

Chapter 2

Historical Piracy and its Impact

Bruce Elleman

Piracy can be carried out by individuals, by collectives, by clans, by organized crime groups, and even on occasion by governments. Ransoms obtained by Somali pirates are a major source of state income, and there appears to be strong links between the pirate organizations and the Somali clans that control the government.

The rapid growth of piracy during the twenty-first century, if it continues unabated, could threaten the global system, which is based on maritime trade. Over a hundred thousand merchant vessels transport over 80% of the world's commercial freight. Container shipping is considered particularly susceptible, with millions of containers moving constantly around the globe.

Due to overlap among two or more countries' territorial seas, contiguous zones, and EEZs, patrolling the seas to halt piracy has become much more complex. Of special concern to the US government and to other industrialized nations is that the threat of piracy is not just growing worldwide, but that it is growing most quickly in exactly those parts of the world—such as Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia—where global trade is rapidly expanding. If piracy is not stopped, then this failure could have a negative impact not only on world trade in general, but more particularly on the long-term development of these regions.

Introduction

Piracy suddenly hit the front pages of the popular press with the 1985 *Achille Lauro* incident, in which terrorists took control of a cruise ship.¹ While this event was not particularly long—only 2 days—or violent—only one person was killed—it

¹ Technically, this takeover was not piracy, but a hijacking, since the terrorists had boarded the ship as passengers, but many newspaper headlines failed to make this distinction clear.

B. Elleman (✉)
Maritime History Department, U.S. Naval War College,
2040 East Main Road, Portsmouth, RI 02871, USA
e-mail: aasbs@cox.net; ellemanb@usnwc.edu

occurred at a time of rising global terrorism, and it involved a highly public target that had not previously been associated with acts of terrorism, so the *Achille Lauro* hijacking gained a “special symbolic as well as substantive importance.”² Since that time international acts of piracy on the high seas, both economically and politically motivated, have increasingly attracted global attention.³ Prior to this sudden increase, piracy had been considered by many scholars to be an ancient relic on its way to extinction.⁴

Historically, piracy could be conducted by individuals, groups, or by state-sponsored organizations. For example, government-sanctioned European privateers preyed widely during the almost constant wars of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries on vital trade routes from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean, even while state-sponsored Muslim corsairs off of North Africa interfered with Mediterranean trade. Commerce raiding in one form or another continued through until the twentieth century. During the “Great War,” the major navies were all engaged in attacks on commerce, and the Allies were particularly challenged by the appearance of Germany’s unrestricted submarine warfare campaign. Later still, in 1939, during the early days of World War II, one of the final ship-on-ship attacks of this type took place when the German pocket-battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* cruised the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean from August to December and sank nine British merchant ships totaling just over 50,000 t. The German raider’s final battle with three British cruisers was “the last in naval warfare comparable to those of the past—with the enemy always in view.”⁵

From the twelfth century Crusades onward, east–west trade predominated. Because of increasing trade between Europe and Asia, piracy off the African coast, in South Asia, and in Southeast Asia became of greater concern to merchants. To fight piracy in these regions, European countries—and particularly England—sought to defend free trade under the rubric of “freedom of the seas.” Many of England’s so-called “imperialist” policies in this region were linked to its efforts to eradicate piracy, as it attempted to prop up and strengthen local governments so that their own self-interest would convince them to eliminate the pirates. This chapter will focus on early historical cases of piracy, divided by region, before turning to an examination of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

² Simon 1986.

³ “An Analysis of the United States’ Response to the Achille Lauro Hijacking.” *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 8(Winter 1988): 137–49; Halberstam 1988.

⁴ Literature on historical pirates is vast, and books published both before and after 9–11 can often make it falsely appear that piracy was a generally unwelcome phenomenon that ended by general consent prior to the twentieth century; see, for example, Karraker 1953; Lucie-Smith 1978; Little 2005.

⁵ Ortzen 1973.

