Piracy and World History: An Economic Perspective on Maritime Predation
Author(s): J. L. Anderson
 Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Journal of World History*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall, 1995), pp. 175-199
Published by: University of Hawai’i Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078637
Accessed: 16/05/2012 02:19

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Piracy and World History: An Economic Perspective on Maritime Predation*

J. L. ANDERSON
La Trobe University

Oceans and seas have always provided opportunities for the relatively cheap transport of products and persons, and the resulting movement of vulnerable assets has attracted from earliest times predators called pirates. These generally behaved as a species of William H. McNeill's metaphorical macroparasites, human groups that draw sustenance from the toil and enterprise of others, offering nothing in return. The form of maritime macroparasitism termed piracy adversely affected trade and so productivity in ways not always recognized. It also had political implications when it was an expression of conflict between the practice of indigenous peoples and the economic expansion of a power from beyond the region.2

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview, with analysis based on legal and economic concepts, of the nature and significance of piracy. This form of predation has been global in its incidence and, at times, at least partly global in its structure. The patterns that emerge from a study of several historical examples are the reflections of wider

* I gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments and suggestions given by participants in the World History Association Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, June 1993, particularly K. N. Chaudhuri and K. R. Robinson. I attribute the sharpening of some definitions and some of the analysis in this paper to the comments of anonymous referees. Remaining inadequacies are my own responsibility.


contexts of commerce and politics, and often of remote events and policies formulated far from the scene of a particular action. In the Caribbean, piracy originated in and was fueled by Old World rivalries. The predation on merchant shipping in the Mediterranean Sea in early modern times was sustained not simply by ideological animosity and individual greed but also by economic rivalry between European nation-states. In the eastern seas in the nineteenth century, piracy was indirectly stimulated and eventually suppressed by the economic and technical changes that were associated with the British industrial revolution, half a world away. The story of maritime predation involves much more than localized incidents or enterprising and colorful individuals.

Piracy is a subset of violent maritime predation in that it is not part of a declared or widely recognized war. Within the general category of maritime predation, a precise definition of piracy universally acceptable over time and between places has eluded jurists. A broad definition that emerges from historical writing is that of the essentially indiscriminate taking of property (or persons) with violence, on or by descent from the sea. This concept of piracy certainly includes one of the widely accepted elements of stealing—that is, the taking and carrying away of the property of another—but doubt may arise about a further element, the lack of “color of right.” This further element relates to whether there was reasonable belief that the relevant conduct was justifiable. While some may see a partial justification for piracy in Marxist terms as an expropriation of the expropriators, comment on the question of culpability generally focuses on the question of the traditional rights of members of communities to appropriate to themselves the property of others and the associated question of whether interference with those rights was anything more than the manifest imperialism of an expansionist power.

The problem of framing and securing international recognition for laws that would rid the seas of pirates, without infringing the rights of

---

3 The industrial revolution was associated with an increase in oceanic trade and produced the technology that helped to defend that trade—in particular the steam gunboat and the electric telegraph. See Daniel R. Headrick, The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century (Oxford, 1981), pp. 43–57.

4 A distinction between piracy and privateering can be drawn in theory but not always easily in practice. A privateer was an armed vessel, privately owned, carrying formal authority to attack the shipping and to take in a regulated way the property of a specified enemy in time of war. This form of predation on commerce was abandoned in 1856 by most nations by the Declaration of Paris. A recent study of privateering, with useful bibliography, is that of David J. Starkey, British Privateering Enterprise in the Eighteenth Century (Exeter, 1990).
sovereign states, appears not to have been resolved for many reasons, some relating to the nature of the offense. Private purpose (animus furandi) has generally been held to be a necessary element of piracy, to distinguish the crime from political activity. If a pirate claims to be acting on behalf of a state rather than from private motives, then the issue turns first on whether the state is one entitled to authorize such actions and then on whether it accepts responsibility for them or not and whether it can or will act responsibly in either case. Throughout history, many officials at all levels of authority have found it expedient and usually profitable to ignore or even covertly to sponsor acts of piracy. It was precisely the inaction or ineffectiveness of ancient and medieval European states in relation to theft by sea that led to the practice of reprisal, whereby an aggrieved party was given license to recover from any member of the offender’s community the value of property stolen. The path from that action to random piracy is short and clear.

It has been argued that some societies, stigmatized as having been piratical, were merely claiming or exercising a historical right to levy “taxes” on passers-by. For example, Alfred H. Rubin writes of the Mediterranean Sea in the sixteenth century, when predation was unarguably intense, that “the picture is actually, legally, one of lively and dangerous commerce and conflicting claims to authority that might be called an authority to tax nearby shipping lanes with capture of the vessel, confiscation of its cargo, and the enslavement of the crew the penalty for tax evasion.” He writes also of “waters historically claimed as within the taxing jurisdiction of Tunis” and refers to a British legal decision in the nineteenth century as implicitly denying Borneo Dyaks “a jurisdiction of their own to control commerce, tax it, or forbid it in waters they might claim as part of their own territory.”

This approach raises interesting questions about the origin of and justification for such levies. If the rights claimed were established and maintained by force, can there be complaint if a superior force extinguishes those rights? Further, reference to “tax” in this context is inappropriate. The term tax, with its aura of legitimacy, implies revenues collected from a community in return for the provision of public goods, such as defense and law at a minimum, and perhaps public works and services designed to improve the life and livelihood of those taxed. If the arrangement lacks this reciprocity, then the exactions are more properly termed tribute. Tribute may be defined as unrequited, systematic exactions effected by force or threat of force, such as were made, for example, by medieval European robber-barons and modern protection-racketeering gangsters.

The legal problem of suppression of piracy is further compounded by the question of jurisdiction. The emergence of nation-states in Europe led to the establishment of clear (though often disputed) frontiers between territorial units, and within each unit jurisdiction was by definition not in question. By contrast, the sea offered no such defined frontiers other than coastlines, variously defined at law. Therefore, strictly speaking, there could be no lawful general policing of the oceans by a party willing to intervene in an incident between nationals of two other states or their ships. By the same reasoning, however, it seems difficult to allow any group a right of jurisdiction over the high seas for the purpose of collecting tribute, or for that purpose even over vessels making “innocent passage” through what the group might arbitrarily choose to consider its territorial waters.

