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The Ancient Roots of Settler Colonialism

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The discourse on settler colonialism has largely been shaped by historians of the modern era, with a strong emphasis on Western colonial practices. While this perspective has provided valuable insights into the phenomenon's influence on the modern geopolitical order, its narrow scope limits a more comprehensive understanding of settler colonialism as a broader historical process (exceptions include Kiernan 2007; Cavanagh and Veracini 2017). This is particularly evident in the field's efforts to uncover the deeper underlying factors driving the so-called "logic of elimination" of indigenous populations within settler colonialism (Wolfe 2006). Prominent scholars have connected the emergence of this destructive structure to defining elements of Modernity, such as capitalism, class struggle, nationalism, and Enlightenment philosophy—thereby suggesting that it is a product of a specific historical context (e.g. Wolfe 2006; Mamdani 2020).

To an ancient historian, the emphasis on (early) modern European history is unsatisfying, as many aspects of modern settler colonialism strongly align with phenomena familiar to the ancient world. This suggests that the quest to unravel the roots of this structure cannot be limited to an analysis of Western colonialism in the modern era; instead, it must embrace a global historical approach and, more importantly for this essay, a long-term perspective (Levine and Marriott 2012). A deep historical approach would not only offer more examples and contexts to examine but also provide a stronger foundation for addressing one of the key underlying questions in this field: whether all human migrations into new territories inherently have the potential to lead to eliminatory projects, or whether such outcomes arise only under specific colonial configurations, societal conditions, or ideological contexts.

The ancient world, in particular, offers a valuable lens for exploring this question, given the diverse colonial forms it produced, only some of which appear to have resulted in systematic eliminatory policies. This diversity presents a unique opportunity to investigate the specific factors that drive such destructive colonial logics. While there is extensive scholarship on colonization and its effects on indigenous societies in antiquity, a comprehensive structural analysis of the dynamics behind colonial elimination practices—and why they are particularly prominent in some cases but less so in others—remains largely absent. Notably, one of the few direct attempts to tackle this issue dates back to the early 16th century, offering some intriguing ideas that merit further exploration. In his Discourses on Livy, Macchiavelli examines the question why people leave their homelands and invade the

territories of others (Macchiavelli 1531, 2.8). Within this discussion, he also proposes an intriguing theory about why certain forms of expansion lead to mass-elimination while others do not. In his analysis, he compares the Gallic invasion of Italy with Roman imperial expansion, contending that they led to significantly different levels of violence and displacement, with the Gallic model clearly representing the most extreme case.

Machiavelli's theory on the logic of elimination

Machiavelli's primary insight is that the logic of indigenous population elimination is fundamentally influenced by the differing motivations behind territorial invasions. According to his analysis, *ambition* leads to expansion without a logic of elimination, while *necessity* results in the mass displacement and elimination of populations. The reason for this difference, in his view, is that ambition is fulfilled when the conquered people acknowledge their subordinate status and submit to the will of the new power, whereas expansion driven by necessity only achieves its goal if the native population is removed from the targeted land. While this differentiation somewhat corresponds with the modern scholarly convention of distinguishing between exploitative colonialism and settler colonialism (Veracini 2011 and Osterhammel 2002 for a more refined typology), there is an important difference. Macchiavelli, with his example, seems to suggest that expansion in imperial contexts, like the Roman Empire are exclusively driven by ambition, while necessity motivated expansion, such as the Gallic invasions, operated outside an official institutional context.

Furthermore, Machiavelli not only proposes that factors such as poverty and demographic pressure trigger this destructive force, but also highlights relative differences in living conditions. He suggests that the warm and abundant Mediterranean lands serve as constant pull factors. Analogous to an inverted thermodynamic law, people are naturally drawn to warmer and presumably more comfortable living conditions. According to this perspective, the structure of settler colonization is thus also shaped by inequalities in the expected standard of living. Lastly, Machiavelli underscores the significance of scale: the structure of elimination can only be activated if a sufficient number of people migrate collectively. Intriguingly, he suggests that migrating communities that lack the power to replace indigenous populations adopt cooperation strategies, but nonetheless are inherently part of the replacement structure, remaining dormant until circumstances allow them to act.

