

Information sheet no 080

Piracy

Pirates are sea robbers who prey on other ships and rob them of their goods and sometimes capture the ship itself for their own purposes. Piracy began over 2000 years ago in Ancient Greece when sea robbers threatened the trading routes of Ancient Greece. Since then, this threat continued amongst seafaring nations until the birth of regular navies. Roman ships were attacked by pirates who seized their cargoes of grain and olive oil. The Vikings (which means sea-raider) were renowned for attacking shipping and coastal settlements. Piracy really flourished between 1620 and 1720 and this period is known as the golden age of piracy. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, different types of pirates include privateers, buccaneers and corsairs.

Privateers were pirates authorised by their government to attack and pillage ships of enemy nations. They shared their profits with the government. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries governments issued 'letters of marque' which licenced these sailors to plunder foreign ships. This letter prevented privateers from being charged with piracy, an offence punishable by death. Francis Drake was England's most famous privateer. In the sixteenth century, he attacked Spanish treasure ships returning from the new world and shared his profits with Queen Elizabeth I. He was also knighted for his services.

Buccaneers were both pirates and privateers who operated from bases in the West Indies and attacked Spanish shipping in the Caribbean. Corsairs were Muslim or Christian pirates active in the Mediterranean from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The Barbary Corsairs were Muslim and operated solely from the North African states of Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli and Morocco and were authorised by their government to attack the ships of Christian countries. In contrast the Maltese Corsairs were Christian and were granted a licence by the Christian Knights of St John to attack the 'barbarian' Turks.

Many pirates had served in merchant or naval ships prior to turning to piracy. Life on a pirate ship appeared more attractive as they were independent of national laws, the crew were treated much better than normal sailors and prize money was shared out equally. Most seamen became pirates as they hoped to become rich on plunders of treasure and cargo ships. When pirate ships captured merchant ships, the pirate captain would ask for volunteers to serve under him. Many of the crew would volunteer as life on a merchant ship was harsh and conditions awful

There were not many women pirates as seamen believed that it was unlucky to have women aboard ships. Women wanting to live as a pirate usually disguised themselves as men. There were some extremely powerful women pirates, such as Ching Shih who commanded a pirate community of 80,000. The two most famous women pirates were Anne Bonney and Mary Reed. They were captured in 1720 and put on trial in Jamaica. They were both sentenced to death but escaped execution as they were both pregnant. Mary Reed died of fever a few months after the trial but Mary Bonney was released.

Becoming a pirate was called 'going on the account' and they had to agree to live by the rules of the ship. These rules were often strict and breaking them could mean flogging or even death. If a pirate was found stealing from

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their comrades or deserting during battle, they were marooned on a desert island with meagre supplies. Most would die a slow death from starvation if they could not hunt or fish.

Pirates used flags to frighten passing ships into surrendering without a fight. The original pirate flags were blood red and this signalled that no mercy would be shown once the pirates boarded and battle ensued. As piracy developed, more flags were used and pirates often had their own flags. The Jolly Roger (a skull and crossbone) is the most famous pirate flag. The symbol had been appropriated from the symbol used in ships' logs, where it represented death on board. It was first used as pirate flag around 1700 and quickly became popular with pirates, who designed their own version of the flag e.g. a skull and crossed swords.

Pirates required ships that were fast, powerful and with shallow draught. Surprise was vital to a pirate attack and they needed to be able to navigate in shallow coastal waters to hide in secluded coves and inlets. Schooners were used by pirates in North American waters. They were fast, easily manoeuvred with a shallow draught but were large enough to carry many guns and a large crew. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Barbary Corsairs used galleys that were long and narrow with a sail. During action, these vessels were rowed to allow travel at speed. Each oar was manned by up to six slaves who were chained to benches. The aim of the corsairs was to ram the enemy ship, board and defeat the crew in hand-to-hand battle. The galleys were only suited to the Mediterranean where conditions were calm. Junks were flat bottomed boats with three masts and sails held together with bamboo rods, used in Chinese waters. The largest junks held twelve guns and carried rowing boats to raid coastal villages or board enemy ships. Pirates often took over captured merchant ships and altered them to suit their purpose to increase speed, cut more gun ports and also to hide the true identity of the ship. They also utilised weapons, clothes, medicines and food found on board.

