

How are colonial systems represented in Early Modern Newspaper discourses?



A study of representations of places, people, and trade goods in the Burney and Nichols Collections of newspapers, c. 17th -18th centuries

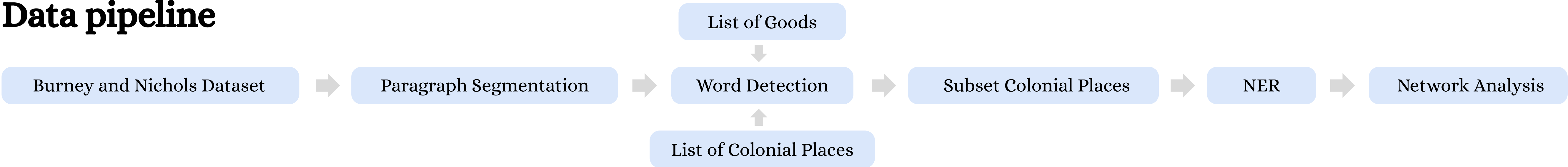
Cédric Baron
Siyan Liu²
Miika Piiparinen²
Jonas Fischer²

Rebecca Daniel⁴
Ila Manish³
Mengdi Zhang²
Ke Shu²

Jana Klinger⁵
Isabel Petersen²
Shibingfeng Zhang¹
Ville Vaara²

¹University of Bologna, ²University of Helsinki, ³Lancaster University, ⁴University of Trier, ⁵University of Würzburg

Data pipeline



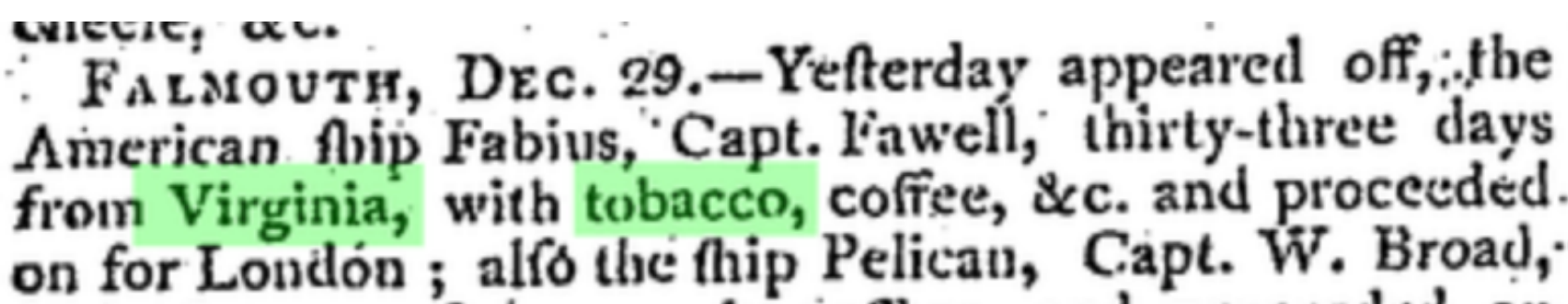
How is a colonial geography being created? How is the world being organized through a colonial lens?

Maritime Focus

The geographies referenced are almost entirely coastal and largely appear as maritime trade news. There is no mention of the extensive plantations in the Southern states of North America – only the harbours from which the crop was shipped. This discursively constructs the colonies as purely a coastline in the minds of the average English reader and does not reflect the realities of colonial production.

