

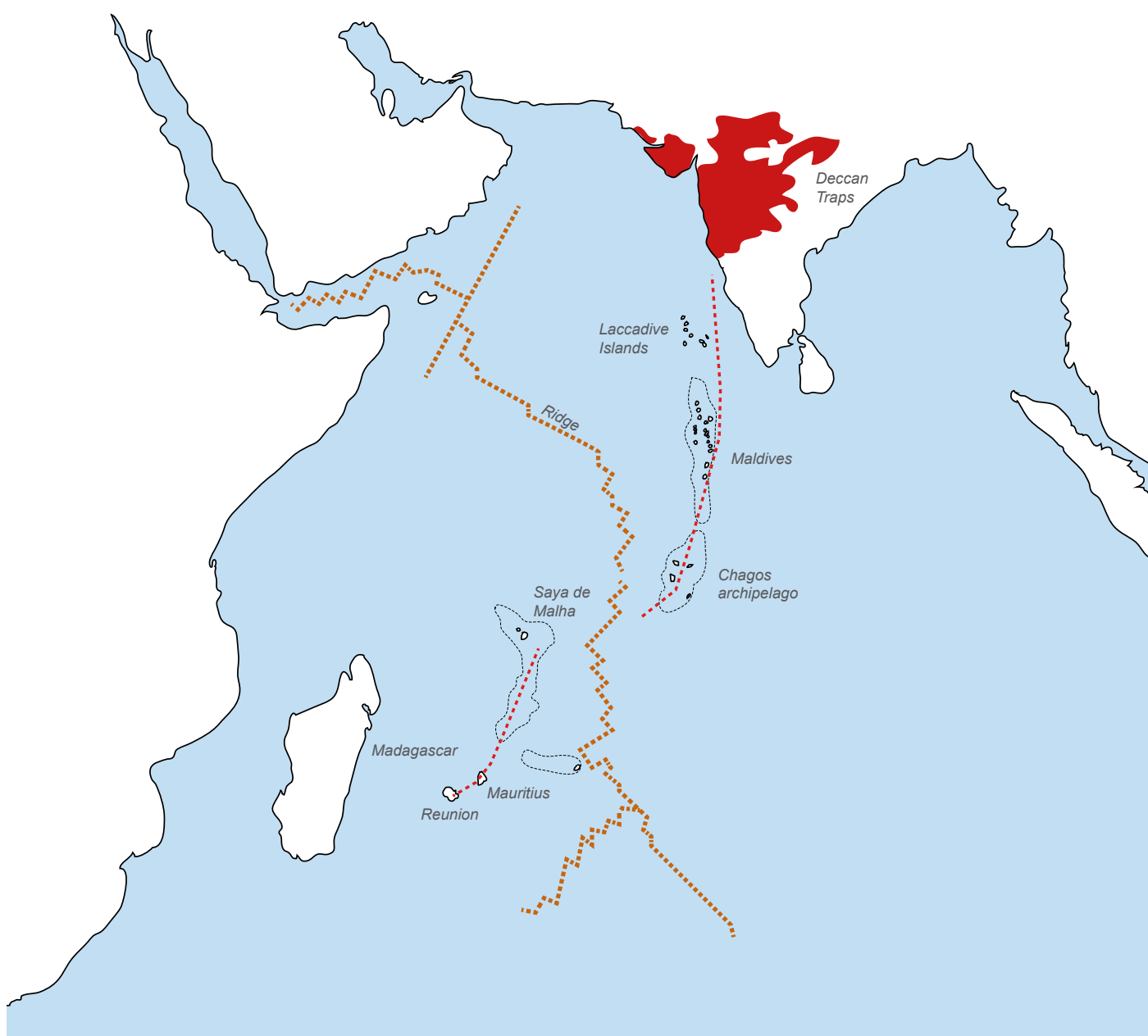


Fig.1: Geological features created by the Réunion hotspot

I. Scales & Frames

01. Land & ocean

Land & ocean as formed: geology

La Réunion is a volcanic island, the largest of the Mascarene archipelago, 70km long and 50km wide. Mauritius is the nearest land mass, 200km east; Madagascar lies some 700km west.

