

Purchasing Dunkirk: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Absolutist Empire in England and France

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This article considers Louis XIV's purchase of Dunkirk from Charles II in 1662 as a case study in the interwoven histories of monarchy and empire. In France and England, proponents of absolutism sought to broaden definitions of conquest to encompass both diplomacy and commerce. It proved nearly impossible to bring the concept of buying or selling a town into congruence with grand dynastic designs. Analyzing diplomatic correspondence and royal history alongside an array of artistic representations, I contend, underscores the extent to which ideals of kingship collided with imperial and commercial concerns, as early modern states adapted to the realities of an interconnected seventeenth-century world.

INTRODUCTION

ON 23 JULY 1665, a truly motley crew of buccaneers and adventurers seized the Dutch settlement on Sint Eustatius in the Leeward Islands for the glory of King Charles II (1630–85). With an area of eight square miles, this relatively modest island outpost supported six cotton and sugar plantations, as well as a population of around 330 colonizers and 840 enslaved laborers. Despite its small size, Sint Eustatius became enmeshed in a drama of royal competition that played out across five continents. By the time a combined Dutch and French force recaptured the colony in November 1666, the English officers in charge of the local garrison had decided to rename it (at least informally) in a highly

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charged gesture of patriotic support for their king and disgust at his enemies. They called the island New Dunkerke.¹

The English force holding Sint Eustatius could reasonably have expected the new name to scandalize the officers demanding their surrender. During the 1660s, the small Flemish port of Dunkirk, strategically located near the intersection of the English Channel and the North Sea, emerged as a flashpoint in debates about empire, monarchy, diplomacy, and commerce. English and French negotiators signed an agreement in October 1662 by which Louis XIV (1643–1715) would purchase the town with its fortifications and armaments from King Charles II for 5 million livres. Over the course of the subsequent decade, both monarchs—as well as their ministers, supporters, and propagandists—attempted to frame this event in terms that aligned with the ideals of European absolutism. For Charles, news of the sale sparked rumors of renewed civil war and featured prominently in the impeachment of his lord chancellor and chief minister Edward Hyde (1609–74), Earl of Clarendon.² In France, in contrast, artists and scholars struggled to portray the purchase of Dunkirk as an example of martial valor and royal glory. It would take more than a decade for representations to converge on common themes. In the interim, the pressures of celebrating or disavowing the deal shaped French and English statecraft.

This article considers the purchase of Dunkirk as a case study in the interwoven histories of monarchy and empire in France and England. It follows discussions about the port through five phases: English acquisition (1658), Stuart Restoration (1660–61), diplomatic negotiation (1662), glorification (1663–66), and resolution (after 1667) as new narratives emerged within broader dynastic histories. Throughout, conversations about Dunkirk, sovereignty, and empire reverberated across multiple media and around the Atlantic world. Analyzing diplomatic correspondence and official royal history alongside public reactions, political polemic, and an array of artistic representations, I contend, underscores

¹ During the negotiations that resulted in the surrender of the English garrison in November 1666, commanding officer William Brewer consistently referred to the island as New Dunkerke (or Dunkerke) “Alis” Estatia. These letters are reprinted in Hamelberg, 2:40–42; Hartog, 94–102. There is no indication in English Colonial Office records that officials in Jamaica or Westminster approved or were even aware of the new name. For accounts of the raid on St. Eustatius that consider both Dutch and English archives, see Goslinga, 389; Israel, 432. Dutch historian W. R. Menkman briefly speculated, as I argue here, that the name change referred to Louis XIV’s purchase of Dunkirk in 1662. See Menkman, 110.

² Samuel Pepys described both the rumors of mob action (19 and 31 October 1662) and his impression of the campaign to impeach Lord Chancellor Clarendon (10 July 1663 and 20 February 1664/65) in his diary: see Pepys. The full text of Wheatley’s 1893 edition of the diary, organized by date, is available at <https://www.pepysdiary.com/>.

the extent to which ideals of kingship collided with the interests of merchants and joint-stock corporations, as early modern states adapted to the realities of an increasingly interconnected seventeenth-century world.³

Louis XIV and Charles II each sought to broaden the scope and scale of royal power in their respective domains. In the 1660s, competition between the two young kings inspired renewed efforts to harness empire, diplomacy, and merchant capitalism in support of absolutist agendas. In the centuries following the earliest Portuguese ventures along the coast of Africa, early modern European states developed through interaction with and in counterpoint to African, American, and Asian polities.⁴ Nevertheless, theorists and practitioners of absolute monarchy worked tirelessly to represent other modernizing modes of sovereignty, value, and exchange in ways that accorded with the traditional visual and political rhetoric of French and English royal statecraft. For Louis, this involved translating diplomacy and economic prosperity into an iconographic language of martial kingship. For Charles, in contrast, the theoretically absolute sovereignty achieved through conquest inspired fever dreams of imperial monarchy and a fiscal apparatus less dependent on parliamentary appropriations. Both regimes sought to broaden definitions of conquest to include both diplomatic negotiation and expansion into new markets. It proved nearly impossible, however, to bring the concept of buying or selling a town into congruence with grand dynastic ambitions. In France, attempts to glorify the purchase elided acquisition and military victory. In England, supporters of the regime subsumed the loss of the Flemish port within broader narratives of territorial and commercial expansion. In both contexts, Dunkirk came to emblemize hopes for imperial resurgence.

DUNKIRK AND THE ABSOLUTIST IMAGINATION (1657–60)

In a pamphlet published anonymously in Paris in 1657, Jean François Paul de Gondi (1613–79), cardinal de Retz, urged King Louis XIV to imagine a work of monumental art that could never plausibly have been painted. In this hypothetical scene, French armies fought valiantly to conquer Dunkirk and other nearby ports on behalf of a distant English ruler. Any informed viewer, the cardinal explained, would surely dismiss such a canvas “as a Capricious fancie of a Painter . . . or rather of a description of a Masquerade, where those who enter the Lists do only make their Swords glisten for the divertissement of the beholders.” And yet, the cardinal raged, this is exactly what the king’s first

³ For an accessible discussion of the growth of early modern global trade, see Brook.

⁴ Bennett, esp. 90–94; Martínez, esp. 1–24; Adelman, 1–12; Benton.

minister Cardinal Jules Mazarin (1602–61) had quite recently agreed to do for Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658).⁵

Gondi's fanciful exercise in imagined history painting co-opted a language of visual representation of profound significance to Louis XIV and his court. In a holdover from feudalism, French cultures of absolutism insisted that a king ought to be judged according to the valor and prowess he displayed on the battlefield, imagining *gloire* (glory or prestige) earned through conquest as a sign of divine favor.⁶ The cardinal's text urges readers to apply the visual rhetoric of absolutism to the Treaty of Paris, signed in March 1657, under the terms of which the English Commonwealth would aid France in its war with Spain in exchange for possession of Dunkirk and the adjacent fortifications at Mardyke. The combined French and English armies had not yet conquered the region. Nevertheless, Gondi decried the mere prospect of an English Dunkirk as "a publick Scandal, which eclipseth the glory of your Reign by such unparallell'd baseness." Any artist foolish enough to tackle the conquest of Dunkirk would be forced to include the "false Prophet" Cromwell watching the action unfold from the safety of the Tower of London. In this grotesque tableau, an affront to the king's credentials as an absolute monarch, "all the blood that is spilt whether Spanish or French, is drawn as if it were in a sacrifice, which we our selves do offer to his illusions."⁷ Evoking either pagan ritual or Christian sacrifice, Gondi precisely inverted the logic of divine right monarchy. There could be no triumph for Louis XIV should the terms of Mazarin's treaty be implemented.

By the time Gondi's words appeared in print, Dunkirk held both personal and strategic significance for French, English, Spanish, and Dutch leaders. Situated on the English Channel, the town and its port serviced the Flemish lowlands that had fallen in and out of French (and occasionally English) control for centuries. Since 1513, it had been part of the Spanish Netherlands. In 1646, when Louis XIV was seven, his armies seized Dunkirk, but they only managed to retain it for six years. During this interval, Oliver Cromwell worked to secure the port for England, sending John Fitzjames (1619–70) to Dunkirk to negotiate with its governor, Godefroi, comte d'Estrades (1607–86), in hopes that the town might be given over to the Commonwealth before it was reconquered.⁸ Negotiations stalled and a Spanish army took the city.

⁵ Gondi, 1659, 9–10. This contemporary translation hews closely to the original French text, published as Gondi, 1657.

⁶ For the king's embrace of a medieval emphasis on achieving *gloire* on the battlefield, see Cornette; Lynn, 28–32; Morrissey, 41–43.

⁷ Gondi, 1659, 8, 10.

⁸ Grose, 1933a, 7–8; Gardiner.