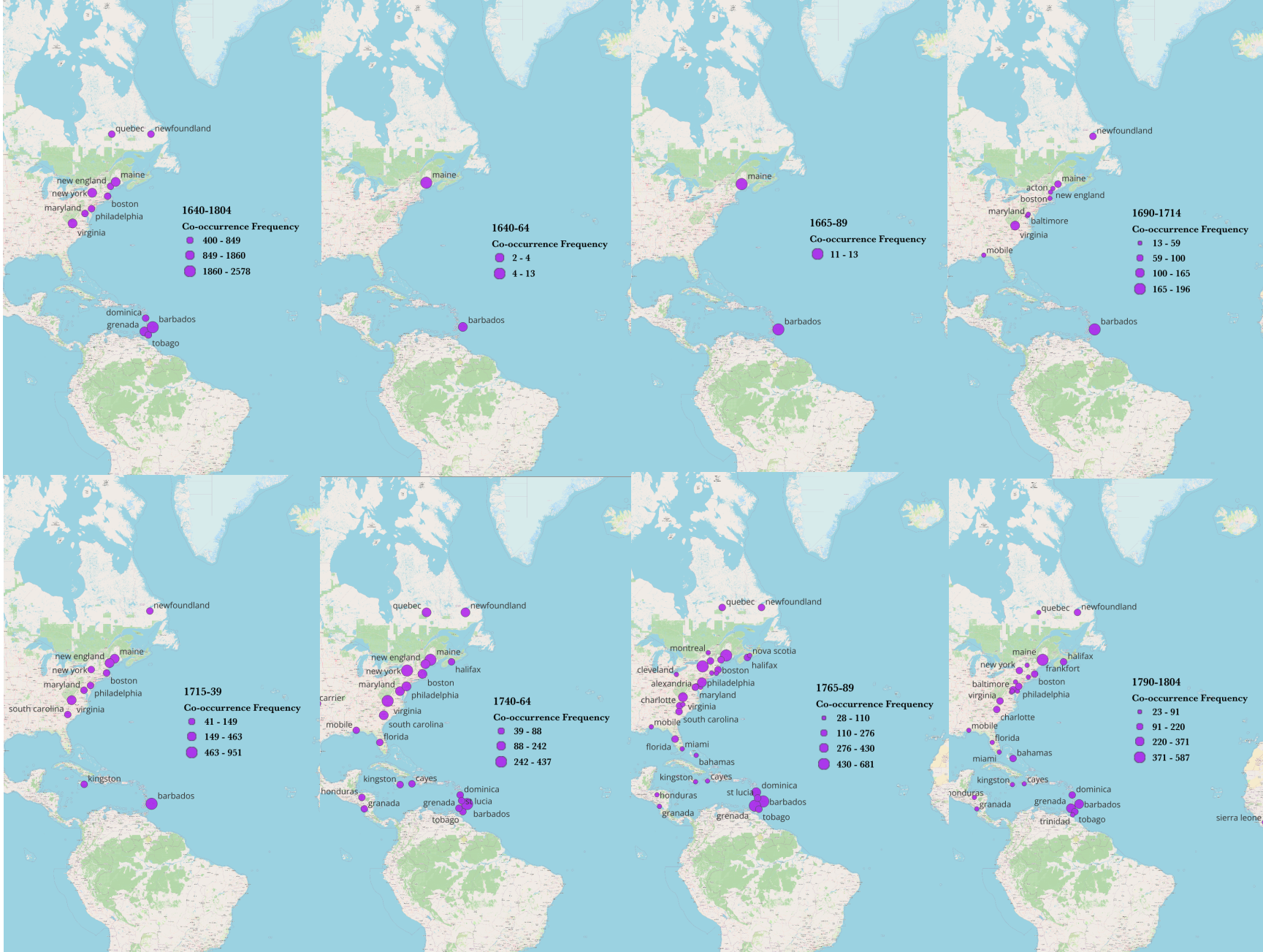
Unchanging View of the Landscape

The places mentioned are reduced to points on a trade route in ship bulletins. The fact that these places were captured, and the ports and plantations constructed over time remains invisible.