The legal aspects of piracy affect expected returns and costs in what was essentially a business. The problems of legal definition and jurisdiction in cases of alleged piracy, when a given state’s laws do not clearly apply, would tend to lessen the probability of a pirate’s being brought to trial and successfully prosecuted, which would in turn reduce the “costs” pirates might expect as a consequence of their activities. Similarly, the elusiveness and anonymity of a ship in the expanse of oceans and the ease of disposal of incriminating evidence (and witnesses) make detection and apprehension difficult, which further...
Anderson: Piracy and World History: An Economic Perspective

reduces the probability of punishment in the pirates’ calculus of profit and loss. The expectation of punishment would be lowered still further if the pirate had the open or tacit protection and support of powerful individuals or enjoyed the benign indifference of a state administration. On the other side of the ledger, high returns could be expected from piracy; wealth is concentrated in ships themselves and in their holds, and ships are easy to intercept as they predictably double capes or negotiate narrow straits and other “choke points” on trade routes.

The consequences of piracy and, more broadly, maritime predation can be further examined in economic terms. The economic significance of predation in history extends beyond the transfer of commodities or destruction of vessels that it occasioned. It also includes the implications of the reduction in tradeable assets that results from predatory activity. For analytical purposes, the losses may be considered as immediate, both direct and indirect, and as dynamic, resulting from the adverse effects on future production.

Direct losses to the violence of predation were the destruction of capital in the form of ships and cargo, and of labor with the death of crew members. Indirect losses, which are less obvious and less noticed in the literature on piracy, were the resources used for protection against the predators and so lost to direct productive activity. These losses occur because piracy does not represent a simple transaction that is economically neutral; rather, the resources of both predator and victim are consumed in contesting the transfer of the assets. The pirate’s labor and capital could probably, although not necessarily, have been used in ways that would have added to the total of desirable goods and services, and it is certain that a mercantile victim would have found more productive use for the assets devoted to protection. These assets could include taxes paid for defense or sums paid for guns, for crew to defend the vessel in addition to those necessary to work it, and for various forms of insurance.

The immediate effect of theft associated with piracy would be to reduce the supply of commodities available in the normal channels of trade. Both the producers and consumers of such commodities are likely to suffer loss. Fewer goods would be available to the consumer, and those probably at a higher price. Even if the pirate placed the stolen goods on the market, the producer would have suffered a loss, leading to a contraction in production and in the trade dependent on it.

In dynamic terms, losses that result over time from pirates’ acquisition of part of the benefits of trade lie in the reduction of incentives

---

for existing producers and merchants to continue with or to expand their activities, or for others to enter those industries. Indeed, reduction of productive effort, which reduces assets at risk, is one way of self-insuring against predation.\(^{12}\) Another way to reduce risk is to reduce the proportion of capital in the production process, despite the consequent fall in productivity. The random nature of piratical predation, with concomitant business uncertainty, would compound disincentives.\(^{13}\) A reduction of trade tends to limit the opportunity for exchange and so reduces the scope for increased satisfaction through diversity in consumption. It also limits the specialization in production upon which advances of productivity overwhelmingly depended, directly or indirectly, in the pre-industrial world.

**Losses in general could be reduced in two ways: through a reduction of predation, effected perhaps by more efficient naval patrols, and through a reduction in the costs of providing a given level of protection, as could result from the deployment of fewer but individually more effective warships. In the first case, the ship owners and merchants—and the crews—would obviously benefit. In the second case, the benefits might be retained by the providers of protection, but even so, the savings in resources could permit an increase in investment and trade, and that result would almost certainly follow if political arrangements were such that the reduction in protection costs was passed on to the merchants. Despite the conspicuous consumption of individual merchants, their function as a group was to invest and expand their activities in search of profits.\(^{14}\)**

\(^{12}\) Anderson, *Economics of Crime*, p. 41. The threat of predation can severely restrict all maritime activity, with consequent economic dislocation to industries and regions. In England in 1625, for example, it was reported of so-called "Turkish pirates" that "in the west parts they made the coast so dangerous through their spoils as few dared put forth of their harbors." Gray, "Turkish Piracy," p. 161. In the same century, according to a former chaplain at Surat, European pirates in Arabian seas "so impoverish'd...some of the Mogul's people that they must either cease to carry on a trade or resolve to be made a prey" (G. V. Scammell, "European Exiles, Renegades and Outlaws and the Maritime Economy of Asia, c. 1500–1750," *Modern Asian Studies* 20 [1986]: 661). For the Philippines, see Warren, *Sulu Zone*, pp. 168, 181. For parts of the Caribbean, see Kenneth R. Andrews, *The Spanish Caribbean: Trade and Plunder, 1530–1630* (New Haven, 1978), p. 165.

\(^{13}\) A large part of the explanation of economic development in Europe may be argued to have been the reduction, through impersonal law, of predation on the business community by those not under authority—and by those in authority. See E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 85–149.

At particular times in world history, and over the long term, costs of protection fell. The benefits of reduced costs, however, accrued differentially to merchant groups, the differences depending on a variety of technical and political circumstances. Those merchants who enjoyed relatively low costs of protection had a competitive advantage over their mercantile rivals who did not. The net surplus acquired through this advantage in premodern times is plausibly argued by Frederic C. Lane to have been "a more important source of profits . . . than superiority in industrial techniques or industrial organization." In this analysis, protection costs are central to the process of capital accumulation and differential economic growth, and the costs of protection to the mercantile sector, when so much trade was seaborne and vulnerable, were in turn significantly affected by the intensity of maritime predation. It has been shown, for example, that a substantial part of the fall in freight rates on the North Atlantic between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries reflected the savings made in costs of protection as a result of the suppression of piracy.