Are Mass-migrations a Form of Settler Colonialism?

While Machiavelli's theory is certainly intriguing, it has clear shortcomings, particularly due to its evident bias in evaluating Roman imperialism. His suggestion of less violent Roman invasion strategies

is not supported by literary sources, including Livy, who frequently documents Roman colonial elimination campaigns (cf. below). However, his analysis of mass-migration movements, such as those of the Gauls, raises an intriguing question: can these phenomena be considered examples of settler colonialism? Answering this question meaningfully would require formal criteria for defining settler colonialism—an issue not yet fully addressed in current scholarship. Most modern studies either overlook this form of settlement invasion or distinguish it from colonization, arguing that it does not leave behind a controlling center of expansion or does not create separate political units in the case of frontier expansion (Osterhammel, 2002, 4-10). However, if the aim is to understand the dynamics that lead to elimination practices in resettlement contexts, examining these mass-migration cases may still prove valuable.

While the details of ancient mass-migrations remain unclear, recent studies suggest they were more replacive than previously thought. Traditional scholarship assumed these migrations led to hybrid cultures by blending migrating peoples, often considered minorities, with indigenous populations. However, genetic research is challenging this view. Ancient DNA analyses reveal significant shifts in genetic makeup, showing that existing populations and cultures were absorbed far less than once believed. The early Bronze Age Yamnaya culture, for instance, replaced languages, cultures, and genetic populations in Europe, with only a small portion of the original population surviving, probably through the incorporation of local women (Haak et al. 2015; Furholt 2018; for critical views Klejn 2017; Balanovsky 2017). Similar patterns are seen in later migrations into the Mediterranean, though the extent of replacement and its mechanisms remain debated. Despite fragmented and contested evidence, a growing consensus suggests these migrations were more replacive than once thought, aligning with elements of the settler colonial logic of elimination paradigm.

Arguably, the most important difference between these early examples of mass-migration and modern settler colonial case-studies is not so much the extent of elimination, but the institutional context. While modern settler colonialism occurred within an imperial framework, leveraging an asymmetrical power system armoured by legal, ideological and military instruments, these early examples occurred in more anarchic conditions. Especially Wolfe, emphasizes the importance of this imperial context and juridical and ideological tool-kit for settler colonial structure (Wolfe 2006). While we should not overemphasize the importance of these institutional-imperial instruments in modern settler colonialism, as much of this happened in rather anarchic conditions too, this is an important difference. In any case, it seems reasonable to distinguish between these two scenarios of replacive settler migration. Perhaps we can use the term *Settler Colonization* as a more general term that encompasses both phenomena, while *Settler Colonialism* refers only to the latter variant, as the term colonialism entails a system of domination accompanied by an ideology and legal system of control.

If it is plausible that *Settler Colonization* is a very ancient phenomenon that certainly predates Modernity, the two logical follow-up questions are whether *Settler Colonialism* is an ancient phenomenon too, and, arguably more importantly, what factors have triggered the development of such practice and its associated logic of elimination. Again, here the problem of establishing the precise criteria for what thresholds define settler colonialism, complicates any analysis. However, while such a formal approach is currently out of reach, it is possible to highlight some striking parallels between aspects of settler colonialism structure distinguished in modern colonialism and practices and mentalities recorded for the ancient world.

Settler colonial logic of elimination in Antiquity

Ancient sources often recount instances of settler communities attempting to completely annihilate indigenous populations (Dougherty 1993, 31–44). This tradition of narrating colonial violence dates back to at least the 7th century BCE (e.g., Mimnermus of Smyrna, fr. 9 IEG, cited in Strabo, Geography 14.1.4) and becomes particularly prominent in Classical period literature (5th–4th century BCE). These texts frequently narrate earlier colonial campaigns from the Dark Ages and Archaic period (9th-6th century BCE), describing the total elimination or expulsion of local populations (e.g., Thucydides 6.3.2; Diodorus Siculus 11.76.3). A similar surge in elimination motives can be found in the literature of the Late Republican and Early Imperial period (1st century BCE - 1st century CE), which discusses both contemporary and earlier colonial campaigns (Roselaar 2010; Jewell 2019).