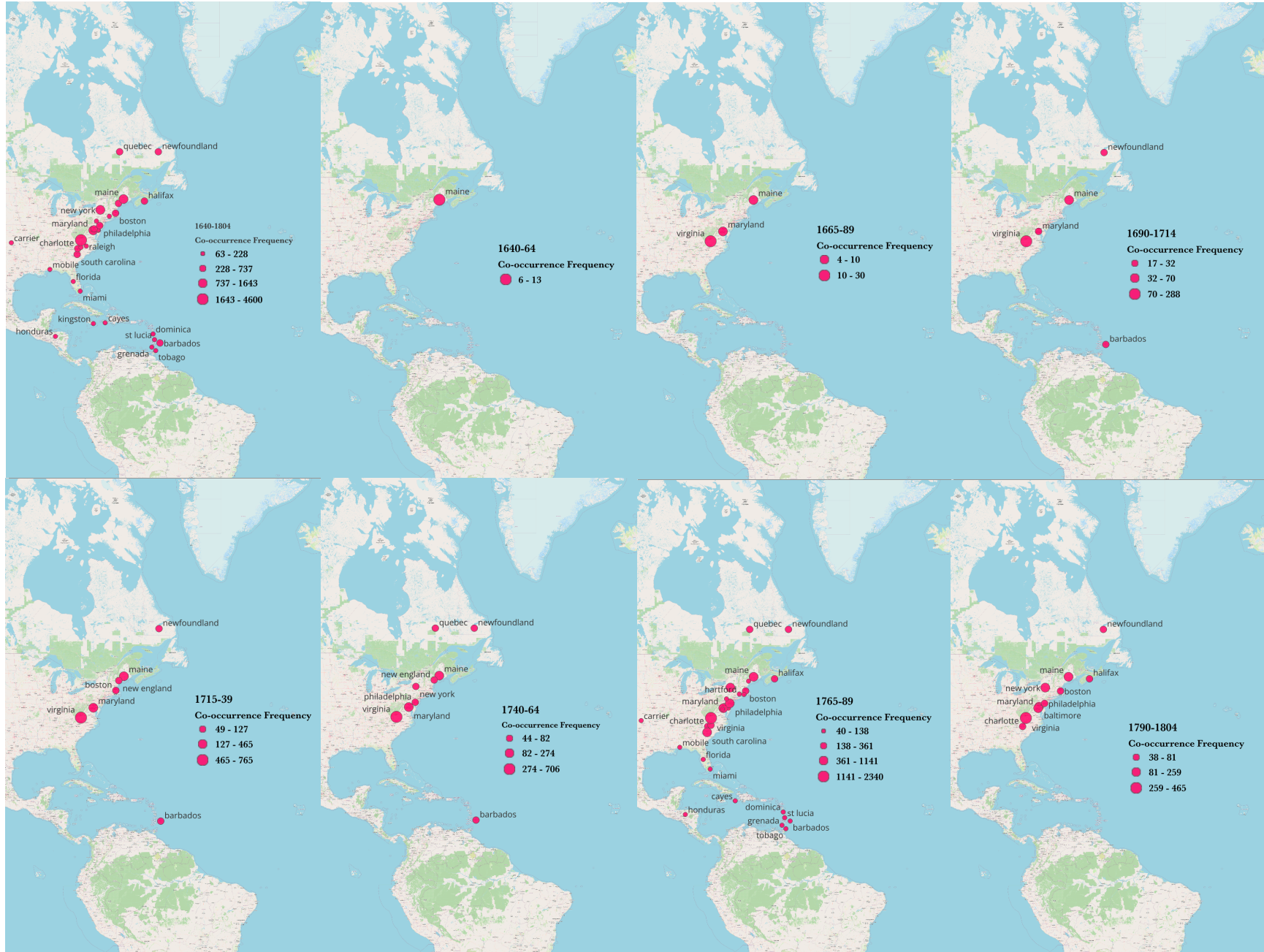


Johnson's British Gazette and Sunday Monitor, January 2nd, 1803

Locations related to 'sugar' across time



Locations related to 'tobacco' across time



Triangular Trade

Caribbean and New England colonies most often show up in ship bulletins about the movement of sugar: this was a well-documented trade route that formed a part of the triangular slave trade. The New England-Europe connection was easier than shipping directly from the Caribbean plantations.