For analytical purposes, piracy, or predation of a more ambiguous nature, may be broadly classified in terms of its form or expression. It may be parasitic, dependent on the extent of seaborne trade or the wealth of vulnerable littorals; episodic, occasioned by a disruption or distortion of normal trading patterns; or intrinsic, a situation in which piracy (or at least predation) is part of the fiscal and even commercial fabric of the society concerned. These classifications relate to the causes of predatory activity and so necessarily to its suppression.

---

15 At a different level, Jones, *European Miracle*, argues that competition between nation-states in politically fragmented Europe restrained governments in their revenue raising and also reduced transaction costs. This was to the economic advantage of early modern Europeans, relative to their contemporaries in comparatively monolithic Asian empires.
16 Lane, "Economic Consequences," p. 410.
17 Piracy, in Marxist analysis, could have contributed to primitive accumulation of capital by Europeans, but its quasi-universal and random nature and its costs to all parties could hardly have yielded Europe a significant surplus, if any. Quantitatively, piracy would be inconsequential relative to the other forms of plunder and expropriation discussed in part 8 of Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (reprint, Harmondsworth, 1976). This point might be considered with P. K. O'Brien's calculations of the limited contribution that even lawful overseas trade made to European economic growth. P. K. O'Brien, "European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 35 (1982): 1-18. This is not to deny that the transfer of assets effected by successful predation could provide a net profit for particular individuals or groups.
The analogy of pirate with parasite is useful in understanding the
argument that rejects the assertions that, if trade was flourishing, then
reported piracy could not have been a significant problem.\(^{19}\) With par-
asitic piracy, it is precisely when trade is flourishing that piracy is likely
to be a problem: parasites flourish when hosts are readily available, and
an efficient parasite at worst debilitates rather than destroys the host
that sustains it. The trade data say nothing about the counterfactual
probability of “what might have been” if there had been no piracy.

The simple parasite analogy, however, cannot carry too great a
weight of analysis. The functional relationship between this form of
piracy and trade expansion is not one of constant proportions, as
might be expected between parasite and host. Instead, after a certain
point, parasitic piracy is likely to be reduced as trade increases. This
follows from economies of scale in defense—the probability of there
being a reduction in cost of defense per ship or unit of cargo with an
expansion of trade. As the volume of trade increases, the form of pro-
tec tion can change with increased cost-effectiveness. Initially, each
ship may carry soldiers and their provisions, which would be expensive
directly and also indirectly through reduction of cargo-carrying capac-
ity. At a greater scale of activity, merchants might jointly hire an
armed ship to convoy their vessels. At a still greater scale of operation,
they may form a group (or pay a government) to deploy cruisers and
perhaps to dominate, annex, or destroy predatory societies.

This increasing efficiency of defense with increased scale of mer-
cantile activity would reduce unit costs of protection and loss from
predation. Assuming the political structure to be such that these ben-
fits flowed onward to the merchants, their greater share in the gains of
trade would provide an incentive to increase trade still further. This
process depends ultimately on the society having sufficient resources
to prevail in the conflict with the predators. The Roman empire and
the great trading companies and nation-states of France, Britain, and
the Netherlands had such resources, but city-states with significant
dependence on revenues from trade were more vulnerable. Singapore
merchants in the early nineteenth century were highly sensitive to the
problem, but were able to gain the support of metropolitan power.
Venice, standing alone at the end of the sixteenth century against
powerful adversaries, was not so fortunate.

Venice is a documented case in which piracy contributed to the

\(^{19}\) Fisher, Barbary Legend, pp. 157, 176. The point is raised also in Carl A. Trocki, Prince
of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johore and Singapore, 1784-1885
(Singapore, 1979), pp. 86-87.
decline of an established commercial center.\textsuperscript{20} The city-state was subjected to a predatory onslaught on its seaborne commerce in the late sixteenth century. At that time, Venetian ships were at hazard from Uscocki boats in the northern Adriatic Sea, from Algerian and Tunisian corsairs at the entrance to the Adriatic, and from Turks, Dutch, English, and others in the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{21} The effect of this situation on Venetian trade can be gauged by one of the few available estimates of losses of ships and profits as a consequence of piratical activity. Between 250 and 300 Venetian ships (with a total of about ten times that number of ships in general) are estimated to have been taken between 1592 and 1609—not many fewer than the 350 that suffered shipwreck.\textsuperscript{22} Around the turn of the century, insurance rates rose; even normal rates more than doubled, and some rose to more than 50\% of the value of the goods insured—when insurance could be had.\textsuperscript{23} It is estimated that from an expected return of 10,000 ducats on a voyage in 1607, 8,500 would have been consumed in expenses for port dues, soldiers, sailors, and insurance.\textsuperscript{24} In the late sixteenth century, Venetian capital and enterprise began to turn from the sea. Although the fundamental causes of the long-term decline of the Venetian economy were the rise both of the Atlantic nations and of Islamic power in the Levant and the Mediterranean, “the pirates, and especially their activities in the years 1595–1605, brought the organization of Venetian trade and shipping to a crisis which could only accentuate the results of a secular trend.”\textsuperscript{25}

Returning to the analysis of the nature of piracy, it can be accepted that defense is not the only activity enjoying economies of scale; piracy does also. Philip Gosse identifies and outlines the nature and dynamics of a “piracy cycle.”\textsuperscript{26} In this piracy is initially conducted by small and independent groups of individuals using their boats for piracy in desperation of poverty dictate or as the opportunity presents. Success in this venture equips the groups with more and larger vessels,
and an organization can emerge to coordinate their activities, these changes making predation increasingly effective. With further success the pirates' strength becomes such as to make them a virtually independent power when they may choose to enter into an alliance with some recognized state. At that point the pirates have become in effect a mercenary navy, paid by plunder. Success will legitimize their power; failure and defeat will lead to disintegration of the organization into the small, furtive outlaw groups from which the force originated. This "piracy cycle" is evident in the Mediterranean in Roman times. The organization of the Cilician pirates on the coast of Anatolia moved from bands to squadrons to a navy, which early in the first century B.C.E. was allied with Mithridates of Asia Minor in a war against Rome. The Cilicians survived their ally's defeat to become an independent and troublesome force. The Cilicians had been increasingly active in the Mediterranean and along its coasts from about the middle of the second century, but had been tolerated by Rome for the slaves that they provided. However, the developing dominance of the seas by Cilicians, along with the threat they posed to the grain supply of Rome, stirred the Senate in 67 B.C.E. to give the general Pompey, titled "the Great," what was effectively plenary power over the Mediterranean and Black Seas and their littorals. With a comprehensive and systematic strategy, and an astutely humane policy to the vanquished, Pompey destroyed the pirate power in a few months.27