Control of Dunkirk remained a clear strategic priority for both Mazarin and Cromwell, serving as a point of connection between European power politics and oceanic networks of exchange. In Spanish hands, the town provided a convenient base for privateers to harass English shipping. Merchants complained that this “new *Algiers* set up in Christendom” interfered with international trade and endangered England’s fledgling colonies in the Americas. Some of the so-called Dunkirkers and Ostenders—marauders operating from these cities—reportedly even joked with English authorities that they would plunder Cromwell’s coal from Newcastle while he was busy searching for gold in the West Indies.⁹ For Cromwell, neutralizing this threat would be a necessary first step in his Western Design to conquer Spain’s possessions in the Caribbean.¹⁰ Meanwhile, French political leaders found English imperial ambitions deeply disturbing. The cardinal de Retz warned that Cromwell sought new targets for his “restless and ambitious imaginations” that had “come to nothing in the Indies.” A foothold in Flanders, Gondi suggested, would only encourage the territorial designs of “a Republick, which from the very first instant of its birth, embraceth both the one and the other Hemisphere, and, as it were, in a bravery defieth the Universe.”¹¹ All the while, Dunkirk’s location and connection to Atlantic networks of communication made it an attractive destination for disgraced exiles, including both French *frondeurs* and English royalists plotting a Stuart invasion. Removing Dunkirk from Spanish control offered obvious advantages for both regimes.¹²

The Treaty of Paris amplified Dunkirk’s symbolic significance. In the aftermath of this agreement, Charles, James (1633–1701), and Henry Stuart (1640–60) led a small force of English exiles that fought for Spain during the Flemish campaign of 1657. That September, a French-led army seized the fortress at Mardyke and, as promised, delivered it over to Cromwell’s forces. As fighting wound down for the season, the Stuarts joined a Spanish attack that failed to dislodge the small English garrison holding Mardyke. In 1658, the Anglo-French army captured Dunkirk in the wake of a major victory at the Battle of the Dunes. Soon afterwards, Louis XIV staged a triumphant

⁹ Sir George Downing described Dunkirk as “a new *Algiers*” in the House of Commons on 3 May 1678: Grey, 5:308. Italics in the original. Major Rich. Elton to the Admiralty Commissioners, 26 February 1656, in Green, 200.

¹⁰ As others have long noted, Cromwellian imperial policy emphasized interrupting the flow of Spanish wealth being used to finance the ongoing war against Protestantism: Kupperman, 1988; Pestana, 2005. More recent scholarship has uncovered a host of continuities between the Western Design (long presented as an aberration) and late Stuart colonial policy. See, for instance, Swingen, 32–55.

¹¹ Gondi, 1659, 16.

¹² Grose, 1933a.

entry into Dunkirk as a conquering hero only to hand the keys of the city over to the English Ambassador William Lockhart (1621–75).¹³ The mere hint that Louis XIV had fought on behalf of the commoner Cromwell, one of the parliamentarians responsible for executing King Charles I, threatened to expose the French king to ridicule and shame. No monarch would wish to invite comparisons with the author of the greatest affront to the idea of absolutism in recent memory. Moving forward, Dunkirk carried lingering associations in both England and France with the failure of royal ambitions.¹⁴

As England took possession of Dunkirk on 26 June 1658, the country was on the brink of a profound political reorientation. Oliver Cromwell died in early September of that year, and the already fractured English Commonwealth began to fall apart. In 1660, legislative leaders weary of a decades-long period of civil war and political disruption invited Charles Stuart to return from exile. His coronation, on 23 April 1661, signaled a fragile return to stability. It also brought Dunkirk back to the forefront of England's imperial ambitions.

RESTORATION AND PERSONAL RULE (1660–62)

The historical circumstances of the early 1660s converged to raise Charles II and Louis XIV as each other's most immediate rivals. The English king insisted that his reign rightfully began in 1649, when Parliament executed his father. Nevertheless, it took twelve years before the English political establishment recognized his authority as monarch. Charles II took power in 1661 with sweeping ambitions to reassert and amplify his royal prerogative. That same spring, Louis XIV opted to govern without a first minister. The young monarch took the throne in 1643 at the tender age of four. His mother Anne of Austria (1601–66) ruled as regent until 1651. With the death of Cardinal Mazarin in March 1661, Louis XIV seized the opportunity to prove his capacity as a ruler by taking ownership of French policy. Known as his personal rule, this new phase of the king's reign would serve as a referendum on his capacity as divinely ordained ruler.

For both England and France, however, historians have traditionally subsumed the conflict and uncertainty of the 1660s within narratives focused on later developments. Since the eighteenth century, Whiggish historians, intent on celebrating the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, have painted the

¹³ For a full discussion of the 1657 campaign, as well as the role of Stuart forces, see Waylen, esp. 184, 190–92; Grose, 1933a, 8–9.

¹⁴ Gondi's pamphlet, for instance, describes Cromwell alternately as an "Assassin" (4), a "Tyrant" (5), and "a Modern *Attila*, the Paricide of Royaltie" (17): Gondi, 1659.

twenty-five years of Charles II's reign as a period of relative calm between two political storms. The king was too interested in art, pleasure, and a slew of mistresses, this narrative suggests, to pursue an agenda that might exacerbate unresolved political and religious tensions. These pressures would eventually erupt during the exclusion crisis (1678–81) and bring an end to the brief reign of James II (1685–88).¹⁵ Likewise, confident effusions of French absolutism at Versailles have often overshadowed Louis XIV's experiments with new approaches to empire, diplomacy, and monarchy during the first decade of his personal rule. Before military victories in the Dutch wars and the triumphant crossing of the Rhine (1672), the future Sun King still felt a great deal of pressure to produce evidence of *gloire*.¹⁶

With the support of myriad royalist ministers, artists, and intellectuals, Charles II and Louis XIV applied the logic of absolutism to articulate more expansive visions of royal authority. The ambitions of both kings, it should be emphasized, far outstripped their effective control over domestic affairs, especially in venues and spaces far from court.¹⁷ In practice, divine right monarchy demanded a delicately choreographed negotiation between the impulse to consolidate sovereignty and the pressure to embody the ideals associated with a wise and just ruler.¹⁸ No king ruled in a vacuum. Public opinion, political opposition, and the weakness and corruption of bureaucratic institutions frustrated many royal designs. The resurgent Stuarts hoped that the goodwill surrounding Restoration would provide political capital to repudiate opponents and solve structural problems that had caused civil war. Nevertheless, Charles and his closest advisors squandered the opportunity, securing neither financial stability nor basic measures of religious toleration for Catholics and dissenters.¹⁹

¹⁵ The private papers of privy councillors provide ample evidence of these proclivities. Earl of Clarendon to Duke of Ormond, 9 September 1662, printed in Lister, 3:222. For typical examples in the Whig tradition, see Hume, 6:155–58; Lister, 2:215–17. For more recent discussions of art and sexuality in Restoration England, see Sharpe; Harris, 2007. Tim Harris offers a nuanced variant of this argument that the initial popularity of Charles II masked sharp religious and political divisions: Harris, 1993, esp. 26–51.

¹⁶ Sonnino, 153–57, treats the period before 1667 as a long prelude to the Dutch Wars. Lynn, 33–34, suggests that the period 1661–75 witnessed an aggressive pursuit of *gloire* by the young monarch. Burke, 61, describes the years 1661–67 as “the age of self-assertion” before “The Years of Victory.”

¹⁷ The literature on Restoration and the reign of Charles II is vast. For a useful historiographic study, pointing out several of the limits within which Charles II operated in England and the other kingdoms of Great Britain, see Harris, 1997.

¹⁸ McClure, 33–36.

¹⁹ For an evenhanded overview of the early years of the Restoration, see Kishlansky, 228–39.

As Louis XIV took the helm of the ship of state, France still reeled from domestic troubles, tax revolts, and the long and costly wars that had dominated the early years of his reign. Ongoing rebellions continued to cast doubt on the king's monopoly over state power.²⁰

Empire offered a potential vehicle to assert royal prerogative and attain glory. Despite substantial differences between the French and English imperial projects, both monarchs sought ways to use colonies to enhance the power of their regimes.²¹ Strict French codes of nobility disincentivized aristocratic investment in imperial ventures. Profiting from trade or commerce provided sufficient grounds to strip a member of the second estate of any privileges associated with their status, including tax exemptions.²² In 1661, Louis XIV delegated responsibility for colonial policy to his new favorite, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83), who embarked upon a thorough investigation of French overseas possessions. In 1664, Colbert established new French East and West India Companies, patterned after Dutch originals, as part of his design to centralize control of both government and trade. In the Caribbean and West Africa, this project involved pressuring colonial proprietors to divest and cede control to royally appointed governors. The West India Company, for instance, paid the heirs of Jacques Dyel du Parquet (1606–58) 240,000 livres to relinquish any claim on Martinique, one of several such deals.²³ The imposition of greater royal control involved an infusion of capital, both political and financial, that allowed possessions in the Americas—and especially the West Indies—to flourish. In 1662, Louis XIV considered French empire and European conquest as two interconnected projects tied to the fate of his reign.²⁴

Charles II and his closest advisors also envisioned colonial expansion as a vehicle for absolutism, and the early years of the Restoration would prove a crucial period in the history of English empire. Here, too, however, the long historiographical shadow of the Glorious Revolution has at least partially obscured the novelty of Charles II's imperial agenda. As Steve Pincus and Owen Stanwood, among others, have argued persuasively, James II's ill-fated attempt to centralize authority under a Dominion of New England undermined support for his regime on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁵ In contrast, as both Jack Sosin and

²⁰ For the extent of domestic resistance during the reign of Louis XIV, see McCullough.

