

Practicing Exclusion and Managing Diversity in England's Trade and Empire, 1550-1700

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Abstract

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England's trade and empire took place in global spaces that were home to a plethora of distinct cultures, peoples, and ways of doing business. To overcome this challenge, English merchants developed a range of institutional innovations designed to manage diversity and facilitate their participation in these complex international environments. Central to these practices were corporate forms of organisation that institutionalised exclusion as means of managing diversity, at home and abroad. This article examines how these exclusive practices developed and how they contributed to the emergence of systemic inequalities within the emerging British empire.

Keywords

Early modern England, British empire, Corporation, Business, Inequality, Diversity

Resumo

Nos séculos XVI e XVII, o comércio e o império ingleses desenvolveram-se a uma escala global, em espaços caracterizados por diversidade cultural, populacional e de práticas de negócio. Os mercadores ingleses responderam aos desafios apresentados por estas diversidades através do desenvolvimento de uma série de inovações institucionais, de forma a administrar, controlar e facilitar a participação do grupo num contexto internacional de negócios. Uma das respostas institucionais aos desafios impostos pelas várias diversidades foi o desenvolvimento de formas corporativas de organização do negócio, as quais institucionalizaram o fenómeno de exclusão como forma de controlo e administração da diversidade, em Inglaterra e no estrangeiro. Este artigo examina a forma de desenvolvimento destas práticas e a forma como as mesmas contribuíram para a emergência de um sistema de desigualdade no império britânico.

Palavras Chave

Inglaterra no período moderno, Império britânico, Corporativismo, Negócios, Desigualdade, Diversidade

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Introduction

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England's trade and empire took place in global spaces that were home to a plethora of distinct cultures, peoples, and ways of doing business. Managing diversity was an integral part of how English merchants and other participants set out to engage in trade and empire overseas. First, commercial and colonial activities took place in a variety of environments, and each required modes of engagement that recognised and adapted to its unique attributes. Second, English merchants overseas experienced cosmopolitan settings in which they confronted communities that differed both from the English merchants themselves and from each other, again requiring adaptation and understanding. In an effort to ensure that English actors in these spaces were capable of working with diverse peoples and in diverse spaces, England's merchants adopted ways of working that were often exclusionary, whereby only a specific professional group of Englishmen could participate in trading ventures overseas (Sacks 1995; Jones and Ville 1996; Erikson 2014). This meant that practices of exclusion were often justified as a means of generating forms of formal governance that would ensure orderly trade, the creditability of English merchants, and good relations with local people (Harris 2020). This, in turn, led English merchants to develop and maintain a unique role in English society, and they faced perceived threats to their position on professional, class and other grounds. The specific ways that English merchants imposed their regulatory structures differed depending on the requirements of specific localities overseas and were shaped by the experience of merchants operating in these environments, but in general, English merchants lived within their own small communities even as they established themselves in cross-cultural trading networks.²

Central to the development and enforcement of these practices were the corporations – urban, livery and trading – that shaped so much of England's commercial activity during the early modern period (Smith, 2021a). While these organisations were, at times, responsible for directly managing specific trades, they were more typically and importantly responsible for establishing and regulating the institutions that underpinned commercial activity (Gelderblom 2013). At their core, these organisations operated on the basis whereby their members – known collectively as freemen, citizens or the generality in different organisations – were given access to corporate activities in return for corporate support. For instance, once becoming a “citizen” or “freeman” of the City of London

² Similar practices sustained Wangara, Sephardic, and Armenian trading communities. See Curtin (1984), Trivellato (2009), and Aslanian (2011).

corporation, members could vote in elections or serve as officers for the company. In turn, they would be protected by their corporation's privileges regarding life and work in the city. Livery companies and trading companies, likewise, permitted members access to unique commercial and social opportunities in return for their agreement to abide by each organisation's regulations. Sometimes corporations took direct investment from their members in specific projects—such as livery company's colonial activities in Ireland or the East India Company joint-stock financing model—but more typically merchants worked within these organisations in partnerships with other members. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, corporations were as likely to represent “overseas merchants trading on their own accounts according to collective regulations” as they were joint-stock financed company-states (Leng 2016). This article, by examining the role of corporations and the practices of exclusion that defined them, will analyse how English merchants managed their experience of diversity, and to trace the ways in which practices adapted and developed during this formative period of commercial expansion and imperial development.

Focusing on the institutions that enabled English merchants to conduct cross-cultural trade allows us to trace the tensions within both historical sources and the historiography: between the cosmopolitanism English merchants found in many trading spaces, and the exclusionary treatment of the “other” in principle and in practice within England's trade and empire.³ The English were not, of course, alone in managing the difficult balancing act between “interaction and segregation, co-existence and curiosity, profit and exchange,” and they were participating in spaces where practices of overcoming these challenges were often contested by other communities encountered within them (Salzberg 2019: 416). For instance, if we consider William Hawkins's account of his time in Agra at the Mughal court, we learn much about his familiarity and integration into the courtly community—perhaps most notably in his marriage to an Armenian woman at the behest of the emperor Jahangir. However, his account also lays bare how his understanding of his place in the court was riven with fears about his security; his disparaging and fearful perception of Portuguese Jesuits; and his negative portrayal of many local people on ethnic, cultural or religious grounds.⁴ In accounts like Hawkins's, we can see how the experience of the “global” in specific spaces could be simultaneously inclusive—in terms of facilitating trade, exchange and communication across boundaries—and exclusionary, highlighting participants”

³ This tension is clear, for instance, in Games (2008) and in much writing by travellers during this period, see Thompson (2016) and Das and Youngs (2019).

⁴ Hawkins's account is transcribed in Foster (1921), pp. 60-120. For the most recent examination of this account, see Singh (2021).

perceived difference and separation from communities and people that they engaged with. As Nathalie Rothman has suggested, actors taking part in such contexts articulated ideas of “belonging and foreignness” together, simultaneously straddling political and cultural boundaries and engaging in notions of nationhood and separation (Rothman 2011: 3).

