

The Royal Society: Institutionalizing Science and Creating Imperial Global Networks



Overview

This lesson explores early Atlantic colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and the founding of the Royal Society in 1662—examining how British science became formally organized through this institution. The Society’s founding marked a transition from diverse, community-based scientific practices to formal institutions that privileged upper-class men. Understanding this institutional foundation is essential because the Royal Society’s advancement of scientific knowledge was from the beginning closely intertwined with British imperialism, including maritime networks like the transatlantic trade of enslaved people, specifically peoples from Africa. This lesson illustrates these connections through the work of Royal Society Fellows Hans Sloane and James Petiver, who used imperial networks to collect biological specimens while often marginalizing the contributions of those who made their work possible. The formal networks established here created the structure for the maritime collecting expeditions you’ll study in Lesson 2, helped undermine recognition of individual contributions of African knowledge-holders you’ll analyze in Lesson 3, and established

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Institutionalizing Science and Creating Imperial Global Networks

Overview

Setting the stage: The Atlantic World and early British Empire

Royal Society: Establishment and early years

British bioprospecting: Exploiting colonial environments

Hans Sloane and James Petiver: Exploiting sea-lanes of slavery for science

The Royal African and South Sea Companies

Conclusion

Discussion questions

the colonial patterns that contemporary institutions are working to address in Lesson 4.¹

Setting the stage: The Atlantic World and early British Empire



Map of the areas of the world that were historically a part of the British Empire.

The British Empire became the largest empire in world history, at its peak covering nearly a quarter of the Earth's land surface. Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade began in 1562 and peaked in the 1730s, transporting an estimated 3.1 million Africans to the Americas. By the mid-17th century, Britain was deeply engaged in what historians call the “Atlantic World”—the region encompassing the Americas, Africa, and Europe, connected by the Atlantic Ocean during a critical stage in world history when European exploration, colonization, and the transatlantic slave trade became deeply intertwined.

The **Royal Society**'s founding in 1660–1662



Map of the transatlantic slave trade, 1500–1900.

1. Note: Historical sources often contain language that modern readers may find outdated or offensive. Despite this problematic language, it is important to preserve it when analyzing history because it helps us recognize how perspectives and power dynamics have shifted over time.

Key Terms:

Apothecary

Biopiracy

Bioprospecting

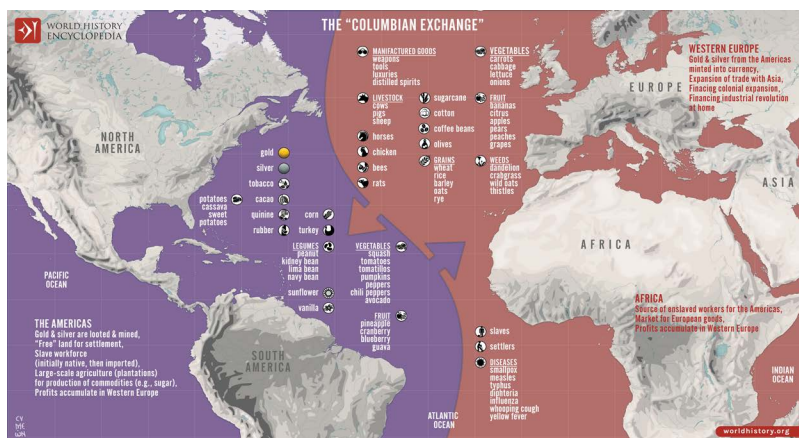
Naturalist

Royal Charter

Royal Society

Scientific Networks

Specimen



occurred during a period when multiple major changes were happening at once. European empires competed fiercely for control of Atlantic trade routes and colonial territories. The Columbian Exchange—the widespread transfer of plants, animals, diseases, and knowledge between continents—was reshaping ecosys-

tems, agriculture, and human populations across the Atlantic World. Economic activities were increasingly organized through chartered trading companies (businesses granted exclusive rights by the crown to trade in specific regions), which relied on producing and selling commodities like sugar, tobacco, and cotton. Importantly, Europeans were not creating these systems from scratch. They were entering into and fundamentally altering existing networks: African trade systems, Indigenous ecological knowledge, local medical practices, and scientific traditions that had developed over centuries in Africa and the Americas. The British scientific revolution, culminating in the establishment of the Royal Society in 1660, emerged within and helped drive these interconnected changes. As this lesson will show, the development of institutionalized British science was inseparable from imperial expansion, the slave trade, and British naturalists' use of African and Indigenous knowledge—often without giving credit to those who shared it.

