The natural flows of air and sea had a profound effect on European colonisation and exploitation of the Caribbean. Early European mariners quickly discovered that the clockwise rotation of wind and currents in the North Atlantic basin, most notably that of the Gulf Stream, greatly facilitated navigation to and from the new world. It was also learned that within the Caribbean, the prevailing currents and winds flowed to the west, sometimes reaching speeds of up to five knots. This made it easy to enter, but difficult to exit the Caribbean through the Lesser Antilles. Wooden-hulled sailing ships could leave with some difficulty via the Anegada, Mona, and Windward Passages in the Greater Antilles, though by the early sixteenth century a more desirable route was discovered through the Leeward Passage.\(^1\) This involved sailing through the Yucatan Channel to enter the Gulf Stream in the Gulf of Mexico, and to coast with it through the Straits of Florida and out into the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, virtually all ships destined to or from the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, or the Atlantic side of Central and South America eventually came through Florida waters. Given the treacherous nature of the reefs and storms along this route Florida’s coastline acted as a kind of cultural sieve, culling a representative sample of this shipping in the form of thousands of sunken vessels which lie preserved on the seafloor, awaiting discovery and excavation by modern archaeologists.

This phenomenon makes the study of Florida shipwrecks ideally suited to gaining a broader understanding of interregional trade and the evolution of and interaction between economic core and peripheral areas during the development of global capitalism in the sixteenth through twentieth centuries. Keith Muckelroy was the first maritime archaeologist to propose analysing shipwrecks as components within larger military and economic systems.\(^2\) Since he wrote, and especially in
recent years, increasing numbers of archaeologists have used data from shipwrecks for such research.\(^3\)

The present study is different in that instead of focusing on the material remains of wrecks in the archaeological record, it relies on shipping losses extant in the documentary record. This chapter comprises an analysis of a dataset of 1,431 shipwrecks lost in Florida waters between 1520 and 1890, modified from a larger database originally compiled by state underwater archaeologists in the Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research (BAR). At least one study of similar scope has been undertaken to date, which utilised a database of 4,000 shipwrecks in the Gulf of Mexico.\(^4\) Evan Garrison’s valuable and innovative study focused primarily on spatial patterning, in order to generate a predictive model of likely shipwreck locations, based on factors such as shipping routes, winds and currents, port locations, historic hurricane paths, and the location of shoals, bars, barrier islands, reefs, and other hazards. The present analysis, however, is less concerned with where or how the shipwrecks took place than with where they were going to or coming from, and what commodities they were carrying. The quantification of these types of variables exposes patterns reflecting the ongoing processes of economic restructuring that took place throughout Europe and the new world between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

**Cores, peripheries, and the expansion of global capitalism**

Immanuel Wallerstein proposed that in the development of a capitalist world economy, the global division of labour consists of core and peripheral areas.\(^5\) Core regions are those with political, economic, and technological power, and their sophisticated infrastructures – including shipbuilding industries – are used to extract and transport commodities from remote or peripheral areas. Wallerstein maintained that prestige or sumptuary goods alone could not perpetuate what he termed the Modern World-System, which instead required the production of bulk goods, those which were seen as necessary by increasingly consumer-driven societies. One notable example is that of sugar, whose transformation from a rarity to a luxury, and finally to a household necessity, has been well chronicled by Sidney Mintz.\(^6\) The global division of cores and peripheries was therefore driven by the impetus to open new markets for such manufactured or processed goods, and to obtain exploitable resources such as raw materials, cash crop produce, and labour. Wallerstein also discussed intermediate areas and semi-peripheral societies which exhibit features of