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Beyond the Skull and Crossbones: A Historiographical Review of Piracy from Antiquity to the Contemporary Era

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Abstract
Piracy has been a persistent feature of maritime history for over two millennia, evolving from ancient Greek sea robbery to contemporary organised criminal enterprises in Southeast Asia. This paper provides a historiographical review of piracy, tracing its development across four distinct periods: ancient, medieval, early modern, and contemporary. Drawing on classical sources, historical chronicles, and modern maritime reports, the study examines the shifting nature of piracy, the socio-economic conditions that foster it, and the varying state responses that have succeeded or failed in suppressing it. The paper argues that effective counter-piracy measures require not only naval power but also address root causes such as poverty, political instability, and the absence of rule of law. The analysis further reveals that while piracy has adapted to changing geopolitical and technological contexts, the fundamental drivers, economic desperation, weak governance, and the lure of illicit profit, remain remarkably consistent. The study concludes by drawing lessons from historical counter-piracy campaigns, particularly Pompey the Great's comprehensive approach, and applying them to contemporary challenges in the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

Keywords: Barbary pirates, buccaneers, piracy, maritime security, counter-piracy,

Introduction
The word *"piracy"* originates from the Greek term *peiratēia* and the Latin *pirata*, both of which refer to acts of high-sea robbery, plundering, and illegal activities committed by sea-focused criminals (Pike, 2014). The term entered the English lexicon in the early sixteenth century, specifically in 1520, when it was primarily associated with maritime theft and criminal activities

perpetrated by sea robbers on the high seas (Pike, 2014). Over time, the semantic field of "piracy" has expanded to encompass various forms of intellectual property infringement, including unauthorized copying and distribution of copyrighted material. Hence, the word 'maritime' is now used to qualify the type of piracy that relates to robbery or depredation on the high sea. The ancient origins of the term 'piracy' suggest that piracy has been a social problem for millennia (Kontorovich, 2004). Under Roman law, *piracy jure gentium* (piracy by the law of nations) was part of *jus gentium* (law of nations). According to Roman legal codification, piracy constitutes a crime under both international and municipal law (Graham, 2016). Under international law, *piracy jure gentium* differs from piracy under municipal law, as the former does not always include offenses classified as such under local law and, consequently, is not susceptible to universal jurisdiction (Graham, 2016).

This paper undertakes a historiographical review of piracy, tracing its evolution from ancient

Greece through the medieval Viking and Barbary eras, the early modern buccaneering period, and into contemporary piracy in Southeast Asia, Gulf of Aden and Gulf of Guinea. The central argument is that while piracy has manifested in diverse forms across different historical epochs, its root causes, economic marginalisation, weak governance, and geopolitical instability—remain persistent. Furthermore, the most effective counter-piracy measures have combined military force with socio-economic addressing of root causes.

Statement of the Research Problem

Existing studies on contemporary piracy appear to lack historical depth as they do not provide a profound background to the emergence of modern piracy, which is foundational to the understanding of issues of piracy in the contemporary period. Existing studies, to the best of the knowledge of this study, are multifaceted and do not present comprehensively the developmental stages of piracy from the ancient period to the contemporary period. An understanding of how humanity has battled the problem of piracy, highlighting successes and failures, provides a hindsight of the problem of piracy, which is foundational to the understanding and handling of contemporary piracy.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How has the nature and organisation of piracy evolved across different historical periods?
2. What socio-economic, political, and geopolitical factors have driven the emergence and persistence of piracy?
3. What counter-piracy measures have been most effective, and what lessons can be drawn for contemporary maritime security?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three theories, which include the State Fragility theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Routine Activity theory. State fragility theory posits that piracy flourishes where state authority is weak, contested, or absent (Menkhaus et al., 2015). This is evident in the historical record, from the fragmented Greek city-states to contemporary Indonesia, Philippines and Somalia. Rational choice theory suggests that pirates are rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of their activities (Satkauskas, 2014). Piracy persists when the expected gains exceed the expected costs of detection and punishment. This framework helps explain why piracy has flourished during periods of economic hardship, such as the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The

Routine Activity theory is a criminological approach that emphasises the ecological process of crime, examines it as an event, and establishes a close relationship between crime and the environment (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The routine activity theory differs from many other criminal theories in that it focuses primarily on crime circumstances rather than criminals.