It is located above a volcanic hotspot: a terrestrial region fed by abnormally hot, upwelling rock rising through shafts in the earth's mantle. As magma reaches the uppermost layers of the planet's crust, it provokes volcanic activity on the surface.⁶ Whilst hotspots remain in relatively stable positions, the tectonic plates forming the earth's surface gradually drift above them: they bear the traces of past volcanic activity in locations long severed from the hotspot that made them. In the last 66 million years, the Réunion hotspot created a large number of geological features across the Indian ocean (fig.1).⁷ The alignment of these topographies attests of the dynamic nature of the oceanic landscape: their linear arrangement visually represents the thrust that pulled India away from the Mesozoic supercontinent of Gondwana 84 million years ago and pushed it in its present location.

Réunion is thus part of a geological ensemble that testifies to the dynamic material processes operating at large temporal and geographic scales that produced the Indian Ocean as a space, and generated the vast distances between Africa, Indian coasts and all intermediary islands: a place of migration, transaction and contact.⁸

⁶ "What is a hotspot?" Oregon State University. Accessed August 11, 2017 [http://volcano.oregonstate.edu/what-is-a-hot-spot].

⁷ These include the Deccan Traps in India, the Laccadive Islands, the Maldives, the Chagos archipelago, the Nazareth Bank and Saya de Malha undersea plateaux, the Cargados Carajos shoals, Mauritius and La Réunion.

⁸ Lyndsay Bremner, 'Folded Ocean: The Spatial Transformation of the Indian Ocean World', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 10:1 (2014). 18-45.

As a material formation, the island itself and its abrupt relief are the product of local earth processes: volcanic construction coupled with relentless chemical, thermal and hydrologic erosion. Volcanic activity created two distinct summits that constitute the island. The younger southern massif is the 2631m high volcano ‘Piton de la Fournaise,’ amongst the most active worldwide. The older extinct volcano, ‘Piton des Neiges,’ constitutes the northern part of the island. It peaks at 3069m, the highest point in the Indian Ocean.

Three calderas are concentrated around ‘Piton des Neiges’ in a cloverleaf shape: they are named Cilaos, Mafate and Salazie (fig.2, 4, 5). Calderas, also known as ‘*cirques*,’ are cauldron-like depressions caused by the collapse of a volcano’s magmatic chamber and its subsequent erosion by tropical rainfall. Surrounded on all sides by an enclosure of vertical rampart-like cliffs, 600 to 1200m high, the cirques are topographically isolated areas, self-contained and only connected to the coast by deep and narrow gorges that funnel rainfall to the ocean (see fig.16).

From the highly regular perimeter of the island, which presents no peninsulas or natural bays, the terrain slopes steeply upwards and inwards to the edges of the calderas, a 2200m altitude increase over a distance of 35km. Along these slopes and inside the calderas, erosion has carved deep ravines that hinder transversal communication. From sea level to the peaks, extremely diverse ecologies and climate conditions can be found.⁹

⁹ Anthony S. Cheke and Julian Hume, *Lost Land of the Dodo: An Ecological History of Mauritius, Réunion & Rodrigues* (London: T & AD Poyser, 2008), 14.