While these narratives suggest parallels between ancient and modern settler colonial practices, their accuracy is debated in current scholarship. Scholars question whether they depict actual historical events or are instead literary tropes rooted in propaganda traditions dating back to the Bronze Age, designed to exaggerate the scale and impact of colonization and conquest to reinforce power claims and elevate the victors' prestige. For the earlier phases of ancient colonial history (9th–6th century BCE), recent archaeological research has not substantiated these replacement narratives. Instead, it suggests that these early settlements adopted coexistence models, marked by limited conflict and minimal displacement (Osborne 1998; Crielaard & Burgers, 2012). This aligns with their modest demographic size—often numbering only a few hundred settlers, insufficient to dominate vast territories—and their lack of imperial support structures. Furthermore, the motivations for establishing these colonial settlements, as described in the sources, align more with necessity-driven colonization than with the structures characteristic of settler colonialism. Their foundations are depicted as responses to urgent challenges, such as fleeing famine or socio-political instability, and took place without the support of an imperial framework (Garland 2014, 34–38).

Yet, the sources also highlight an emancipatory dimension, as colonists set out with the promise of equality—receiving equal land allotments and political rights—opportunities that were often unattainable in their homelands (Malkin & Blok 2024). Colonial settlements in this period were mostly conceived as new, sovereign polities, independent both from the mother city and from the local populations whose lands they settled. This vision carried a utopian quality, resembling modern settler colonial social experiments in its aspiration for a fresh start and social reorganization. The focus on sovereignty and land offers a clear context in which these settlements could evolve into elimination projects. When the ambition for sovereignty is obstructed by the presence of indigenous populations, it may trigger violence and practices of replacement.

While archaeological evidence indicates that these settlements initially adopted cooperative strategies and had limited impact on the colonized territories and their populations, there is also evidence suggesting that over time many of these settlements expanded significantly, leading to conflicts and campaigns of elimination against the surrounding native populations (cf. below). In this regard, and perhaps similarly to the colonial settlements of the European Age of Exploration (1500-1650), these small-scale early settlements—though founded on a very different logic—eventually evolved into critical entry points and centers of knowledge in foreign territories, playing significant roles in later colonial developments that did result in processes of indigenous replacement and elimination. Moreover, the political culture that emerged in these early settlements, centered on promises of equality and land, fostered an environment where subsequent expansion could easily fuel practices of elimination.

This shift toward colonial practices more closely resembling modern settler colonialism can be roughly dated to the 6th and 2nd centuries BCE (Osborne 1998; Wilson 2006; Zuchtreigel 2018, 1-33) and coincides with a broader transformation in Mediterranean power structures, marked by popular movements challenging aristocratic dominance, which led to political and legal advancements for the middle and lower classes, as well as new interpretations of citizenship rights (Hammer 2015; Filonik et al. 2023). The militarization of these classes played a central role in expanding their political influence, contributing to the rise of participatory political systems or, through military clientelism, the emergence of strongman politicians. Amid an evolving ideology that linked political power and citizenship to land ownership, social emancipation became increasingly dependent on land redistribution programs, either within the homeland or through territorial expansion. In this context of rising territorial imperialism, ancient colonization underwent a fundamental transformation, shifting from a trade-focused model of small, independent coastal settlements to one targeting inland territories (Terrenato 2019, 73-108). This new model involved large populations and was closely tied to strategies of territorial control, expansion, and elimination (Zuchtreigel 2018, 1-33).

Current scholarship, however, does not offer a clear understanding of the extent to which this new colonial structure affected indigenous populations or whether it aligns with the criteria for identifying a logic of elimination. While most scholars assume it resulted in significant displacement or elimination, a revisionist view argues that it was primarily characterized by exploitative or even cooperative forms of domination (Bradley 2006; Terrenato 2019). This issue remains unresolved due to the lack of convincing quantitative data or methods to assess the impact of this new colonial model on indigenous population survival rates. Nevertheless, although the precise nature of elimination in ancient colonialism during this period cannot be fully reconstructed, it is clear that this era saw the development of a distinct colonial ideology, in which notions of elimination and replacement played a prominent role. More importantly, our sources offer valuable insights into the dynamics that shaped the development of this ideology and its practices, which are relevant to the broader study of settler colonialism.