Recent reflections on global and micro history have highlighted these frictions further. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam and others have demonstrated, simple dichotomies between communities in these early modern contexts, even when generalised by contemporary commentators, are ill-suited as a means for interpreting global encounter (Subrahmanyam 2011: 21-22). We are warned against the habit of “celebrating the cosmopolitan” and not to assume that “the person who crosses cultural boundaries with a certain facility [was] always valued in past societies” (Subrahmanyam 2011: 22). In Ghobrial’s examination of “Elias of Babylon,” for instance, we are shown the “importance of dissimulation, self-fashioning and improvisation as critical elements in the experience of individuals whose lives were lived on a global stage” (Ghobrial 2014: 58). Rather than “faceless globetrotters, colourless chameleons and invisible boundary crossers,” merchants’ experiences of diversity were just as likely to take place in moments of “crisis and dislocation” (Ghobrial 2014: 59-60). Similarly, De Vivo cautions that global history can encourage focus on “encounters and exchanges at the expense of conflict,” and England’s merchants certainly experienced (and caused) enough of the latter to show how understanding their experience of diversity must fit uncomfortably between these extremes (Vivo 2019: 180). By recognising this tension, we can see in the institutions that developed to support English merchants frameworks for engagement with the wider world that sought both to mitigate the challenges of acting in “cosmopolitan” spaces and ensure that English merchants could maintain their distance and division even while embedded in other communities overseas. In this way, we can see moments where our interpretation of the mercantile experience “investigates the connections between individual and context, between the regional, national and even the global” and served to connect “local communities and international networks” (Vivo 2010: 392).

The challenges that global trading spaces presented, as much as any cosmopolitanism that allowed them to function as effective markets, helped justify the need for institutional frameworks that could manage how English actors participated within them. As Douglass North has argued, “the development of long-distance trade, perhaps through caravans or lengthy ship voyages, requires a sharp break in the characteristics of an economic structure” that cannot be explained through the lives of individual merchants or events: they are instead

“largely a story of institutional evolution” (North 1991: 97-99; Milgrom, North and Weingast 1990). On the one hand, livery, urban and trading corporations represented a form of collective action through which members could more effectively negotiate with states, enforce contracts, and strengthen bonds between members (Greif 2006; Harris 2020; Smith 2021a). On the other, they adopted restrictive, exclusionary practices that could limit competition, increase transaction costs, and stymie innovation (Ogilvie 2012: 420-422). Across these organisations, and the merchant community that they represented and sustained, institutional models were developed that merchants would depend upon as they established trade with peoples further and further afield.⁵ While corporations relied on the support from the state—especially for patents and charters that defined their privileges—it was primarily merchants that drove and governed them. In relation to long-distance trade, through which English merchants would come to interact with diverse people in cross-cultural contexts across the world, these corporate structures helped create means by which participants could more effectively operate (Carlos, 1992). However, they were, in England and overseas, structures built on practices of exclusion that would come to inform how English actors managed their experience of diversity overseas, especially as they obtained more responsibilities governing lands and people in an expanding empire. By focusing on diversity in the developing English empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then, this article seeks to show how corporate practice in England shaped the English experience of diversity overseas.

Membership and Monopoly: Systems of Exclusion in England’s Commercial Expansion

Between 1550 and 1650, England’s merchant’s engagement in international commerce expanded rapidly. In Bristol, imports increased from around £12,500 in 1563 to over £80,000 in 1637, while in London they rose from £900,000 in 1600 to £1,900,000 in 1640 (Stone 2011: 219-225; Millard 1956: 316). Exports rose too, including so-called “old draperies” (woollen broadcloths) that had risen in volumes from just shy of 20,000 cloths in 1485 to over 127,000 by 1614, but also less traditional products (Brenner 1993: 9; Supple 1959: 258).⁶ For instance, between 1600 and 1640, exports of high-quality cloth made with

⁵ For detail regarding the practical organisation of trading companies see Anderson, McCormick and Tollison (1983), Fisher (1933), and Scott (1910).

⁶ These volumes relate specifically to shortcloths from London by English merchants.

Spanish wool increased from zero to over 13,000 per year, while the sale of cheaper, colourful “new draperies” increased fivefold and soon matched “old draperies” in terms of value (Supple 1959: 136-162). In London, the value of exports other than “old draperies” increased from almost £200,000 in 1609 to upwards of £600,000 by 1640 (Supple 1959: 153). Similarly, total exports from Bristol rose from around £7500 to just over £48,500 per year between 1563 and 1637 (Stone 2011: 219-226). These increases were not just due to new markets in Asia or America but in the widespread expansion of trade to sites across Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa. By 1660, total imports into England were valued at £3,495,000, of which colonies contributed £421,000, the East India Company £409,000 and European trades a massive £2,638,000. Exports were even more skewed towards European markets, which received £1,809,000 of the £2,039,000 total, leaving only £163,000 for colonial markets and £30,000 for the East India Company (Zahedieh 2010: 11).