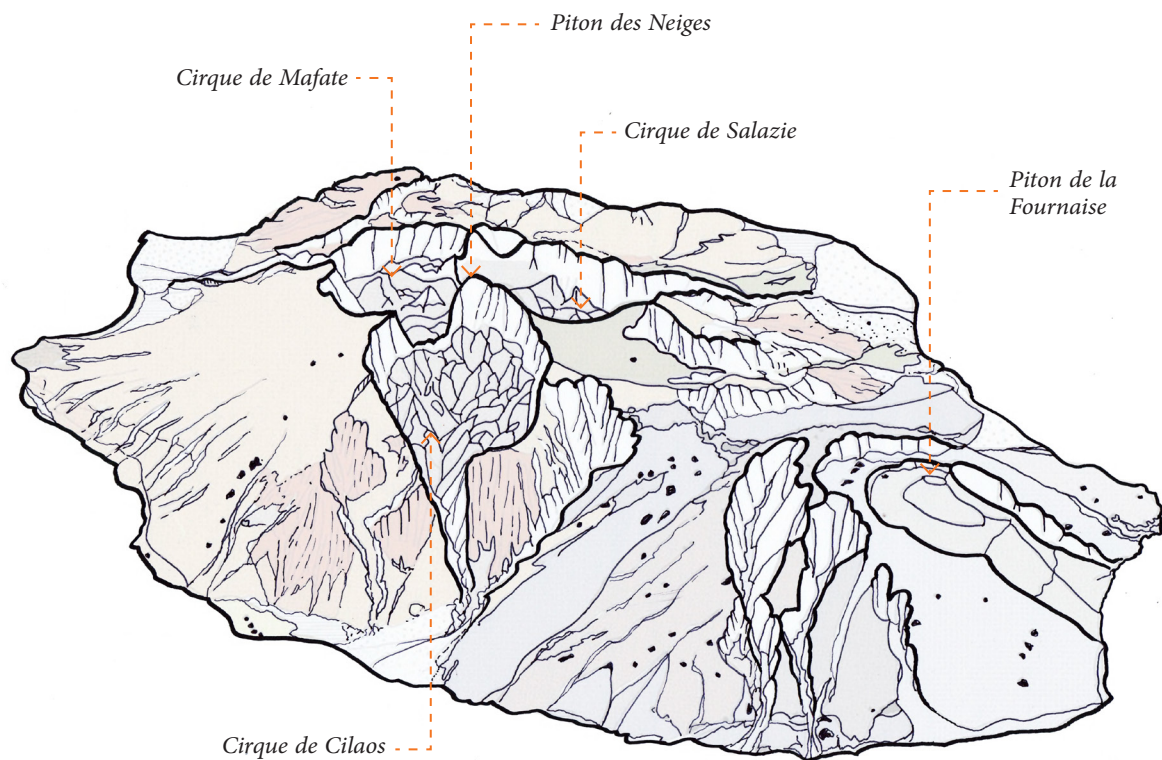


Fig.2: Topographic representation of La Réunion, viewed from the South.
Based on Michel Raunet, *Le milieu physique et les sols de l'île de La Réunion* (1991).



Fig.3: Aerial photography of La Réunion from the North, with Piton des Neiges and the calderas in the middle ground.
The many ravines that scar the landscape are also visible.