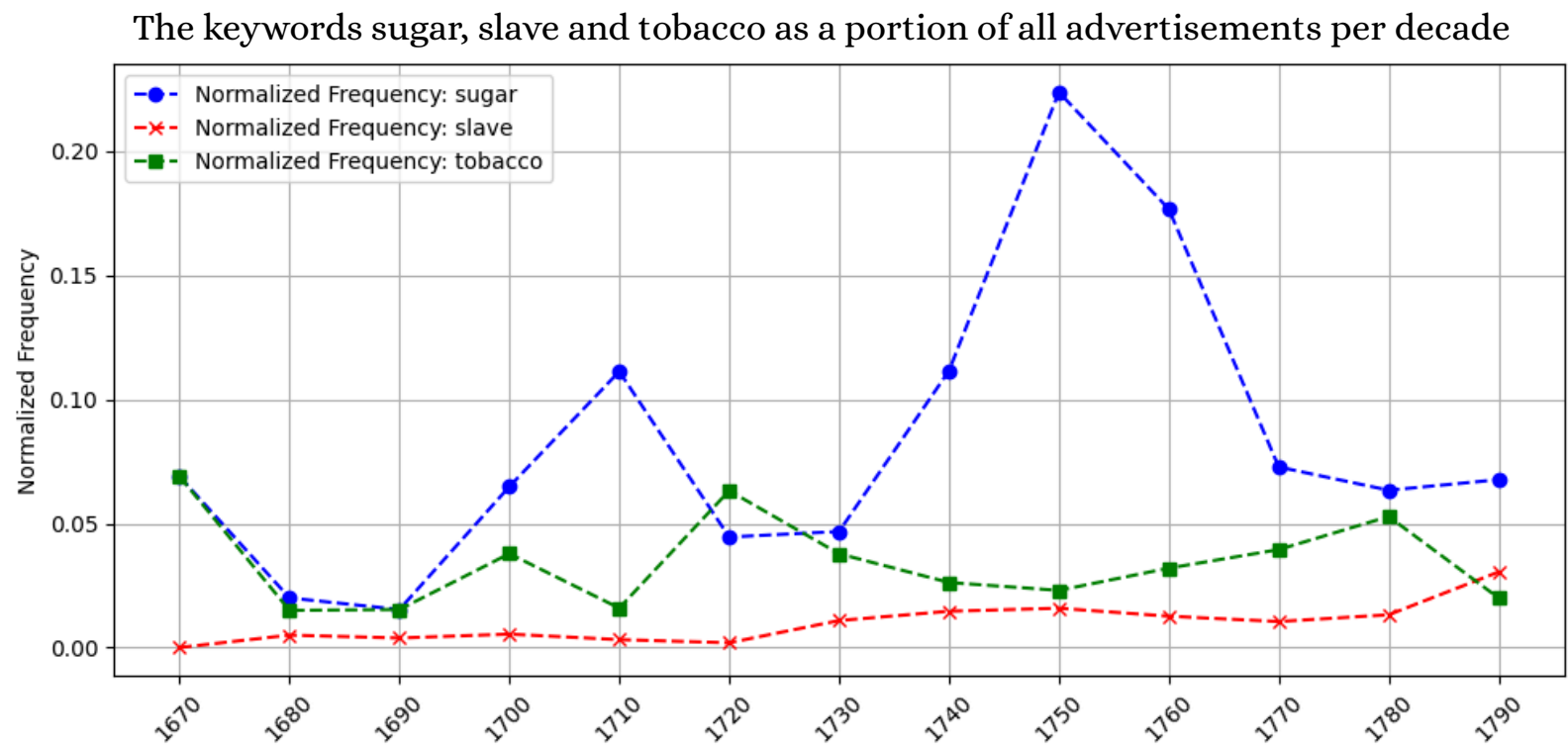
Critique of the Method

The newspapers create a geography of these lands as precise, bordered places that could be named by the White colonizer. Our method gives in to this construction of space. Understandings of space from Indigenous perspectives would provide an important counter-narrative to what we have identified here.