Royal Society: Establishment and early years

In the early- to mid-17th century, groups of British scientists (often known as natural philosophers or **naturalists**) and their patrons (supporters) began to meet in formal organizations, recognizing the power of collaboration in advancing scientific knowledge. This shared vision led to the creation of a school promoting experimental learning



17th-century painting of Charles II of England, shown in Coronation robes.

at Gresham College, London, following a public lecture by the astronomer, mathematician, and physicist Christopher Wren. By 1662, the group had gained royal recognition.

Charles II (1630–1685), King of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and a patron of science awarded the group a **royal charter**—a formal document issued by a monarch granting certain rights, privileges, or powers to an individual, organization, or colony. The group adopted the official name “The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge.” It quickly developed networks of amateur and professional British naturalists, including biologists and botanists, working in Britain and its growing network of colonies. These networks contributed to the development of institutionalized early modern

natural sciences in Britain and its colonies.

Scientific practice before institutionalization

Before the Royal Society's establishment, scientific inquiry in England often took place across diverse social settings and involved a much broader range of practitioners than would later be recognized by formal institutions. Merchants, **apothecaries**, immigrants, medical practitioners, artisans, and others participated in a relatively open culture of scientific experimentation and discovery. Households and kinship networks participated in local and regional efforts through personal interactions and friendly exchange of information.

Women and men collaboratively developed what some historians now call “household science”—systematic investigations of the natural world conducted through daily domestic activities. Families kept detailed notes and careful accounts recording experiments with medicines, preservatives, and materials. This work often emphasized practical knowledge with immediate applications to health, agriculture, and household management. It incorporated knowledge from diverse sources, without the rigid hierarchies that would later develop in laboratories, research centers, and universities.

The transition to institutionalized science through organizations like the Royal Society fundamentally changed scientific inquiry. Social, political, and economic shifts increasingly restricted scientific credibility to men of particular social standing and education. These shifts effectively excluded or silenced women, servants, tradespeople, and colonial subjects from recognition in developing scientific practice and knowledge.

The British were not alone in seeking scientific knowledge through empire. Other empires, notably the Spanish, also began maritime voyages focused in part on scientific discovery of the world outside Europe. From the 16th century onward, European empires often competed for land, power, and wealth in places like the Americas, seeking to increase knowledge of astronomy, chemistry, geology, navigation, oceanography, and other natural sciences. For example, the Spanish scientist Antonio de Ulloa shared knowledge of platinum in 1735—a rare, beautiful, and malleable South American metal that had been used by South American people *before* the arrival of Europeans.

While many scientific fields were significant for Europeans seeking to improve their knowledge and control of the world around them, this module focuses primarily on British Royal Society naturalists' efforts to collect, classify, transport, and study biological specimens in the Atlantic World—the region encompassing the Americas, Africa, and Europe, connected by the Atlantic Ocean. These efforts not only increased scientific



Depiction of a woman at work distilling, 1691.

knowledge but contributed to the foundation of natural history collections in British museums and other institutions. And it was not just Europeans who participated, as we will see, but people from Africa and the Americas as well.

Global perspective and imperial connections

From its early years, the Royal Society demonstrated a keen interest in a broad range of scientific pursuits. To facilitate this, the Society established a committee to organize communications with naturalists and others across the Atlantic World. This strategic move allowed the Society's Secretaries and individual Fellows to engage in extensive scientific correspondence across Europe and in European colonies, contributing to the development of early modern natural sciences.