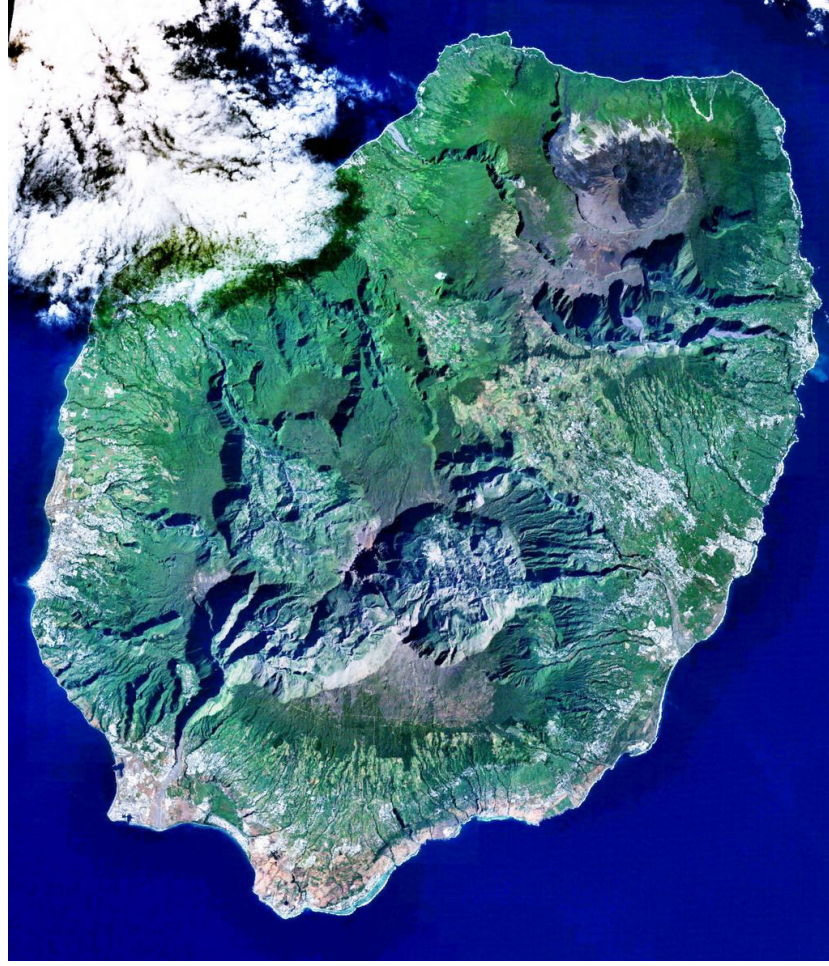


Fig.4: Satellite view of La Réunion, with windward coast under clouds.

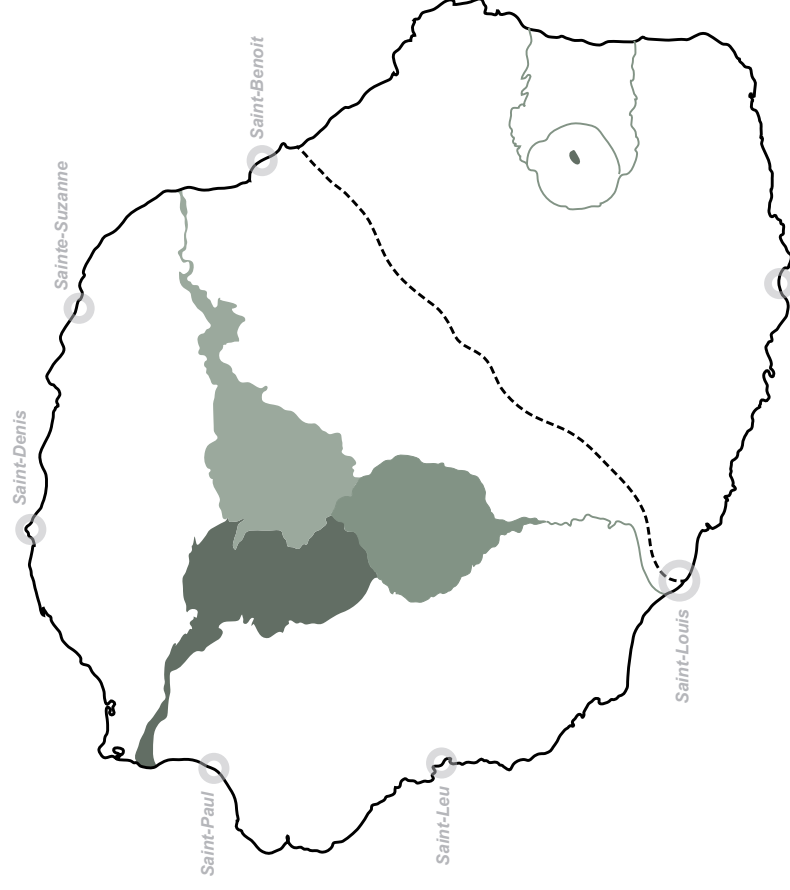


Fig.5: Plan view of the island, showing major towns and geological features:

- the three cirques or calderas centred on the Piton des Neiges are shown in dark green;
- the dotted line indicates the geological demarcation between old and young volcanoes;
- on the bottom right, outline of Piton de la Fournaise crater and adjacent lava field.