According to the routine activity theory, crime happens when a motivated criminal finds a suitable victim without a capable guardian present (Felson & Cohen 1980). Instead of concentrating on criminal activity, it looks at how exposure, proximity, and availability alter the regular activities of prospective victims and offenders and how that alters the crime rate. Notably, the routine activity theory makes the assumption that everyone who has the chance to commit a crime can. A motivated perpetrator, an appropriate victim, and the lack of a capable guardian (such as security personnel or law enforcement agents) are the three requirements for a crime to occur, according to the routine activity theory. Accordingly, crime is explained by the Routine Activity Theory as the outcome of three crucial components: motivated offenders, or persons who are motivated to commit crimes; suitable targets, that is, the presence of things that are of some economic value and which can be easily transported; and the absence of capable guards or persons who can prevent a crime from taking place.

Empirical Literature

The historiography of piracy has evolved significantly over the past century. Early twentieth-century scholarship, exemplified by Ormerod's *Piracy in the Ancient World*, published in 1920, focused primarily on classical sources and treated piracy as a peripheral phenomenon in ancient history. Mid-century works, such as Gosse's *The History of Piracy*, published in 1932, adopted a more narrative approach, chronicling pirate exploits across civilisations, though without sustained theoretical engagement. The late twentieth century witnessed a shift toward more analytical treatments. Bradford's works (1992, 2007) analysed piracy across historical epochs and identified the socio-economic drivers of pirate activity. De Souza (1999) provided a detailed examination of Greek piracy, arguing that piracy was integral to ancient Greek maritime culture and identity. More recent scholarship has focused on regional case studies, particularly Southeast Asia (Liss, 2007; Purbrick, 2018), Gulf of Aden (Obuah, 2010), Gulf of Guinea (Kamal-Deen, 2015, Anyika, Ojakootu & Ani, 2022) and on the linkages between piracy and other forms of maritime crime (Menkhaus, John, & Colin, 2015).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historiographical research design. The method involves a historical analysis of secondary sources, including classical texts, historical chronicles, and modern maritime security reports. The study draws on the works of Ormerod (1920), Gosse (1932), Bradford (1992, 2007), de Souza (1999), and other historians of piracy. For the contemporary period, the study relies on annual reports from the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), particularly the Piracy Reporting Centre's data from 1992 to 2020. The analysis is organised chronologically into four periods: (1) Ancient Piracy (c. 1200 BC – 476 AD), (2) Medieval Piracy (c. 500 – 1500 AD), (3) Early Modern Piracy (c. 1500 – 1800 AD), and (4) Contemporary Piracy (c. 1945 – present). Within each period, the analysis examines the nature and organisation of piracy, its root causes, state responses, and outcomes. The study acknowledges some limitations. First, the historical record is fragmentary and biased toward elite perspectives, particularly in the ancient period. Second, data quality for contemporary piracy is inconsistent due to under-reporting and definitional inconsistencies across jurisdictions. Third, the study focuses primarily on piracy in the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia, Gulf of Aden and Gulf of Guinea reflecting the concentration of historical scholarship and contemporary concern.

Findings and Historical Analysis

Ancient Piracy

Greek Piracy: Origins and Mythology

In the ancient period, pirates were perceived as sea robbers who preyed on other ships, robbing them of goods and sometimes capturing vessels for their own purposes. Piracy began over 2,000 years ago in Ancient Greece, when sea robbers threatened the trading routes of Greek city-states (Royal Naval Museum, 2002). Since then, piracy has persisted among seafaring nations until the establishment of regular navies. Roman ships were frequently attacked by Greek pirates who seized cargoes of grain and olive oil (Bradford, 2007). Ancient historians such as Homer and

Cicero documented incidents involving Greek and Roman mariners, and several centuries later, during the Middle Ages, Western Europeans weathered Viking onslaughts (Cordingly, 2015). According to Herodotus, pirate activities precipitated a major conflict between the Greeks and Persians. The earliest known pirates were the Greeks and Persians, with the latter claiming that the Greeks were provoked by Phoenician pirates. Argos, the wealthiest city in what is now Greece, was visited by Phoenician traders who loaded their ships with goods from Egypt and Assyria (de Souza, 1999). The Phoenicians established a trading post at Argos, but on the fifth or sixth day, they captured Princess Io and her maids, setting sail for Egypt.

