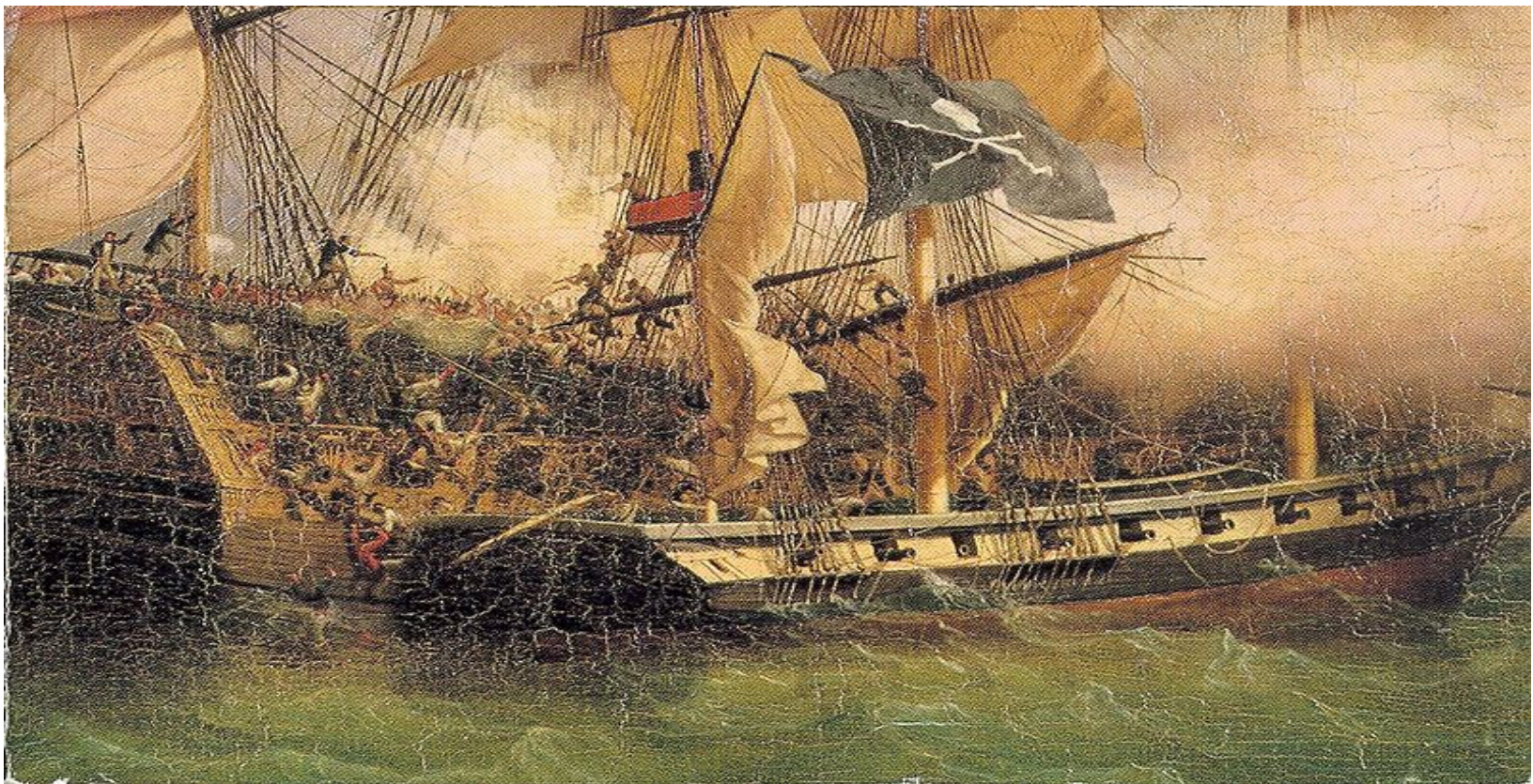


# Plunder on the High Seas



## **Piracy in the Early Modern World**

Written by students in the History of Cultural Contact course

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Instructor: Dr. Kitty Lam

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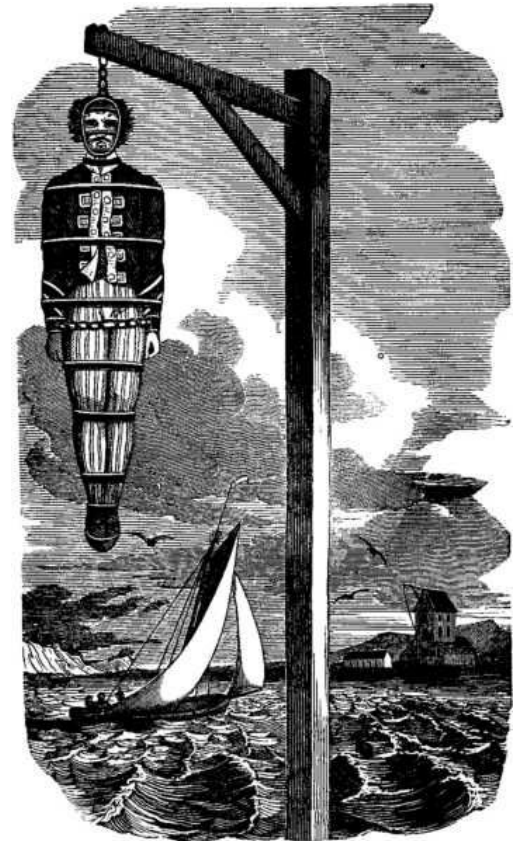


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# Introduction

By Angitha Bright, Jessica Hoos, and Angelica Villegas

The word ‘piracy’ conjures infamous tales of adventures on the high sea. Often, piracy is associated with images of men screaming and ransacking ships, the look of unclean clothes and unhygienic skin, inherent violence and inherent treachery, the never-ending lust for riches - all the makings of uncivilized human beings. But the idea that all pirates fit this description is a misconception. Pirates tended to be more complex than that, and some even established special codes that denoted a social order and rules to be followed. In the Golden Age of pirates, from the 17th to 19th century, pirates ruled the seas and affected some major civilizations. Essentially, piracy was directly proportional to the proliferation of trade during that time period. But this was not necessarily for glory, violence, or chaos. Ultimately, a pirate’s goal was to get resources to live on. Gold, silk, spices and other valuable goods on ships were attractive sources of wealth for pirates. Sometimes these pirates would work in tandem with a major country that gave them an official license to rob ships from the country’s competitors, in a practice known as privateering . They traveled throughout different parts of the world, pillaging ships along oceanic trade routes. Sources about pirates include oral histories and stories passed down through generations of families, codes of conduct composed by pirates, and government documents, such as letters and trial records. Through these sources, we can learn about pirates’ motivations and actions, as well as how others perceived their activities.



The Hanging of William Kidd, in *The Pirates Own Book* by Charles Ellms, 1837

Image source:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hanging\\_of\\_William\\_Kidd.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hanging_of_William_Kidd.jpg)