To facilitate and then manage this expansion, many significant trades were placed in the hands of people with distinct professional training, membership and interests – known as “mere merchants” (Smith 2021a: 63-69). English merchants were required to do business in locations—within and beyond Europe—where their business could be experimental, dangerous, and relied on effectively working together and with foreign merchants and brokers to be successful (Curtin 1984: 38-59). To do business meant working within different commercial frameworks and these were certainly not imposed by England on the world. As Francesca Trivellato has highlighted in reference to the Sephardic diaspora, mercantile success depended on the ability to adapt and function effectively in the face of different economic practices and behaviours maintained by trading partners overseas (Trivellato 2009: 1-2). How to achieve this, and to ensure that English merchants could reliably be expected to act in ways that would not be detrimental to other English merchants, was a challenge that shaped the way English trade was structured and managed, and informed the practices of exclusion that underpinned it. The practicalities of trading with people across the world could be learned through training and experience but making sure that there were institutional structures that could be depended upon to ensure merchants could operate in these environments was a much greater challenge. As Catia Antunes, Amelia Polonia, Sebouh Aslanian, Ron Harris and others have shown, approaches for developing and maintaining such institutions differed greatly in different contexts, but at their core had many of the same aims—to generate trust, standardise behaviour, and regulate people (Antunes and Polónia 2015; Aslanian 2011; Harris 2020). In the English case, these aims were managed in part through the imposition of strict inclusion standards within the merchant community, both

by private traders and within the corporations that oversaw large parts of England's overseas trade. That is to say, you could only participate in England's formal trading empire if you had completed the necessary training and been welcomed into the corporations that regulated it. In this way, English merchants sought to establish strict regulations about training, employment, accountability, reporting and discipline across, with the expectation that these would strengthen the bonds between them and allow them to operate on a global stage. Through these means, innovations and novel approaches employed by corporations and private traders alike were grounded on mercantile practices that remained secure, resting on decades of tradition and common practice.

To take part in English trade, therefore, meant being part of a community that had its own rules, behaviours, and customs, many of which were reinforced by a corporate system that defined who could participate in global trading activities and where they could do it.⁷ Exclusionary practices on the part of England's merchants began when young men (there was a strict gender division within the "mere merchant" community) began their apprenticeships, which were an essential route for entering the commercial community.⁸ Apprenticeships usually began in someone's late-teens, meaning apprentices would usually have completed some schooling (including essential skills like writing and arithmetic) and possibly had some experience of the operations of their family's businesses (Rappaport 1989: 295; Wallis 2008: 846-847). Once in these roles, aspiring merchants were able to obtain the skills and connections necessary for becoming fully fledged members of the merchant community, usually by receiving on-the-job as factors or servants for more senior merchants, often overseas. Through this mechanism, apprentices would receive training and obtain experience while working for minimal wages, usually for some years (Epstein 1998; Humphries 2003; Wallis 2008). In doing so, they obtained the practical and social training that made it possible for them to join England's commercial community. Apprentices were not only trained in the specific skills required for conducting trade, such as writing letters or

⁷ A trading company was not normally the first or only corporation that a merchant would join. In most circumstances, they would have completed their apprenticeship under the auspices of a Livery Company (somewhat comparable to European guilds) and having obtained membership of this organisation become a citizen and member of urban corporation (such as the City of London or City of Bristol), following which they would be in a position to join a trading company as a full-fledged member (rather than working within them as a servant or apprentice). Many of these corporations had similar components, such a member's being able to vote and participate in the activities of the "generality" and to stand for election, but each differed too depending on the scope of their privileges and their core activities. An urban corporation, for instance, focused on regulating the lives of people living in the urban environment, while a livery company might regulate a craft and enforce standards, and a trading company oversaw the regulation of trade overseas. Many corporations had overlapping interests and authority, leading to competition and disagreements between them (or collaboration), both domestically and overseas. See Smith (2021a), pp. 57-172.

⁸ On female apprentices, see Ben-Amos (1991) and Gowing (2016).

keeping accounts, but were also tied into their employer's client, credit and supplier networks. This was essential for many merchants, who required trusted apprentices and servants to operate on their behalf overseas.⁹ Importantly, apprenticeships also served to educate young merchants about the cultural and behavioural norms of doing business in the early modern world. Such tacit knowledge, acquired through imitation, observation and experience, was most effectively obtained through an apprenticeship immersed in the practice of trade (Wallis 2008: 847). Vitally, "the completion of an apprenticeship marked a man out as trustworthy and dutiful" (Humphries 2003: 90). Through the process of apprenticeship, young merchants were able to demonstrate their suitability for joining a community that depended on common behavioural norms to maintain the bonds of trust and creditability that made long distance trade possible.

By demonstrating their ability to participate in the merchant community, young merchants were able to meet the requirements of joining corporations and participating in its activities as a fully-fledged member.¹⁰ In most cases, people could join a corporation through ancient right (that they had belonged to the trade before), patrimony, service or redemption (Withington 2005: 29-37). The expectation that members were part of this distinct, merchant profession is clear in the entry requirements for many organisations.¹¹ For instance, the Eastland Company insisted "that none be admitted unless he were a merchant," defined as someone who had "of some good countenance not less than three years trade at home and abroad beyond the seas merchant like."¹² Similarly, the Spanish Company, allowing entry only to those who "dealt and traded as a merchant, without any retailing or shop-keeping, the full space and term of eight years (in which time an apprentice by his service may attain to the freedom) shall be accounted a mere merchant."¹³ Thus, when the mercer Thomas Dalby and merchant tailor Edward Davenant sought entry in 1604, they were refused "by reason they are supposed to be retailers and keepers of warehouses." Attempting to overcome the rejection by agreeing to pay £10 for their membership, this offer too was

⁹ For a detailed quantitative analysis of relationships between apprentices, their masters, and the leadership of England's trading companies, see Brock (2017).

¹⁰ Female members of these organisations were rare and were investors rather than merchants or factors, but they could be influential. See, Ewen (2019) and Ewen and Brock (2021).

¹¹ As Gelderblom notes, institutional structures in European trading centres also adopted practices to resolve disputes between merchants privately, rather than involving the state legal machinery. See Gelderblom (2013), p. 139.

¹² Company of the Merchant Adventurers of York [CMAY], Acts and Ordinances of Eastland Merchants, f. iii. Requirements for time spent overseas was reduced to two years in 1617. CMAY, Acts and Ordinances of Eastland Merchants, f. 5-7. 18th March 1617.