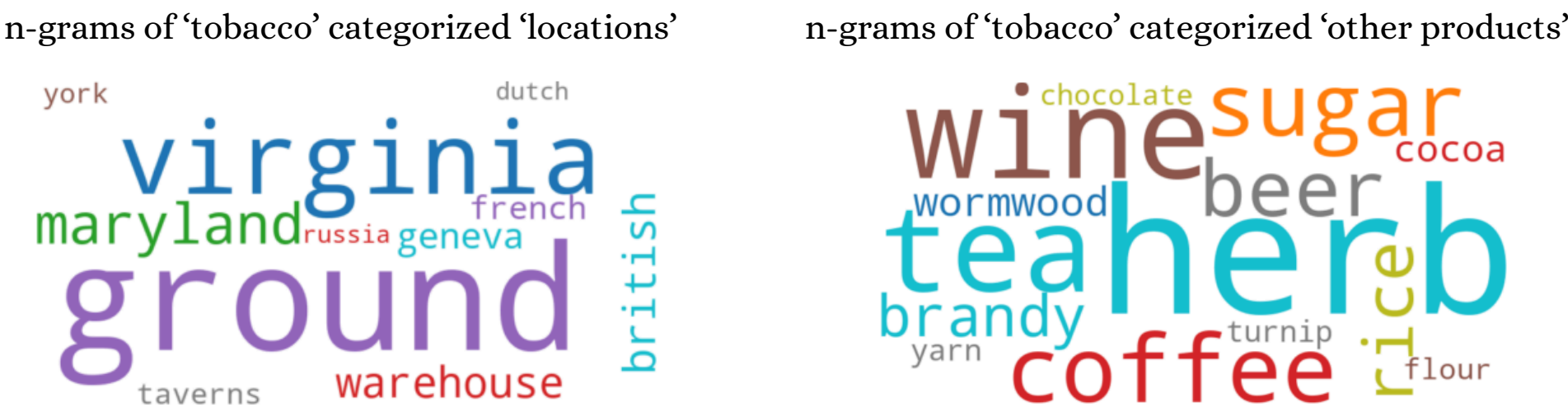
How were colonial goods depicted in advertisements, and what does this tell us about British society?

Enslavement and Trade

'Sugar' frequency spikes around mid-century, when slave trading also increases rapidly, potentially indicating that demand for sugar was supported by exploitation of colonies and the enslaved.



Context: Annual British shipments of enslaved people from the African coast in peacetime rose from an estimated 25,800 between 1749 and 1755 to 43,500 between 1763 and 1775 (Richardson, 1987).