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# How is piracy defined?

**By Sonya Gupta, Alex Schray, and Claudia Zhu**

From the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, pirates have been a perpetual nuisance throughout history, yet they have shaped the vibrant interactions that make up the cultures we know today. In the 1700s, piracy was becoming an issue that both European and Asian governments had to combat. But what is piracy? Piracy is defined as the hostile attack and plunder of ships owned by others and is often characterized by raiding and pillaging. However, piracy was sometimes a term that specific governments used to incriminate seafarers who threatened their oceanic trade. Other groups who often committed the same actions were labeled as privateers, so long as their actions benefitted the governments that sanctioned them. Through the history of maritime travel, the term “pirate” has become a label for those who commit acts of violence at sea against other seafarers.

While the definitions of privateering and piracy were incredibly similar, several factors distinguishes the two. In the Royal Commission issued to Captain William Kidd in 1695, Kidd was asked to capture those who “do, against the law of nations, commit many and great piracies, robberies, and depredations...[causing a] hindrance and discouragement of trade and navigation, and to the greater danger and hurt of our loving subjects, our allies, and all others....upon their lawful occasions.”<sup>1</sup> Later on the document defined these persons as being “natives or inhabitants of New York, and elsewhere, in our plantations in America, who have associated themselves with...ill-disposed persons.”<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates that the English defined piracy as an illegal profession and classified their enemies as being pirates. William Kidd, as a privateer, was given a Royal Commission to take “into custody...all such pirates, free-booters, and sea-rovers....with all their ships and vessels, and all such merchandise, money, goods, and wares as shall be found on board.”<sup>3</sup> Privateering, although very to piracy, was legal, as it was commissioned by the government, while piracy was illegal, even though they both committed similar acts of violence at sea. .