²¹ Belmessous.

²² Clark, 223; Bien.

²³ Du Tertre, 1:438–47; Mims, 55–62; Higham, 28–29.

²⁴ Scholarship on French empire is too broad to survey here. For the importance of the 1660s, see Boucher, esp. 168–201; Hodson and Rushforth. French imperial policy is most often framed as a failure. See, for instance, Belmessous.

²⁵ Dunn; Pincus; Stanwood.

Robert Bliss have argued, the policies pursued at the time of the Restoration appear overwhelmingly conciliatory, as if Clarendon, the king's principal advisor, sacrificed any uniform vision of English empire to achieve a fragile stability among competing interests.²⁶

Clarendon and other policymakers pursued an imperial agenda capacious enough to promote royal prerogative while also securing support from merchants, planters, and proprietors. The Stuart regime chose its focus with considerable care, leaving the governments of North American settler colonies largely intact.²⁷ Instead, the king and his advisors embraced new opportunities to assert and entrench royal sovereignty overseas. Notably, Charles and James Stuart established the Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading into Africa (later the Royal African Company) as a vehicle to expand English involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. As Holly Brewer has shown, English absolutists could apply the same legal principles to justify both slavery and the divine right of kings.²⁸ Stuart investment in empire extended far beyond the slave trade. Clarendon and other leading ministers endeavored to build a network of colonies centralized under royal authority while using merchant-friendly reforms to buttress support for the regime.²⁹ This vision for an imperial Restoration settlement offered different policies and pathways for plantations with English settlers and commercial colonies focused on mercantile exchange. At least initially, the Stuarts aimed to placate powerful commercial interests while conquering new domains that would function under the king's absolute sovereignty.

TOWARD AN ABSOLUTIST EMPIRE OF CONQUEST

The unique legal status of Dunkirk in 1661 made it a focus for Charles II's imperial experiment. Most of the earliest English colonial ventures relied on

²⁶ Bliss differentiates between the Restoration settlement in North America and the West Indies. Both Sosin and Bliss, however, suggest that Clarendon privileged stability over strategy. Sosin; Bliss, esp. 132–60. In her analysis of Jamaica, Carla Pestana concludes that, with the exception of the slave trade, the Stuarts simply continued the policies established as part of Cromwell's Western Design. See Pestana, 2017.

²⁷ Bliss, 133–37.

²⁸ Pettigrew; Swingen; H. Brewer. Brewer's conclusions align with an emerging consensus that discourse surrounding slavery and the slave trade shaped European understandings of sovereignty and monarchy. See Bennett, 132–51.

²⁹ Both Abigail Swingen and Holly Brewer call attention to Charles II's embrace of empire. Swingen, 56–81; H. Brewer. As I will argue below, Swingen's emphasis on territorial possession, clearly a priority in the 1670s and 1680s, obscures the extent to which Clarendon's brief tenure as Charles II's first minister produced an abortive attempt to construct a global network of trading posts and factories in the private possession of the royal family.

private joint-stock companies operating under royal charter or proprietorships granted through letters patent. This corporate empire displaced much of the risk, as well as the considerable potential for reward, into private hands. At the same time, it granted a measure of autonomy long associated in English legal tradition with local liberty and corporate privilege.³⁰ In contrast, Charles II considered Dunkirk a private possession of the crown. As such, its expenses and maintenance fell under his own household budget, a situation that posed novel problems while also piquing the interests of the architects of royal policy. Even during the impeachment trial of Clarendon in 1667, five years after the sale of Dunkirk, members of the House of Commons could not quite agree on the precise legal and constitutional status of the port.³¹

That Dunkirk would emerge from the Restoration as a crown colony was by no means a foregone conclusion. Both the French and the Dutch could stake defensible claims to the town and its surrounding lands. More concretely, Spanish diplomats started from the position that it had never lawfully been captured in the first place. In the secret Treaty of Brussels (1656), Charles Stuart—then in exile—promised to return any territories that Cromwell seized from Spain. This already included Jamaica, captured in 1655, and would eventually also cover Dunkirk.³² Upon the Restoration, Spanish envoys immediately pressed for the return of both territories.

Charles and his ministers decided not to honor the agreement. Instead, the king, his brother the Duke of York, and the Earl of Clarendon began to lay the groundwork for a reformed maritime empire built around a network of royal possessions scattered around the globe. This new approach took its inspiration from the idea, a commonplace in international law, that military conquest brought absolute sovereignty over newly acquired territories. Charles's advisors were well versed in Grotian readings of natural law. A conquering king, this reasoning suggested, acquired property in the lands (and, under certain circumstances, even the people) whose sovereign he had bested on the battlefield.³³ For an English monarch, this meant that conquered colonies might be governed without any of the legal and constitutional protections that limited his power in other domains.

³⁰ Stern.

³¹ *The proceedings in the House of Commons*, 42–46.

³² Aubrey, 108; Swingen, 56.

³³ Grotius offered perhaps the most influential assertion that “any one whatever, engaged in regular and formal war, becomes absolute proprietor of every thing which he takes from the enemy.” This view of property acquired through conquest also informed most seventeenth-century intellectual justifications for slavery. Grotius, 334–50 (quotation on 335).

In 1661, Charles II, his privy council, and key law officers decided that Dunkirk and other territories taken during the interregnum were conquests and thus defaulted to the king's personal possession. This reasoning relied on several legal and historical fictions. As outlined above, Charles fought on the losing side in the campaign that brought Dunkirk into English possession. In addition, Cromwell's forces played only a supporting role in the conquest, instead securing rights to the town through diplomacy. Presenting Jamaica as a royal conquest required similar reasoning. Commonwealth forces seized the island from Spain in 1655 as part of the Western Design, and the Stuarts promptly offered to return it. In 1661, however, the king established this colony as "His Island"—only the second crown colony in the Americas after Virginia—and appointed the Commonwealth general Edward D'Oyley (1617–75) as his royal governor.³⁴ This decision threatened relations with Spain and likewise depended on a revisionist history that defied belief. "[By] his Majesty's acquisition" of Jamaica through conquest, the king's law officers would later assert during the 1670s, "he is absolute sovereign, and may impose what form of constitution both of government and laws, he pleaseth."³⁵ In future, if this principle held, any additional territorial conquests would entrench the king's prerogative and broaden the global reach of his absolute power.

The decision to retain Dunkirk and Jamaica signaled a shift in imperial policy. On 4 July 1660, mere weeks after the king's triumphant return to London, the privy council convened an ad hoc body, known variously as the "Committee of Plantations" and the "Committee for America," to craft a restoration settlement for English colonies across the Atlantic world. As work proceeded, however, Clarendon and the king formalized this body, reestablishing it on 10 December 1660, as a new Council for Foreign Plantations. The king's instructions urged councillors to inspect other foreign approaches to colonial administration and to pursue efforts to standardize charters, laws, and governments.³⁶

After reviewing European imperial rivals, the Stuarts took inspiration from Portugal. Dom João IV (1604–56) offered a model of successful royal restoration. The Portuguese king came to the throne in 1640 as part of a revolution aimed at reestablishing independence from Spain. In Westminster, both the Council for Foreign Plantations and a Council of Trade borrowed a distinctive Portuguese conciliar structure that provided an alternative to Dutch company-states or Spanish viceroalties. During a long and bitter war with

³⁴ The privy council informed the Spanish ambassador of the king's decision to retain Dunkirk and Jamaica in a letter dated 6 December 1660: Grant and Munro, 1:302–03; *Proclamation for the encouraging of planters*.

³⁵ Sainsbury, 9:429–30.

³⁶ Sainsbury, 1:492–93; Swingen, 58.

their Iberian neighbors, Portugal created an Overseas Council in Lisbon to secure crown control of colonial possessions. Made up of aristocrats and career civil servants, this institution acted as a central clearinghouse for royal patronage and colonial correspondence, with the goal of standardizing policies across a vast empire that included both scattered maritime outposts as far away as Macau and the burgeoning plantation economy of Brazil.³⁷

Most obviously, Charles II signaled his alignment with Portuguese imperialism through his choice of bride. The king rejected proposals for a Spanish or French match and instead pursued the Portuguese infanta. Their union represented the culmination of extensive diplomacy. Signed in June 1661, the Treaty of Marriage between Charles II and Princess Catherine (1638–1705) amounted to an assertion of dynastic imperial ambition. In addition to the new queen's dowry, to be paid "in sugar, Brazil wood, and money," Portugal ceded both "the City and Castle of Tangier" and "the Port and Island of Bombain [Bombay] in the East Indies" directly to Charles II. In exchange, the Stuarts bound themselves to keep Jamaica, Dunkirk, and (most importantly) Portugal out of Spanish hands.³⁸ In a last-ditch attempt to prevent the alliance, Philip IV (1605–55) of Spain offered a compromise that would have included a choice of brides and a desperately needed cash payment for the return of Cromwell's conquests. Charles rejected the offer, and the Spanish ambassador decried the king's marriage as tantamount to a declaration of war.³⁹

Along with Dunkirk and Jamaica, Bombay and Tangier formed the core of a new absolutist English empire to be constructed as a bulwark of royal sovereignty. The Stuarts considered each of the four territories personal possessions of the king. This quartet of colonies, one propagandist predicted, would both bring prestige to the restored monarchy and "may conduce to the honor, security, and advantage of this nation."⁴⁰ Clarendon agreed wholeheartedly. In an address to the Commons, the lord chancellor proclaimed "that the new acquisitions of Dunkirk, Mardike, Tangier, Jamaica, and Bombayne, ought to be looked upon as jewels of an immense magnitude in the royal diadem." These colonies "were like in a short time, with God's blessing, to bring vast advantages to the trade, navigation, wealth, and honour of the king and kingdom."⁴¹ Clarendon articulated a bold, imperial vision for English absolutism. This network of royal possessions, the Stuarts hoped, would entrench the king's absolute

³⁷ Myrup.