Historical Piracy in Europe and Africa

Throughout written history in Europe, piracy has been considered to be a perfectly normal occupation. Warfare among the Greeks consisted “largely of plundering raids from the sea,” with the most famous raid of all—the siege of Troy—being merely an exception of scale, not of methods. So long as the raids were not conducted on one’s own people, then there was no sense of wrongdoing: “Sea roving or ‘sea robbing’ in this Greek Bronze Age was largely indistinguishable from legitimate warfare.”⁶ Although pirates almost certainly predated written descriptions of their actions, Homer reported an act of piracy in *The Odyssey* that would have occurred around 1000 B.C.⁷

The Romans also had to deal with the scourge of piracy. In 102 B.C., Marcus Antonius was responsible for a campaign to Sicily to locate and destroy pirates.⁸ Julius Caesar himself was captured in 76 B.C. and, after paying the ransom for his release, “fitted out a squadron of ships to take his revenge.”⁹ Following the Roman creation of standing fleets at Misenum and Ravenna, supporting by auxiliary fleets in Egypt, Syria, and, along the coast of modern-day Libya, “for the first time in history the whole of the Mediterranean was adequately patrolled, and the inhabitants of its coast obtained respite from marauders.”¹⁰

Following Rome’s collapse, piracy expanded rapidly, soon controlling many crucial rivers, including the Rhine, Elbe, and Oder. During the ninth century, in particular, the Vikings moved southward into Western Europe, where they “prowled the narrow seas between the British Isles, Scandinavia and the mainland of Europe, raiding, plundering, and murdering as they went.”¹¹ The threat from the sea was particularly great in seaports and river towns. Piracy became such a problem during the early Middle Ages that many major European cities were built 10–20 kms inland for greater protection.¹²

During this period, piracy was considered to be the norm, not the exception. This applied in particular to the British, later the most strident opponents of piracy, but: “In the Middle Ages, English seamen in the Channel were accounted the hardest pirates in the world.”¹³ As east–west trade increased in the twelfth century, spurred on by the Crusades, which once again connected Western Europe with the trade routes from the Orient, piracy boomed. Much of this was centered on Italy, since the city-states there controlled the majority of the trade from further east. Although attempts were made to halt piracy, the Italian city-states often were more concerned

⁶ Little 2010.

⁷ Burnett 2002.

⁸ de Souza 1999.

⁹ Karraker, *Piracy was a Business*, 17–18.

¹⁰ Ormerod 1978.

¹¹ Cochran 1961.

¹² Meier 2006.

¹³ Johnson 1962.

with fighting rather than cooperating with each other: “As a consequence, professional piracy, quite unmolested, expanded once more over the Mediterranean, and guerilla warfare, which is revealed as nothing less than partly concealed plunder of the enemy, threw on the rivalry of the Italian republics.”¹⁴

Caught between East and West were the well-known pirate communities in Northern Africa. The Mediterranean Sea was long known as a haven for pirates, and for centuries piracy was pursued by Christians and Moslems alike. Captives were enslaved and sold throughout northern Africa. With the Conquest of Granada in 1492, however, and the exodus of tens of thousands of Moors from Spain throughout the Barbary coast, the number of piracy attacks increased dramatically: “Joined by African Moors and led by Moslem adventurers from the Levant, these new pirates embarked on a career of plunder and slave-hunting on the Spanish coast.”¹⁵

When the Ottoman navy was defeated at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, many former sailors turned to piracy and were called “corsairs.” Later, the total expulsion of Moors from Spain in 1609 added further to this problem: “The corsairs not only scoured the sea, but often raided the coasts of Italy, Spain, and the various Mediterranean islands, sometimes advancing considerable distances inland, robbing houses and villages, and carrying off the inhabitants into slavery.”¹⁶ Between 1569 and 1616, it was estimated that 100 such Moorish ships captured a total of 466 English ships, selling their crews into slavery.¹⁷

One of the most famous of these pirates was Kheyreddin Barbarossa, who Sultan Selim I eventually made his “beylerbey,” or governor-general, over all of North Africa. Barbarossa is credited with founding the pirate empire in North Africa that exacted tribute from European states for more than two centuries. For the next 200 years, the European countries sent numerous expeditions against the Barbary coast. However, the more normal arrangement was to pay tribute—little different from protection money—so that their ships would not be attacked by the corsairs.