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<sup>1</sup> Captain William Kidd’s Royal Commission, 1695, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail: A Norton Casebook in History*, ed. Robert J. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

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Often times the line between piracy and privateering was rather thin. The progression of Mary Read's career demonstrates this concept. Read, who was an especially well-known English pirate, began her career as a soldier and later became a small business owner, but soon thereafter entered into the world of privateering alleviate poverty.<sup>4</sup> Charles Johnson, the author of *History of Pyrates*, using trial records and personal accounts, states "(the) Governor of the Island of *Providence*, was fitting out some Privateer, to cruise against the *Spaniards*, she [Mary Read], with several others, embark'd for that Island, in order to quote details how the British government differentiated between pirating and privateering, endorsing privateering but shunning the idea of piracy. With the king's backing, Read and her go upon the privateering Account, being resolved to make her fortune one way or other."<sup>5</sup> These fellow privateers took to the sea. Mary Read, however, did not remain in the privateering business for the long. In order to gain more profit, Read and her fellow crewmates "rose against their Commanders, and turned themselves to their old trade."<sup>6</sup> This progression shows the very fluid relationship between piracy and privateering: and that some seafarers practiced both at one time or the other.

The Ibans a group of people from the island of Borneo, "lead [their] warriors to guard the mouth of the Saribas river to prevent the Illanuns and other pirates from entering, and to attack other strangers... [went] further overseas to look trading ships" (135). Their actions were similar to acts committed by pirates; however, the Ibans were unlike many other pirates. Among island nations, piracy was extremely common and simply regarded as normal intertribal warfare. It was such that "It was the ambition of nearly every young Iban warrior [group of pirates] ... to get one or more Seru heads" (138). Since almost every young pirate wanted to get "one or more Seru heads" this kind of violence was commonplace. This shows how piracy was was also regarded as a very common form of intertribal altercation. The term "pirate" was thus not applied in these Island nations even though the Ibans fit every description of a pirate. Thus, piracy was sometimes a subjective description to describe certain illegal activities at sea.

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<sup>4</sup> The Life of Mary Read, 1717, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 87-88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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# Who were pirates?

**By Monique Crum, Glorielly Gonzalez, and Kiersten Loften**

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, pirates originated from a variety of backgrounds including Chinese, English, Arab, and Indian culture. Although piracy was a male dominated activity, female pirates were also active during this time. Often, pirates were financially disadvantaged people who turned to robbery at sea out of desperation. In short, answering the question “Who was a pirate?” is an ambiguous because the criteria for defining piracy was often unclear.

As previously mentioned, pirates generally came from backgrounds of all sorts, and there is no stereotypical pirate. As an example of this diversity is Cai Qian, a man from the Tongan area of China from about the late 1700s to early 1800s, who started off as a cotton bower before he became a pirate.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, his wife had no previous occupation and simply became a pirate because of connections to him.<sup>8</sup> In this way, piracy was somewhat reliant on the connections that individuals had. The story of Cai Qian and his wife, based on local legends in various parts of the South China coastal region, lacks significant information about their backgrounds before they were pirates. The reliability of this source should be questioned because of the lack of information provided to the reader, but this story shows that ordinary people were attracted to piracy as a way of life.

Women also participated in piracy, but their experiences as pirates varied widely. One example would be the story of the female pirate Mary Read. It must be noted that the story of Mary Read, told in book called *History of Pyrates* was based on trial records and stories; therefore, the information may have been arranged to present a particular view of her as both a villain and a victim of difficult circumstances. The account depicted Mary Read as a woman from an impoverished background, whose mother dressed her as a boy in order to receive money from relatives. In her adulthood, out of desperation, she and “entered herself on Board a Man of War, where she serves some Time.”<sup>9</sup> Posing as a man in the military, she

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<sup>7</sup> Cai Qian and Matron Cai Qian, 1700 CE - 1800 CE, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony, eds. (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2007), 118.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The Life of Mary Read, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony, eds. (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2007), 87.

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received food and shelter and was able to escape dire poverty for a short time. Later in life, she decided to “ship herself on board of a Vessel bound for the *West-Indies*, ”<sup>10</sup> dressed a male. The ship was taken by the English, and the crew on the ship surrendered, but Mary Read, still disguised as a man, took up a job as a privateer. The author noted that she was pardoned from a death sentence only after the court found out that she was pregnant at the time of her trial.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, a pirate can not be classified under a specific framework or stereotype. Pirates were from different cultural backgrounds, and could be from any gender and age group.