Elements of the "piracy cycle" can also be seen in the semi-piratical careers of the English Sea-Dogs who emerged from the tradition of West Country piracy, and who came to form the core of the English navy. Their Dutch contemporaries, the Watergeuzen (Sea-Beggars), driven to predation at sea by troubles in their mercantile and maritime homeland, became organized on a scale adequate to seize the politically significant Dutch port of Den Briel, and they continued as the maritime arm of the Netherlands in the rebellion against Spain.28 Further examples of the "piracy cycle" can be found in the rise of the city-states of the North African littoral, the so-called Barbary States,29 which menaced the Mediterranean sea lanes in alliance with or inde-

28 Given their circumstances and motivation, even the early Sea-Beggars could more reasonably be seen as privateers than as pirates, but "unfortunately, they but too often made their demands upon both friend and foe" (John Lothrop Motley, The Rise of the Dutch Republic: A History, 3 vols. [London, 1906], 2:285).
29 The term Barbary has been commonly if vaguely used to refer to the whole or part of the region of North Africa that lies to the west of Egypt, including part of the Atlantic coast. The region is more properly called the Maghrib.
dependent of the Ottoman empire, and in the patterns of Chinese piracy in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The involvement of elements of a navy, mentioned above in reference to a process of suppression of piracy, bespeaks the entry of a political force into the contest between pirates and merchants, usually as the result of an increase in the scale of trade. In the Caribbean and colonial waters, increased volume of trade in the eighteenth century meant that governors, as well as planters and merchants, could benefit more from legitimate activities than from corruptly supporting or clandestinely supplying the pirates. Increased American trade in the Mediterranean following independence led to the punitive expeditions conducted in the Mediterranean by units of the fledgling U.S. Navy. In the first century B.C.E. the Roman state, with increasing commerce and power, took action, at first relatively ineffectually, against piratical activity in the eastern Mediterranean. The British pursued a similar course of action in the eastern seas. At the stage when state power is enlisted to suppress predation upon shipping, however, the predators themselves are likely to be at the apogee of the “piracy cycle” and to form part of an organized society if not of a state, whether recognized or not. The situation then becomes legally and politically unclear.

At the point when predation is de facto or de jure a part of the commercial or fiscal functioning of an organized community, it may be classified as “intrinsic.” Any attempt by another state to interfere with that activity by definition impinges on the customs, revenues, prestige, and perhaps territorial integrity of the indigenous peoples concerned—whether of the cities of the North African and Indian littorals in early modern times or of Malayan sultanates in the nineteenth century. In this situation, the circumstances surrounding the predation and its suppression cloud the issue of right. A merely reactive resistance by potential prey to attack by maritime predators is a hazardous if not wholly ineffective policy, as it gives the predator a probably decisive tactical advantage. Consequently, warships have commonly cruised to actively protect seaborne trade and to destroy predators’ vessels, and armed forces have at times engaged in punitive expeditions ashore. The question then arises whether these initiatives were police actions justifiable by an extension of the natural rights of property and self-defense or whether they represented the naval edge of imperialism.31

31 Rubin argues, inter alia, that the Pax Britannica in the eastern seas, similar to and in some ways patterned on the Pax Romana in the Mediterranean of two thousand years before, was wrong at law. Rubin, Law of Piracy, chaps. 1 and 4. See also A. P. Rubin, Piracy, Paramountcy and Protectorates (Kuala Lumpur, 1974).
A possible test of the nature and intent of anti-piracy patrols and expeditions is whether as in police doctrine the action involved no more force than was necessary for the purpose or whether as in military practice the maximum force was applied and the territorial intrusions became permanent occupations. On these criteria, European activity in the Mediterranean and British activity in the eastern seas to suppress interference with shipping were perhaps less imperialistic than a strict interpretation of law might suggest. In each case, for quite some time, only limited force was applied, and that generally intermittently; the territorial control or occupation that effectively eliminated predation came late in the process.

In the Mediterranean Sea, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the line between piracy, privateering, and trading was seldom easily discernible. Rhetoric in the Atlantic powers, charged with mercantile self-interest and colored by hostility toward Islam, condemned as piracy the activities of corsairs sailing from the North African ports of Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Salé, cities for which predation was an intrinsic part of public finance and of commerce. However, there was little to distinguish the behavior of corsairs from those cities from that of the Christian Knights of St. John based at Malta and of those of St. Stephen at Pisa and Livorno, for example, or from the behavior of many individual European mariners sailing under their national flags or as renegades under the flags of their North African bases. Predation was generally but not necessarily directed across ideological lines, Christian versus Muslim, but both sides enthusiastically attacked the richly laden Venetian ships. Indeed, Fernand Braudel observes of the Mediterranean at this time that “privateering often had little to do with either country or faith, but was merely a means of making a living.” When failure in the enterprise meant famine at home, “privateers in these circumstances took no heed of persons, nationalities or creeds, but became mere sea-robbers.”