One early response to the piracy threat was the creation of new mutual aid trade groups, like the Hanseatic League, intended to protect its members from attack. European countries experienced a particularly rapid increase in piracy in or around 1530, preying largely on the Spanish riches from the New World. This largely corresponded to the so-called Commercial Revolution, during which time European countries projected and organized European trade on a global scale. Because of the enormous profits that could be made, privateering went through many stages of official and unofficial sanctions before the national interests led to its gradual termination beginning in the mid-1800s.¹⁸ As Daniel Defoe derisively stated in 1724: “Privateers in time of War are a Nursery for Pyrates against a Peace.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Karraker, *Piracy was a Business*, 17–18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶ Allen 1965.

¹⁷ Karraker, *Piracy was a Business*, 44.

¹⁸ Carse 1957.

¹⁹ Defoe 1972.

New World Piracy

With the European discovery of the “New World,” piracy quickly moved into the Western Hemisphere. One underlying reason for the growth of piracy was that in the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas Pope Alexander VI gave Spain all of the Americas, except for Brazil, which went to Portugal. This decree largely ignored the economic interests of the British and the other European states, who were quick to take action. By 1563, it was estimated that there were over 400 pirate vessels roaming the seas preying mainly on Spanish treasure ships from the New World.²⁰ In 1572, Queen Elizabeth ordered her Lord Admiral to clear the seas of pirates, but in reality the wealth the privateers brought backed to England both crippled Spain’s empire in the New World and filled the British treasury with gold. Many British “pirates” were treated as national heroes.

In 1575, the British captain, John Oxenham, crossed the Panama Isthmus and conducted raids along the Pacific coast in a small pinnace, but he was captured and imprisoned as a pirate by the Spanish. To prove that they were sanctioned by their home government, privateers were required to carry letters of marque, which Oxenham was not in possession of: “Oxenham and his officers were taken to Lima and, being unable to produce Letters of Marque there, were hanged as pirates.”²¹

Oxenham may have been the first Englishman to see the Pacific, but his death prevented him from returning to England to announce his find. Three years later, Francis Drake, in 1578, became the first British navigator to round the tip of South America and enter the Pacific Ocean by sea. On 1 March 1579, Drake’s ship, *Golden Hind*, took the Spanish treasure ship *Nuestra Senora de la Concepcion*, nicknamed *Cacafuego* or “spitfire.” As a result of this one attack, Drake obtained “13 chests of silver coin, approximately 26 t of silver bars, 80 pounds of gold, and coffers of pearls and gems.”²²

Fearful of encountering Spanish galleons if they tried to go home by sailing to the south, Drake went north instead, looking for the hoped-for Northwest Passage. Failing to find it, he eventually returned to England by going west and circumnavigating the globe, arriving home on 26 September 1580, almost 3 years after he had departed. This voyage was only the second time when the globe had been circumnavigated, following Juan Sebastian de Elcano’s return in 1522 on *Victoria*, a year and a half after Magellan’s death on 27 April 1521 at the hand of natives near Cebu.

The riches and treasures brought back to England by, now, “Sir” Francis Drake, spurred other European mariners of many nations to follow his example. The 1588 British naval victory over the Spanish Armada ensured the Royal Navy’s continued domination of the seas. New groups of pirates now began to operate in the Caribbean. Pirate hunting parties on the island of Hispaniola would cut wild pig meat and smoke it into dry strips called *boucan*, spawning the term “boucaniers” and later

²⁰ Course 1969.

²¹ Course, *Pirates of the Western Seas*, 3.

²² Sherry 1994.

still “buccaneers.” After 1629, pirates formed a settlement on Tortuga Island, just north of Hispaniola. In 1641, France claimed Tortuga, and soon began to issue letters of marque to “the boucaniers to legalise their piracy against Spanish ships and give to it the name of privateering.”²³

Meanwhile, the British-claimed island of Barbados soon became a major base for British privateers. Later, Port Royal in the Bahamas also developed into a major pirate headquarters. Another famous pirate haven was the tiny island off East Africa called St. Mary’s, just north of Madagascar, and from this base the pirates could attack the lucrative Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade. Through until the early 1700s, British privateers were considered perfectly legitimate auxiliaries to formal navies. Strict rules required all prizes to be returned to their home country so that special courts could determine if it was a fair prize or not. Interestingly, many of the spoils were taken to the colonies in America to be traded for “powder and rum.”²⁴