¹³ British Library [BL], Add Ms 9365, p. 51. Register Book of the Spanish Company, 1st July 1605.

dismissed by the generality who “agreed that they are not capable” as merchants.¹⁴ Similar offers by “certain merchants of Southampton” were also rejected on the basis that they also worked as shopkeepers, and that allowing them entry would be “dangerous a precedent” and “inconvenient for the company.”¹⁵ In part this was because of concerns that admitting retailers and shopkeepers would undermine the prices that merchants members could obtain for their goods, often sold to shopkeepers, but also because these outsiders did possess the correct training to operate within a mercantile organisation. The standards of these corporations were enforced, and the exclusion criteria were strict.

For people who sought to enter corporations by redemption rather than through apprenticeship or service, and pay a higher charge to do so, this was acceptable on if they were “being all mere merchants and free of other companies”— if not within the Spanish Company, they must still have completed the required training in a different corporation.¹⁶ Similar practices were found in the French Company, that welcomed applicants who were sons of members or apprentices “employed in that trade by the space of two years,” while the Levant Company charged only 20s for apprentices who had served the company for three years (compared to £50 for those entering by redemption) and would “remove, expel and put out of the said company” members found “to be retailers and not mere merchants.”¹⁷ These practices were not just restriction to corporations based in London, either, and across England trading bodies insisted that their members met similar standards. Thus, when the Company of Merchants Inhabiting in Kingston upon Hull was chartered, it too restricted membership to those “using the trade of merchandise from Hull into the parts beyond the seas.”¹⁸

As well as demanding specific training or experience, England’s trading corporations also carefully restricted access to people whose livelihoods were not predominantly focused on overseas trade. For example, the Merchant Adventurers of York forbade members from “keeping shops of retail in London” because it brought down prices and therefore took “the living from their brothers.”¹⁹ Similar restrictions were maintained in Bristol, where “no

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25. 19th September 1604.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40. 15th January 1606.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26. 31st August 1604.

¹⁷ The National Archive, UK [TNA], Patent Rolls, 9 Jac. 1, 35. Charter of the French Company, 1611; BL, Add Ms 20031, ff. 9-10, 20. Charter of the Levant Company, 9th November 1605.

¹⁸ Hull History Centre and Archive, C BRS/1/3. Petition to Queen Elizabeth from Kingston upon Hull, 11th May 1577.

¹⁹ CMAY, Trade Correspondence, London. John More’s Comments on the Eastland Company, Merchant Adventurers and Spanish Trade, 1579.

retailer or artificer, whilst they remain retailers or artificers, shall be received or admitted in to the freedom” of the Merchant Venturers, and similar rules applied to Merchant Adventurers in London.²⁰ Across these corporations, practices of exclusion were common, reinforcing both what we might call “class” or “professional” boundaries regarding access to England’s expanding commercial activities, as well strict hierarchies based on age and wealth within organisations. Women, ‘strangers’ and “aliens” were typically excluded irrespective of what training or skills they might have contributed to these organisations (Das et al 2021). Once overseas, as well as functioning in communities that were strictly defined by national and professional identity, many merchants overseas operated in what Rachel Moss and Eva Johanna Holmberg have described as “homosocial environments,” which rarely included wives or other English women. For instance, in the Levant Company, “the community in Istanbul mostly consisted of younger unmarried men serving their masters” (Moss 2018: 11). Such “formally structured homosocial environments” helped “to establish and perpetuate hegemonic norms about gendered behaviour and social power” (Holberg 2021: 227).

Strict exclusions like these were justified on the basis that they were necessary for securing orderly conduct among merchants overseas that was required for operating in difficult trading environments and to make sure that English creditability was not damaged by actors who were not deemed capable of operating in these spaces. In turn, these exclusionary criteria were reinforced by monopolistic control of trade—either in general from specific ports or in relation to specific geographies overseas—that gave corporations the ability to restrict access further. Within these corporations, though, these practices were designed to provide the support and structure necessary for conducting trade overseas effectively (Scot, 1910; Blussé and Gaastra 1981; Wallis Coulson and Chilosi 2018; Ogilvie 2019).²¹ In exchange for the powers, including monopolies, that corporations received, they took responsibility for the affairs of their polities in their designated spheres (Stern 2012: 42). As Philip Withington has shown in relation to urban corporations in the sixteenth century, these organisations transformed political culture and created “little commonwealths” that were governed by their own citizens in line with contemporary ideas regarding civic responsibility (Withington 2005). Similar practices can be seen in livery and trading corporations, where specific behaviours were encouraged and enforced as a means not just of building effective government but also instilling members with each company’s

²⁰ Bristol Archive, SMV/1/1/1/7, f. 77. Acts, Ordinances and Decrees [undated]; BL, Add Ms 18913, f. 81. The Lawes, Customs, and Ordinances, of the Fellowship of Merchant Adventurers, 1608.

²¹ Corporations and other forms of communal governance provided an institutional framework for economic activity.

conceptualising of its own “moral economy,” behavioural standards and forms of governance (Middleton and Shaw 2018; Wubs-Mrozewicz 2011). These practices were transferred and exchanged across the merchant community and its corporations through tightly interlinking networks between members—who often belonged to multiple trading organisations—and helped generate accepted practices of behaviour whereby corporations functioned as both formal institutions and informal communities.²² Even when corporations operated as functioning “company-states,” imposing their authority over employees, members and others, they were restricted and directed by individuals within the complex web of social interactions and relationships that made up their memberships (Stern 2012: 6). Once part of corporate organisations, and to benefit from their institutional structure and monopolistic powers, merchants were expected to follow its rules, meet its behavioural expectation, and commit to working for the common good of all its members (Greif, Milgrom and Weingast 1994). In England, then, the professional role of “mere merchants” within trading corporations maintained, for the most part, strict exclusionary criteria about who could participate in overseas ventures, how they were expected to act during them, and what structures were put in place to govern their lives while overseas.