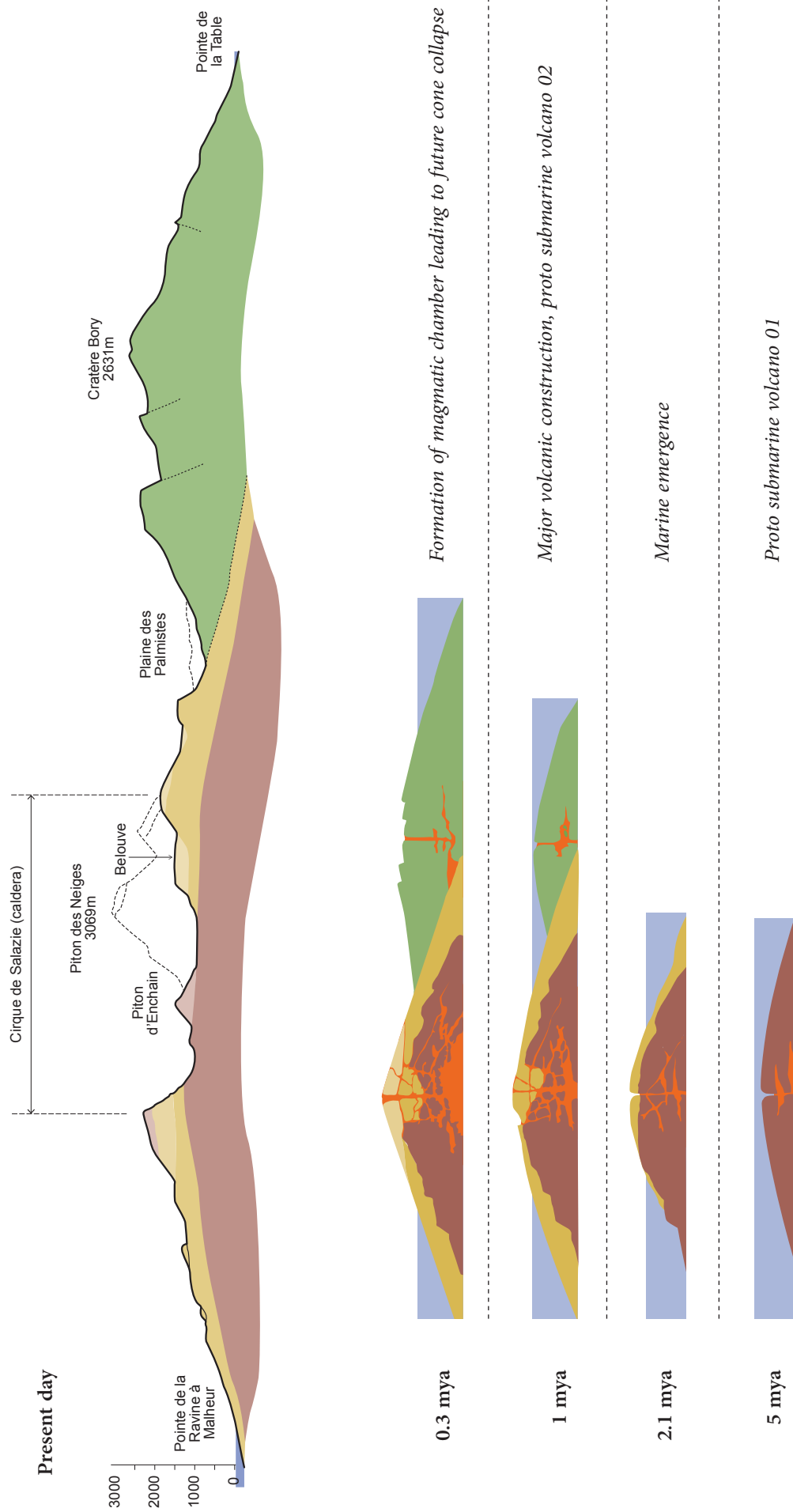


Fig.6: Geological scales - Evolution of the two volcanoes (mya = million years ago).
Based on Michel Albany, ed. *À la découverte de Le Réunion. Volume 1: Géologie et Volcanisme* (Saint-Denis: Favory, 1980).

