

Historical Context, Timeline, and Glossary

Below are provided a list of reference materials for this module, including a brief outline of the historical context, a timeline of key events, key figures, and a glossary of terms used in the lessons.

Historical Context

The British Empire became the largest empire in world history. During the 1600s, Britain established colonies in North America and the Caribbean while developing trading networks in West Africa. Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade began in 1562, intensifying dramatically through the 1600s–1700s and transporting an estimated 3.1 million Africans to the Americas. By the empire's peak in the 1920s, British territories covered nearly a quarter of the Earth's land surface. Concurrent with this imperial expansion, the British scientific revolution began around 1600, culminating in the establishment of the Royal Society in 1660—an institution that would become deeply interconnected with Britain's colonial networks.

The infrastructure of slavery became essential to scientific advancement. Naturalists often relied on the “triangular trade” routes to access specimens from regions otherwise unreachable by European scientists, demonstrating how deeply scientific progress was embedded in colonial exploitation.

Timeline of key events

- 1562 - Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade begins
- 1660 - Royal Society established in London; Charles II grants a royal charter to the Royal African Company
- 1662 - King Charles II grants the Royal Society a royal charter
- 1665 - King Charles II becomes a Fellow of the Royal Society
- 1672 - Royal African Company granted a monopoly on the British slave trade
- 1685 - Hans Sloane elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society
- 1687–1689 - Hans Sloane collects specimens in Jamaica
- 1695 - James Petiver elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society
- 1698–1700 - Edmond Halley leads the first British maritime scientific voyage on HMS Paramour
- 1730 - Graman Quacy discovers bitterwood (*Quassia amara*)
- 1773 - Olaudah Equiano joins a British Arctic expedition
- 1784 - Clara brought from Gold Coast to Jamaica, shares inoculation knowledge
- 1796 - Edward Jenner introduces smallpox vaccine

- 1807 - Britain abolishes its slave trade
- 1831 - Charles Darwin starts his journey aboard the Beagle
- 1834 - Slavery Abolition Act comes into force
- 1838 - Full emancipation implemented

Key figures

Royal Society founders & fellows

Charles II: King of England who granted the Royal Society its royal charter in 1662 and supported both scientific advancement and the slave trade.

Hans Sloane - Royal Society Fellow who collected hundreds of botanical specimens in Jamaica while serving as physician to the British governor; his collections helped found the British Museum.

James Petiver: London apothecary who built extensive networks with ship captains and traders to collect specimens from across the Atlantic World.

Charles Darwin: Evolutionary biologist elected to the Royal Society whose Beagle voyage led to the theory of evolution.

African naturalists & contributors

Olaudah Equiano: Enslaved African who became a free sailor, abolitionist, and author; participated in British Arctic expeditions and contributed to maritime natural history.

Graman Quacy (Kwasi): Enslaved African from the Gold Coast (West Africa) who became a skilled obeah practitioner; discovered medicinal uses of bitterwood, which Linnaeus named Quassia Amara in his honor.

Joanna: Fifteen-year-old enslaved domestic servant who provided medical care to British naturalist John Gabriel Stedman, successfully treating diseases where others had failed.

Clara: Enslaved woman from the Gold Coast (West Africa) who shared knowledge of African inoculation practices with British planter Bryan Edwards.

John Edmonstone: Formerly enslaved man who taught taxidermy skills to Charles Darwin in Edinburgh, contributing to Darwin's specimen preservation techniques.

Other key figures

James Cook: Ship captain whose voyages (including the famous Endeavor expedition) advanced botanical and biological discoveries with Royal Society naturalists aboard.

Carl Linnaeus: Swedish naturalist who developed the binomial nomenclature system for classifying species and honored Quacy by naming bitterwood Quassia Amara.

Edmond Halley: Royal Society Fellow who led the first British maritime scientific voyage aboard HMS Paramour to map magnetic compass variations.

John Gabriel Stedman: British soldier and naturalist who documented the contributions of enslaved people like Quacy and Joanna in his Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition.

Glossary of key terms

African Diaspora: The global dispersion of people of African descent, particularly through the transatlantic slave trade, and the communities they established in the Americas and elsewhere while maintaining connections to African cultures and knowledge systems.

