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Cockacoeske's Rebellion: Nathaniel Bacon, Indigenous Slavery, and
Sovereignty in Early Virginia
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The expansion of the plantation complex in seventeenth-century Virginia put Indigenous Virginians at risk of enslavement and land loss. In 1676, Cockacoeske, a Powhatan weroansqua, confronted both physical attacks on her land and legal and cultural arguments about her people's lack of sovereignty. European travel writing and international law were fertile areas that colonists such as the newly arrived Nathaniel Bacon drew on to claim that Indigenous women such as Cockacoeske had no place as sovereigns and were instead suited to racial slavery. Almost captured and enslaved by Bacon, Cockacoeske rebelled against his racialized arguments for anti-sovereignty and slavery. She signed a treaty with the English Crown after the rebellion that changed the trajectory of Native slavery in Virginia: only Indigenous people whose nations could not establish sovereignty before the crown would be subject to racial slavery. Her successful battle to protect Powhatans shows how Native women like herself had to navigate the distinction between slavery and sovereignty in the early South. Though Cockacoeske was protected from enslavement, the slave trade into Virginia continued from the deeper South, and Indigenous women whose governments could not claim subjecthood or tributary status within the English Empire were successfully racialized and forced to pass slavery on to their children.