Living Overseas: Managing Diversity, Maintaining Separation

Once overseas, though, the challenge of participating in international trading circuits required English merchants to do business in places that lay beyond the familiar confines of their home markets. In these spaces, Anver Greif, and others, have suggested the prevalence of common legal norms and customary practices across different national and cultural boundaries helped create some forms of common commercial practice in spaces like the Mediterranean, and English merchants would have been familiar with these as a consequence of their common training (North 1999: 97; Greif 2006: 70-71). As Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik have suggested, “trade diasporas remained the most efficient way of organising commerce across much of Afro-Eurasia until the nineteenth century” and in many ways the English merchant community mirrored this pattern of organisation (Pomeranz and Topik 1999: 7). Common practices within the English “diaspora,” or community, were vital because “trust was an essential component of early modern long-distance trade,” whether English merchants were seeking to ensure an “orderly” woollen trade in Hamburg, find new trading

²² For networks, see Smith (2018a, 2021b). For formal and informal roles of corporations, see Rappaport (1989), Withington (2007), and Bishop (2011).

partners in Ahmadabad, or maintain a sense of community in Madras.²³ In these contexts, as Francesca Trivellato has shown in relation to the Sephardic diaspora, trust was generated through communal forms of governance and reciprocal behaviours that contributed to the development of “communities of mercantile trust” that were carefully formulated and maintained (Trivellato 2005: 101-103; Trivellato, 2009: 12).²⁴ To function in diverse spaces, where English merchants “worked across geopolitical, linguistic, and religious boundaries,” as well as different economic cultures, customs and jurisdictions, it was essential that they had the institutional structures necessary to do so (Trivellato 2009: 1). In this way, English merchants adopted similar methods to other commercial communities that “operated simultaneously in different colonial settings” whereby the need to adapt to specific local contexts did not undermine relationships within their own community (Silva 2011: 7, 17).

The behavioural standards that were imposed among English merchants overseas by the exclusionary criteria of their corporations were a lifeline when these individuals were placed into the diverse, contested and sometimes dangerous spaces in which they were required to do business—whether in Europe or further afield. One useful guide for considering what these looked like in practice is the *Merchants Avizo*—a book compiled by the experienced merchant John Browne that offered recommendations to English merchants that could be applied both in ‘Spain and Portugal or other countries.’ In his text, Browne explained how his own entry into Spanish markets, in the sixteenth century, had been “troubled with difficulties, for want of such pattern as this, for ease of our tender wits,” and he hoped that his guide would make clear how new merchants were expected to act. Recognising the trading effectively required building relationships with people from diverse background, a central tenet of Browne’s advice was that all merchants ‘show yourself lowly, courteous, and serviceable unto every person.’ Noting that “it is well known by experience” that “there springs of no one virtue so great fruit unto us, as of gentleness and humility: for it will both appease the anger and ill will of our enemies, and increase the good will of our friends,” he suggested an approach that was, as far as forming business relationships went at least, remarkably inclusive. It was not the place of English merchants to impose their own expectations onto others and Browne reminded the reader that they should be “circumspect

²³ Christopher Bayly used the concept of “communities of mercantile trust” in Bayly (2002), p. 59. Aslanian draws on concept of ‘social capital’ to interpret these relationships, Aslanian (2011), pp. 166-174. For “Communal governance” in a corporate context, see Smith (2018b). For how “disorderly” members and outsiders interacted with these communities, see Leng (2016).

²⁴ Competition within commercial communities was of course common, and conflicts of interest between competing merchants could have significant repercussions for the stability of these groups. See, Bhattacharya (2008).

touching your behaviour when you be in the country of Spain or elsewhere,” and to “learn what be their civil laws and customs, and be careful to keep them” (Browne 1590: dedication, 3-5). Working overseas meant not only working within spaces with different customs and cultures but ensuring that as a merchant you were capable of following the same.

While Browne’s text was just one guide about how to trade overseas—albeit one that was reprinted in multiple editions in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—it aligned closely with the expectations made both of young apprentices and more senior merchants when they operated overseas. Ensuring that merchants maintained such values, obtained through their apprenticeships and experience trading overseas, was a necessary first step in ensuring English merchants could operate effectively both within their own community and within cross-cultural environments overseas. Thus, English merchants’ experience of diversity was often intricately linked to their efforts to embed themselves in the ports and cities where they did business, a task that required they sustain relationships with local people. For instance, following a difficult entry into the region in the later sixteenth century, English merchants trading to Morocco confessed they needed more time to learn the customs of the region and the best places to conduct trade before they would be able to outperform non-European competitors.²⁵ As merchants spread further from their traditional routes into Spain and northern-Europe, they carried these behaviours into new ventures – whether undertaking business in Livorno, Smyrna, or Surat, forming working relationships with local traders was essential (Divitiis and Parkin 1990: 23-35; MacLean and Matar 2011: 79-123). When merchants failed to live up to these expectations, they risked the reputation of the wider English community. Corporate charters insisted that “no commerce or intercourse can be maintained or continue without order and government,” and it was through working effectively with local people, “by their orderly trading and selling” that merchants might “gain many privileges” and increase their market share.²⁶ Thus, when their members or interloping non-members acted in ways that risked these relationships, corporations were quick to try and establish their authority, removing such detrimental actors and returning their trade to “orderly” governance (Smith 2021a: 28-32, 110-116, 126-128).

Of course, these structures could only do so much to help English merchants understand and interact with the diverse societies and cultures that they encountered overseas. Poor information or understanding of the people they met could limit the

²⁵ BL, Cotton Nero B XI, ff. 296, 299. Petition from merchants trading to Barbary to the earl of Leicester, 1574; An account of imports from Barbary and Portugal, 1574-5.