³⁸ Coxe, 5:78; *British and Foreign State Papers*, 1.1:495, 498.

³⁹ A series of letters and memoranda from February and March 1661 are summarized in Coxe, 5:83–84, 88.

⁴⁰ Sainsbury speculates that John Brydal authored this document: Sainsbury, 5:83.

⁴¹ Clarendon, 2:160.

authority and display a new kind of royal glory to be measured through commercial success.

The Portuguese treaty offered a roadmap for achieving an absolutist empire of conquest. To shore up the alliance, negotiators secured a guarantee that England could keep any formerly Portuguese “Towns, Castles, or Territories” now in Dutch possession.⁴² This paved the way for the Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading into Africa (chartered in 1660) to seize slaving forts and trading factories, with the proviso that Ceylon would be split between the two signatories. Any conquests secured under this mandate would enrich the royal family, many of whom invested in the Company, and would bring further domains under the king’s absolute sovereignty. In February 1662, Charles II commissioned his brother and heir “High Admiral of Dunkirk, Tangiers, and all foreign possessions in Africa and America.”⁴³ In 1663 and 1664, an English fleet seized Dutch outposts at Goreé, in present-day Senegal, and at several sites along the Gold Coast. The Dutch recaptured most of these forts during the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–67). After being expanded and renamed Cape Coast Castle, Carolusburg (taken in 1664) would anchor the English slave trade until the early nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Efforts to entrench royal prerogative in some domains did not necessarily guarantee conflict in others. At least initially, the Stuarts imagined that a network of crown colonies would operate alongside and in harmony with settler colonies (often called plantations).⁴⁵ At the Restoration, the Stuarts seized some opportunities to assert royal sovereignty in the Americas. In 1661, for instance, a committee within the privy council took advantage of a dispute over control of Barbados and several neighboring islands to determine that proprietorship had defaulted to the king. Nevertheless, Charles promptly rewarded Francis, Lord Willoughby (1614–66)—one of the principal claimants—with a royal governorship and a lease for half of the colony’s revenue for seven years.⁴⁶

⁴² Conde de Ponte to Charles II, 4 February 1661, and an undated memorandum summarizing the treaty, in Coxe, 5:78. The final version of the treaty is available in *British and Foreign State Papers*, 1.1:494–501. My interpretation is shaped by H. Brewer, 1047.

⁴³ Sainsbury, 5:79.

⁴⁴ DeCorse, 172–75.

⁴⁵ Karen Kupperman observes an early modern distinction between colonies, primarily focused on finding or creating wealth, and plantations, places where settlers would be planted. See Kupperman, 2000, 13; Games, 124.

⁴⁶ The president and council of Barbados acknowledged this situation in their minutes for 10 July 1661, which they submitted to the Council for Foreign Plantations along with a petition, recognizing that their authority stemmed from the king. Sainsbury, 5:45–46, 114; Higham, 15–16.

English American possessions had earned a reputation for latent royalism that departed drastically from Charles's British kingdoms. In 1649 and 1650—before even Scotland crowned Charles II king in 1651—both Virginia and Barbados declared their allegiance to the exiled monarch only to be cowed into submission with threats of force. The Stuarts continued to use proprietary grants, charters, and royal commissions to secure the loyalties of the aristocratic elite in ways that would not have been feasible in France. In 1663, the king granted a new charter to eight Lords Proprietor, including Clarendon and several other members of his inner circle, “to transport and make an ample colony of our subjects” in the Province of Carolina.⁴⁷

The architects of Stuart empire also sought to placate mercantile interests across the Atlantic world. The marriage treaty with Portugal secured the right for a small group of English merchants to reside and trade in major ports in Brazil and South Asia (including Goa, Cochin, and Dio). In a similar vein, the crown chose to operate Tangier as a free port, permitting merchants of all ethnic and religious backgrounds to operate in the city with only a minimal entry duty for any goods traded there.⁴⁸ Moving forward, the king planned to expand his sovereignty into a network of new conquests, many of which would operate as colonies tailored toward trade and commerce.

Negotiations that resulted in the purchase of Dunkirk brought the implications of Stuart imperial policy into focus. Charles II and his privy council endeavored to transform a network of commercial outposts scattered across the globe into the financial and political foundation for a new absolutist empire. This attempt to modernize and strengthen English monarchy sought to lessen the crown's dependence on legislative appropriations. Funding the experiment, however, also put immediate pressure on enduring points of conflict between crown and parliament. The future of Dunkirk would help to determine the success or failure of Charles II's absolutist ambitions.

NEGOTIATION (1662)

The costs of maintaining Dunkirk proved prohibitive, threatening Charles II's household finances. During the summer of 1662, French and English negotiators began meeting to lay the groundwork for the transfer of the town. Agents of the two monarchs signed a final version of the agreement on October 27. In the months before and after the deal, both regimes framed diplomatic

⁴⁷ Swingen, 35–36; McConville; Nelson.

⁴⁸ This provision excluded ships from colonies in Asia and the Americas in a nod to mercantilist policies elsewhere. *British and Foreign State Papers*, 1.1:494–501; *Proclamation declaring His Majesties pleasure*, Stein, 999–1001.

negotiation as a kind of conquest that could bathe a monarch in honor and glory. Stemming from parallel campaigns to modernize absolute monarchy, this imperative focused attention on commerce, royal finances, and diplomatic negotiation as sites of conflict that might produce outcomes akin to military victory. In each context, ministers and theorists experimented with new absolutist narratives capable of celebrating international trade and territorial expansion overseas.

The quest for imperial glory invited creative repurposing of the historical benchmarks associated with absolute monarchy. In France, supporters of the *ancients* plumbed classical history and mythology for precedents against which to measure European princes. Those who embraced the *moderns* turned instead to immediate predecessors or neighboring monarchs to find examples for comparison. Greedy for glory, Louis XIV and his promoters sought to transcend either metric.⁴⁹ The absolutist emphasis on *gloire* and martial kingship was predicated on the idea of a monarch personally leading his armies into battle. The semi-global scale of early modern European empires, however, made such feats of bravery unlikely if not impossible. Similarly, the staggering costs of imperial warfare made individual monarchs and the states they governed increasingly dependent on credit. Theorists of absolutism struggled to account for the delegation of royal authority to ambassadors and generals.⁵⁰ They could hardly fathom situations in which bankers and merchants might not find the king creditworthy. The fiscal reality of seventeenth-century Europe strained the ability of monarchs and ministers to move ever larger amounts of cash in specie, while also forcing those in power to negotiate baroquely complex credit structures to finance their global ambitions.⁵¹

The triumphant confidence of Stuart Restoration quickly collided with severe fiscal limitations. When Charles II retook the throne, the Stuart king almost immediately found his household strapped for ready cash. The Restoration Parliament promised Charles a settlement of just over 1.2 million pounds. In 1662, however, the privy council estimated that this figure fell more than 200,000 pounds short of annual expenses. This shortfall was untenable, straining the king's credit and creating a considerable demand for specie with which to redeem his debts. The royal deficit owed in large part to the costs of maintaining Tangier, Bombay, Jamaica, and Dunkirk. The maintenance and defense of the first three cost on the order of 100,000 pounds per annum.

⁴⁹ For Louis XIV's attempt to bridge the conflict between ancients and moderns, see Morrissey, 41–43.

⁵⁰ McClure.

⁵¹ For the vital role of fiscality to English state formation and politics, see J. Brewer. For France, and especially the materiality of money, see Spang.

Dunkirk alone, Lord Chancellor Clarendon calculated, required yearly expenses in excess of 130,000. The French, too, were keenly aware that the costs of Jamaica and Dunkirk ate into the king's household budget and left him with little room in which to maneuver.⁵²

At first, Charles II and Clarendon seemed intent on retaining Dunkirk as a node in the new Stuart empire of conquest. Over the course of 1661, the English lord chancellor and French superintendent of finances Nicholas Fouquet (1615–80) carried out back-channel negotiations for a treaty that might include “secret assistance” from the French to defend both Dunkirk and Portugal.⁵³ The cost of maintaining the Flemish port and its garrison, however, proved prohibitive for the cash-strapped regime. These issues—glory, trade, money, empire, and conquest—set the tone for a second round of negotiations between England and France, during which the sale of Dunkirk emerged as a consensus preference.

