

## Early medieval settler colonialism

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Settler colonialism is a foundational concept across all the courses I teach—whether we’re reading early medieval law codes, 19th-century federal Indian policy, or 21st-century poetry. Analyzing modes of settler colonialism across time allows students to see how conquest and dispossession function not as isolated historical events, but as structural logics that bind the past and the present. In my courses, we trace those logics across a deep historical arc, beginning not with the modern era but with the early medieval world.

I start with a provocation: what if the logics of Anglophone settler colonialism—logics of land seizure, jurisdictional violence, and narrative control—were already being developed in early medieval England? And what might it mean for students to consider that the story of colonialism they know as a present force in their lives is the same framework that shaped the medieval world, too?

Settler colonialism is often thought of as a modern phenomenon born out of Europe’s age of exploration. In fact, it is often imagined as the defining feature of modernity, or at least that is what scholars of colonality like Walter Mignolo would like us to believe. But when I use the term in early English studies, I’m not making anachronistic claims. I’m underscoring structural features—land expropriation,

settlement, resource extraction, and legal-ideological formation—that were active well before 1492 (or the 12<sup>th</sup>-century if we want to count the Norse arrival in Vinland).

We can see these structures in the historical record of the early medieval North Atlantic. The settlement of new communities on inhabited, sovereign land as well as the production of law codes, origin myths, religious narratives, and cultural artifacts all make up the fundamental structures of modern settler colonialism.

Students often arrive with an intuitive sense that colonialism is something that happened, not something that is sustained across time. This is where the concept of settler colonialism— as articulated by Patrick Wolfe as “a structure not an event”—can be usefully expanded in a medieval studies classroom. By introducing this model alongside early English materials, students begin to see how colonial logics are not only historically specific but also historically recursive.

One of the most effective ways to bring students into this framing is through questions of genre. Early English hagiographies, chronicles, and law codes do more than preserve history—they produce it. So, we might begin by asking: what does it mean to narrate a conquest as divine mission? What work does “religion for the sake of community” perform in justifying settlement? A key example I use is Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, which narrates the so-called “conversion” of the English as a providential unfolding of history. But when read alongside Indigenous critiques of missionization and conversion—something most North American students are already familiar with to some degree—Bede’s text offers students an early instance of spiritual conquest underwriting a territorial one.

Of course, introducing students to this framework can sometimes cause friction. Many arrive with a romanticized view of the early medieval world or, conversely, with no

exposure to it at all. The same is true with regard to students' previous experience with Indigenous studies. To address potential resistance, I offer layered entry points. We read poetry alongside legal codes. We also use Indigenous feminist theory to frame questions. I establish from day one that I'm not looking for mastery—I'm looking for ethical engagement. I take seriously my responsibility in the classroom to create a space where intellectual discomfort can be explicitly seen as productive change. I want students to leave with more than just knowledge of early English history or colonial theory, but a new conceptual vocabulary for understanding how history gets made—and how it makes us.

By presenting early medieval Anglophone settler colonialism as a site of both rupture and continuity, students can examine their own locations within colonial and imperial inheritances. And more than that, we make possible a mode of study that is historically rigorous, ethically urgent, and intellectually alive.