A note on the term 'landscape'

At this stage, it is worth clarifying our use of the word 'landscape,' which relates to Christopher Tilley's definition. In his anthropological work,¹⁰ he establishes a reading of the landscape centred on human perception, in an attempt to recapture the experience of prehistoric populations. He emphasises the dialectical relationship between perceiving bodies and the spatial environments they inhabit, typical of a phenomenological approach. He highlights an issue with the term 'landscape,' in its association with the ideologies of representation, which often define it as "an image structured on canvas, in writing and on the ground through earth, stone and vegetation".¹¹ Tilley rejects this definition, this "notion of landscape as inheriting solely in the form of mental representation and cognition,"¹² preferring to understand landscapes as "the physical and visual form of the earth as an environment and as a setting in which locales occur in a dialectical relation to which meanings are created."¹³ In our study of Bourbon, the term 'landscape' also refers to a material and spatial setting rather than an abstract representation. It is both an agent in, and a product of human relations, and is thus charged with social, political and symbolic qualities.

The introductory geological overview described Réunion's geographic structure as the product of intense geological processes, a dynamic landscape where the sheer forces that animate the earth are manifest. Though this account was devoid of anthropological traces, this is no licence to consider the landscape as a tacit backdrop to human history. On the contrary, I wish to regard it as a grounding element into and out of which human practices have evolved. Any historical account of the human colonisation of Réunion should be perceived as entwined with the deep, million year long process of its material formation. It is the coming together of forces of early global capitalism and this landscape that has begotten the histories that I aim to construct.

¹⁰ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Land & ocean as shaped: European expansion in the Indian ocean

The Indian Ocean has for long been the terrain of human movement and interaction. The role of its deep structure is critical in understanding the patterns of its use. Michael Pearson thus writes:

“several of [the more isolated islands in the Indian Ocean], taking account of the deep structure matter of their location, have acted as hinges, connecting very distant parts of the ocean.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 18-19.

It is indeed as a hinge that Réunion entered European history, a cog in the mechanisms of early commercial and colonial expansion deployed by French monarchy in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Whilst the Portuguese were the earliest Europeans to establish trading relations with Asia from the fifteenth century, the Dutch, French, Danish and British followed suit and eventually took over. Each created powerful trading companies with publicly traded shares, acting as economic vehicles for their political ambitions. The *Compagnie des Indes Orientales*, founded in 1664 by chief minister to King Louis XIV Jean-Baptiste Colbert, was set up to open France's trade with South Asia in competition with its European counterparts.

“The French nation cannot be contained within the paddock of Europe,” declared a propaganda brochure to attract investors to the *Compagnie*,¹⁵ outlining an ambition to expand French influence globally. Fort-Dauphin, at the southern tip of Madagascar, was already founded in 1643 as a strategic base from which to progress towards India and Indonesia.¹⁶ Soon after, Bourbon was envisaged as another revictualling station for the *Compagnie*'s ships. The first permanent settlers, supposedly two white men with ten Malagasy servants, arrived from Madagascar in November 1663.¹⁷

¹⁵ Dirk van der Cruysse, *Voyage de François de l'Estra aux Indes Orientales (1671-1675)*, (Chandeigne: Paris, 2007), 20. Translated from French by author.

¹⁶ Raoul Lucas and Mario Serviable, *Commandants et gouverneurs de l'île de la Réunion* (Saint André: Océan Editions, 2008), 73.