Factors that triggered settler colonialism structures in Antiquity

The factors driving the change in colonial strategies in antiquity leading to more eliminatory practices are seldom explicitly detailed in literary sources, though occasional glimpses can be found. A notable example is the Greek colony of Cyrene, founded on the coast of present-day Libya in 631 BCE, for which relatively detailed accounts have survived. Initially, Cyrene was established as a modest settlement reliant on the goodwill of local powers and skilful negotiation for its survival. Over time, however, it evolved into a major hub for successive waves of colonial settlers from the Greek mainland, who increasingly dismantled indigenous structures and killed or displaced local populations (Herodotus 4.150–165). Importantly, Herodotus provides a key insight into the causes of this shift: the outbreak of violence seems to have been driven by socio-political dynamics in mainland Greece, which prompted mass-migration to Cyrene. This influx resulted in large-scale land annexation and redistribution, which sparked internal tensions and ultimately paved the way for Cyrene's transition from a monarchy to a democratic state. (Cecchet 2017; Malkin 2023). Similar patterns emerge elsewhere. For instance, in the colony of Heracleia in Pontus, radical land redistribution initiatives and the establishment of asymmetric legal and property regimes coincided with a period of intense social unrest and the rise of a populist tyranny (Burnstein 1976; Mandel 1988). This shift disrupted previously peaceful coexistence with indigenous populations, leading to conflict. Further evidence of this correlation can be found in Metapontion, where land division systems are plausibly linked to tyrannical rule (Carter 2006). These cases illustrate a pattern where land redistribution and the rise of participatory or populist regimes often led to violent conflicts with indigenous communities. Initially dependent on indigenous support, early

colonial settlements grew with incoming settlers, driven by demographic changes and political reforms, ultimately escalating tensions and resulting in land redistribution and eliminatory campaigns.

The structure of settler colonialism was not limited to developments within the colonies but was closely linked to dynamics in the imperial metropoles. Colonization during this period seems to have been deeply influenced by social pressures in these metropoles, driven by emerging emancipatory ideologies and imperial ambitions. Since emancipation depended on access to land and resources, it required either property redistribution or territorial expansion. Unsurprisingly, aristocrats typically favoured the latter, making warfare and territorial expansion central to participatory political systems. However, supporting land redistribution programs could also serve as a strategic move by ambitious elites to gain the support of the plebs, thereby enhancing their political standing. The dynamics driven by emancipatory agendas thus introduced chronic internal tensions, as the failure to address land demands could ignite populist movements calling for redistribution, ultimately threatening aristocratic power and property. To alleviate such potentially destabilizing pressures, aristocrats frequently turned to colonization as a means of diverting social unrest and preserving stability at home (for the modern world see Veracini 2021).

Interesting perspectives on this structural tension and the need for societies to build in "safety valve" strategies to reduce social tension survive especially in philosophical treatises. For example, Plato in his Laws portrays settler colonization as a mild form of civic purging, contrasting it with the harsher alternative of execution. He writes: "When, owing to scarcity of food, people are in want, and display a readiness to follow their leaders in an attack on the property of the wealthy,—then the lawgiver, regarding all such as a plague inherent in the body politic, ships them abroad as gently as possible, giving the euphemistic title of 'emigration' to their evacuation." (Laws 5.735c–d). Similarly, Isocrates, in his advice to Philip II, warns against the dangers posed by potentially unruly mobs, particularly discharged soldiers. He suggests settling them in newly founded colonies, which would serve a dual purpose: alleviating the threat of social unrest and revolution by removing these individuals from the heart of the empire, while simultaneously strengthening the imperial frontier (To Philip, 120–123, c. 342 BCE).