In his royal charters of 1662 and 1663, King Charles II outlined an ambitious and far-reaching vision, expressing his “particular” support for natural studies, observation, and experimentation to help shape early modern science, which he believed was lacking globally. His charters guaranteed Society Fellows “[the enjoyment of] mutual intelligence and knowledge with all and all manner of strangers and foreigners, whether private or collegiate, corporate [commercial] or politic[al], without any molestation, interruption, or disturbance whatsoever.” With its global perspective and ambitious goals, this charter underscores the Society's significant role in advancing scientific knowledge and its profound impact on the international scientific community.



19th-century engraving of Royal Society members meeting at Crane Court in London.

Charles' intentions were clear: to bolster the Royal Society's efforts to position the British Empire as a leading scientific force and secure his imperial legacy. The British Empire justified colonization through their ideology of empire as a “civilizing mission”—the belief that European colonization would bring progress and civilization to colonized peoples. Gaining knowledge of colonial ecosystems to improve them for British use and colonial settlements played a significant role in this imperial ideology.

Motto and scientific method

The Society's motto, “Nullius in Verba,” reflected Charles' adherence to “every kind of truth,” following scholar Francis Bacon's (1561–1626) proposed scientific methods based on first-hand observation and experimentation. Royal Society Fellows would, their motto stated, “Take nobody's word for it.” With royal patronage, they began to conduct their first-hand studies on scientific matters following a collective understanding of the scientific method (a systematic approach to acquiring knowledge through observation, experimentation, analysis, and review).

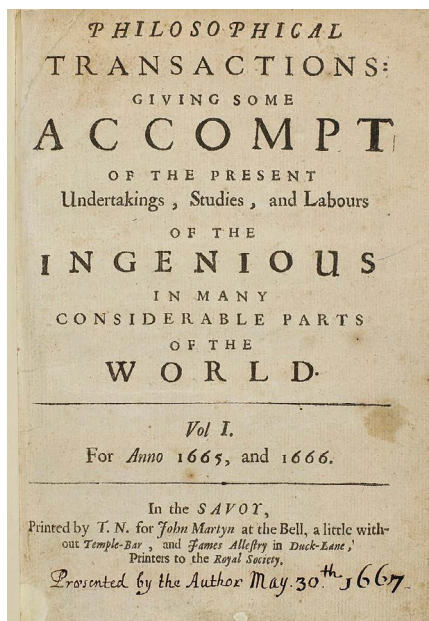
While “household” practitioners had long conducted systematic observations and ex-

periments, the Royal Society formalized a specific approach that valued forms of written documentation and peer review by “gentlemen” (men of noble birth). This transition created barriers to recognition for knowledge created by women, colonial subjects, and, in general, those from the lower classes. The Society’s motto, perhaps, should have read “take nobody’s but a gentleman’s word for it.”

By 1662, the Society’s secretary, the well-connected European intellectual Henry Oldenburg, founded the journal *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*. The Society’s Curator of Experiments, Robert Hooke, famous for some of the first scientific illustrations of micro-level observations of insects and plants, managed the Society’s scientific demonstrations and experiments. Many elected Royal Society Fellows went on to gain lasting global fame, including mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton (1672), politician, scientist, and inventor Benjamin Franklin (1756), and evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin (1839). Members of the Royal Society also held positions as governors of British colonies like Jamaica, such as John Vaughan, 3rd Earl of Carbery, who, like other colonial officials, used the slave trade and its connections to British power for personal, political, and economic benefit.



Bookplate of the Royal Society, showing its motto “Nullius in verba.”



The title page of the Volume 1 of *Philosophical Transactions*, November 28, 1666.

British bioprospecting: Exploiting colonial environments

It is no coincidence that King Charles II endorsed both the British slave trade and the Royal Society in 1660. British interests in the transatlantic trade of enslaved people started in the mid-16th century. Their interest and ambitions grew in the 17th century, and by the early 18th century, Britain led the world as slave traders. The slave trade, the British Empire, and British colonies within the Atlantic World worked together to support the British economy and its interests and holdings in the Atlantic World. While these interests are often associated with efficient commodity production of goods like cotton, tea, and tobacco, they also include what may at first seem like less lucrative biological specimens.