Achieving glory on a semi-global imperial scale, both monarchs realized, would depend on careful management of money and the delegation of considerable authority to worthy intermediaries. At the outset of his personal rule, Louis XIV introduced an innovative system of dual correspondence to ensure careful, direct engagement with diplomats representing his interests across Europe. Each ambassador and envoy would prepare separate accounts for the secretary of state and for the eyes of the monarch. This system allowed Louis XIV to insist upon the primacy of his will far beyond the boundaries of the kingdom despite the obvious contradictions that such delegation posed for absolutist ideologies.⁵⁴

In this context, points of diplomatic protocol became entangled in questions of glory. After the Restoration, Louis XIV sent the comte d'Estrades, the former governor of Dunkirk, to establish relations at the court of Charles II. In January 1662, a dispute over whether the French fleet should be required to strike its flag in the presence of the English king nearly caused an international incident. In a letter to d'Estrades, Louis XIV acknowledged that his fleet was in no condition to defeat an English armada, but he insisted that it would be worth declaring an unwinnable naval war “rather than be guilty of the least weakness,

⁵² The privy council records containing English estimates of the king's budget shortfall are summarized in Lister, 2:165–67. The French diplomat responsible for negotiating the Dunkirk deal suggested in July 1661 that Jamaica and Dunkirk each came at an annual outlay of about 1 million livres: d'Estrades, 1718, 183.

⁵³ Coxe, 5:96. This volume of Clarendon's papers also includes several missives exchanged with a French agent, Bastide, in the employ of Fouquet until the French minister's fall from power in September 1661.

⁵⁴ For the most thorough history of French diplomacy during this period, see Picavet. See also McClure, 151.

which may tarnish that glory I aim at in every thing.”⁵⁵ In this instance, the English relented, but a new precedent in naval encounters could hardly erase the superiority of the English navy, of which both the French king and his ambassador were clearly aware.

During diplomatic exchanges, both regimes expressed eagerness for new conquests and clearly understood their efforts in imperial terms. In his first private audience with Charles II in July 1661, for instance, d’Estrades offered a master class in diplomatic flattery, praising the Portuguese match as a vehicle for Stuart glory. Although the king had not actually bested anyone on the battlefield, the ambassador fawned, his marriage left him in the “condition to conquer whole kingdoms full of riches, and to bring immense treasures into his dominions without any of the inconveniencies of war.” Material wealth, this thoroughly mercantilist argument emphasized, offered its own distinctive species of glory. The riches amassed through colonial trade served as a kind of collateral that could be used to leverage against potential future conquests. According to d’Estrades, Charles II “designed” in this initial meeting “to push the business of Jamaica.” It is possible—even likely—that the English king sought formal recognition of his claim to the island, it may also suggest that Jamaica (like Dunkirk) might have been available at the right price.⁵⁶

Discussions stalled. Charles II urgently needed specie, and d’Estrades sought to utilize French credit structures to his king’s advantage. In the end, negotiations hinged—and almost fell apart—on the issue of how quickly and in what form the payment would be transferred from France. English negotiators only accepted d’Estrades’s final offer of 5 million livres in nine payments spread over two years after Colbert arranged for the Parisian merchant and banker Jean Hérinx (1615–ca. 1665) to provide a cash advance on the final installments in exchange for a commission of just under 12 percent (346,000 livres). In late October, French officials gathered 4.5 million livres for transport to Calais, where the silver would be handed over to the English, a payment weighty enough that it required forty-six carts to haul overland. The English tasked goldsmith Edward Backwell (1618–83) with counting the coins (1.5 million silver *écus*) and inspecting each bag for evidence of counterfeit or

⁵⁵ d’Estrades, 1755, 162. I quote eighteenth-century English translations in this edition, as they correspond quite closely with French originals published earlier in the century. In this case, “plûtôt que de commettre la moindre foiblesse, qui ternit la gloire, où je vise en toutes choses, comme au principal objet de toutes mes actions,” in d’Estrades, 1718, 266. The ambassador carefully tailored his letters for prying eyes. As such, these should not be considered private correspondence.

⁵⁶ d’Estrades, 1755, 109; d’Estrades, 1718, 171–72.

being underweight. It took four men twelve days (with a break for the Sabbath) to count and confirm the payment.⁵⁷

Londoners followed the progress of the funds with close interest. Pepys noted the arrival of the “Dunkirk Money” on 21 November 1662, and joined the king and his brother three days later when they visited the Tower of London to see the cash in person. The king’s moneyers melted the French silver and minted “new money . . . which are very neat, and like the King.”⁵⁸ Hundreds of thousands of new silver coins bearing a royal portrait would soon enter circulation, attesting far and wide to the credit and achievement of the king. This tribute, in terms of both image and riches, however, would have to contend with other often dramatically different political and symbolic legacies. “The price of *Dunkirk* here may much procure,” lamented poet George Wither. “*Dunkirk* was sold, but why, we do not know, / Unless t’ erect a new *Seraglio*, / Or be a Receptacle unto those, / Were once intended our invading foes.” In sum, he mused, “(Tis easier far to sell than gain a Town.)”⁵⁹

SELLING THE PURCHASE (1663–65)

As news of the Dunkirk deal broke, French and English politicians endeavored to shape a historical narrative favorable to their own interests. Public opinion, not surprisingly, proved nearly impossible to control. Despite the best efforts of the English privy council and the regime’s most ardent supporters, the opposition faction in parliament railed against the decision to part with a potentially valuable overseas possession. If the deal appeared to illustrate the weakness of the Stuart monarchy, Louis XIV and his propagandists also struggled in their efforts to present the purchase of Dunkirk in triumphant terms. This was not conquest by traditional means. Instead, royal diplomats negotiated an agreement by which the king would exchange multiple payments divided between specie and promissory notes in exchange for control of the town. Over the next decade, artists, scholars, and diplomatic theorists endeavored to frame the acquisition of this Flemish port—still part of France—as evidence of royal glory. This ambition turned out to be fraught with historical and representational difficulty. The artists and intellectuals tasked with celebrating his reign sought to broaden the definition of war to include both imperial commerce and diplomacy.

⁵⁷ Lister, 2:171–73. For a detailed and thorough analysis of the payment process, see Grose, 1933b.

⁵⁸ Entries for 21 and 24 November 1662 in Pepys.

⁵⁹ Written before Wither’s death in 1667, this political verse went through several printings in 1668. Wither, 3, 6.

To frame Dunkirk in the language of royal triumph required considerable creativity and care. The competition that would eventually evolve into the first Prix de Rome nearly ended in disaster for Charles Le Brun (1619–90) and the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. In 1663, Le Brun and his patron Colbert sought new letters patent with a revised set of statutes governing the institution. As mandated in these rules (yet to be finalized), the academy met on the last day of March to choose a “subject on the heroic actions of the King” for a student competition. The assembled members chose “the king’s conquest of Dunkirk, once by valor and once with riches.”⁶⁰

To an extent, this subject is typical of the multimedia campaign to magnify Louis XIV’s martial glory during Le Brun’s long tenure as chancellor.⁶¹ To realize this ambition, the academy chose to present the cash payment of 1662 (conquest with riches) as the fulfillment of the king’s earlier victory at the Battle of the Dunes (conquest by valor). This narrative sidestepped much of the complicated recent history of Dunkirk. Within days, the academy selected a proposal from established court painter Henri Testelin (1616–95), which invited students to interpret the mythical story of Danaë as a visual allegory for the king’s heroic actions in Flanders. In Greek myth, the king of Argos imprisoned his daughter Danaë after the oracle at Delphi prophesied that her son would cause his grandfather’s demise. The always amorous Zeus took a fancy to the young maiden and managed to impregnate her by means of a golden rain that seeped into the dungeon where she was sequestered. Testelin envisioned this shower of gold as a potent iconographic vehicle. His prompt used language of conquest with care and subtlety, acknowledging the role of money in a composition to be titled the “recovery” or “reconquest” of the town of Dunkirk into the king’s hands.⁶² Testelin’s prompt avoided the language of military action but quite clearly assigned agency to the king and his limbs. In an apparent reference to one of Titian’s (d. 1576) interpretations of the story (fig. 1), Testelin’s proposed design positioned the king (as Jupiter) above Dunkirk (personified as a young girl), while the god showers an old woman (representing Britain) with gold.⁶³ The story of Danaë, however, was not typically associated with triumph and glory. Instead, the mythical shower of gold tended to be deployed as a visual cue for bribery, corruption, and greed.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ “Un sujet, sur les actions héroïques du Roy”; “la conquest du Roy sur Duncquerque, une fois par la Valleur et une autre fois par la Richesse”: Montaignon, 1:256, 220.

⁶¹ For an excellent overview of the multimedia campaign to glorify Louis XIV, see Burke.

⁶² “La reduction de Dunkerque”: Montaignon, 1:224.

⁶³ Montaignon, 1:221.

⁶⁴ Goldstein, 327.



Figure 1. Titian. *Danaë*, ca. 1544. Oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Artwork in the public domain. The image is part of a collection of reproductions compiled by the Yorck Project. © Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH. Licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License.

