



The Golden Age of Piracy



The word *Pirate* brings to mind buried treasure, walking the plank, parrots, cutlasses, black eye patches, wooden legs, pieces of eight, and jolly Roger flags. How close are these images, though, to the real world of pirates? Who were these men and how did they live their lives?

Piracy is as old as the history of sailing itself. Some of the earliest pirates were the Phoenicians who plied the Mediterranean from about 2000 B.C.. While the Phoenicians conducted much legitimate trade, they also didn't flinch from attacking other merchant ships or even coastal towns.

A Sample of Pirate Shipboard Rules:

- Men caught stealing from the ship's coffers will have their noses slit and will be marooned on a desert island.
- Lights and candles are to be extinguished by 8 o'clock every night. Anyone who wants to go on drinking must do it on deck by moonlight.
- Any musicians hired to entertain the crew are to have Sunday off. The rest of the week they must play every night.

Later, around 150 B.C. the Cilician pirates from Turkey took control of the Mediterranean until 67 B.C. when the Roman senate ordered Pompey, a brilliant Roman general, to hunt them down. He was successful in clearing the sea of them within three months.

Pirates appeared in great number on the Mediterranean again during the Middle Ages. While on land, crusades were conducted by Christian Europeans to get control of the "Holy Land" of the Middle East, held by Muslims, pirates conducted similar battles on the Sea. These pirates, known as the Corsairs, were skilled Muslim and Christian seamen who attacked ships owned by those of the opposing religion. The booty

they gained was often the crew and passengers of the ships as well as the cargo. Men and women were sold as slaves or, in the case of those from rich families, ransomed for cash.

The Golden Age of Piracy

The pirates we are most familiar with, though, are those from a time that might be called The Golden Age of Piracy. This period started soon after the discovery of the New World and continued for about 250 years.

In 1494 the Pope divided the New World between Spain and Portugal. Predictably this did not sit well with the other European nations. They wanted a part of the gold the Spanish were stealing from the Aztecs of South America and conflict was inevitable.

The part of the New World coast from South America through the Caribbean to Northern Florida was known as "The Spanish Main".



It was from ports along these coasts that Spanish galleons, large treasure ships, sailed for Europe. The European powers began attacking these ships and taking the gold for themselves.

Outfitting ships was expensive and one way to raise a fleet at little cost was to issue "letters of marque" that entitled the owner of a private ship to outfit it for war and use it to attack enemy ships. In return for official permission the ship's owner split any booty captured with the royal treasury. Men who engaged in this activity were referred to as "privateers."

Privateers were in effect legal pirates. Or at least legal to those governments with which they shared the loot. Sir Francis Drake, who started his career in 1570, was a hated pirate to Spain, but a hero in England where Queen Elizabeth addressed him as "my dear pirate." His popularity with the crown was assured after one



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expedition where he captured for treasury 300,000 pounds of booty, keeping another 10,000 for himself. Drake not only raided ships, but attacked Spanish towns and mule trains carrying gold. So favored was Drake by the Queen that she presented him with a special sword to use upon her enemies.

There was a danger in using privateers, though. Often these independent captains were tempted to attack ships of countries besides those their nation was at war against. Also in times of peace it left thousands of men jobless who had been trained to attack ships and seize goods. The temptation to turn pirate during these times was immense and many men did so.

The Buccaneers

In 1630 a treaty was signed with Spain that allowed the English and French to colonize some of the lands along the Spanish Main. Many of the European settlers wound up on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). One of the main sources of food on the island was wild pigs originally introduced by the Spanish. The settlers barbecued the pigs on open fires called *buccans* or *boucan*. From this the settlers eventually got the title *buccaneers*.

The Spanish became nervous over the many buccaneers on Hispaniola and sent hunters to slaughter the pigs. This backfired as the buccaneers, with their food supply gone, turned to piracy to meet their needs. Many of the buccaneers, who also referred to themselves as the "Brethren of the Coast," moved to the island of Tortuga, off the coast of Hispaniola and it

became a pirate stronghold. Its fresh water, fertile ground, good anchorages and defensible harbors made it ideal for their needs.

The buccaneers often used small boats called pinnaces for their attacks. Using these they could sneak up on unsuspecting merchant ships and get control of the ship even before the crew knew they were under attack. When they used larger ships the pirates often favored smaller, single-masted sloops that could operate in shallow water. This allowed the ships to be easily hidden in small hidden bays and inlets. The English buccaneers liked attacking with the dozen or so cannon on deck, while French pirates preferred hand-to-hand combat with small arms and knives.

While some pirates were excessively cruel outlaws, many were just plain sailors who could not find an honest living. The life of a sailor in those times was hard. The power of the captain of a merchant ship or a military vessel was nearly absolute. Crewmen could be whipped by a cruel captain for the least offense.

In contrast many pirate ships were run democratically. Before a voyage the crew held a council that included all the members. As a group they decided where to sail, who should be captain, and how any booty should be divided up. The captain usually got a double share and crew members with special skills, such as a doctor or carpenter got one and one half. The council also drew up a list of rules that all the crew agreed to obey.

<http://ummuseum.mus.pa.us/pirate.htm>