Sanctioned by Charles II, the Royal Society participated in the Columbian Exchange (the widespread transfer of plants, animals, culture, human populations, technology, diseases, and ideas between the Americas, West Africa, and Europe). This participation positioned British naturalists, their agents, and their servants in the center of global history’s most significant scientific endeavors. At the same time, British scientists and agents who practiced **bioprospecting** were often guilty of **biopiracy**. This included stealing knowledge

and specimens of scientifically exciting flora (plants), fauna (animals), and significant agricultural and commodity crops. Plant specimens, for example, could be new foods (like potatoes) or used in industry or medicine. European empires, like the British, used bioprospecting and biopiracy as forms of imperialism. They exploited land, resources, and labor for political, economic, and scientific gain. This ecological imperialism led to long-term political and financial consequences of European settlements in colonized lands.

Hans Sloane and James Petiver: Exploiting sea-lanes of slavery for science

Two Royal Society naturalists, Hans Sloane and James Petiver, serve as case studies for the interconnections between British science and maritime imperialism. Both men relied on British trading companies to transport specimens back to Britain. Petiver, for example, relied heavily on the South Sea Company, which, with other British companies like the Royal African Company, captured and transported African people to the Americas. Naturalists like Petiver relied on trading company employees and ships to collect, preserve, and transport specimens and information. In addition, although the British captured and enslaved Africans primarily as forced manual and domestic labor, some were also valued for their expertise in agriculture and the natural sciences.



Representation of 18th-century British naturalist's museum cabinets.

Hans Sloane

The naturalist Hans Sloane (1660–1753), a Fellow and later the Royal Society's Honorary Secretary and President, traveled to Jamaica in 1687 aboard the HMS *Assistance*, a British naval ship, to serve as the personal physician to the colony's British governor. At this time, Jamaica was a colony where enslaved people performed work for British landowners. Between 1687 and 1689, Sloane collected hundreds of botanical specimens (plant samples) in Jamaica and several other Caribbean islands during his time in the area. He often relied on the knowledge and assistance of local enslaved people.

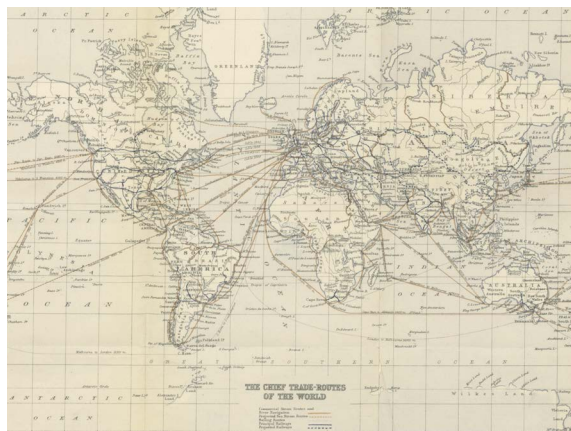


Illustration of British trade routes created by the 19th-century.

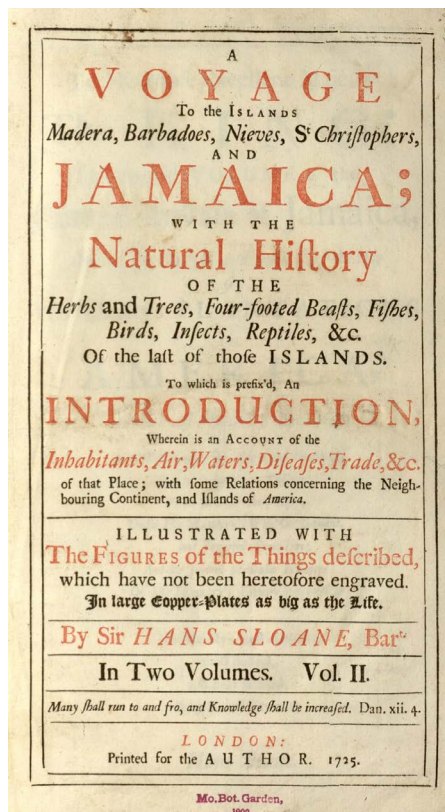
Sloane published this work widely, including a *Catalogue of Jamaican Plants* (1696),