Anne Bonny and Mary Read, female pirates

Image source

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/if-theres-a-man-among-ye-the-tale-of-pirate-queens-anne-bonny-and-mary-read-45576461/>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.



# Where did pirates go?

By Grace Kelly, Jen Song, and Maddi Swanagan

Pirates travelled to different locations depending on their intentions; pirates traveled along trade routes where there was a higher concentration of ships filled with goods for them to raid, while privateers tended to go to areas where their government ordered them to go. A Chinese imperial edict issued in 1803 described the business between Cai Qian, a pirate on the coast of Fujian, and the members of port town. This document a decree by the Jiaqing

Emperor, instructing the governor of Fujian to sent out spies to infiltrate the pirate and societal organizations, trying to capture the leaders. The merchants were forced to pay a fee once they went overseas and returned, and if the fee was not paid, the merchants would lose both their money and their lives. Because merchants must travel overseas in order to make a profit, they were forced to pay this fine, which provided motivation for the pirates to locate themselves near port towns.<sup>12</sup> This source, which heavily condemned the pirates, provides a glimpse of the interaction between merchants and pirates in a particular port city frequented by pirates. In a Royal Commission, issued to William Kidd in 1695, a representative of William III, King of England, wrote a letter giving Kidd commission as privateer for the English government to raid pirate ships.<sup>13</sup> Because he was assigned a specific target, Capt. Kidd would have wanted to travel to the locations where he knew the King's enemies were located. Through these two examples, it can be seen that pirates travelled to different locations based on their purpose for travel.



Image source: <http://www.dkfindout.com/uk/history/pirates/>

<sup>12</sup> Imperial Edict Concerning the Problem of Piracy, 1803, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert F. Antony (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 121.

<sup>13</sup> Captain William Kidd's Royal Commission, 1695, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert F. Antony (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 77-78.



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# What did pirates do? What did they want?

**By Martin Filbert, Andrew Kim, and Nathan Rosell**

Pirates attacked merchant ships and plundered them of their goods to obtain more wealth. They attacked enemy ships on their own initiative, stealing treasure, plundering all goods that the ship carried, taking prisoners, and gaining control of the ship. This activity was highly illegal due to the fact that pirates were individual entities devoid of governmental affiliation. If they had a legal government contract, they would have been privateers. Privateers plundered ships just as pirates did, but were hired by a specific government to attack enemy nation's ship. Therefore, they were considered legal by the countries that contracted them, and even though they were required to give most of the treasures they stole to their employer, they were allowed to keep a part of it as payment. However, privateers were harshly prosecuted if they attacked another nation's ships that held good relationships with the nation that contracted them, putting a restriction on whom they could attack. Pirates could attack anyone they wanted and keep everything they gained from ships. The captain would divide it amongst the crew members, rewarding everyone for their hard work. In a collection of stories about the female pirate Mary Read, it states that "no Person amongst them was more resolute, or ready to board or undertake any Thing that was hazardous."<sup>14</sup> This quote not only shows the bravery and overall badassery of Mary Read, but also states that it was dangerous to overtake ships in an attempt to loot it and leave the original possessors completely robbed. Read grew up from tough circumstances in her earlier life, and turned to piracy in order to take care of herself and take (or earn) a living.

Pirates also had an organized method of conducting trade, plundering enemy ships, and controlling their own population which was actually not random. Attacks made by the Saribas and Skrang Ibans were made because they had specific plans that they thought would lead them to success. "The Saribas and Skrang Ibans also began to make attacks on the Land Dayaks and Chinese who lived south and west along the coast in the vicinities of Pontianak and Sambas."<sup>15</sup> Most attacks made by pirates were calculated in order to be especially effective to get the most goods. Moreover, pirates developed strict rules for

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<sup>14</sup> The Life of Mary Read, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert F. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 88.

<sup>15</sup> An Oral History of Sea Dayak Raiding, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert F. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 137.

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themselves to follow in order to maintain order and to be sure they were accomplishing their goals as quickly and effectively as possible. “All crew members aboard pirate vessels swore oaths or signed articles at the outset of cruises whereby they agreed on the manner of such matters as discipline and the sharing of booty.”<sup>16</sup> Pirates were intelligent and efficient in conducting activities, both internal and external.