This abduction became the primary cause of animosity between the Persians and Greeks. In retaliation, several Greeks, likely Cretans, the most infamous pirates, sailed to Tyre and abducted Princess Europê. Other Greeks sailed to the Black Sea, where they pillaged Colchis, took the Golden Fleece, and abducted Princess Medea (Bradford, 2007). Medea's father, Aeetes, the King of Colchis, dispatched envoys to Greece to retrieve his daughter, but the Greeks refused restitution, citing the lack of compensation for Io's abduction. A generation later, Paris of Troy, aware of these events, abducted Helen, sparking the Trojan War. The conflict between Europe and Asia thus escalated from the abduction of women to full-scale war, with the Greeks sailing to Asia with a massive expedition (Bradford, 2007).

In ancient Greece there was a thin line between a hero and a pirate. War heroes often doubled as notorious pirates. On their journey home from battle, heroes turned to pirates, and usually pillaged adversaries or neighbours. Odysseus exemplifies this duality, a hero on the battlefield but a pirate upon his homecoming. According to Greek mythology, piracy played a significant role in early Greek history (1200–700 BC), when the distinction between a band of warriors and a band of pirates was negligible. Odysseus, carried by wind to Ismarus and the Cicones, was infamous for his piracy. His encounter with Polyphemus further illustrates the Greek perception that there was little difference between a pirate and a hero (Pritchett, 1974). Throughout Greece, the most infamous pirates were the Cretans (de Souza, 1999; Bradford, 2007).

Greeks versus Barbarians Piracy

The Greek world consisted of small kingdoms and aristocratic states with no central authority to prevent blood feuds. No state was powerful enough to subjugate the others or stop piracy in the Mediterranean or the Aegean (Zacks, 2005). However, aristocrats gradually recognised the importance of cooperation and their role in the *polis* (city-states), which became a potent tool for defending their interests and controlling neighbours. Under the guidance of the oracle at Delphi, the Greeks launched hundreds of colonising expeditions in the eighth and seventh centuries, establishing new poleis from the Black Sea coast to North Africa and west to Italy, Sicily, and the northern Mediterranean (Bradford, 2007). These expeditions required significant resources and generated substantial returns. As the Greeks pushed into the Western Mediterranean, they

encountered the Carthaginians (in North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain) and Etruscans (in central Italy), who responded by plundering Greek ships (Langewiesche, 2004). The Carthaginians and Etruscans provided sixty ships each to a combined force, engaging the Phocaean fleet of sixty ships in the Sardinian Sea. The Phocaeans prevailed but lost forty ships, prompting them to abandon their colony at Alalia (Bradford, 2007).

In the sixth century, Greek colonists took control of the Lipari Islands, wiping out the local population (Williams, 1961). Tyrrhenian pirates attacked the new immigrants regularly, forcing the Greeks to learn self-defence and become aggressive (Bradford, 2007). The Greeks focused

their energies on piracy, creating a kind of pirate utopia where each citizen received an equal portion of the land's harvest and loot, with one-tenth paid to Delphi as tithe to appease the god Apollo (Picarelli, 2006). The tyrant Polycrates founded another pirate state on Samos, gathering a force of a thousand bowmen and constructing a fleet of one hundred penteconters (fifty-oared galleys) to raid the Aegean (Stavridis, 2014). He assaulted and pillaged the Island of Siphons (Bradford, 2007). No one was safe from Greek pirates, who captured lone individuals and targeted crowds at religious festivals and public celebrations (Bradford, 2007). Cities built networks of watchtowers inland and along beaches to serve as strongholds and to broadcast warnings when strange ships were sighted.