considered a valuable contribution to botany and scientific nomenclature (a system of naming and classifying organisms) in travel accounts for the Royal Society's journal. He also published his *Natural History of Jamaica*, and two volumes entitled *A Voyage to the Islands* (1707 and 1725). This work relied heavily on his connections to British imperial efforts and the slave trade. He funded his work with shares he owned in the Royal African Company and the South Sea Company, companies heavily involved in Britain's transatlantic trade in enslaved people. Additional funding came from his wife, Elizabeth Langley Rose, who held shares in a Jamaican sugar plantation.



Bust of Hans Sloane in the main foyer of the British Library.

Sloane immersed himself in a growing maritime and colonial network of naturalists, merchants, plantation owners, and politicians across the British Empire. This allowed him to gather information and specimens to add to his growing collections. Sloane acknowledged in his *Natural History* that enslaved people provided local knowledge for his research but rarely credited the enslaved people who gathered specimens for him. He also visited “slave gardens” which were small plots of land where plantation owners sometimes allowed enslaved people to grow food to eat or sell. In these gardens, Sloane gathered knowledge of African agricultural practices and African crops transported to and transplanted in the Americas through the slave trade. In some cases, enslaved people may have transplanted African crops from seeds braided into their hair and carried with them to colonies where they used agriculture methods and knowledge they brought with them from Africa.

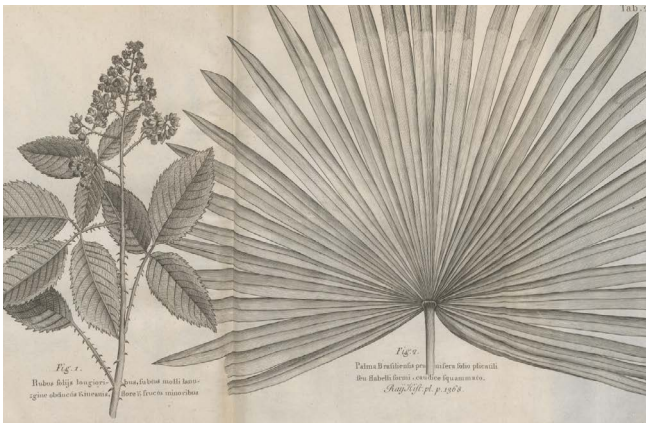


Title page of Sloane's A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbadoes, Nieves, St. Christophers and Jamaica, 1707.

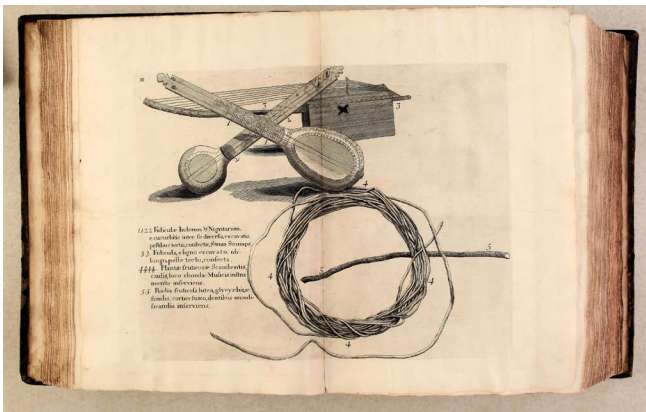
Sloane also knew that other naturalists used enslaved people to gather specimens. He had a close relationship with James Petiver, who used colonial networks to aid his collection and scientific work. Sloane often relied on Petiver's and his collaborators' ability to identify and describe specimens while maintaining his authority in medical knowledge and **scientific networks** at home in England. Sloane and Petiver's collecting interests overlapped, although Petiver's unique ability to work closely with trading companies, ship crews, and naturalists across the British Empire proved invaluable to their collaborations and the creation of vast specimen collections and scientific knowledge.