The stakes for both students and academicians could hardly have been higher. Le Brun and Colbert hoped that the new patent would firmly establish the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture as the central clearinghouse for court patronage. Henceforth, all of its members would have the privilege to style themselves as painter or sculptor to the king.⁶⁵ The new “royal prize,” for which Dunkirk would serve as the inaugural theme, offered a means for the professors and rectors of the academy to evaluate aspiring artists seeking royal commissions and, ultimately, to control the artistic representation of Louis XIV and his glory. By the rules spelled out in the statutes, each student would have three months to prepare and draft a design. These submissions would be reviewed in July for a preliminary prize. With guidance and feedback from the academy’s members, three finalists would then have six months to produce a finished “tableau” by the end of the year. The winning picture would remain at the academy as part of its permanent collection, an enduring testament to the skill and vision of French art and design.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Montaiglon, 1:34, 212.

⁶⁶ Vitet, 269; Michel, 39.

The planned competition veered dangerously off the rails, prompting Le Brun and other officers to thoroughly revise the structure, timeline, and outcome. After selecting the finalists, academicians decided to change course, noting that the “uncomfortable wordiness” of the original instructions had caused confusion.⁶⁷ Having inspected the submissions, leading members expressed concern about the ability of students to paint well enough to capture the dignity of a royal triumph. Le Brun and his fellow artists decided to reopen and reframe the contest, dropping Testelin’s prompt and allowing each artist to choose a subject related to the king’s heroism. In addition, the academy invited its professional members and all of its students to submit work for consideration. Any current academician who won would earn the title of Professor, while students might have the work counted toward the requirements for full membership. As a result of these changes, the academy failed to award a royal prize on the schedule laid out in its statutes. In August 1664, the King’s Council of State delivered a clear and sharp warning to the body and its leaders, pointing out that several key provisions of the new statutes had not yet been administered. In the end, the competition culminated in the summer of 1664, at which point ten compositions (eight paintings and two bas-reliefs) had been submitted for review. By the time the prize was finally awarded in September 1664 (nearly eighteen months after it was announced), the theme of Dunkirk had been all but abandoned. Of the three prize winners, only fourteen-year-old painter Jean-Baptiste Corneille (1649–95)—who placed second—responded to the original prompt of the story of Danaë. The winning composition, submitted by Pierre Monier (1641–1703), instead imagined the heroism of Louis XIV through reference to Jason and the golden fleece and with no clear connection to Dunkirk. The visual gymnastics required to tackle the subject, it seems, proved too difficult for all but the most imaginative iconographers.⁶⁸

In 1663, still early in the king’s personal rule, there were as yet few clear royal triumphs for the king’s artists and intellectuals to celebrate. As drama surrounding the king’s prize unfolded in the Royal Academy, Charles Le Brun himself produced two (of at least three) representations of the king’s triumphant entry into Dunkirk that had been staged on 2 December 1662. Resurrecting a Roman precedent, many early modern monarchs celebrated military successes with elaborately staged triumphal entries, typically imagined as a performance of the king’s return from a campaign as conquering hero.⁶⁹ In Dunkirk in 1658 and again in December 1662, however, Louis XIV participated in ritual

⁶⁷ “La prolixité incommode”: Montaignon, 1:233.

⁶⁸ Montaignon, 1:221, 233–34, 266–67; Goldstein; Burke, 107–23.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Moffitt, 103.



Figure 2. Charles Le Brun and Jean Lefebvre. *Histoire du roi l'entrée du roi à Dunkerque*, ca. 1667. Tapestry. Collection du Mobilier National, Paris, F-2175-001. Photograph by Isabelle Bideau, Mobilier National: <https://collection.mobiliernational.culture.gouv.fr/objet/F-2175-001>.

triumphs that enacted conquest as they celebrated the king's arrival as a kind of homecoming.

Le Brun included one such design in his grand fourteen-tapestry series *L'histoire du roi* produced at Gobelins. Completed in 1667 from an earlier design, the finished hanging (fig. 2) eschews mythology entirely and presents the king in the guise of a conquering hero, albeit with subtle cues to distinguish this scene from a more traditional royal triumph. The legend woven into the finished work notes only that the king had retaken the city from the hands of the English. Mounted on horseback, Louis XIV accompanies his army as it marches toward Dunkirk. He lacks any of the traditional trappings of armed combat. Instead, the king wields what is clearly a scepter pointed in the direction of the town. This detail differentiates Le Brun's design from



Figure 3. Hyacinthe Rigaud. Portrait of Louis XIV, after 1701. Oil on canvas. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA, 70.PA.1. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

other royal equestrian portraits. Titian, for example, painted Charles V (1500–58) wearing armor and carrying a spear at the battle of Muhlberg. Other court painters (including Le Brun) frequently replaced one ornamental staff—the scepter, symbol of royal sovereignty—with another: a marshal's baton.⁷⁰ This distinction is illustrated, for example, in two famous portraits by Hyacinthe

⁷⁰ Lynn, 1. Titian, *Charles V at Muhlberg*, 1548, oil on canvas, 132 x 111 in., Museo del Prado; Diego Velázquez, *Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV*, June 1635, oil on canvas, 119 x 124 in., Museo del Prado.



Figure 4. Hyacinthe Rigaud. *Louis XIV of France*, ca. 1701. Oil on canvas. Museo del Prado. Artwork in the public domain. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Rigaud (1659–1743). In the first (fig. 3), the king holds a scepter which rests on a table covered with his robes of state and the crown, other material trappings of kingship. In the second (fig. 4), the king, dressed in armor, stands on a field of battle in the same pose, but with a *bâton de maréchal* resting on his helmet.⁷¹ Le Brun's tapestry thus consciously depicted the king in a standard martial pose adapted from Roman models (the equestrian portrait) but as a monarch (head of state) rather than a general.⁷²

French propagandists worked studiously to present victories around the negotiating table in the traditional terms of grand history painting. Le Brun thus cleverly gestured to the delegation of royal authority as it was projected

⁷¹ Burke, 187–98.

⁷² Moffitt.

beyond the borders of France in the visual context of royal pageantry. This conflation between statecraft and war is reinforced repeatedly throughout the image. Several soldiers, for instance, mirror the king's posture. This includes the figure in the central foreground—likely meant to represent a member of the *garde de corps*—who gazes at his royal master while running toward the city. This faceless figure carries his own ornamental staff that provides a visual link between the king's scepter and the ranks of muskets and swords that carry royal power in advance of the king's person directly to the gates of Dunkirk. In doing so, Le Brun ties the ultimate symbol of Louis XIV's authority to the implements of war. He thus carefully elides political posturing and military strategy, offering a visual argument that leadership carried out through skilled diplomatic negotiation might reap the same rewards as success on the battlefield. In Le Brun's vision, men of war take the place of the ambassadors responsible for bringing Dunkirk back under the king's control.

The interpretation put forward in this installment of Le Brun's royal history articulated a broadened view of absolutist practice taking shape in the intellectual and literary productions of French writers and theorists. During this period, Colbert, Le Brun, and a small group of other propagandists carefully directed the propagation of the king's image across artistic and written media.⁷³ As negotiations for Dunkirk unfolded, historiographer Jean de Lartigue (d. after 1680) was already articulating an approach to diplomacy that compared negotiation to armed combat. His treatise on *The politics of the conquerors* (1662) encouraged the king to pursue universal territorial acquisition across the globe. On an imperial scale, Lartigue insisted, French absolutism would depend heavily on diplomats, whose work would blend military strategy with *raison d'état*. French ambassadors engaged in a kind of psychological conflict that mimicked "an Image [or picture] of warfare." As on the battlefield, Lartigue argued, "we attack and we defend, we take cities, we win battles and defeat enemies without an army, without spilling blood, but by reason and address alone, and by this imperceptible art that is the highest degree of civil science."⁷⁴ Lartigue's text crystallized and explicated ideas informing Louis XIV's more direct approach to diplomacy. It also spelled out a vision of diplomatic negotiation as a venue for psychological conflict and interpersonal manipulation that corresponded with a broader intellectual shift in the framework of

⁷³ Burke, esp. 49–60.

⁷⁴ "Une Image de guerre, on attaque & on défend, on prend des Villes, on gaigne des batailles, on vainót les ennemis sans armée, sans effusion de sang, par la raison & l'adresse seule, & par cet Art imperceptible qui est le plus haut degré de la Science Civile": Lartigue, 123–24. I first learned of Lartigue's writings from William Brown. See Morrissey, 39–41; Brown, 234–36.

European diplomacy, as exemplified over the next few decades in the writings of Abraham de Wicquefort (1606–82) and François de Callières (1645–1717).⁷⁵ For Lartigue, diplomats should aspire “to manipulate minds” in pursuit of outcomes favorable to their royal masters.⁷⁶ In this new formulation, diplomacy became a vehicle for bloodless conquest without the notoriously bottomless expenses of mobilizing for war.