²⁶ TNA, Patent Rolls, 9 Jac. 1, 35. Charter of the French Company, 1611.

effectiveness of how well English merchants might embed into trading into difference localities. In accounts of new potential trading regions, sometimes written by English travellers but often translated, it is clear how stereotyping could warp English conceptions of diverse spaces and peoples. For instance, in 1580, the English merchant John Frampton, a member of the Muscovy Company who was seeking to encourage the expansion of the corporation's trade to east Asia, supported the publication of *A Discoverie of the Countries of Tartaria, Scythia, & Cataya, by the Northeast*. This text, that Frampton informed the reader he had translated from a collection written by the Spaniard Francisco Thamara, was designed to assist the corporation in its maritime passage to "Cataya," to "better shun perils" along the way, "and on the other side take the benefit of the place the better" (Frampton 1580: ii). Frampton's suggestion was that a north-eastern route, by sea, would allow English merchants to avoid the long southern route to Asia, which was dominated by the Spanish and Portuguese already, and discover their own entry into distant markets via the Anian Straight. Like many similar texts, Frampton's repeated rumour and myth as much as providing any evidence of contemporaneous travel to the regions discussed, and it was heavy with stereotyping about the peoples and places encountered. For instance, in his description of the Tatars, we are told that, in terms of appearance "all the Tatars are of an evil shape in their bodies, the most part of them being of small stature. They have huge great eyes, standing far out, and the lids thereof covered with very much hair" (Frampton 1580: 3). Worse still, Frampton reported that they were cannibals, describing how "when they take any prisoner of their enemies, to show their cruelty the more, and the desire they have to revenge themselves, sometimes they roast them at the fire, and after many of them assemble and eat him, like unto wolves, they tear him to pieces, and eat his flesh" (Frampton 1580: 5). Further east still, Frampton reported, was an island rich in "white pepper," but inhabited also by cannibals who "kill their enemies, eat their flesh, and drink their blood" ((Frampton 1580: 27).²⁷ For the Muscovy Company, if Frampton's text was taken seriously, this would hardly be a description to encourage trade or other interaction with Tatar or Ciampa people, irrespective of the rich commodities that might be on offer.

Yet, even as Frampton exhibited how stereotyping had the potential to shape English interest in and perception of particular places and people in a very negative way, the final section of his texts, regarding "Cataya" reveals the opposite dynamic. Here, myth and information blurred to generate a description of this distant land that presented diversity as a source of massive wealth rather than something to fear and identified similarities between

²⁷ For uses of Cannibalism in medieval travel writing, see Montanari (2021).

English and Catayan culture and society that would easily allow merchants to do business together. Situated somewhere to “the other side of the Ganges,” Frampton informed his readers, “is the best, and the richest country in all of India” which “is now called Cataya.” Frampton’s readers were informed how, in Cataya, “the people are of great reason, and live in better order than we do.” Furthermore, the “Catayans are idolaters, great merchants, and craftsmen,” with access to “gold, spices, and precious stones” as well as “ginger, pepper and cloves” (Frampton 1580: 21-22, 35). In terms of religion, too, Cataya was presented as friendly space, with “many Christians” already living there, a scholarly environment whereby it had “universities and studies of learning, and the scripture of the old and new testament, whereof it comes to pass that they honour God, and believe in the everlasting life” even if they were “not baptised.” If rumours were true, Christianity in Cataya might be even more entrenched and Frampton reported that “in old time it was said, that it [Cataya] belonged to Prester John” (Frampton 1580: 21-22).²⁸ Finally, if it was to be believed, in Cataya there was “neither pestilence, nor any other contagious diseases” (Frampton 1580: 23)! What better location could there be for English merchants to strike out and trade? Despite further efforts to explore the northern seas, no navigable passage to “Cataya” was found and English merchants had to come to terms with a reality in this distant land that would have diverged from Frampton’s text.²⁹ Yet, as plans for a northern route diminished, texts like Frampton’s and others, translated into English or collected by English travellers, shaped how distant lands were perceived, understood, and shaped the practices of English merchants as they increasingly interacted with markets across the world.³⁰

Frampton’s account of the Tatars and Cataya highlights the extreme ideas and perceptions that English merchants might carry with them as they sought to enter new markets and they certainly shaped how merchants might approach new spaces. However, such stereotyping, whether deeply negative or hopefully positive, while common in travel literature related to most places where English merchants did business, were rarely so obvious in the practices employed by English merchants when taking part in trade. If we consider one of the largest overseas English communities active during this period – in northern Germany – we can see how diversity experienced by English merchants was managed in practice. As Thomas Leng has demonstrated, “many issues that we associate with corporate contact with the world beyond Europe had been foreshadowed by a corporation

²⁸ For an examination of the link between “Cataya” and Prester John, see Aigle (2015), pp. 41-65.

²⁹ For information asymmetry in travel writing, see Mackenthun, Nicolas and Wodianka (2017).

³⁰ For corporate uses of travel writing, see Brock (2021).

[the Merchant Adventurers] operating in less exotic, but still challenging, territories” (Leng 2016b). In Europe, English merchants, whether from London or provincial ports like York, Newcastle or Hull, presented a united front and “traded alongside communities of foreign merchants arranging themselves into “nations” as a means to negotiate with local rulers (Leng 2016b: 510). In joining these self-organising groups, the Merchant Adventurers adopted and mirrored forms of organisation that had been transported northwards by merchants from southern Europe, often designed to navigate the cross-cultural spaces of the Mediterranean trading region, and the diversity therein. In doing so, the England’s merchants benefited from “the willingness of continental cities to compete amongst themselves for merchant’s custom, by offering lucrative privileges to foreign traders” (Leng 2016b: 511). For the Merchant Adventurers, then, the exclusionary practices that defined the company’s membership and organisation of trade in England presented a positive means to engage with the diversity they encountered overseas. A consequence of these rules and regulations was, from the perspective of the Merchant Adventurers at least, the development of behaviours that made English merchants more attractive trading partners. Thomas Wheeler, the company’s secretary, suggested that it was for this reason that foreign customers were drawn to its members “in most ample, friendly, and merchantlike manner,” that meant “English commodities were kept and holden in singular credit and estimation” (Wheeler 1601: 45). Removing the company’s rules and by allowing a more diverse range of English participants into the trade, Wheeler warned, would lead to a “promiscuous, straggling and dispersed trade” that would undermine the collective bargaining power of English merchants and simultaneously risk their carefully calibrated relationships with foreign traders and states in the region (Wheeler 1601: 13).