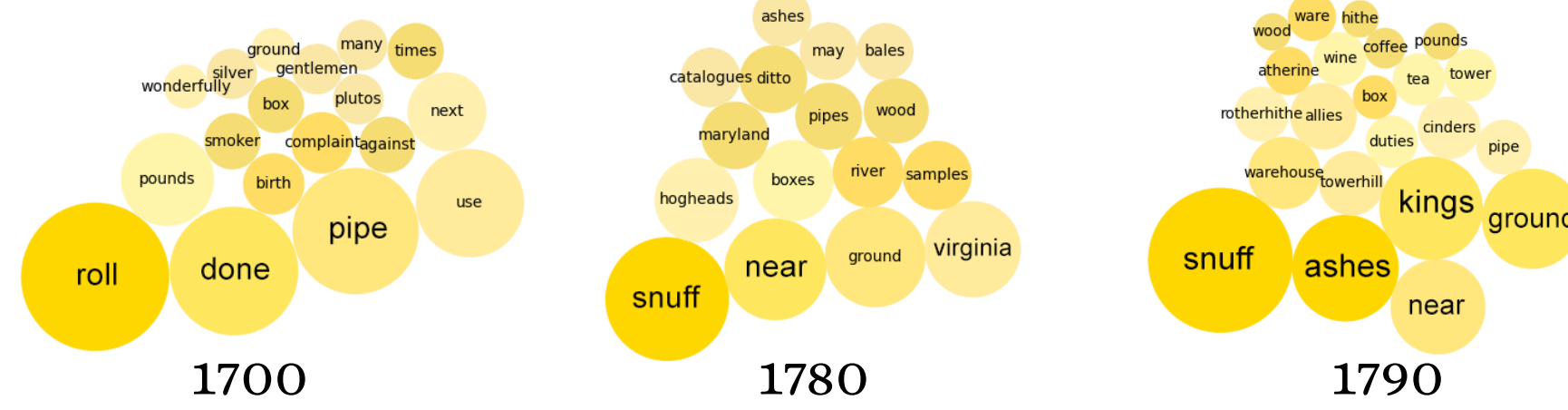


Hidden Origins

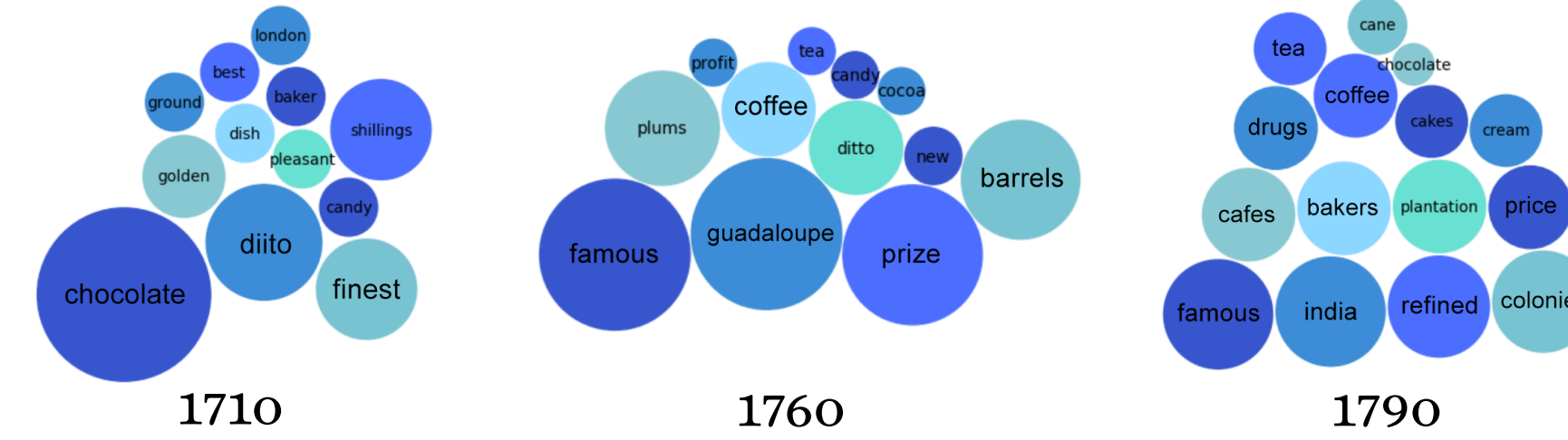
Colonial origins of the products are explicitly mentioned in only a few advertisements. While there are occasional references to their colonial background—such as terms like 'colonies' or 'plantation' in connection with sugar—such associations are absent for other goods, such as tobacco. Overall, colonial products are often presented together, even when they do not originate from the same regions. Within the advertising narrative, they tend to merge with locally produced goods and are primarily promoted for their quality, with their colonial origins fading into the background.

The Consumption Revolution

Words surrounding 'tobacco': Snuff became a new popular colonial luxury for the upper class by the end of the century.



Words surrounding 'sugar': Advertisements of sugar and tobacco are connected with higher consumption of tea, coffee, and chocolate. The language of ads targets working families and their new consumption habits.



How are people embedded in the colonial structures?