James Petiver

Petiver (1665–1718) was a London apothecary and, like Sloane, amassed an enormous collection of



Drawings from Hans Sloane's A Voyage to the Islands, illustrating plant life.



Engravings of instruments and uses of plants from Jamaica, from Sloane's A Voyage to the Islands.

specimens from across the Atlantic World. Petiver carefully built relationships with ship captains and surgeons (ship doctors), an extensive network of trading company employees, plantation owners, pirates, privateers (a private person or ship authorized by a government to attack enemy vessels), and colonial officials. These relationships are a testament to the extensive network of collectors he worked with and how his work as a naturalist and collector connected to British imperialism and the slave trade. Petiver's correspondence to his collectors is well-known for including careful directions about securing and transporting flora and fauna onboard ships.

Academic research reveals his crucial role as an intermediary and co-creator of British naturalists' knowledge and growing collections. His history also clearly demonstrates the links between British science and British imperial com-

merce, facilitating the exchange of specimens between his vast network of collaborators and the Royal Society in London. The specimens collected included animals, plants, birds, insects, seeds, shells, and other samples from colonial environments, such as minerals.

Petiver's connections included South Sea Company ship's surgeons, who often served as collectors for British naturalists as they sailed the Atlantic Ocean and visited colonies. His relationship with this company reveals the connections among British imperialism, the slave trade, and scientific work.

The Royal African and South Sea Companies

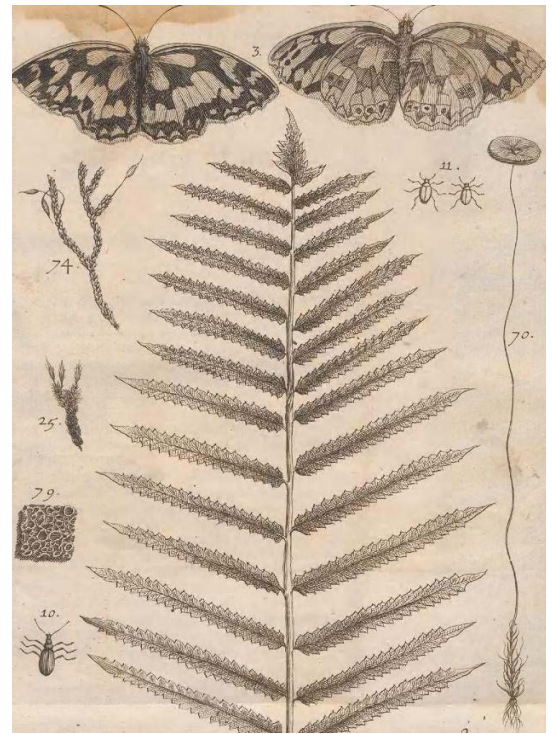
In the early 1660s, Charles II granted a royal charter not only to the Royal Society, but to the Royal African Company. Thomas Sprat noted in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) that the Royal Company served "as [the] twin sister of the Royal Society," revealing that Royal Society members recognized the crucial links between British scientific discovery, the British state, and the slave trade. By the 1680s, as the Royal Company turned to focusing on human trafficking, naturalists proposed relying on enslaved Africans from the Royal African Company to help collect specimens.

In 1713, the Spanish crown granted Britain an *asiento*, or contract, in the Treaty of Utrecht, which specifically expanded British involvement and profits in the slave trade. The South Sea Company (1711–1720) bought the *asiento* from the British crown, hoping

for vast profits in the slave trade. The company quickly failed due to financial difficulties, now known as the South Sea Bubble (a speculative bubble that occurred in Britain in 1720, causing a significant financial crash). During its decade of operations, however, the Royal African Company leased ships to the South Sea Company to transport enslaved Africans, and Petiver relied heavily on these ships, crews, and associates to build his growing biological specimens and knowledge collections.