Although the practice was widely condemned, the economic effects of piracy could be highly positive. When Thomas Tew came back from St. Mary’s in 1693 to Newport, Rhode Island, he reportedly brought 10,000 pounds worth of loot with him; sums of this size could not help but spur economic growth in the colonies.²⁵ It is often overlooked that if there had been no buyers, the pirates would have been put out of business: Thus, “... many men were willing to sail without papers because there were always merchants in the West Indies or the North American colonies who were willing to do business with them, regardless of the legal niceties.”²⁶

A major cause for a sudden rise in this kind of piracy dates to 1651, at the time of the British Navigation Acts. In order to monopolize all commerce with the 13 colonies, England stipulated that trade had to be conducted by British ships, that English colonies could sell only to England, and in turn had to buy all of their goods from England. In addition to receiving lower than market prices for their tobacco and other agricultural products, English manufactured goods were marked above market prices. Also, cargoes from England had to pay high customs duties, thus making them even more expensive in the colonies, and non-English manufactures had to be imported in English vessels and by English merchants. Many luxuries, such as “silks, spices, perfumes, and the like,” were as a result vastly overpriced or were simply not available in the colonies.²⁷

Rejecting this monopoly, merchants in the 13 colonies, with the knowledge and tactic support of local officials, traded with privateers. Undoubtedly many of these privateers could really be considered pirates, since they did not take their spoils back to England to be divided, as they were normally required to do:

In colonial cities all along the Atlantic coast, privateer loot was ‘imported’ in defiance of the Navigation Acts and resold openly. In almost every colonial port, privateers could be sure that they would not only find buyers for their booty but also obtain hospitality, provi-

²³ Course, *Pirates of the Western Seas*, 20–24.

²⁴ Karraker, *Piracy was a Business*, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁶ Starkey et al. 1997.

²⁷ Sherry 1986.

sions, protection, and crewmen for future enterprises. Very often the same merchants and officials who furnished the illegal market for privateer plunder also outfitted expeditions in exchange for guaranteed shares in a ship's loot.²⁸

One reason for what appears to be a dramatic increase in piracy after 1690 was that Britain concluded peace with Spain during the 1680s and fighting soon broke out between Britain and France, including the French and Indian wars in North America. This trade reached its climax in the early 1700s, when there were so many pirates along the New England coastline that one official described the region as being in a "state of war."²⁹ During this period, British privateers' attacks against Spanish ships were not condoned, and so were considered piracy. In fact, the primary difference was not that the attacks increased, but was that they suddenly were considered illegal, as versus the legal status the privateers had enjoyed previously. This resulted in one of piracy's most infamous eras known as the "Golden Age of Piracy."

The "Golden Age of Piracy"

Piracy reached a peak during the 10 years between 1716 and 1726. According to one view, it was "during those decades, [that] the world experienced the most intense outbreak of seaborne banditry ever recorded."³⁰ It has been estimated that during this decade, there were some 2400 ships attacked, or an average of about 218 attacks per year. As a point of comparison, the yearly figures in Southeast Asia alone from 2000 to 2004 averaged 184 attacks per year.³¹ While this comparison might normally appear to undermine the perceived threat posed by traditional pirates, these modern numbers include many minor thefts and robberies, while the traditional pirates often absconded with entire ships, their crews, and their cargoes.

During the early 1700s, war once again broke out between England and Spain. Privateering revived and was particularly widespread during the War of the Spanish Succession, 1702–1713. Privateers were defined as a private man of war bearing a commission or letter of marque from their government, thereby allowing them to harass enemy commerce and take any captures as a far prize before a Vice-Admiralty Court.³² Although legal so long as the privateer had a valid letter of marque, if this letter was lost then privateers—William Dampier's sojourn in a Dutch prison as a pirate is a good case in point—could expect to be mistreated. In May 1720, Captain Shelvocke even risked drowning when he entered his sinking *Speedwell* to retrieve his "commission scroll and the chest containing 1100 \$ of the owners' money."³³

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

²⁹ Karraker, *Piracy was a Business*, 67.