Candlelight Stories, “Attacking Merchant Ships”

Image source: <http://www.candlelightstories.com/storybooks/attacking-merchant-ships/>

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<sup>16</sup> Pirate Articles, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert F. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 91.

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# What kind of social order did pirates form?

**By Lucas Sullivan, Andrew Peev, and George Li**

The social order on pirate ships emphasized the equality of all the crew members, with several pirates being at the top of the command chain, such as the captain and the quartermaster. This hierarchy was necessary in order to maintain the order of a ship, as well as an entire groups of pirates, because otherwise the pirates would not be able to function efficiently and effectively.

The order formed by pirates put several crew members above the rest, but apart from that all others were equal. One example of this order formed by pirates may be seen when examining the code of conduct of the *Royal Fortune*, a British pirate ship, which was written in the early eighteenth century, and all crew members were expected to sign, and adhere to. This document was written by the captain himself, and gave rules for all of them to follow. Because of the captain's bias towards himself and his officers, the captain and the quartermaster got the largest shares of the prize, and the master, boatswain, and gunner got the next largest share. Other officers also got a somewhat larger share of the prize than ordinary crew members. Other than this, the code on this ship says that each pirate "has a Vote in Affairs of Moment" and an "equal title to the fresh Provisions".<sup>17</sup> Because pirates could often be quite difficult to control, a strict command order was necessary so the ship could function smoothly. However, because mutinies were so common, the captain also had to be sure to keep his crew well satisfied with their role on the ship. So, the code was a balance between the officers' extra privileges and the general equality between the crew members.

Between pirate lords who each commanded hundreds of pirates and ships, the social order was very different and focused on regulations between the lords and what happens when one lord violates the rules. The Chinese Pirate Pact of 1805 united seven extremely powerful pirate lords, which created a confederation of approximately 50,000 pirates who all obeyed the pact.<sup>18</sup> This pact was written by the pirates themselves to create their own rules to follow. This document was intended for the pirates, and wasn't meant to demonstrate their strength

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<sup>17</sup> Pirate Articles, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony (New York: Norton & Company, 2007), 92.

<sup>18</sup> Chinese Pirate Pact of 1805, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony (New York: Norton & Company, 2007), 122.

and unity on other people. These pirates wrote the document to maintain order because they considered order to be very important, and they believed that order was a way to conduct themselves in a way that was beneficial to the entire confederacy. Each lord was very powerful alone, so the code had to have strict punishments so none of them would violate the rules and betray or steal from another pirate lord. If any of the pirates steal loot that another ship had captured first, the second ship “[was] subject to attack from the entire group.”<sup>19</sup> With these regulations in place, the pact could be maintained. This pact was also focused on political aspects, such as maintaining good relations with certain nations, even if one faction disliked them, because it would be better for the confederation as a whole.



Image: Pirates divide up treasure among themselves

Image source: By Howard Pyle - Pyle, Howard; Johnson, Merle De Vore (ed) (1921) "Blueskin, the Pirate" in Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates: Fiction, Fact & Fancy Concerning the Buccaneers & Marooners of the Spanish Main, New York, United States, and London, United Kingdom: Harper and Brothers, pp. Plate facing p. 154 Retrieved on 14 April 2010., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10047277>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 123.



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# Piracy: Official and Popular Perceptions

By Yuri Oh, Spoorthi Jakka, and Ananya Yammanuru

Governments sometimes viewed pirates as advantageous partners. Some officials from major trading powers used the pirates' effectiveness at attacking ships to their benefit by giving pirates formal licenses to seize the goods from other pirate ships, as well as from ships of other rivals. The English government hired William Kidd as a privateer and gave him "full power and authority to apprehend, seize, and take into [his] custody...all such merchandizes, money, goods, and wares found on board [any of the ships he was assigned to capture]."<sup>20</sup> The letter from the English government, written in 1695, gave Kidd permission to attack other pirate ships, praised Kidd and referred to him as "our trusty and well-beloved Capt. Robert [i.e., William] Kidd."<sup>21</sup> This shows that the English government relied on privateers to protect English merchant ships and the goods they carried. Hiring privateers was a convenient for governments and merchants to raid rival ships. Additionally, hiring privateers was a solution for states and companies which could not afford a navy to protect their maritime interests.

