

# *The Sea, Empire and Colonialism before the Rise of Steam*

RICHARD UNGER (UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA)

## **Abstract**

From the earliest adventures of conquest, settlement and integration in and of lands beyond the continent European expansion relied on travel over the open ocean powered by wind. The grand phase of European empire building began in the fourteenth century with sailing south from Iberia. The voyages of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus at the end of the fifteenth century led to a flood of enterprises to investigate the potential of the sailing routes, examining, exploring and expanding them in the process. The heroic tale of the age of discoveries based the narrative of success and superiority of Europeans on their conquering the sea. They made efforts to drive others from the oceans worldwide, setting up settlements around the globe to supplement that effort on the water. There is no question that European expansion from the fifteenth century on through to the nineteenth depended on the ability to sail further and faster and more reliably with larger payloads across the open ocean. That reliance on superiority to use the oceans gave a certain character to European inroads overseas.

There was considerable variety in the empires that emerged through sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There were at least two kinds of colonialism, one relying on trading posts and the other on agricultural settlement, and within those large categories variations depending on, among other things, the sea routes that connected the empires to Europe. In both cases the numbers of Europeans overseas were small and grew only slowly. All the empires that emerged in their variety were limited in the scope and extent of their ability to control the lands they might claim, quite different from the new kind of imperialism ushered in by the age of steam. It was not just European states with sailing ships that had empires. Russia expanded its borders, incorporating lands in Central Asia and so, in time, coming up against the other great expanding land empire, that of China. All empires faced similar problems and similar opportunities. The practices of those land empires give indications of what was unique in European maritime expansion, what set it apart and what were the critical characteristics of ships, shipping and maritime society that ultimately shaped empires and colonialism in the age of sail.