---

33 Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period (Cambridge, 1987). See pp. 159, 164 (Algiers); p. 177 (Tunis); p. 194 (Tripoli); p. 221 (Sala). It is observed (p. 165) that the intrinsic nature of predation in the first three of these cities persisted because of the exclusion of their shipping from European ports and the predatory activities of the Knights of St. John.
35 Tenenti, Piracy and the Decline of Venice, p. 18.
36 Braudel, The Mediterranean, 2:867. Weakening domestic political control could also result in corsairs crossing the line between regulated predation and criminality. See Abun-Nasr, History of the Maghrib, p. 194.
Ironically, it was the consolidation of the nation-states of Atlantic Europe, with the establishment of law and order within their boundaries, that brought lawlessness to a new level of intensity on the Mediterranean Sea. The policy of ideological homogeneity adopted by the nascent nation-state of Spain led to expulsions of Muslims and suspected Muslims, which provided at the beginning of the seventeenth century and perhaps earlier a flow of aggrieved Moriscos to man the raiders of the North African cities of Algiers and Salé. The rivalry between France and Spain set upon the sea corsairs of dubious commission and doubtful integrity. A French alliance even allowed a Turkish fleet under the command of Khayr al-Din, known as Barbarossa, the opportunity to harass Spanish shipping and raid coasts from the French base at Toulon. English and Dutch entered the Mediterranean with heavily armed merchantmen and with little respect for the property of French or Spanish nationals—or, often enough, for that of any nationals, whatever the diplomatic relations between states happened to be.

This behavior foreshadowed and led into the more systematically competitive mercantilist era of the seventeenth century, when it was assumed that in the competition for trade, one party’s gain was another’s loss. The term mercantilist reflects the symbiotic alliance between the state and the commercial interests in pursuit of power and wealth at the expense of other states. The aggressive spirit of mercantilism was perhaps as well expressed by the behavior of the Europeans in the armed merchantmen as it was later by the warfare between nation-states, partly for explicitly economic ends, that punctuated the second half of the seventeenth and all of the eighteenth century. The geography of the Mediterranean Sea, together with the technology and logistics of naval warfare, meant that the ideological and commercial conflict there was of necessity carried on not by fleet actions but by raid and counter-raids. This was undertaken in large part by private enterprise, often in the fullest sense of the term, for the acquisition of profit and the power on which profit in those times largely depended.

The same mercantilist pursuit of profit and power led nation-states

---

37 Lloyd, English Corsairs, p. 94.
38 The English and Dutch carried into the Mediterranean their developed practice of predation by private enterprise, sharpened by the bitterness of the conflicts of the Reformation.
40 Guillemain, Gunpowder and Galleys, p. 264.
of Europe to come to an accommodation with the states of the Maghrib, whose corsairs the Europeans often termed “pirates." By this accommodation, the European states competitively served their own interests by paying tribute for the safe passage of their ships, which they hoped would be denied to their commercial competitors. In practice, safe-conduct passes could be unreliable protection in the absence of adequate naval power to ensure that they were accepted.\textsuperscript{41} Diplomatic relations were established between the states of Europe and the Maghrib, but these were generally fragile and often ruptured. Nevertheless, such recognition of the sovereignty of the Maghribi states gave increased weight to the claim that predators acting under their patronage were privateers rather than pirates.\textsuperscript{42}

In the eighteenth century relations between Christian and Islamic powers in the Mediterranean Sea were regularized and became less overtly hostile. This is not surprising, since with the development of the east Asian trade, European commercial interest in the Levant had relatively declined. Also, northern navies were more powerful and therefore more threatening, while their expansion provided employment for restless seamen who in earlier centuries might have “gone on the account” and even “turned Turk” to do so. Further, in the global wars between European nations in the eighteenth century, in which navies were important instruments, the alliance or at least respectful neutrality of the North African states was a useful strategic asset, confirmed by the regular payment of tribute.\textsuperscript{43}

These comfortable arrangements were disrupted in the early nineteenth century by the nascent power of the newly independent United States. That country had come into conflict with Tripoli over a dispute concerning tribute payments. Action by U.S. naval forces and marines obliged the pasha of Tripoli to undertake to refrain from interfering with American ships and from demanding tribute. Corsair attacks continued, however, and a further naval expedition to Algiers, Tunis, and again Tripoli in 1815 temporarily restrained (but failed to subdue) the rulers of those cities.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} The power of the Royal Navy, from the late seventeenth century on, meant that British ships were less at risk in the Mediterranean than those of their commercial rivals and so could carry smaller crews. This gave them a cost advantage and with it a large share of the carrying trade. Ralph Davis, “England and the Mediterranean, 1570–1670,” in Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England, ed. F. J. Fisher (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 131–32.

\textsuperscript{42} One purpose of the establishment of relations was the facilitation of the ransom or exchange of captives. Predators in the Mediterranean took captives as a matter of course for ransom or for use as slaves ashore or aboard galleys.

\textsuperscript{43} Lloyd, English Corsairs, pp. 147, 156–58.

Almost immediately after the American action, the power of the Maghribi states was further challenged by Britain, but again with limited effect. The Royal Navy, acting on earlier precedents and with Dutch support, in 1816 bombarded Algiers into accepting peace and the abolition of the slave trade. As on many previous occasions, however, punitive actions and naval demonstrations by one or two nations brought only a temporary respite from interference with seaborne commerce—naturally so, as predation had long been intrinsic to the structure and functioning of the maritime states of North Africa. The threat that their corsairs posed for the safe passage of ships on the Mediterranean Sea was all but eliminated a few years later, not through occasional naval action but through a novel cooperation between the major European maritime powers, at that time Britain and France. About a decade later, France occupied Algeria as part of the nineteenth-century movement of European colonial expansion.

A similar situation developed in the seas of southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century, though on a smaller scale and involving weaker predatory groups. For the purpose of predation, the environment was ideal. The flow of maritime trade between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea was concentrated into the Straits of Malacca, on the littorals of which and on nearby islands dwelled groups that possessed few natural resources other than their location. Predation increased in the nineteenth century with the expansion of trade in and through the region, but predation had been endemic from the earliest times. The hazard of pirates was referred to with apprehension as early as the fifth century by Chinese who sailed in those waters.