In the Roman context, similar patterns emerge, with colonial land redistribution programs often coinciding with periods of intense social conflict between patricians and plebeians, frequently culminating in policies of elimination (cf. Livy 4.47–4.51; Dion. Hal. 7.13–14). Especially the texts from the Late Republican and early Imperial periods are filled with purging metaphors that reflect elite fears of rising populism, mob movements, and demands for redistribution (Jewell 2019). These sources clearly portray settler colonization as a mechanism to mitigate such threats, while also suggesting it

played a central role in campaigns of elimination against indigenous populations (see for critical views Bradley 2006 and Patterson 2006).

A compelling example comes from Polybius (2nd century BCE). In contrast to Machiavelli's depiction of relatively restrained Roman expansion, Polybius recounts how Romans killed or displaced large numbers of Gauls to establish colonies in the Picenum region. The situation escalated a generation later under the populist leader Gaius Flaminius, who proposed to divide the entire territory among Roman citizens. This redistribution prompted the Gauls to declare war, perceiving the Romans' actions not as a bid for supremacy or sovereignty but as a campaign for their complete displacement and extermination (Polybius 2.19–21).

While these narratives often focus on the Roman state and the military as the primary agents of these clearing campaigns, these sources highlight that such campaigns were often initiated at the request of the plebs, rather than by the ruling elites. A telling example of this is the extermination of the people of Sora (4th century BCE), which happened after this Italic people had attacked Roman colonists in their former territory. Livy tells us that Rome sent out a retaliation campaign and that: "All those taken to Rome were scourged and beheaded to the great satisfaction of the plebs, who felt it to be a matter of supreme importance that those who had been sent out in such large numbers as colonists should be safe wherever they were" (Livy 9.24), and later on we read about the Roman people demanding the annihilation of the Aequi after another act of betrayal: "Within a fortnight they [the Romans] had stormed and captured thirty-one walled towns. Most of these were sacked and burned, and the nation of the Aequi was almost exterminated" (Livy 9.45).

Further echoing elements of modern settler colonial structures is the emphasis on large-scale land division and agriculture as the primary means of seizing indigenous territories, utilizing asymmetric property systems and occupation rights. Agriculture in Roman colonial contexts is viewed not only as a means of sustenance for settlers but also as a moral justification for claiming land, presenting it often as unused and therefore open to occupation. Additionally, agriculture is seen as a way to transform idle or "unproductive" people into useful citizen-soldiers (Pelgrom and Stek 2014; Pelgrom 2018). In this regard, settler colonialism acts as a form of social engineering, transforming 'undesirable' groups into useful elements in a cost-effective manner (Cassius Dio 38.1).

Finally, while the sources generally lack compassion for the fate of indigenous populations affected by this structure, later texts reveal a form of nostalgia, hinting at a longing for these disappearing cultures (e.g., Strabo, Geography 6.1.2-3; Emperor Claudius' lost work Tyrrhenika). This mirrors patterns observed in modern settler colonial contexts, where such sentiments arise during periods when indigenous territorial claims no longer challenge settler sovereignty. At these times, settler

colonial states often incorporate elements of indigeneity into their own identities to distinguish themselves from other states and strengthen their connection to the lands they occupy (Wolfe 2006).

To summarize, the ancient texts reveal a structure in which settler colonialism and its eliminatory logic emerge from the interaction between emancipatory forces advocating for equality and political freedom, grounded in agricultural property systems, and conservative aristocratic strategies aimed at channelling these forces toward frontier territories. This dynamic is driven by the rising political influence of urban lower-class populations, which threatens the aristocracy's control over power structures and mechanisms of property acquisition. To alleviate this pressure, a system develops to redirect these populations from the metropole with promises of a better life in settler colonies, simultaneously strengthening the empire's frontiers in a cost-effective manner. This process frequently culminates in elimination campaigns targeting those who obstruct the realization of these promises. Viewed this way, settler colonialism represents an emancipatory project for lower classes, achieved only at the expense of others.

However, the elite strategy of removing undesirable groups by offering promises of improvement and freedom could backfire, as it inadvertently nurtured the growth of liberal ideas and practices within colonial contexts. Colonization, in this sense, became a breeding ground for emancipatory ideologies, further fostering ideals of egalitarianism and political freedom. Once established and thriving, these colonial settlements, as examples of alternative socio-political models, had the potential to inspire and strengthen revolutionary political and social movements in the mother country (Malkin 2005, for such dynamic shaping the modern world see Dahl 2018).

