

# The Evolution of Piracy

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Although they are often picturesquely romanticized in the modern world, pirates formed an intriguing subculture which profoundly shaped the British empire and colonial America. Piracy in fact went through a process of devolution from mercantile and imperial authority into a distinct egalitarian social order. The privateering industry which flourished during wartimes and had brought riches to the British empire would eventually transform into a illegal state of piracy, which would become the enemy to the maritime world. A campaign of terror would be initiated to eradicate piracy, forcing a durable and distinctive culture below-decks.

Ironically, in tracing the roots of piracy it was the pirates who brought riches to England and propelled her to the status of a naval authority in the era of overseas expansion. Francis Drake, born in Devonshire about 1545 and one of the earliest pirates, sailed from Plymouth in 1577 on his round-the-world plundering expedition. "Upon his return in September, 1580, Queen Elizabeth ordered the royal barge rowed down the Thames so that she might knight the 'master thief of the known world on the deck of his *Golden Hind*.' The loot Drake brought back to England has been moderately valued at 1,500,000 pounds" (1 p.5). There was a fine line between privateering and piracy. Privateering was generally considered to be piracy during peace time, but during wartime it augmented the standing navy. Many of Francis Drake's raids on Spanish shipping and coastal towns in the 1570's were acts of piracy because they were carried out when England was officially at peace with Spain. The same status was given to Henry Morgan who a century later raided the Spanish Panama. While both Drake and Morgan were considered pirates by Spain, because Spain was Britains traditional rival, they were both treated as heroes and received knighthood (2 p.9). As national hostility toward Spain increased, Elizabeth became even more indulgent with pirate affairs. Not only did she shut her eyes to

their aggressions against the Spaniards, but she began to take an active interest in their exploitive affairs. The embracing of piracy by the British empire brought much wealth to the country, but more importantly it provided a foundation for the evolution of a race of seamen which saved England in its time of need, defeated its enemies, and made it the world power on the seas. Others would continue to be swayed into the privateering industry by England's maritime heritage, traditions, and its reliance on sea trade (1 p.6-7)

Piracy passed through a number of historical stages before common working sailors could have a vessel of their own. There was a "long term tendency for the control of piracy to devolve from the top of society to the bottom, from the highest functionaries of the state (in the late sixteenth century), to big merchants (in the early to middle seventeenth century), to smaller, usually colonial merchants (in the late seventeenth century), and finally to the common men of the deep (in the early eighteenth century)" (3 p.156). Woodes Rogers, the hugely successful captain of a privateering voyage between 1708 and 1711 was influential in obtaining the enactment by the British Parliament of a new Prize Act in 1708. At one time the crown received a fifth of the profits from all privateering enterprises and then later one tenth. Under the new prize act however, the Crown received nothing at all. The largest share of the profits went to the owners of the ships and the private investors who financed the voyage. A smaller share went to the ship's officers, and an even smaller share was distributed among the crew (1 p.7). Woodes Rogers, who would become the royal governor of the Bahama Islands and the scourge of pirates in the West Indies, arrested a sailor who wished himself "aboard a Pirate" and said that, "he should be glad that an Enemy, who could over-power us, was a-long side of us" (3 p.162).

Privateers were often not happy ships. Many captains ran their vessels like naval craft, subjecting their crew to severe codes of discipline and other draconian measures that generated

protests or mutinies. Merchant seamen were also subject to impressment during wartime by the Royal Navy. Conditions aboard navy vessels were in some respects worse than the mercantile equivalents; Wages, especially during wartime, were lower, food rations were meager, and maintaining order required even more violent displays of discipline. The ships were also ill-ventilated, causing disease of epidemic proportions. "One official claimed that the navy could not effectively suppress piracy because its ships were 'so much disabled by sickness, death, and desertion of their seamen'" (3 p.160). An anonymous author of a pamphlet entitled *Piracy Destroy'd* (1700) wrote: "It was the too great severity Commanders have used as to their backs and their bellies" that "had occasioned the Seamen to mutiny and run away with the Ships." The harsh discipline, and poor conditions aboard naval and mercantile vessels caused crew to mutiny and turn pirate. It is not difficult to fathom then that the majority of those who became pirates volunteered to join the crew of outlaws after the capture of their ship.