The Phoenician fleet assisted the Persians in conquering the Ionian Greeks, incorporating Greek fleets into a general Persian navy and ending the careers of pirate tyrants like Polycrates. This marked the first time Greek piracy was effectively suppressed, as the Persians stabilised the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean (Stavridis, 2014). Later, with Athenian and Eretrian support, the Ionians revolted against the Persians, leading to conflict with King Darius. In 498 BC, the Ionians defeated the Persian ruler at sea, and in 497 BC, destroyed their army on land (Bradford, 2007). The Persians retaliated, routing the Eretrians and devastating their city before moving the populace into the Persian Empire. At the Battle of Marathon (490 BC), the Athenians defeated the Persians, with Miltiades as the hero. Themistocles, his political successor, persuaded the Athenians to prepare for the Persian return. The Athenians emerged as the leading naval force after the historic battle of Salamis (480 BC). They exploited their victories to take command of the allied fleet, transforming the anti-Persian naval coalition into the Delian League, which eventually became the Athenian Empire (Bradford, 2007).

Greek versus Greek Piracy

As the Athenians forced all Greek naval powers to join the Delian League and drove enemy navies off the water, they suppressed piracy by eliminating safe havens and safe targets. The League was formed to crush Persia, project Athenian power, and advance the Athenian economy (Bradford, 2007). Any polis by the sea suspected of harbouring pirates or encouraging piracy was open to Athenian attack and destruction. Under Pericles, the Athenians ruled the Aegean, but the Spartans grew uneasy with Athenian power. The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) resulted from Spartan fear of Athenian imperialism and Athenian ambition itself (Pritchett, 1974). Athens' adversaries frequently hired privateers to target Athenian vessels (Menkhaus, John, & Colin, 2015). The Athenians overreached themselves and lost the battle of Sicily, after which pirates exploited the power vacuum to launch indiscriminate raids. Theopompos of Miletus, a pirate whose activities had been restricted by the Athenians, sided with the Spartan admiral in the final battle against Athens (Bradford, 2007).

In response to piracy, some states-imposed sanctions on individuals who assisted pirates, and states formed mutually beneficial arrangements to protect one another's citizens (Mahan & Thayer,

2015). The Peloponnesian War impoverished Greeks and increased violence throughout the Greek world. Some generals extorted money from their troops or exploited their armies to plunder. The Spartans urged allies to plunder Athenian shipping and the city of Athens itself, as the Athenians could not pay the required indemnities. Athenian admirals in the fourth century frequently behaved more like pirates than generals, as they had to acquire funds to pay their troops (Bradford, 2007). Some generals forgot that obtaining loot was not their goal (Satkauskas, 2014). While there was no distinction between pirate and privateer in antiquity, piracy became widespread in the Aegean in the fourth century (Ormerod, 1920). Not even the renowned Greek philosopher Plato was safe. After losing favour with the tyrant Syracuse, he was sold into slavery (Whipple, 1991). The dictator had invited Plato to instruct his heir, but Plato declared his intention to return to Athens. Fearing a negative story, the tyrant had pirates take Plato's ship and sell him into slavery. Plato was saved only because a friend spotted him at the slave market and purchased his freedom (Whipple, 1991).

Greek versus Macedonian Piracy

As the Athenians regained naval might, they faced a new foe, Philip II of Macedonia, who was more powerful than the Spartans or Thebans. The Athenians lost their northern possessions, allies, and trade, while Philip was surrounded by pirates who caused significant damage at sea. Philip used his wealth as a tool of policy, attracting followers with gold coins called *philippians*, which funded mercenaries, purchased allies, and enticed traitors (Bradford, 1992). After exhausting his resources in a long siege in northern Greece, Philip seized an Athenian grain fleet of 170 ships. When the Athenians accused him of piracy, Philip responded that the fleet was a legitimate target because it carried grain to his enemies. He also confiscated and enslaved Athenian citizens in remote Aegean areas, raided the Athenian homeland at Marathon, and took control of Athens' sacred trireme. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, invaded the Persian Empire to eliminate Macedonia's most formidable adversary. The Persian navy and pirates, fostered by the Persians, challenged his army. Alexander ended piracy in the eastern Mediterranean by securing all harbours from which pirates could operate.