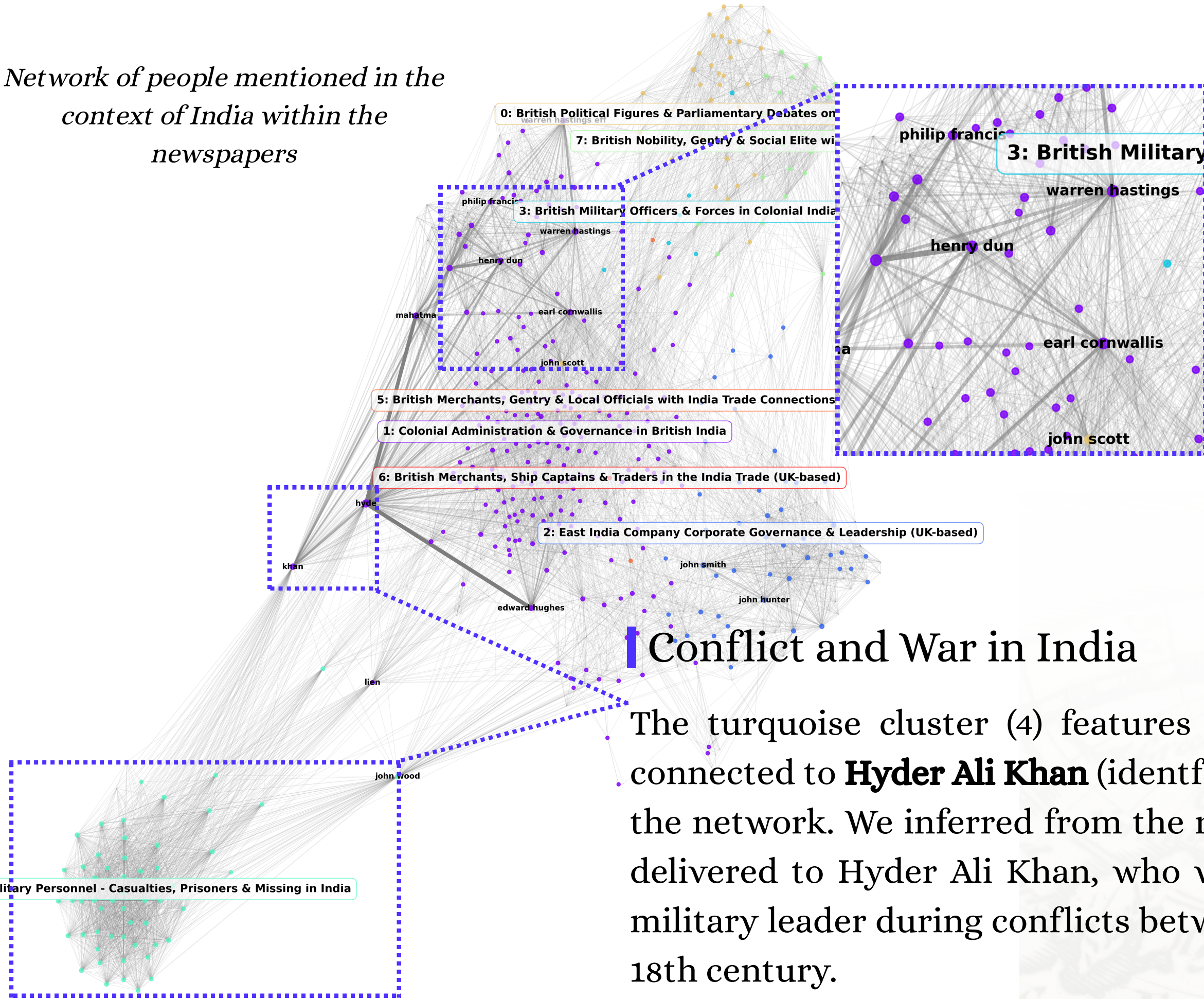
Colonial Governance Networks

The Indian network shows a centralized land-conquest model with high centralization (0.35) and dense coupling, indicating hierarchical power flowing from groups linked to politicians, nobility, and investment networks via the East India Company and its military. Absent shipping news suggest private Company information channels.

Graph Name	Nodes	Edges	Density	Avg Degree	Max Degree	Degree Centralization	Avg Path Length	Avg Betweenness
West Indies	1,806	30,776	0.0189	34.08	414	0.2107	2.6792	0.0009
India	600	7,180	0.0400	23.93	234	0.3519	2.5397	0.0026

The West Indies operated as a decentralized commercial system with lower centralization (0.21) and scattered sub-networks, showing fragmented structures where merchants, shipping partnerships, and administrators had greater autonomy. This maritime economy used public information networks, evidenced by shipping intelligence and commercial directories.

Network of people mentioned in the context of India within the newspapers



Conflict and War in India

The turquoise cluster (4) features war prisoners, most of whom are connected to **Hyder Ali Khan** (identified as 'khan' or 'hyde' by the OCR) in the network. We inferred from the newspapers that war prisoners were delivered to Hyder Ali Khan, who was a ruler in southern India and a military leader during conflicts between India and the British in the late 18th century.



Hyder Ali (1720–1782), engraved by Keck after William Dicks (1846)