Life aboard a pirate ship was largely a reaction to the abuses of the traditional capitalistic maritime system. The pirate ship was democratic in an undemocratic age; Crews distributed justice, elected officers, and divided loot equally. Captains of a pirate ship were also given much less authority, none of the extra food, and none of the special accommodations with which merchant and naval captains were accustomed. Captains who exceeded their authority were often executed. The captain's power was also limited by the quartermaster who was elected to represent the interest of the crew and a general council that involved every crew member.

Pirates were also class-conscious, often taking revenge on tyrannous merchant captains and royal officers. "'Distribution of Justice' was a specific practice among pirates. After capturing a prize vessel, pirates would 'distribute justice' by inquiring about how the ships commander tread his crew. They then 'whipp'd and pickled' those 'against whom Complaint was made'. They often

rewarded the 'honest Fellow that never abused any Sailors' and even offered to let one decent captain 'return with a large sum of Money to London'(3 p.163).

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The pirate ship was usually made up of a multi cultural, multiracial, multinational crew. There are even some accounts of female pirates in the eighteenth century. Pirates generally denied affiliation with their own country, proudly claiming themselves as "from the seas". Black Sam Bellamy's crew of 1717 was "a mix't multitude of all Country's," including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native American, and African American, along with two dozen Africans liberated from a slave ship. Hundreds of people of African descent found themselves amidst the pirates' social order. Even though pirate ships occasionally captured and sold slaves, Africans and African Americans both free and enslaved were numerous and active aboard pirate ships. "Black pirates sailed with Captains Bellamy, Taylor, Williams, Harris, Winter, Shipton, Lyne, Skyrn, Roberts, Spriggs, Bonnet, Phillips, Baptist, Cooper, and Blackbeard"(3 p.166). In 1718, sixty out of Blackbeard's crew of one hundred were black. Black pirates were so common that one newspaper reported an all-mulatto band of sea robber in the Caribbean "eating the hearts of captured white men." In so many ways the pirates' social order was a completely egalitarian subculture at a time when power in the British empire was held by an elite social class.

Because they posed such a great danger to Atlantic trade (especially the slave trade) a reign of terror was initiated by Britain to eradicate piracy. In the American Colonies there was no really strong public sentiment to suppress piracy. The colonists' objection to Britain's Navigation Acts made piracy in the colonies an acceptable part of life. Many colonists considered the pirate captains public benefactors (1 p.168). In 1700 the British Parliament passed the Piracy Act which provided that in the future piracy and other felonies on the Atlantic

would be tried by special vice-admiralty courts constituted by commissions from the Crown. If any colonial governor refused to comply with the piracy act, he would be subject to the forfeiture of his chartered rights to the government (4 pp.38-39). Both Whigs and Tories both responded by erecting gallows for pirates and the merchants with whom they dealt (3 p.173) Lieutenant Maynard's violent execution of Blackbeard prevented North Carolina's inlets from becoming a haven for pirates. Likewise, Governor Woodes Rogers operating out of Nassau, was doing an effective job of cleaning out pirate nests in the West Indies. Virginia however, would continue to be plagued by pirates for a few years afterwards. In 1720 the House of Burgesses presented an address to Virginia's Governor Spotswood which was concerned with the frequent plunderings of pirates off the coast. Four pirates off the coast of Virginia were convicted in 1720 and hanged in chains, as a warning to others (1 p.169) The enactment of deadly legislation by Parliament combined with the superior force of England's improved navy were the two major factors which ultimately lead to the end of piracy.

Only a couple centuries after European rulers had turned pirates loose on the riches of other countries did the pirates themselves become national enemies. Rival nations found a common interest in an Atlantic system of capitalism. Under this system, trade would flow most efficiently without the disruption from an autonomous social order thriving on the terror of the civilized world. The profits from piracy were outweighed by the risks. By the 1720's, thousands of pirates had severely damaged Atlantic shipping. In doing so, they also created a democratic, egalitarian social order and a distinctive below-decks counterculture that would contribute to a colorful history of the maritime world.

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## Bibliography

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