In 1663, Le Brun also used Dunkirk as the backdrop for a grand equestrian portrait (now lost) of Louis XIV. Traces of the image survive in descriptions recorded by André Félibien (1619–95) and Claude Nivelon (1648–1720). It seems likely that Colbert commissioned the painting for his own private collection. According to both descriptions, the canvas presented Dunkirk as the gateway to a glorious future of overseas triumph. In the foreground, the mounted figure of the king (holding a marshal’s baton) tramples on Arab and African weapons, symbolically vanquishing the enemies of Christendom. According to Félibien’s text (1663), Le Brun painted the king surrounded by allegorical figures representing abundance, renown, and victory. All three of these qualities converged in Dunkirk, where he had avoided direct military engagement both to ensure commercial prosperity and to secure the greater “glory and triumph” that came from bringing peace to all of Europe.⁷⁷ In this painting, Félibien concludes, Le Brun has displaced military success into a hypothetical future. Rather than the boundaries of the king’s empire, the background scenery reveals a “field open to conquest.”⁷⁸ Both artist and writer, it seems, acknowledge that the acquisition of Dunkirk did not occur as a result of actual conquest, while also adapting the iconographic and allegorical language of victory to raise the king’s actions onto the plane of royal glory. In 1663, Dunkirk was the only event resembling conquest for the king’s artists to glorify.

Echoes of this new interpretation circulated throughout French literary and artistic culture. In a “Discourse on the acquisition of Dunkirk” (1663), for instance, Charles Perrault—best known as the author of several classic fairy tales—compared Louis XIV’s victory at Dunkirk to the Roman triumph over Carthage. A champion of the moderns, Perrault carefully elides “acquisition” (as in his title) with language of war, insisting that it had been the king’s intention in 1662 to “conquer Dunkirk for the second time.” This conceit allowed Perrault to describe the king “giving battle and defeating his

⁷⁵ Lachs; Keens-Soper; McClure, 103–92; Hampton, 163–88.

⁷⁶ I follow Brown in translating “pour manier les Esprits” as “to manipulate minds.” Lartigue, 124; Brown, 235.

⁷⁷ “Estat glorieux & triomphant”: Félibien, 78. For the connection to Colbert, see Berger.

⁷⁸ Félibien, 79.

enemies” while also praising him for putting peace and the happiness of his subjects before his own “noble desire for glory.” In Perrault’s panegyric, Dunkirk thus becomes “a deposit to be withdrawn after the accomplishment of his grand design,” an investment in future military success that allowed the king to transcend the lessons of antiquity.⁷⁹

This was glorious conquest without any of the inconveniences of war. Perrault’s analysis all but ignores the negotiations that resulted in Dunkirk’s purchase, crediting the finger of God (as opposed to the hands of French diplomats) for “the favorable dispositions our negotiators have found.” This marginalization allowed Perrault to present the king’s actions in military terms. The king was the soul of the state, Perrault insisted, and it was his powerful vision and strategy communicated through his agents that had bested the English. Despite having confidence in the ability of his armies to triumph on the battlefield, Perrault surmised, Louis XIV figured that the purchase of a port of such strategic importance would undercut English maritime dominance. “This coup,” he added, amounted to a “political masterstroke” as it served not only “to conquer Dunkirk” but also to break the grand strategy of France’s enemies. Furthermore, the glory of this territorial expansion would be measured both in terms of peace and commercial expansion.⁸⁰

Perhaps the grandest expression of this interpretation came in the king’s official *Mémoires* of his personal rule, written in collaboration with Colbert and several secretaries between 1666 and 1671. With the benefit of hindsight, Louis XIV blamed Mazarin and Cromwell for the compromises that resulted in the transfer of Dunkirk to the Commonwealth in 1658 and its purchase in 1662.⁸¹ After a temporary truce, France again found itself at war with the English. In this new context, the king and his historiographers claimed Dunkirk as one of the most significant victories since the onset of his personal rule.

The *Mémoires* offered practical instructions in kingship to the dauphin, but also presented itself as a “means to correct [future] history” if the king’s actions should be misinterpreted.⁸² In this carefully crafted interpretation, the king and his secretaries chose to reclaim instigative agency and intentionality over the negotiations, declaring that Louis had “charged him [d’Estrades] most explicitly

⁷⁹ “Conquerir une seconde fois Donkerque” (89); “qu’il donna la bataille, qu’il terrassa ses ennemis” (89); “le noble desir de la gloire” (89); such that Dunkirk became “un simple déposit qu’il pourroit retirer après l’accomplissement de son grand dessein” (91): Perrault.

⁸⁰ “Ces dispositions favorables où nos negociateurs les ont trouvez” (93); “ce coup,” “un chef-d’œuvre de sa politique,” “à conquérir Donkerque” (90): Perrault.

⁸¹ Louis XIV, 2007, 154–56; Louis XIV, 1970, 92–93. Henceforth, all citations of passages from the *Mémoires* will refer to Paul Sonnino’s translation (Louis XIV, 1970).

⁸² Louis XIV, 1970, 22. The rationale for creating this text is addressed more fully in Sonnino’s introduction, esp. 4–6.

with making” the recovery of Dunkirk “his principal concern.” The king’s ambassador was thus merely “executing my orders” when he “[brought] casual conversations around to Dunkirk.” The *Mémoires* framed the peaceful agreement as a great victory for Catholicism in Europe, as well as an act of dynastic redemption. Mazarin was wrong to part with the town, meaning “it is certain that I could not have paid too much afterwards to repurchase Dunkirk, which I had definitely resolved to do but which in truth seemed hopeless.”⁸³

This revisionist royal history differs significantly from most other accounts of the negotiations. D’Estrades’s surviving correspondence suggests that the impetus came from an English source. The deal nearly collapsed on several occasions during 1662 over the amount and method of payment.⁸⁴ In practice, delays in correspondence weighed on negotiations. It took Louis XIV nearly a month to receive a letter dated July 17. When he finally replied, the king noted that he still lacked enough detail to give specific guidance about how to proceed.⁸⁵ Insisting otherwise, however, allowed Louis XIV to claim two instances of diplomacy—the Dunkirk agreement and the Treaty of Montmartre, never honored, by which Louis would have inherited the duchy of Lorraine—as his greatest success for 1662.⁸⁶

The theory of monarchical control elaborated in the *Mémoires* emphasized watching and comprehending, and Dunkirk could provide a useful illustration of this concept for the dauphin. The monarch, Louis concluded, must try “to see everything, to listen to everything, to know everything,” because “one never accomplishes anything extraordinary, great, and wonderful without thinking about it more and more often than others.” Although Louis is forthright about the means with which he captured the city—“I would always . . . have preferred conquering states to acquiring them”—he reaches conclusions that co-opt intentionality and responsibility for these actions. In a blunt assessment of the accomplishments of his ambassador, Louis argues that “Variety is necessary in glory as in everything else . . . whosoever says ‘great king’ means almost all the talents of his best subjects.”⁸⁷ Reflecting back on these earliest years, Louis stressed the importance of “such perfect and such rare tranquility” with

⁸³ Louis XIV, 1970, 93–94, 108. Lockwood argues that the *Mémoires* are a unique genre of historical autobiography, and Halévi suggests that they should be considered as a work of political philosophy. See Lockwood; Halévi.

⁸⁴ d’Estrades, 1718, 315; d’Estrades, 1728, 15–16.

⁸⁵ d’Estrades, 1718, 243; d’Estrades, 1728, 13.

⁸⁶ Louis XIV, 1970, 90.

⁸⁷ Louis XIV, 1970, 95–96.

the caveat that “my youth and the pleasure of leading my armies would have made me wish for a few more external affairs.”⁸⁸

SELLING THE SALE; OR, WHAT PRICE GLORY? (1663–66)

Across the Channel, efforts to justify or even celebrate the sale of an English domain sparked vigorous political resistance. Objections over Dunkirk quickly emerged as a rallying cry for a resurgent opposition, the influence of which had largely been absent from the Restoration. As news of the agreement broke in London, crowds gathered to protest the decision. Many critics blamed the lord chancellor for allowing the French to hoodwink the king out of a valuable foothold in Europe.

Clarendon and the Stuarts expected the arrival of the Dunkirk money to shift public opinion. Just days before signing the final agreement on behalf of Charles II, Clarendon wrote to fellow privy councillor James Butler (1610–88), Duke of Ormond, that when it came to Dunkirk “all men’s mouths are open according to ther several complecions.” Still, he predicted, “The money will shortly be in the Minte, and then wee shall the less consider the talke.”⁸⁹ In this, however, Clarendon was sorely mistaken. The lord chancellor’s opponents accused him of accepting payment from the French to secure the king’s support for an indefensible deal. In July 1663, this alleged misdeed featured prominently in articles of impeachment brought before the House of Lords. Clarendon survived this attempt to remove him from office, but Londoners began referring to his grand new home in Piccadilly as “Dunkirk House.”⁹⁰

Friends of the administration attempted to fold Dunkirk into a dynastic historical narrative far more favorable to the restored monarchy. In *A discours of Dunkirk* (1664), the royal apologist and pamphleteer James Howell (1594–1666) insisted that “twas nothing dishonorable for *England* to give away that which she never got.” In 1661, the king created the new position of Royal Historiographer for Howell, who subsequently defended his patron with considerable zeal. Howell indirectly repudiated Charles II’s initial decision to claim Dunkirk as his private possession. Back in 1658, Howell explained, “twas the *French* King with whom the town did capitulat; twas to Him she opened her Gates, and gave up her Keys; twas *He* who did ride Conquerer into the

⁸⁸ Louis XIV, 1970, 28.