Of course, pirates were disliked by governments who did not hire them because they disrupted trade. Governments made enemies with pirates. For example, the Royal Commission to Captain Kidd, characterized pirates Captain Thomas Wake and Captain William Maze as "wicked and ill-disposed persons," who "against the law of nations, commit many and great piracies, robberies and depredations on the seas".<sup>22</sup> Hence, the English government sent orders to their own privateers to capture these pirates.

Pirates made enemies with each other as well. According to an oral history of the Sea Dayaks, the Iban people set up the Sea Dayaks for failure by "[telling] the Saribas Dayaks that the Balau Sebuyau Dayaks hated them, and vice versa."<sup>23</sup> Although some of the events are likely exaggerated, some conclusions still remain: some pirates in different confederations did not like each other because they were rivals. Moreover, competition from other pirates could potentially jeopardize one group's profit.

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<sup>20</sup> Captain William Kidd's Royal Commission, 1695, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert Antony (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>23</sup> An Oral History of Sea Dayak Raiding, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert Antony (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 136.

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# Endurance of Piracy

**By Agne Naksovaite, Julia Simmons, and Shruthi Sundar**

Image source: <http://paulinespiratesandprivateers.blogspot.com/2010/05/history-democracy-in-golden-age.html>

Throughout the 17th to 19th centuries, pirates were a constant nuisance to maritime trade merchants, particularly in the Indian and Atlantic Ocean trade networks, because they frequently attacked and ransacked merchants' ships. The resulting loss of income these merchants faced continued to increase as the number of attacks did, forcing their respective governments to take countermeasures,



namely by hiring privateers to attack and capture these pirates. In a royal decree to one such privateer, Captain William Kidd, the English government commissioned the attack and apprehension of French pirate vessels. Their defense of this commission was that pirates “wicked and ill-disposed persons, [...] against the law of nations, commit many and great piracies, robberies and depredations on the seas upon the parts of America, and in other parts, to the great hindrance and discouragement of trade and navigation.”<sup>24</sup> This royal decree reflected the effect piracy had on maritime trade, especially amongst the European

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<sup>24</sup> Captain William Kidd's Royal Commission, 1695, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 75.

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regimes associated with Indian Ocean World trade. The pirates of this time, however, were able to endure the challenges posed by these merchants and official trading powers due to the creation and strict obedience of a code of conduct amongst themselves. For example, the most powerful Chinese pirate chieftains, one of which was Zheng He, made a pact in 1805 to organize all 50,000 of the Chinese pirates under their reign. It included rules for the pirates' organization, such as "each branch shall have its own name and number. If any [vessel] falsely displays another branch's name and banner, then as soon as it is discovered the vessel and its weapons will become the property of the whole group."<sup>25</sup> Also, "whenever attacking merchant junks [without passes], all of the captured cargo will become the property of the vessel that attacks it first".<sup>26</sup> Rules such as these congregated the pirates into one main body ruled by a hierarchy of Chinese pirate chiefs. This was a successful method that kept the majority of pirates in place, making them a more organized and formidable force. The enforced unity that these new rules brought to pirate ships made pirates less likely to run off, sell goods without permission, or get into any unwarranted trouble. This allowed them to therefore endure against the strong opposition they received from the various governments. There are records of English pirate leaders also writing up a set of rules to better control their subordinates. For example, Captain Bartholomew Roberts also created a code of conduct for his ship, *The Royal Fortune*, in 1720.<sup>27</sup> This code focused more on the rules on the ship rather than those off it, and as a result, as British pirates became more internally organized on their ships, they as a unit became a lot stronger. Thus, although pirates of all geographic origins were persecuted by the various governments whose merchant ships they captured, piracy continued to be very prevalent throughout the 17th to 19th centuries because of its structured organization.

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<sup>25</sup> Chinese Pirate Pact of 1805, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 122.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Pirate Articles, in *Pirates in the Age of Sale*, ed. Robert J. Antony (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 91.

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# Glossary

Junks - a ship most commonly found in the East Indies or China, having flat bottoms, high sterns, and lugsails

Maroon - to leave someone trapped or isolated in an inaccessible place, usually an island

Boatswain - a ship's officer in charge of equipment and the crew

Man-of-War - an armed ship

Sea Dayaks - people from the heart of Borneo that were infamous sea raiders

Privateer - private individuals who were commissioned by the government and were authorized to raid and/or capture enemy merchant ships

Plunder - to steal goods from a place or a person; typically using force

Buccaneers - pirates who specifically targeted Spanish ships

Opium - an addictive drug prepared from the juice of the opium poppy; a narcotic



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