In his meticulous analysis of the experience of merchant John Quarles, a merchant specialising in expensive, dyed and dressed cloths, Leng digs deeper into the relationships that sustained his trading interests in Europe and highlights how “corporate affiliation impacted on the behaviour both of members, and of those excluded by the company’s monopoly”—and importantly how this effected how their interacted with different actors in Germany (Leng 2016a: 825). He notes how Quarles, the son of a merchant and trained to the professional standards of the merchant community, organised trade in Middelburg and Stade through two factors (also trained merchants)—John Kendrick and George Lowe (Leng 2016a: 828). In the case of Lowe, the factor in Stade, Quarles willingness to operate in spaces outside the Merchant Adventurers’ oversight placed his servant in a potentially precarious position—how would he manage to operating in this cross-cultural space without the

support of the company? Mostly, it seems, by maintaining the same standards and practices as he had done so previously, by following the practices and behaviours of a well-trained merchant, and generally focusing on his place within the English community in Stade, rather than trying to integrate more deeply into the city's cosmopolitan networks. In his letters to Quarles, Lowe spent considerable efforts describing the demands and personalities of his European customers, and considerable concern given about how to maintain creditable relations with them, especially as they could be undermined by the poor-reputation of other English merchants. As this suggests, the English community in Stade was 'simultaneously interdependent and fragmented,' and merchants like Lowe and Quarles remained bound within its rules and regulations even as corporate oversight might fall away – it was, after all, these very practices that were designed to keep them safe and productive while interacting with diverse cultures overseas.

However, whereas Lowe was part of a well-established community in Stade, the inability or unwillingness to operate within such parameters could be hugely detrimental for business, as seen in the case of Quarles' interloping partner Thomas Jackson, who had trained under the Haberdasher and Merchant Adventurer Henry Billingsley, whose factors Lawrence Overton and William Ballydon had penetrated deep into the German interior to trade in sites such as Leipzig. Jackson's business interests ranged far beyond the remit and support of the English communities in Hamburg and Stade and was condemned by the Merchant Adventurers, yet, he had trained as a merchant and was still bound by the same behavioural and practical norms that this entailed. Thus, despite his contravention of the Merchant Adventurer's monopoly, details of his business activities and the ways in which he managed trading overseas naturally align with those of other English merchants—both those doing business in this part of Northern Europe and elsewhere. In this way, this episode serves a useful reminder that “corporate privileges created opportunities not only for members, but for outsiders who could access those parts formally closed to [members]”—and in Quarles we can identify a merchant who was willing to work with his fellow merchant Jackson outside the parameters of the company, choosing to maintain this relationship even if it undermined his place among the corporate community. However, despite some early commercial success, Jackson struggled to maintain positive relations, either with his European customers or with other English merchants, and he was pushed further and further into debt with Quarles, before his operations collapsed, and he became insolvent.

Throughout the letters Lowe shared with Quarles about this episode, there is little information about how the English merchants should manage specific experiences of

diversity, and there was a much greater concern about who and who should not have access to markets overseas, rather than how English merchants might operate within them—it was expected that English merchants would have the training and skills necessary to navigate any experience of diversity that might come their way. As Leng correctly notes, the issues raised during this period, about the governance of trade and the role of corporations as regulators, “framed much of the debate on corporations for the century to come.” By carefully maintaining institutional structures that rested on the exclusion or inclusion of participation in a domestic context, merchants believed that good relations and positive trading conditions could be maintained overseas (Leng 2016b: 512). It is with this in mind, then, that the experience and management of diversity in England’s trade and empire needs to be considered, where a positive vision of global trading opportunity rubbed against the experience of traders overseas, and the challenges of maintaining their common practices and behaviours in challenging cross-cultural contexts.

As England’s trading and colonial interests expanded, English practices for managing diversity were not restricted to ensuring commercial relations with local people, and in sites across the world English merchants would come to manage sizeable populations – both in terms of English communities but also non-English people. Encounters with diversity in spaces such as these forced English merchants to develop new strategies for governing themselves and their encounters with other peoples. For instance, as Haig Smith suggests, factors and servants of the East India Company when they “arrived in the cities of Surat, Bombay and Madras in the seventeenth century,” “encountered cosmopolitan spaces that were centres of not only commerce but also religious interaction and exchange” (Smith 2021c). In terms of religious diversity, in sites like Madras or Bombay English merchants interacted with, and governed over, a vastly greater array of different faiths and ethnicities that they did in contexts like the Merchant Adventurers in Hamburg or Stade.³¹ These included Memon Sunnis, Khoja Shias, Turkish Chalebis, Bengali Baniyas, Zoroastrian Parsis and Cochin Jews, as well as Armenian, French Capuchin, Dutch Protestant and Portuguese Jesuit communities. As Smith notes, these groups presented England’s merchants with a dilemma, representing both “religious familiarity, friendship, and cooperation” and “spiritual competition and antagonism” (Smith 2021c). In spaces like these, English traders serving the East India Company were governed by many of the same rules and regulations as their counterparts in other parts of the world, but applied their practices of exclusion and inclusion

³¹ Across the world, the challenges of religious governance over English merchants were compounded by the variety of Protestant sects represented within this community. See, Smith (2018c, 2021d).

in ways that suited the specific local context of these Indian cities. The training and experience that English merchants had received, often in religious spaces like the Iberian or Ottoman empire where they similarly operated in non-Protestant environments, did provide some guidance about how to positively interact with the diverse populations in regions like south Asia.