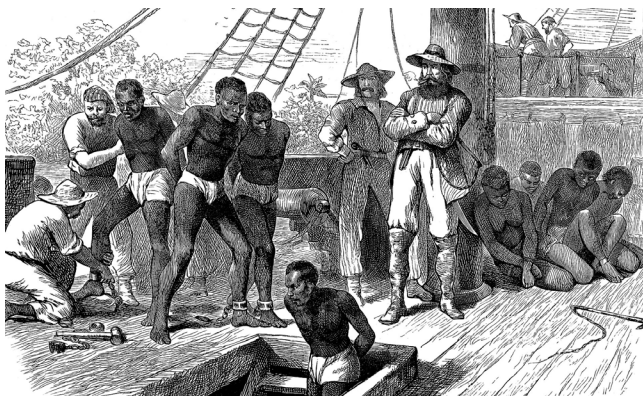
Research shows that ship captains and surgeons comprised almost half of his collaborators. Petiver's collaborators and agents collected specimens from various ports along the Atlantic rim lands, from South America to West Africa. In addition to ship captains and surgeons serving on South Sea Company ships, Petiver's collaborators had diverse but direct connections with the slave trade.

Research reveals that close to a quarter of Petiver's collaborators in the Atlantic World, overlapping at times with the captains and surgeons noted above, worked as slaving agents and crew members on slave ships or sold enslaved Africans in the Americas. In addition, Petiver regularly suggested that his collaborators use enslaved labor to gather specimens. Ship surgeons even provided Petiver with anatomical specimens from enslaved African bodies, gathered while surgeons treated captive Africans aboard ships or on plantations.



A foldout of butterflies and plants, from James Petiver's, The Petiverian Museum, 1695.

Conclusion



A 19th-century representation of enslaved Africans forced aboard a ship headed for the Americas by European slave traders and sailors.

The Royal Society's establishment in 1662 fundamentally transformed scientific practice in the British Empire, creating lasting patterns that shaped both scientific institutions and colonial relationships. This lesson has revealed how the Society's rise represented three interconnected developments that continue to influence scientific institutions today.

The Royal Society played a pivotal role in advancing natural history knowledge of the Atlantic World

between 1660 and 1838, as British interest in science overlapped with the growth of the British Empire and the slave trade. The Society maintained strong connections with the Caribbean facilitated by Fellows with ties to plantations and Caribbean trade, enabling a continuous flow of botanical specimens and observations to London. Notable British naturalists like Hans Sloane and James Petiver illustrate the direct links between British science and the transatlantic trade of enslaved people, as their extensive collections

remained influential throughout this period.

However, the Royal Society's rise also marginalized existing knowledge systems in the Atlantic World. The transitions from household and indigenous to institutionalized science reshaped not only who could participate in recognized scientific practice but also what types of knowledge were considered valuable and who could share them. The Society's emphasis on gentlemanly authority and formal documentation methods effectively erased contributions of British and British colonial subjects who had been actively creating and sharing knowledge in their community networks. In addition, their pursuits were inextricably linked to the expansion of the British Empire and its colonial enterprises, including the morally reprehensible transatlantic trade of enslaved people.



An early trade label of the South Sea Company.