Final reflections

An underlying question, which also intrigued ancient scholars, is why this structure—grounded in emancipatory forces and the pursuit of freedom—developed in some societies while these qualities seemed absent in others. This issue was particularly explored in the context of the Greco-Persian Wars, where the peoples of the Achaemenid Empire were often depicted as lacking such aspirations (Raaflaub 2004). While the accuracy of this depiction is questionable, it is notable that the Greek world fostered a sense of exceptionalism based on a perceived greater capacity for individuals to control their own destiny. This culture of freedom, as it has been described (Meier 2009), became a core element of Greek societal ideology and influenced their alleged cultural heirs, such as the Romans. Ancient explanations for this drive for freedom often pointed to geography and climate. The fragmented landscapes and micro-ecosystems of the Mediterranean, coupled with moderate temperatures, were believed to nurture independence, while vast, open, and warmer regions with uniformity of the seasons, were thought to promote submissiveness (Hippocrates, *De aere aquis et locis*, XVI; Aristotle, Pol. 7.7). Cold climates,

in this paradigm, were considered to foster a strong spirit of freedom but were deemed unsuitable for establishing stable societies and enduring political structures due to harsh living conditions, which often prompted migrations to more temperate regions.

This geographic explanation, with its racial undertones, does not resonate with most modern readers. However, contemporary scholarship continues to debate the origins of the so-called culture of freedom and whether it was truly a defining characteristic of Greek culture. One prominent line of inquiry connects the development of such ideals to early colonial experiences or the narratives about colonial adventures (Malkin 1998; 2011). It is perhaps no coincidence that societies known for participatory political systems and settler colonial structures—such as the Greeks, Carthaginians, and Romans—share deeply ingrained migratory origin myths. Typically, these cultures often trace their origins to an act of colonization rooted in deep, mythical history. The notable exception, perhaps, is Athens, which claimed autochthonous origins but nonetheless incorporated colonial narratives into its mythology, particularly regarding its role in the so-called Ionian migration.

These myths typically involve a population displaced by famine, warfare, or political strife, embarking on a journey in search of a new beginning. Particularly interesting in the light of Machiavelli's theory, is that several early Greek colonial narratives, such as Return of the Heracleidae or the Doric invasion myth, reflect an ancient belief that the origins of many Greek polities lay in migratory movements from northern regions like the Balkans or the Caspian steppe to the more temperate Mediterranean areas of modern-day Greece, connecting them to the necessity driven mass-migration movements. Whether these experiences were real or imagined, they may have fostered a cultural foundation grounded in self-governance, egalitarianism, and freedom. From this perspective, the settler colonialism structures that took shape during the emerging territorial empires of the Classical and Hellenistic periods, can be seen as extensions of an older cultural ethos. This ethos, centred on freedom and self-rule, may have developed from a foundational colonial narrative that shaped societal identity and values.

In conclusion, drawing from Machiavelli's model, one could argue that mass-migration driven by necessity—settler colonization—whether real or imagined, provides the ideological basis from which the structures of settler colonialism could develop in imperial contexts. In this process, historical experiences and foundational narratives that shape cultural identities played a key role. If this is correct, it raises the question of whether similar dynamics were at play in the early modern period (but see Owen and Hurst 2005 for the risks of using historical analogies in colonial discourses). During this time, the revival of classical culture may have reactivated settler colonial mythologies and ideologies of freedom (Pelgrom and Weststeijn 2020), which helped to foster intellectual and practical frameworks that ultimately fuelled settler colonial ambitions and the eliminatory logics associated with them (E.g.

Lipsius 1598, 1.6). Thus, the key insight from this essayistic attempt to integrate an ancient historical perspective into settler colonial discourse is the need to incorporate (ancient) ideological paradigms and (mytho-)historical frameworks when exploring the underlying dynamics of settler colonial structures (Lupher 2003; Kiernan 2007). The classical texts, alongside the biblical narratives that derived from the same chronological context, serve as foundational origin myths for the Western world, profoundly influencing societal developments and the evolution of settler colonial structures within it.

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