The interest of political and legal historians in piracy in the Malaysian seas has been focused not on opportunistic activities of individuals or small independent groups, which constituted piracy by any definition, but on the systematic and large-scale predation that was an intrinsic part of organized indigenous communities, tolerated or supported by their chiefs or sultans. The nature of that predation could be less easily defined; it has been argued that tradition had given the

---

45 Seton Dearden, A Nest of Corsairs: The Fighting Karamanlis of the Barbary Coast (London, 1976), p. 244. The corsair activities of the Knights of St. John at Malta also became negligible during the eighteenth century. See Lloyd, English Corsairs, pp. 146-47.


practice “color of right” and that the right of the British in law and morality to suppress it by armed intervention may be questioned.\textsuperscript{48}

The victims of predation were generally Chinese or Indochinese merchants and seamen and relatively defenseless Malay peoples: villagers, fishermen, and merchants trading locally or who had been drawn from the Indonesian seas to the British entrepots of Penang, Malacca, or Singapore. In 1824, a year of troublesome pirate activity, it was noted that only one (European) brig had been taken, but that pirates “harassed the trading prahus [native craft] incessantly, cutting them off and murdering or making slaves of the crews.”\textsuperscript{49} Whatever the precise legal status of the predatory activity, it imposed costs upon the economy in terms of reduced trade and hence reduced specialization, exchange, and productivity, while fear and uncertainty would have restricted capital accumulation. In some cases fear led even to the abandonment of land and the depopulation of coastal and island areas.\textsuperscript{50} These effects must have been a handicap to economic development in the region.

Much of the raiding, particularly by predators coming from the Sulu Sea and southern Philippines, was for slaves. Although the compulsion implicit in slavery may have increased the net productivity of the units of labor taken, it is doubtful whether that would have significantly offset the wastage involved in capture and coercion. Slaving is a business inherently wasteful of human life. In addition to those killed in the raids, some new captives “died from hunger, some from being handcuffed, some from grief. . . . If prisoners were sick so they could not pull on an oar they were thrown overboard.”\textsuperscript{51} Similarly, when


\textsuperscript{49} Anonymous, “The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago,” Journal of the Indian Archipelago, ser. 1, 3 (1849): 632. Other reports support this assessment; see Tarling, Piracy and Politics, pp. 28–29, 166. Of the dozen or so British ships reported as having been lost to pirates in the 1840s, some seem to have been looted after grounding and others were simply lost without trace. See British Parliamentary Papers: Accounts and Papers, 1850 LV 9, “Return of British Vessels Attacked or Plundered by Malay or Dyak Pirates off the Coast of Borneo, August 1839–1840.”

\textsuperscript{50} D. G. E. Hall, A History of South-East Asia (London, 1966), p. 499; Warren, Sulu Zone, p. 29. Similar effects occurred elsewhere. Of ancient times in the Mediterranean, Henry A. Ormerod notes that “as a result of this general insecurity and continued harrying of the coasts, wide tracts of country passed out of cultivation.” Ormerod, Piracy in the Ancient World, p. 49. For examples from later times, see Braudel, The Mediterranean, 1:32, 154.

\textsuperscript{51} Deposition of a former captive dealing with events in 1847, quoted in Warren, Sulu Zone, p. 242.
captives were traded for use in ritual sacrifice, their labor was lost to a region in which labor was already the scarce factor of production.\textsuperscript{52}

In the early nineteenth century, British efforts to suppress predation in Malayan waters were feeble. Because their trade was little affected, they were reluctant to become embroiled in local affairs. It was in the material interest of neither the British government nor the East India Company to expend their resources in the protection of the persons or property of Malay traders or Chinese merchants. As a result of the increasing trade of the newly established Singapore, however, the problem of parasitic predation became so acute that the naval presence was increasingly strengthened. Eventually punitive expeditions were mounted up the rivers of Borneo to destroy the principal predators’ bases.

In a close analysis of the legality of British efforts afloat and ashore to suppress predation in the eastern seas, Alfred H. Rubin remarks incidentally that “the political effect of the raid in Borneo was to help James Brooke, an English adventurer, in his attempts to get control personally of the government of Sarawak.”\textsuperscript{53} Quite so, but the achievement of that objective and the destruction of the predators’ power made the region safer for maritime commerce and for littoral dwellers. It was followed by a freeing of trade through the Straits of Malacca and a sustained increase in trade with Borneo, to the apparent contentment of the indigenous people—though perhaps not of their leaders. Even the formerly “piratical” Sea Dyaks remained loyal to Brooke in later risings fostered by Chinese secret societies and discontented chiefs.\textsuperscript{54}

A further type of piracy, differing from parasitic and intrinsic piracy in its cause and cure, may be termed episodic. The episodes in question may be political or economic. A surge of piracy may accompany the weakening of a political power that had restrained, on either a regional or local scale, the predatory proclivities of some mariners or some maritime communities. In the seventeenth century, with the decline of the Iberian, Ottoman, Mughal, and Ming empires, a “great pirate belt” developed from the Caribbean to the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{55} Weak or disputed political authority in an area would also permit an analytically

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., pp. 199, 249. On labor as the scarce resource, see Anthony Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1686, 2 vols. (New Haven, 1988–93), 1:129.

\textsuperscript{53} Rubin, Law of Piracy, p. 230.


\textsuperscript{55} Braudel, The Mediterranean, 2:865 (citing Louis Dermigny, La Chine et l’occident: Le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle, 1719–1833).
distinct form of episodic piracy to flourish: piracy caused by a disruption or distortion in the normal patterns of trade.

Disruption of trade resulted in the unemployment of both seamen and ships, leading those whose livelihood was derived from maritime activity to seek alternatives, which included smuggling and piracy. When normal levels or patterns of trade were restored, the fundamental cause of this form of piracy was removed. Employment was then available for seamen and ships, and merchants who had supplied vessels or received cargo without questions being asked when trade had been disrupted could then find adequate outlets for their capital in legitimate trade. At that point, piracy presented a threat, rather than an opportunity, to the business community and to government officials. Episodic piracy essentially of this nature occurred in the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the South China Sea.