¹⁷ Desport, *De la Servitude à la Liberté*, 8.

Though these servants were not slaves, the racial relationship among these initial settlers presaged the rise of slavery in Bourbon and the social model that it generated. The later development of plantations and the import of enslaved manpower are to be understood as another step in the colonial project – one that marks Bourbon-La Réunion's

particularity. Indeed, with no indigenous population, the island was solely colonised by Europeans and slaves, all imports from distant localities. The social model of Réunion thus differs from other colonial contexts, where dominant powers exploited pre-existing resources, populations and cultures. Bourbon was a blank slate when the first settlers landed: as opposed to other colonial settings, in Réunion there was no *time before colonisation*.

Land & ocean as agency: the historical scale

As I have mentioned above, the colonisation of Bourbon owes to the contingency of two timelines: that of its geological formation and of early globalisation. Indeed, the tardiness of the French possession can be linked to the island's coastal and sea-floor topography – a sign of the agency of the landscape in historical processes.

The absence of natural harbours explains the relative delay of Bourbon's colonisation in relation to other Indian Ocean island. Its eastern windward coast is too exposed to monsoon winds to allow safe approach. Long sections of its southern coast comprise volcanic cliffs, which have undergone limited erosion due to their young geological age and therefore offer no landing points.¹⁸ Coral reefs shield the leeward western coast, creating a natural barrier to the high sea some hundred meters away from the beach. The shallow lagoons between the beach and the reef is not navigable, and beyond the coral bank, the sea floor plunges steeply into deep water, making it particularly hard for large boats to anchor.¹⁹ In comparison, Mauritius, an older volcanic island where erosion smoothened the coastal landscape, was colonised earlier.²⁰ We begin here to perceive the role of geology as an active non-human agent in colonisation processes.

¹⁸ Michel Albany, ed. *À la découverte de Le Réunion. Volume 3: Approche Géographique* (Saint-Denis: Favory, 1980), 84.

¹⁹ Ibid., 100. See also Cheke and Hume, *Lost Land of the Dodo*, 83

²⁰ Cheke and Hume, 75.

02. Maronage

Maronage as temporal & spatial

Having introduced the material and historical context, we can now provide an overview of maronage. The extent of the phenomenon was limited to the era of the Compagnie's governance, booming particularly after 1720. The majority of marons were eventually wiped out by 1770.

A common distinction existed between '*petit*' or '*grand maronage*' (petty vs. major maronage). The former corresponded to the vagrancy of individuals, deserting temporarily and staying relatively close to their master's property. The latter described an organised attempt to flee permanently, often in groups, much further away from the habitation.²¹ This two tier classification discloses a conception of maronage as spatio-temporal: it is a practice defined by the distance and the duration of an absence from a given position.

By escaping, marons withheld manpower from the plantations, posing a real threat to the colonial economy. The practice was thus severely repressed: after the first absence lasting over a month, the fugitives' ear would be cut off and a fleur-de-lis branded on their shoulder; upon second offense, their lower leg amputated and a second fleur-de-lis added to their other shoulder; if they managed a third escape: death. These punitive measures did little to halt the phenomenon.²² Colonial communities thus sent out detachments of armed men to capture the fugitives and return them to their masters. With time, these became increasingly military in nature, even referred to as 'bourgeois militias'.²³ Hunters were tasked to capture them alive, and were only permitted to shoot if they refused to surrender after three warnings. In reality, very few runaways were caught alive and instead, detachments brought back the fugitives' right hands as authentication of their deaths. A system of reward incentivised the search for defectors: for every maron caught or killed, hunters would receive a slave as bounty; the owner of the dead maron would also obtain a slave as restoration.²⁴

²¹ Gabriel Debien, "Marronage in the French Carriibbean," in Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 110-111.

²² If anything, the degradation of slaves' treatment probably motivated greater numbers to flee.

²³ Archives Départementales de La Réunion (ADR), Série C°, 994.