Apothecary: What we may consider early pharmacists or chemists—practitioners who prepared and sold medicines and often participated in scientific experimentation before the Royal Society’s establishment.

Atlantic World: The region encompassing the Americas, Africa, and Europe, connected by the Atlantic Ocean and their interactions during the age of exploration, colonization, and the transatlantic slave trade.

Biologist: Scientists who study living organisms - during the early modern period, these were naturalists who focused on biological specimens and life sciences.

Biopiracy: The practice of stealing knowledge and specimens of scientifically exciting flora, fauna, and agricultural crops from colonized regions without crediting indigenous or local sources.

Bioprospecting: Searching for valuable biological specimens from colonial environments for scientific, medical, or commercial purposes.

Botanical garden: A garden dedicated to the collection, cultivation, and display of plants for scientific study, often used to grow specimens collected from around the world.

Botanist: Scientists who study plants—during the early modern period, these naturalists specialized in collecting, classifying, and studying plant specimens.

Colonization: The practice of establishing settlements and control over foreign territories and peoples, often involving the exploitation of local resources and labor.

Decolonizing science: The process of recognizing and addressing how scientific institutions and collections were shaped by imperialism and working to acknowledge previously overlooked contributions from non-Western peoples.

Ecological Imperialism: The practice of using biological knowledge and specimens to transform colonial environments for the benefit of European colonizers.

Ecology: The study of the relationships between living organisms and their environment.

Empirical: Knowledge or methods based on observation and experimentation rather than theory alone—a key principle of the Royal Society’s approach.

Evolution: The process by which living organisms change over time—a theory developed through scientific observations including those made during maritime expeditions.

Fauna: Animals, particularly those native to a specific region or environment.

Flora: Plants, particularly those native to a specific region or environment.

Indigenous: In the context of this module, Indigenous may refer to Africans in Africa and the African diaspora, as well as Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

Maritime: Relating to the sea and seafaring—important since much of the module focus-

es on ocean voyages and ship-based science.

Naturalist: What we now call scientists—people who studied the natural world during the early modern period, including botanists, biologists, and other natural philosophers.

Obeah: Afro-Caribbean spiritual and healing practices that Europeans often dismissed as “sorcery” despite their medical effectiveness.

Preservation (of specimens): The process of treating plant and animal samples to prevent decay so they could be studied and transported over long distances.

Primary source: A document, image, or artifact created during the time period being studied, providing firsthand evidence of historical events.

Primary source analysis: The historical skill of examining documents, images, and artifacts from the past to understand different perspectives and experiences.

Reading against the grain: A historical methodology for analyzing sources created by elite groups to uncover information about marginalized people whose voices may not be directly preserved in the historical record.

Royal Charter: A formal document issued by a monarch granting certain rights, privileges, or powers to an organization.

Royal Society: Britain’s premier scientific institution, founded in 1660 to promote scientific knowledge and research.

Scientific networks: The formal and informal connections between scientists, collectors, and institutions that enable global knowledge sharing.

Scientific racism: The use of scientific theories and arguments to support or justify racist ideologies and hierarchies.

Settler Colonialism: A form of colonialism where settlers establish permanent communities in colonized territories, often displacing indigenous populations.

Specimen: A sample of a plant, animal, or other natural object collected for scientific study and analysis.

Taxidermy: The art of preserving and mounting animal specimens for study and display.

Terrarium: An enclosed environment for growing plants, such as the Wardian Cases used to transport live plant specimens on long sea voyages.

Transatlantic slave trade/Transatlantic trade of enslaved people: The practice of forcibly transporting people from Africa to the Americas to be sold as enslaved laborers, lasting from the 16th to 19th centuries.

Western science: Throughout this module, we sometimes use the term “Western science” in quotation marks to acknowledge its problematic nature. As we’ll see, what Europeans called Western science actually incorporated extensive African, Indigenous, and other non-European knowledge—often without acknowledgment. This terminology itself reflects the erasure we’re working to uncover. Jean de Venette (d. ca. 1370).