In the Indian Ocean, a conjuncture of alien intrusions and local political weakness formed the conditions for a spectacular episode of piracy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Piracy in some form, often intrinsic, had been endemic in the Indian Ocean from the earliest times, and merchant vessels carried warriors for protection. Nevertheless, regular trade had been conducted peaceably by merchants, and the large, cosmopolitan ports were neutral places. All that changed with the arrival of the Europeans. The Portuguese, driven by a crusading zeal and a thirst for wealth, sought to control the trade of the eastern seas through their superior naval power and the seizure of bases. This turned Muslim shipping operating from the

56 Restoration of trade in Europe followed the disruptions of war and the depressions of peace. However, when trade disruption resulted from the intrusion of a power that established a monopoly of trade in the area, as happened in the eastern seas, the protracted "episode" could originate or stimulate intrinsic piracy. For a view of the effects of Dutch intrusion into the Indonesian archipelago, see Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, pp. 497–98. For some of the antecedents of raiding in the area, see Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 159–60.


59 The later Dutch and English intrusions into the eastern seas were also inextricably associated with predation and outright piracy. See Scammell, "European Exiles," pp. 649–56.
coast of India into “an armed trade diaspora that made little distinction between the legitimacy of trade and plunder after a century of maritime guerilla warfare.”

In the late seventeenth century, with the weakening of Mughal rule, this predation was systematized under the leadership of the Angria family, initially on behalf of the rising Hindu Maratha power and later for itself when Angria squadrons menaced all shipping off the west coast of India. In addition, pirates from the Caribbean also had established themselves in the Indian Ocean in the late seventeenth century, adding to the European pirates who had been preying on shipping in the region for much of the century.

The Caribbean pirates had been drawn to the Indian Ocean in search of cruising grounds that offered richer prizes and more secure refuges than did the West Indies at that time. From bases on Madagascar they marauded indiscriminately, but their chief prey were the merchant and pilgrim vessels plying the Arabian Sea. Some of the pirates were British—Avery and Kidd being the most notorious—while others often wore English colors. The East India Company accordingly suffered embarrassment as well as losses; it was initially held to account by the Great Mughal for the depredations of those who were or appeared to be its countrymen.

As the East India Company became more capable in the defense of its vessels, the focus of piracy perpetrated by Europeans shifted back to the Caribbean. There, with the early eighteenth-century dislocations of war and of the following peace, piracy reached the apogee of its “classic age.” By that time, piracy had become a business global in its reach, with plundered assets being no less mobile than the mariners who acquired them. While the pirates were operating in the Indian Ocean, New York and other colonial ports made profits from supplying them and purchasing their loot. However, as the century progressed, the growth in America of domestic production and trade afforded alternative employment for labor and capital and led to a demand for the suppression of piracy. Meanwhile, that objective was being pursued with increasing assiduity by agents of the state, civil and naval, of improved efficiency and increased integrity.

Piracy in the Caribbean was not confined to the major episode in the early eighteenth century or to the time of buccaneering—a mixture of piracy and privateering—that occupied much of the preceding

---

60 Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade, p. 147.
The nature of buccaneering, which originated in the Caribbean Sea as a colonial extension of European national conflicts exacerbated by trading exclusivity, is outlined in Gosse, History of Piracy, book 3, chap. 1. See also the bibliographical review in Larry Schweikart and B. R. Burg, “Stand By to Repel Historians: Modern Scholarship and Caribbean Pirates, 1650–1725,” The Historian 46 (1984): 219–34. In the West Indies of the seventeenth century, “it was left to entrepreneurs to carry out state policy by private means” (Ritchie, Captain Kidd, p. 15).

65 For England, see Senior, A Nation of Pirates, pp. 7–11.
66 Black, Pirates of the West Indies, p. 11.
In Chinese waters, a major episode of piracy occurred in the sixteenth century. The fundamental cause was again economic hardship suffered by maritime communities, but in this case it was caused by a prohibition on overseas trade imposed by imperial authorities in an attempt to eliminate petty parasitic piracy. For decades early in the century, a flourishing clandestine trade fused with the mounting maritime power of the so-called wokou. Although the term means “Japanese pirate,” it is clear that Chinese personnel predominated and provided leadership. Official control was ineffective: the Ming dynasty was in decline, and in Japan the Ashikaga shogunate was in the process of disintegration.

The Ming administration’s prohibition of overseas trade in response to petty piracy was a quintessentially bureaucratic solution to an irritant associated with an economic activity in which the administration had no official interest, philosophically or materially. Not surprisingly, the prohibition was not accepted by coastal communities. The wealthy continued to provide finance, officials charged with the suppression of trade still functioned as intermediaries, and the ordinary people continued in their employment in maritime and ancillary occupations, one of which, when opportunity presented, could be piracy. With the passage of time, the merchant-pirates became better organized and more powerful, as groups coalesced and operated from bases on offshore islands beyond official reach. Even then, trade rather than pillage appears to have been the primary desideratum: the most influential of the pirates, Wang Ji, had cooperated with officials to suppress pirates who obstructed trade.

At the same time, private trade with the Japanese had been opened by Chinese merchants. Trade between China and Japan had been limited and formalized within the traditional tribute system, but frustration with this led the Japanese, quasi-feudal and unconstrained by any central authority, to establish commercial and piratical links with Chinese merchants. Pirate bands that emerged from these associations, reinforced by desperate peasants suffering from the droughts and famines of the years 1543–46, cruised in large, well-armed fleets and ravaged the central coast of China, where they established fortified bases on land, frequently defeated imperial troops, and even threatened the imperial grain barges in the Yangzi delta.

---

70 Kwan-Wai So, Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the Sixteenth Century (East Lansing, 1975).
71 Ibid., chap. 1.
73 Kwan-Wai So, Japanese Piracy, p. 34.
This episode of piracy was brought to an end in the 1560s as a result of divisions in the pirate leadership, official astuteness (and duplicity), and campaigns mounted with locally raised, well-trained, and well-led troops. The cause of large-scale piracy was eliminated in the 1560s when the ban on overseas trade was rescinded and a tax system was formulated that was less burdensome on the agricultural peasantry. The threat of Japanese participation in piracy waned as Japan came increasingly under a centralized political control, and without Japanese allies, Chinese pirates could be defeated in detail.