²⁴ ADR, Série C°, 976, 977.

Bodies in maronage

Recorded declarations of captured marons provide an indication of their motivation to escape. The physical violence of their masters seems to be the most recurrent reason. The frequency and brutality of punishments inflicted upon their bodies, the harsh living conditions and the lack of adequate food are all mentioned as motives of flight, along with the fear of punishment after having committed a fault. Given the conditions under which these declarations were recorded, it seems plausible that captured marons sought to deflect culpability by pointing to the cruelty of their masters, thus concealing a more obvious reason for their evasion. More fundamental was perhaps the simple desire to live free.

It appears that up to 90% of fugitives were Malagasy slaves (though this is difficult to ascertain).²⁵ Malagasies had a reputation of being intractable, most prone to mutiny and defiance. Though probably a cultural trait of the Malagasies, this insubordination was also fed by their knowledge of French debacles during the colonisation of Madagascar,²⁶ as well as the hope that they might be able to make their own way home. Indeed, in contrast to other slaves who had travelled for weeks from West Africa (Senegal and Benin), Mozambique or India, Malagasies were aware of the proximity of Bourbon to their homeland due to the shortness of their boat transfer (7 to 10 days).²⁷ This chronological information, gathered from their lived experience, pushed some to attempt an escape by sea. None are believed to have reached their destination.²⁸

Maronage as social & cultural

Marons were the first to venture beyond the colonised coastal regions into the island interior, particularly inside the three cirques of Cilaos, Salazie and Mafate, where they lived in organised communities of hunter-gatherers, across networks of camps that they occupied nomadically.²⁹ Historian Prosper Eve writes of these maron spaces as being palingenetic: “By becoming maron, the slaves liberated their body of all constraints, self-realising by reconnecting with their ancestral culture. [...] Their Africa and their Madagascar is buried inside them

²⁵ Desport, *De la Servitude à la Liberté*, 69.

²⁶ See for example the Débauche of Fort-Dauphin of 1674 in Robert Bousquet, *Les Esclaves et leur Maîtres à Bourbon (La Réunion) au temps de la Compagnie des Indes, 1665-1767*, Livre 3 (Paris: Lulu Presse, 2009), 7, 17.

²⁷ Desport, *De la Servitude à la Liberté*, 23.

²⁸ Prosper Eve, *Les Esclaves de Bourbon: la Mer et la Montagne* (Paris: Karthala, 2003).

²⁹ “Maronages: Refuser l’esclavage à l’île de Bourbon au XVIII^e siècle,” exhibition curated by the Service Régional de l’Inventaire (SRI), organised in Saint-Paul, La Réunion (29 Septembre 2016 to 31 Décembre 2017).

³⁰ Prosper Eve, *Le Corps des Esclaves de l'Île Bourbon – Histoire d'une reconquête* (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2013), 227. Translated from French by author.

[and] their departure in maronage is necessary to reconstitute [them] in Bourbon.”³⁰

‘*Grands marons*’ were organised groups, supposedly gathered around leader figures whose existence is hard to ascribe to historical reality or local mythology. The bands would descend on coastal areas to raid plantations, in order to obtain the goods they required for their sustenance in the hinterland: tools, foods, horses and dogs, weapons, and to abduct women. As we shall see later on, marons settled in camps responding to geological conditions, building timber shelters and defensive structures.³¹ The search for these camps by the slave hunters drew the colonists to the cirques and the central regions of the island, where they would probably not have ventured otherwise.

³¹ “Maronages” exhibition.

Out of the interaction of these racially defined groups across landscapes and according to particular modes of mobility, de facto new geographic epistemologies emerged. In the following chapters, we will further articulate the relationship of maronage and landscape, and highlight the dialectical processes leading to this emergence of geographic knowledge, the result of competing strategies to come to terms with the topographies of Bourbon. Initially, I will analyse the implementation by European settlers of processes of spatial ordering, and the spatial fixity of slave subjects that derived from it.