³⁰ Sherry, *Raiders and Rebels*, 7.

³¹ Eklof 2006.

³² Lloyd 1966.

³³ Poolman 1999.

After the war ended, and the peace of Utrecht was signed in 1713, many privateers refused to quit and return to civilian life. Many years of war, during the War of the Spanish Succession, had resulted in the training of thousands of new recruits in piracy. According to one source: “In spite of the cooperative attitude of the Governments of England and Spain in the Caribbean and on the Spanish Main, and the increasing vigilance of English naval ships, piracy continued. But it could not be camouflaged as buccaneering.”³⁴

Even though Spain and England had signed a peace treaty, there was still stiff competition to control the resources of the Caribbean. For example, when Henry Jennings heard that a Spanish galleon had sunk, and was being salvaged off the coast of Florida, he “persuaded some merchants in Port Royal to put up the money to finance an expedition to capture the booty, although England and Spain were at peace. Three hundred buccaneers were recruited and sailed to Florida in three small ships. They surprised the garrison guarding the treasure and stole 300,000 pieces-of-eight.”³⁵ Captain Henry Jennings was then instrumental in founding a new pirate base at New Providence, Bahamas, in 1716.

By 1715 an estimated 2000 pirates were operating out of Nassau. Their favorite targets were Spanish galleons, often carrying gold and silver back to Europe from Spain’s South American colonies. The profits that could be made from even one successful attack were enormous. In the Atlantic, soon there were not enough Spanish ships to attack, so many pirates began to focus on the lucrative trade between England and her North American colonies. According to one 1717 estimate by James Logan, colonial secretary of Pennsylvania, there were at least 1500 pirates cruising “at any one time off the coast of North America and that no one could travel safely by ship.”³⁶

During this period, piracy reached new heights, including the famous exploits of Edward Thatch (or Teach), alias Black-Beard the Pirate, who was finally killed in 1718. Two female pirates, Mary Read and Anne Bonny, were eventually captured and imprisoned, but both fortuitously escaped execution due to being pregnant at the time. Finally, Captain Bartholomew Roberts reportedly pirated some 400 ships during just “3 years of looting and burning,” before he was finally captured and executed.³⁷

Although the Royal Navy responded to the piracy threat by setting up convoys to protect merchant ships, or even offering—for a hefty fee—to transport cargo on its warships, it proved difficult to track down and eliminate the pirates. There was simply too much money in piracy, and “the profit to be made from such convoy duty made many Royal Navy captains less than zealous to destroy the pirates who were the indirect source of their profits.”³⁸ It took a concerted effort by the Royal Navy

³⁴ Course, *Pirates of the Western Seas*, 73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁶ Sherry, *Raiders and Rebels*, 212.

³⁷ Karraker, *Piracy was a Business*, 217.

³⁸ Sherry, *Raiders and Rebels*, 216.

to track down and capture the pirates. Only by around 1725 were the most infamous pirates captured and hanged.

While this took care of most of the British pirates, French privateers based in Guadeloupe and Martinique continued to prey on the British slave trade throughout the mid-nineteenth century. During the Napoleonic Wars some 2100 British ships were seized during the 3 years, i.e., between 1793–1796, alone. This new period of unrest turned privateers into pirates. Admiral Lord Nelson even stated his belief that “all privateers are no better than pirates.”³⁹ However, the Royal Navy were able to fight off the French privateers: “During this era the Royal Navy developed effective convoy tactics, fast frigate escorts, and matchless gunnery skills—all of which made the lone-wolf privateer all but obsolete.”⁴⁰

The 1856 Treaty of Paris outlawed privateering by individual ships, but state-operated navies could still legally stop, search, and capture commercial ships, guilty of carrying contraband to the enemy. Thus, government-sanctioned commerce raiders, often better known as “sea raiders,” were also legal according to the rules of war. Sea raiders were especially prevalent during the two World Wars. Meanwhile, the introduction of submarine warfare—especially Germany’s unrestricted submarine warfare campaign—propelled commerce raiding against enemy trade to new heights.⁴¹ These types of predations only ended for good in Europe and in the Western Hemisphere following the Anglo-American victory in World War II.