Extensive piracy reemerged on the south China coast in the early seventeenth century, as the Ming dynasty declined in famine and rebellion toward its demise at the hands of Manchu invaders. Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), the son of a high Ming official who had made his wealth in trade and illicit activity, led the resistance to the Manchu in the southern coastal areas and later expelled the Dutch from Taiwan. In these activities he was patriot rather than pirate, at least in purpose, if not always in practice: problems of supply obliged Zheng to raid coastal areas. The episode is interesting because despite the specific circumstances and the particular motivations involved, the actions of Zheng and his Manchu adversaries conformed to the patterns characteristic of large-scale piracy and its suppression in China both before and since. These patterns are the deployment against the dynasty of large, well-organized, and well-disciplined fleets, with pitched battles against imperial forces on land and sea; the banning of maritime trade by imperial authorities to deny prey to the predators (with, on this occasion, the clearing of population from the southern coastal strip for some years in the 1660s); and the termination of the episode of piracy by some combination of internal dissension, imperial diplomacy, and the military force that was available to the empire.

The next large-scale episode of piracy in Chinese waters followed the cessation of a war between factions in northern and southern Viet-

---

74 Cambridge History of China, 7:503.
78 John E. Wills, Jr., “Maritime China from Wang Chih to Shih Lang: Themes in Maritime History,” in From Ming to Ch’ing: Conquests, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China, ed. Jonathan D. Spence and John E. Wills, Jr. (New Haven, 1979), p. 226.
In the late eighteenth century, again a time of famine and civil disturbance in China. Chinese naval mercenaries moved north to their home waters and put their naval, organizational, and strategic skills to use in large-scale and systematic predation for about two decades. Such was the scale of their operations that they were able regularly to engage and defeat fleets of imperial war-junks. The pirates levied tribute in the land areas over which they had some control. In effect, they set up a pirate state, mimicking some aspects of the structure and functioning of the increasingly ineffectual imperial Qing state and adding to the burdens of an already impoverished peasantry.

Although the power of the pirate “state” was broken by internal divisions and the official diplomacy that exploited those divisions, there were further regular outbreaks of Chinese piracy during the nineteenth century. These episodes were generally associated with the crises characteristic of a dynasty in decline and the consequent poverty, lawlessness, and weakening of government control both on land and at sea. In addition, the illicit opium trade in the first half of the century was associated with an increase in parasitic piracy.

Although European vessels carrying opium or the proceeds of its sale were desirable prizes, the burden of piracy in Chinese as in southeast Asian waters appears to have fallen most heavily on relatively defenseless seafarers and inhabitants of the littorals, rather than on the better armed Europeans. Profit, in piracy as in any business, depends on the difference between returns and costs, with the difference being multiplied by the number of transactions. While opium clippers and other European ships offered the prospect of high returns to predators, European ships were generally well armed and therefore costly to engage, except perhaps if there was an opportunity to employ stealth or deception. Local craft, such as market boats, generally offered in themselves and in their cargo a lower return as prizes, but were numer-

---

29 Dian H. Murray, Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790–1810 (Stanford, 1987), pp. 89–90. Control by pirate confederations was established “through formal systems of terrorism, extortion and bribery. . . . Through the systematic use of violence and brutality pirates would intimidate . . . their victims into submission” (Antony, “Aspects of South China’s Water World,” p. 84).

80 In the 1850s there were many relatively small European vessels—schooners of about 200 registered tons—operating in the opium trade on the coast of China. One such, for example, was “armed with four eighteen-pounders of a side; a long eighteen on the forecastle and a sixty-eight pounder amidships—these two last being pivot guns” (Captain Lindsay Anderson, A Cruise in an Opium Clipper [reprint, Melbourne, 1989], p. 35). The armament was comparable to that of a small British warship. Pirate junks appear to have mounted up to a dozen guns, but a pirate ship mentioned as being “a large one” had only four six-pounders, though it had a crew of 120 men. Basil Lubbock, The Opium Clippers (Glasgow, 1953), pp. 202–93, 339.
ous and relatively defenseless. Grace Estelle Fox notes of this period that "pirates... attacked and plundered some European ships, and they captured an incalculable number of native cargoes."81

The episode of piracy most costly of life in modern times took place in nearby seas and again followed the cessation of a conflict in Vietnam. With the establishment of a new regime in South Vietnam in 1975, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese sought to leave their homeland, many doing so in a variety of small, often overcrowded and unseaworthy boats. These refugees, with their wealth—such as it was—necessarily in portable and easily negotiable form, attracted opportunistic maritime predators with hideously tragic results. Problems of jurisdiction and detection impeded effective action to suppress the pirates. States in the region had jurisdiction but not necessarily control over the acts of their nationals at sea. Vietnam had unequivocal legal standing in international law to act or to seek action to protect its citizens, but it did neither. Other states, whatever their revulsion at the occurrences, had no legal standing to act directly.82 Despite efforts that were made within the region to suppress the evil and those made, necessarily indirectly, by states outside the region, predation waned only as the prey diminished.

In that episode of piracy, and commonly in other cases in modern times, difficulties of detection have impeded its suppression.83 Modern piracy committed on commercial shipping, although perhaps organized by criminal groups and essentially parasitic, can have elements of intrinsic predation. Pirates and their vessels are often able to blend undetectably into communities that may knowingly give them shelter and support, but which in any case have legitimate dealings with boats and the sea. In those situations, patrols cannot easily distinguish predators from mariners going about their lawful occasions, and later investigations cannot easily identify offenders or prosecute with a level of proof beyond reasonable doubt.

The problem of piracy—parasitic, intrinsic, episodic—will continue to exist as long as there are criminally inclined persons and maritime zones of ineffective law enforcement. In addition, as this review suggests, piracy is likely to exist while there are littoral communities that are sunk in poverty or vulnerable to economic fluctuations and in which local traditional practice is more respected than the law of a remote central authority. The availability of appropriate technology for maritime surveillance and the apprehension of offenders is—and has been from the remote past—a necessary but not sufficient condition for the effective suppression of piracy. Further requirements are national resolve, international cooperation, and economic development that improves the material conditions of maritime communities.