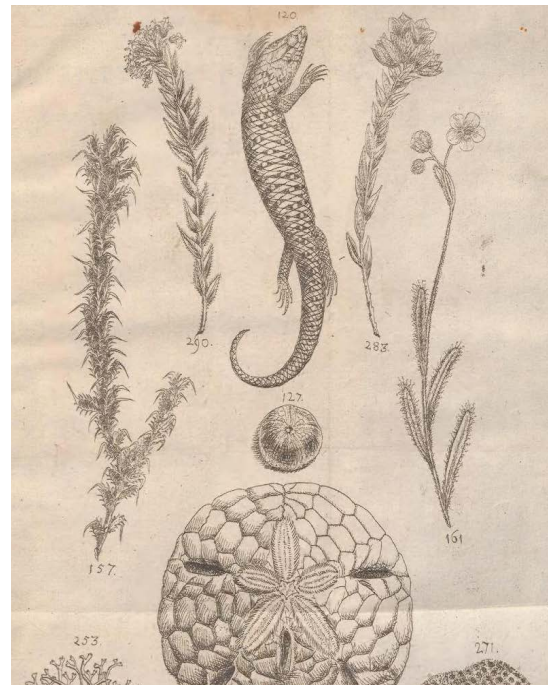
The Royal Society's involvement in natural history in the Atlantic World during this period was characterized by an extensive network of correspondents, support for key expeditions, the influence of figures like Sloane and Petiver, and a gradual shift towards more systematic and analytical approaches to studying the natural world. These networks, built through imperial commerce and slave trade connections, established scientific network hierarchies that prioritized European men while systematically excluding the very people whose knowledge and labor made British scientific advancement possible.



A scene of "British men of science" gathered at the library of the Royal Institution in London, c. 1807-1808.

Discussion questions

- Why did the Royal Society's scientific goals connect to global networks and specimen collection practices? How did these work in tandem with goals of imperial expansion?
- How did the transition to institutionalized science change participation in scientific inquiry? What knowledge systems were marginalized by this shift, and how might this relate specifically to British naturalists' approaches to African (and Indigenous) knowledge in colonial contexts?
- How did the Royal Society's reliance on slave trade networks shape early modern scientific practices? What does this tell us about the connections between scientific advancement and empire?



A foldout from James Petiver's, The Petiverian Museum, 1695.

Further Reading

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Delbourgo, James. *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017.

Royal Society. “Home.” Accessed 2024. <https://royalsociety.org/>. The Royal Society website includes Society history, scholarly articles, and primary sources, including images.

Image Citations

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Woman distilling, 1691, JSTOR, Open: Wellcome Collection, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.24755685>

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“Royal Society, Crane Court, off Fleet Street, London: a meeting in progress, with Isaac Newton in the chair,” wood engraving by J. Quartley, 1883, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wellcome Collection, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Royal_Society,_Crane_Court,_off_Fleet_Street,_London;_a_meet_Wellcome_V0013122.jpg

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View of Mr Greene’s Museum at Lichfield, c. 1788, first published in Gentleman’s Magazine in 1788, The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, <https://romantic-circles.org/gallery/image/mr-greenes-museum>

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Map of British trade routes from “Commercial Geography: based on the latest researches and statistical returns...,” translated by F. Muirhead, 1889, The British Library, United Kingdom, Public Domain, https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/2059209/5498_11202328083_4dec5e1e80_o_jpg

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Bust of Hans Sloane on display in the main foyer of the British Library, CC BY-SA 3.0, Fæ, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12724149>
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Hans Sloane, A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, London, 1707-1725, CC BY-SA 4.0, Courtesy of the Linda Hall Library of Science, Engineering & Technology, https://catalog.lindahall.org/discovery/delivery/01LINDAHALL_INST:LHL/1287836060005961
Engraving plate from Hans Sloane’s A Voyage to the Islands, showing instruments and stems of Jamaica.
Hans Sloane, A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, London, 1707-1725, Public Domain, <https://archive.org/details/voyagetoislandsm01sloa/page/n175/mode/1up>

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Foldout from James Petiver, Musei Petiveriani, Londini, S. Smith & B. Walford, 1695, p. 6, Public Domain, <https://archive.org/details/museipetiverian00peti/page/n6/mode/1up>
Slavers bringing captives on board a slave ship on Africa’s west coast, 19th century print, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=51783662>

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A trading label of the South Sea Company, from Green, John Richard, A Short History of the English People, Volume IV, Macmillan and Co, London, New York, 1894, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SouthSeaCompany_TradeLabel.png
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