As the company came to control access to commercial spaces, they sought to ensure that they continued similar practices of working positively alongside traders of diverse faiths. For instance, the *Articles of Agreement Between the [English] Governor and Inhabitants of Bombay* in 1684 guaranteed “the liberty of exercising their respective religion” to non-English residents in the town.³² However, despite this willingness to trade with people of diverse faiths and ethnicities, the diversity experienced in these locations did worry some East India Company officials who was concerned that engagement with these non-English communities risked the prospect of apostasy or cultural emulation. To secure against this threat, the company sought to build “a well ordered and morally unassailable Protestant society” within spaces like Bombay and Madras where they came to govern a large non-English population after their acquisition of the settlements (Stern 2012: 117-118). As Daniel O’Connor suggested, the company hoped that “modern and sober government” in its settlements would help them obtain “love and estimation” from the “heathenish people” they sought to do business with (O’Connor 2012: 48). To do so, they would adapt strategies of exclusion and strict regulation to separate and secure England’s merchants from the communities that they lived alongside. Smith suggests that this meant the company “begrudgingly accepted the presence of diverse religious communities” while they simultaneously “adopted innovative methods to govern over the religiously diverse behaviours” (Smith 2021c). For instance, the company sought to ensure that at least twice a day all English people in any factory or town were encouraged to join together at least twice a day, “allowing factors and chaplains to assess the spiritual and secular conduct of their brethren” (Smith 2021c). Similarly, English religious spaces served as safe locations where the community could gather – as Shem Bridges noted in Balasore, “at prayer we may not be disturbed or gazed on by the workmen and coolies that are continually about the factory.”³³ Such activities served to demonstrate and secure the separation between the English community and others around them, but were driven not necessarily by a negative perception of the diverse cultures around them but rather the

³² British Library, IOR E/3/43, 8th February 1684. Cited in H. Smith, “The East India Company, English Protestants, and the Wider Christian Community.”

³³ British Library, IOR E/3, 12th May 1669.

potential allure of different religions and a desire to ensure that English relations with local people were not undermined by religious discord that greater interaction might have brought about.

Such practices of exclusion and separation, and the establishment of strict boundaries between the English and local communities in India, while initially designed to provide security for the English community, in time led to stricter and more divisive practices.³⁴ In Madras, for instance, by the eighteenth century, clearly segregated spaces, not just for worship but for living space more generally, had been established. The survey of “Fort St George and Plan of the City of Madras,” completed by the order of Governor Pitt, shows a strict delineation between the English fortress, that would become known as “white town” and the wider city, known as “black town.”³⁵ This division, and the expansion of England’s imperial authority in South Asia, contributed to governmental practices that regulated labour through coercive practices and diminished the representation of non-English residents in local government (Ahuja 1999; Balachandaran, 2008). The expansion of imperial authority, direct British rule over territories and peoples that could be effectively enforced, changed the ways in which English actors interacted with diversity.³⁶ Yet, even in the seventeenth century we can trace similar practices within the establishment of English colonial settlements. In the colonial Caribbean, the development and expansion of plantation slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created clear and strictly enforced racial divisions among the population (Dunn 1972). As Carl Nightingale has shown, practices of racial segregation differed considerably across England’s colonial empire, and indeed were informed by the experience of specific localities within it, but increasingly played an important part in defining how colonial governance was defined and organised in urban spaces (Nightingale 2008; King 1990). In North America and the Caribbean, where English engagement with non-European peoples was defined as much by the seizure of territory as trade, these practices of exclusion as a means of managing diversity reached their most extreme conclusion as vast territories were granted to corporations to govern, with the consequent development of strictly segregated settlers societies (Smithers and Newman 2014). Here, diversity represented a threat that had to be managed and excluded.

³⁴ Working with local people, of course, continued, and the richest members of the local community were invited to participate in the government of the city, in return for paying a special “wall tax.” See Roche (1975), pp. 392-3.

³⁵ Bodleian Library, Gough Maps 41, No. 138. “A prospect of Fort St. George and Plan of the City of Madras actually surveyed by order of the late Governor. T. Pitt,” c. 1730.

³⁶ For changing ideas about race and English identity in the eighteenth century, see Colley (1992), Wilson (2003) and Wahrman (2004).

Conclusion

In this article, the focus has been on examining how the need to operate in diverse spaces overseas shaped how English trade and empire was organised in the foundational period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is, of course, just one part of the experience of diversity that was brought about by the development of Britain's empire. In Britain itself, the consumption of imperial goods, perhaps, is the area where we see the deepest engagement between Britain and the world, while overseas the vast migrations (forced and unforced) of people to and from Britain's colonies changed how people thought about themselves, their nation and their place in the world (Hall and Rose 2006; Fedorowich and Thompson 2013). Yet, the focus on corporation and practices of inclusion and exclusion within England's corporations shows how these came to play an important part of shaping how English people came to understand and interact with people across the world, but also how the very structure of this interaction was built on systems designed to limit access, whether according to gender, class, professional identity or nationality. In practice, of course, the specific ways in which the structures and institutions created by this system played out differed depending on local contexts, the personnel involved, and the interests of the non-English peoples that these merchants were seeking to do business with. Efforts to ensure that only well-trained, responsible merchants would conduct trade were always likely to be undermined by merchants seeking to break into new markets against regulations, by human error, or the challenges of enforcing such rules overseas. However, as shown here, considerable efforts were made on the part of English corporations and the merchant community more broadly to try and create an exclusive commercial environment where access to trade could be controlled, and consequently interaction with people overseas restricted. As English merchants increasingly came to govern people and territory, these structures of exclusion that underpinned the formation of an effective but exclusionary merchant community were imposed and expanded to fit the new objectives of merchants turned colonisers. Despite the need to travel to places with diverse societies and cultures, the internal structures of England's developing empire were not designed to easily enable diverse actors to operate within them. By creating institutions of trade and empire that sought to mitigate against the risks of operating in diverse spaces by controlling access, it is not surprising that similar practices of exclusion would come to dominate British imperial governance in the centuries to follow.

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