⁸⁹ Clarendon to Ormond, 25 October 1662, printed in Lister, 3:227.

⁹⁰ Several contemporary accounts document public dissatisfaction with the deal. See Coxe, 5:278; Pepys entries for 19, 20, and 31 October 1662. For “Dunkirk House,” see his entry for 20 February 1665.

place, where he put up his *Standard*, caused *Te Deum* to be sung, and so took full possession of it." The city and its garrison only ended up in English hands under the terms of "private Articles with *Cromwel*. . . [who] being dead, and the Government of *England* quite alterd, (from a kind of *Commonwealth* to a *Kingdom*) the *French* King was not obliged to perform it longer." Howell added, lest his arguments ring hollow, that to retain the city would have "been to continue the Fame of an infamous Rebel, in regard the world held *Dunkirk* to be an Acquest of *His*."⁹¹ In the end, Howell asserted, Charles II and his ministers managed to convince the French to pay for a city to which the English could stake no real claim.

Such arguments failed to quiet critics. It would take more than words to rehabilitate the king's image as conqueror and undo the damage to his new absolutist empire. The English ambition to find a new Dunkirk in the West Indies, I contend, highlights the extent to which royal ambition intersected with colonization, blurring boundaries between continental warfare and imperial commerce. Even before his coronation, Charles II laid the groundwork for a series of wars in pursuit of Dutch colonies in the Americas, Africa, and South Asia. In North America, English forces conquered New Netherlands in 1664 and renamed the colony (and its capital) after the king's brother James, Duke of York. The king and his privy council, however, were far more interested in acquiring Dutch possessions in the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia. Even before the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Dutch War, Charles II instructed the governor of Jamaica to begin preparing an expedition against Curaçao and other nearby islands. Sir Thomas Modyford (ca. 1620–79) commissioned his lieutenant governor Edward Morgan (1610–65) to recruit pirates, buccaneers, and other adventurers on the promise of "no purchase, no pay."⁹² This fiat authorized approximately five hundred volunteers to pillage and plunder with near abandon, with the caveat that all structures, armaments, and (of paramount importance) the island itself would by default become personal property of the king.

By most contemporary accounts, this mix of personal profit and royal honor provided incentive enough to fire the ad hoc armada into at least semi-coordinated action. Morgan, the commander of the expedition, died during the landing at Sint Eustatius in July 1665. Despite this setback, his deputy Theodore Cary (ca. 1620–83) managed to restore some semblance of order. He and a "full council of officers" oversaw the distribution of plunder seized in Oranjestad, including hundreds of enslaved people, and established a small

⁹¹ Howell, 10–12. Italics in original.

⁹² The king to Modyford, 16 February 1665, and Modyford to Sec. Lord Arlington, 20 April 1665, in Sainsbury, 5:279, 292.

garrison in the fortifications above the town. In a report to George Monck (1608–70), Duke of Albemarle, then coordinating the naval war with the Dutch, Cary gushed that “his Majesty may know that whilst they have fingers on their hands and hearts in their bodies they will continue ready to serve him.” Only those residents who swore an oath of allegiance to the king were allowed to remain on the island.⁹³

Upon learning of the capture of Sint Eustatius and the nearby island of Saba, the king praised Modyford for his efforts to drive the Dutch out of the West Indies, urging the Jamaican government to redistribute Netherlandish subjects across English territories to lessen the chances of a revolt.⁹⁴ The privy council clearly intended for this to be one more in a growing list of royal possessions. His revitalized absolutism would bring towns and trading posts under direct royal control (and thus out of the hands of Parliament). It remade the monarch from a feudal lord to a master merchant. The functioning of this commercial empire, on the other hand, made clear the mercantilist dependence on hard currency while sharply pointing out the limits of the ruler’s creditworthiness.

Renaming the island New Dunkirk served as a defiant gesture of support for the English king. In doing so, the small group of Caribbean subjects insulted the Dutch and French forces then trying to take the island, not to mention the Spanish who had lost Jamaica and Dunkirk to Cromwell in the first place. The name change, however, could also serve to shame Clarendon and any other advisers who had engineered the sale of the Flemish original.

A French alliance with the Dutch turned the tide of the war, bringing about a series of embarrassing English defeats. Amid growing domestic outrage, the historical legacy of Dunkirk continued to provide a rallying call for a burgeoning political opposition. At the conclusion of the Anglo-Dutch War in 1667, an angry mob cut down trees and broke windows at Clarendon House before drawing a gibbet on his gate with the rhyme: “Three sights to be seen; Dunkirke, Tangier, and a barren Queene.”⁹⁵ Having failed to produce an heir, the vandals implied, the Portuguese match entangled the king in a Mediterranean boondoggle at the cost of a valuable Flemish port. By 1667, the king’s alignment with Portugal, along with his embrace of its imperial precedent, had become a mark of shame for the Stuarts and their supporters.

In 1667, Clarendon’s opponents again impeached him for a series of actions that they insisted amounted to the crime of treason. One of the parliamentary

⁹³ Theodore Cary to Albemarle, 23 August 1665: Sainsbury, 5:319. Thomas Modyford echoed this sentiment in a letter to Secretary of State Arlington, 8 March 1666: Sainsbury, 5:363.

⁹⁴ King Charles II to Modyford, 16 November 1665: Sainsbury, 5:329.

⁹⁵ Entry for 14 June 1667 in Pepys. This incident is also described in Lister, 2:386.

committees that investigated his actions focused on the Dunkirk deal, and the eleventh article brought against him suggested that he had not asked for a fair price for the town and its fortifications. This time, however, Clarendon failed to secure enough support to avoid a conviction. Both houses of Parliament voted to banish him from the realm for the remainder of his life. He was symbolically burned on the hand by the common hangman to signify his infamy.⁹⁶

EPILOGUE: DUNKIRK IN THE HALL OF MIRRORS

With the fall of Clarendon, Dunkirk finally relinquished its potency for critics of Stuart monarchy. This shift, however, struck another blow against the English vision for an absolutist empire of conquest. While Jamaica would grow into a wealthy plantation society at the core of the English West Indies, the other foundations of Stuart claims to absolute sovereignty over colonial domains faded away. New Dunkirk, of course, was quickly reestablished as Sint Eustatius. The king transferred Bombay to the East India Company in 1668 in exchange for a nominal annual rent. English forces abandoned Tangier completely in 1684 after decades of costly and largely unsuccessful efforts to secure their power in North Africa. Stuart investment in the slave trade would persist throughout the remainder of Charles's reign, but the Royal African Company's monopoly ultimately gave way to pressure from free traders.

In France, too, the significance of Dunkirk gradually receded as the needs of the king continued to evolve. By the 1680s, after a decade of military victories in the Dutch wars, Dunkirk was still included in the pantheon of conquests celebrated by Le Brun in the Grand Hall of Versailles. This example, however, was no longer a central event in the repertoire of the king's glory, but could instead be relegated to the thirteenth "petite tableau," far from the central panel representing the king and his personal rule (fig. 5).

In his design for "Acquisition de Dunkerque," Le Brun again focused attention on the payment sent to England, resurrecting an image abandoned by the Royal Academy decades earlier. As explained in an officially sanctioned guide to the paintings at Versailles, a kneeling figure (representing Dunkirk) presents the key to the city to France, while she directs an angel ("la Piété du Prince") to pour silver into England's coffers. Meanwhile, Protestant "heresy" retires from the scene in anguish.⁹⁷ Unlike surviving representations from the 1660s, this comparatively modest medallion—evocative of a Roman cameo—explicitly acknowledged the financial transaction, while representing

⁹⁶ Lister, 2:422–44.

⁹⁷ Rainsant, 80–81.



Figure 5. Charles Le Brun. *Acquisition de Dunkerque*, 1662. Marouflage, oil on canvas. Versailles, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, inv. no. 2932. Photograph by René-Gabriel Ojeda / Franck Raux / Dominique Couto, ed. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

this as an exercise of royal salvation on behalf of the king's abandoned subjects. With numerous conquests and victories to celebrate, Catholic piety and Protestant greed had replaced conquest and triumph as the key facets of the acquisition of Dunkirk.

In this final interpretation, Le Brun—who had overseen the Royal Academy's abortive contest—recognized the fact that the city had been purchased. The allegory of abundance described by Félibien had been replaced by a shower of silver to signify Stuart greed in the face of English heresy. This comfortable historical narrative displaced the uncertainty and experimentation that defined the initial years of the king's personal rule. Louis XIV never fully acknowledged the limits of his capacity or his power, but absences and erasures in historical evaluation and artistic glorification foreground the importance of his greed for glory within France and across its empire.

The quest to control historical and political narratives surrounding the purchase of Dunkirk would leave a lasting mark on histories of empire, trade, and diplomacy. Failure to retain the Flemish port undermined the restored Stuart regime, tarnished the reputation of Clarendon, and frustrated efforts to develop

an absolutist empire of conquest. French iconographers found more to celebrate. In both contexts, attempts to fold both commerce and diplomacy into an absolutist framework helped to establish each more firmly as a crucial component of European statecraft.

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