Pirates boarded ships by jamming the rudder with wooden wedges so that the ship could not be steered. They would then use grappling hooks to board the ship heavily armed with pistols, daggers and cutlasses for hand-to-hand fighting. Pirates also used homemade weapons such as hand grenades made by filling wine bottles with gunpowder to create smoke screens by setting fire to yellow sulphur. Merchant seamen under attack tried to prevent pirates boarding by greasing decks or scattering dried peas or broken glass on the decks. They knew if they put up a strong resistance and lost, they would be seriously maimed or murdered. The pirates would take all the treasure or cargo that the ship carried. These might include silks, jewels, spices, wine, brandy, linen, money or slaves. Sometimes the pirates added the captured ship to their fleet or sank it to get rid of any evidence that would convict them. The seamen would be killed, ransomed, taken as slaves or joined the pirate crew.

Pirates also became involved in the lucrative slave trade. The Barbary Corsairs found that by selling the crews of captured ships as slaves or demanding a ransom for them was more profitable than the ship's cargo. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the slave trade was a lucrative business, the profits from slavery attracted many pirates. Some became slavers whilst others sold cargoes of slaves captured from the merchant ships bound for the American colonies or from raids on the West African slave ports. Thus many pirates became a combination of slaver, privateer and pirate, and by the 1830's the term picaroon had come to mean both pirate and slaver.

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John Hawkins (1532-95) was the first English privateer to realise that the slave trade was a profitable trade. In 1562 he made the first of three voyages as a slaver, sailing from England to West Africa to load up 3000 slaves and sail them to the Caribbean to be sold on the island of Hispaniola. Pirate captains in the Caribbean welcomed runaway slaves, who made up as much as one-third of some pirate crews. For the slaves, joining a pirate ship was more appealing than living the harsh life on the plantations as a slave.

The punishment for piracy was death by public hanging. The bodies of executed pirates were often tarred to preserve them to be hung from a gibbet. The corpse would be chained into an iron cage to prevent relatives from burying the body. The notable pirate, William Kidd, received this fate and his body hung for three years at Tilbury Point in the Thames estuary as a warning to seamen and pirates. A condemned man was measured for his iron cage before his execution, and many pirates feared this more than the hanging. After Blackbeard was killed in battle, his head was cut off and tied as a trophy to the yardarm of HMS *Pearl*.

Organised piracy and privateering was finally ended in the nineteenth century. In 1816, the bombardment of Algiers marked the end of the Barbary pirates' power in the Mediterranean. Dutch warships patrolled Southeast Asia and the British navy attacked pirates in the South China seas. However, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, lawful privateers were still flourishing until 1856 when the majority of maritime nations signed the Declaration of Paris. This banned letters of marque and therefore outlawed privateering. Navies of each country were used to enforce this law. The age of steam also helped to end piracy as anti-slavery operations were now undertaken by steam ships. These could sail without wind and at great speed, while pirates still relied upon more cumbersome sailing ships. By 1850 there were only a small number of pirates remaining.

Although piracy has never returned to the level it was in previous centuries, it has not completely disappeared and the world's navies continue to try to prevent piracy. Attacks occur worldwide mainly in developing countries. In the 1990s, political groups hijacked ships, threatening crews and passengers with death if their demands were not met. Pirates in South East Asia have attacked merchant shipping and in the Caribbean, ships have been attacked and robbed. Modern day pirates still rely on speed and surprise in their attacks. They use fast dinghies and arm themselves with assault rifles to overpower ships. Many ships today have smaller crews, relying on technology and so can be easily overpowered.

In the 1700s songs, plays, operas and novels were written about buccaneers, and during the nineteenth century storybook pirates were more famous than the real ones. Almost as soon as the world's navies had made the oceans safe, people quickly began to forget the reality of piracy. Many writers turned pirates into heroes. Byron (1788-1824) did much to create the myth of the romantic pirate hero in his poem 'The Corsair'. However such books as Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Treasure Island' portrayed a more realistic view of pirates as villains.