Historical Piracy in the Indian Ocean Through Malacca

Since premodern times, piracy has always been widespread in the Indian Ocean, in the Malacca Strait, and in and around Indonesia. When European ships first appeared in these waters, they had to contend with local pirates. Piracy was particularly prevalent against the eastward flow of trade from the Indian Ocean, through the Malacca Strait, and then into the South China Sea.

Merchant ships traveling from Europe to the Far East had to be concerned about piracy attacks on the western coast of India. Along the coast from Bombay to Goa were the Malabar pirates. As described by Marco Polo during the fourteenth century, a 100 or more pirate ships would work together during a raid: “These pirates take with them their wives and children, and stay out the whole summer. Their method is to join in fleets of 20 or 30 of these pirate vessels together, and then they form what they call a sea cordon, that is, they drop off till there is an interval of 5 or 6 miles between ship and ship, so that they cover something like a 100 miles of sea, and no merchant ship can escape them.”⁴²

³⁹ Course, *Pirates of the Western Seas*, 2.

⁴⁰ Sherry, *Raiders and Rebels*, 360.

⁴¹ For more, see Elleman and Paine 2013.

⁴² Biddulph 1907.

Piracy was even more of a problem further to the east. During the earliest period of East–West trade, from approximately the first century B.C. onward, merchants would cross from India along the shores of the Bay of Bengal to the Isthmus of Kra, which then involved a 35-mile-long portage to the Gulf of Thailand. One reason for crossing here was that it cut off an extra 1600 miles to the trip. A second reason was that this allowed seafarers to avoid the dangerous shoals and currents that were present further along the Malacca Strait. A third and even more important reason was that “at various times the shores along the straits were believed to be the home of even more dangerous pirates.”⁴³

Eventually, merchant ships did regularly journey back and forth all the way through the Malacca Strait. It was a dangerous journey, however, since the strait is shaped like a funnel, with the western opening very wide but narrowing near Singapore to only about a mile wide. Approximately halfway through the strait, the channel narrows at a location popularly called One Fathom Bank. At this point, there is usually only sufficient leeway for one large modern ship to pass in each direction. From here to Singapore the majority of the channel runs through Indonesian waters. An estimated 80% of the modern-day piracy in the Malacca Strait occurs in this stretch: “It is almost a pirates’ dream opportunity—all they require is a suitable base, some means of getting on board ships underway or at anchor, and a market for their loot.”⁴⁴

In premodern times, such a lengthy journey by sail could also only be carried out at certain times of the year. Due to the annual monsoons, ships from India had a relatively narrow period every year in which the winds were favorable for reaching the Gulf of Thailand, and then they would have to wait until the winds changed again before they could make the return voyage, or wait for favorable winds to continue on to China. Sometimes, it would take months before the winds shifted. The monsoon winds were dependable, however, so “all the ships, whether they were going to or coming from China, tended to arrive in Southeast Asia at about the same time and to leave at about the same time.”⁴⁵

Pirates, of course, could also take advantage of these periodic winds. Mainly due to the opium trade, pirates seemed to prey less on trade from East-to-West, but more on the West-to-East trade. According to a fourteenth century Chinese account of the area around the Malacca Strait:

The inhabitants are addicted to piracy [...] when junks sail to the Western [Indian] Ocean the local barbarians allow them to pass unmolested but when on their return the junks reach Chi-li-men [the Karimun islands] the sailors prepare their armour and padded screens as a protection against arrows for, of a certainty, some two or three hundred pirates praus [boats] will put out to attack them for several days. Sometimes [the junks] are fortunate enough to escape with a favourable wind; otherwise the crews are butchered and the merchandise made off with in quick time.⁴⁶

⁴³ Shaffer 1996.

⁴⁴ Villar 1985.

⁴⁵ Shaffer, *Maritime Southeast Asia to 1500*, 21.

⁴⁶ Eklof, *Pirates in Paradise*, 6; citing Wheatley 1961.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4939-2470-7>

Histories of Transnational Crime
Bruinsma, G. (Ed.)
2015, XIII, 188 p. 1 illus., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4939-2470-7