However, after Alexander's death, his successors actively encouraged pirate attacks on one another. Demetrius "the Besieger" invited pirates to join his raids and sieges of weaker peoples in exchange for plunder. The most notorious pirate haven was Crete, known as a pirate haven since Odysseus identified himself as a Cretan pirate. Cretans were still known as pirates in Roman times. A successful kidnapping required accomplices on land to identify targets, as a single prominent person could bring more ransom than a boatload of captives sold at market price (Bradford, 1992).

Roman Counter-Piracy Measures against Illyria

According to Cicero, pirates were the most hated enemies of Rome (Zetzel, 1995). In the third century BC, the Romans took decisive action against the Illyrian pirates who preyed on the Adriatic Sea's eastern coast (de Souza, 1999). None of the Greek states had sufficient troops to stop piracy at that time. A petty king of Illyria brought the entire city under his rule, turning pirates into a tool of the state (Gosse, 1932). He succeeded by Queen Teutula, who continued the same strategy: using pirates to attack Illyria's opponents, occasionally forming a navy and sometimes simply plundering and giving the crown a portion of the loot (Gosse, 1932). Around 230 BC, Queen Teutula had united the Illyrians into the most powerful kingdom on the Balkan Peninsula and was determined to conquer the entire Adriatic Eastern coast (Whipple, 1991). Italian merchants appealed to the Roman Senate, which heard grievances and sent two envoys to persuade Queen Teutula to control her pirates. However, her pirates killed one of the Roman envoys. A Roman fleet of 200 ships eventually overran Illyria, reduced the state to a few tribes, and installed

Demetrius on the throne. By spring of 218 BC, the queen offered to disband Illyria and pay an indemnity (Bradford, 2007).

The Pirates of Cilicia

The Romans considered the Cilicians the worst pirates, alongside the Tyrrhenians, Illyrians, and Cretans (Bean & Mitford, 1965). Tryphon is credited with starting Cilician piracy by inciting the Cilicians to attack Seleucid territories in an attempt to retake Syria (Blondal, 1965). Other enemies of the Seleucid Empire, such as the Ptolemies in Egypt, supported the Cilician pirates to weaken their rival. Tryphon ultimately failed, committing suicide during a siege, but he gave the Cilicians an insatiable appetite for plunder. They grouped themselves into communities ruled by pirate kings committed to plunder (Cordingly, 1995). These kings led raids across the entire eastern Mediterranean and Aegean, specialising in slaving due to a ready market at the island emporium of Delos (Ormerod, 1920). The Roman Senate declared Cilician pirates enemies of the Roman people and cautioned eastern Mediterranean powers against supporting or aiding pirates (Bradford, 1992). In the second century BC, Rome appointed Marcus Antonius (grandfather of Marc Antony) as governor of the province of Cilicia to eradicate piracy (Blondal, 1978).

Though he strove to do so and received a heroic reception in Rome, the Romans continued to contend with Cilician piracy. The Senate declared Cilicia a praetorian province and instructed its elected consul to write letters to Roman allies, ordering them to ensure their citizens did not associate with pirates (Bradford, 2007). In the first century BC, the Cilician pirates allied with Mithridates, a sworn enemy of Rome (Ritchie, 1986). Mithridates' rise was short-lived, as Pompey the Great defeated him. Although Mithridates' defeat isolated the Cilician pirates, it did not stop their predations. The Cilician pirates bargained with Spartacus, an escaped gladiator and Roman rebel, for assistance against Rome, but Spartacus lost and was killed (Bradford, 2007). The lure of piracy kept recruiting new members. When some Cilicians' Greek neighbours turned to oracles for guidance, they received the advice: "Be prepared to battle and resist forcefully."

The Scourge of the Mediterranean

Mithridates outfit numerous pirates to fight alongside him or harm his adversaries. These pirates operated in vessels ranging from tiny and brittle boats to advanced warships like the trireme. He recruited men from all around the Near East and Asia Minor—individuals with no land to farm who thus "farmed the sea." They assaulted both undefended and fortified towns and ships, imposed sieges, took and looted four cities on the Aegean islands, and either sold prisoners into slavery or held them hostage for ransom.

From all over the Eastern Mediterranean, men who would rather commit crimes than be victims flocked to Cilicia to join the pirates, claiming their plunder as soldier's pay (Ormerod, 1922). These men, numbering tens of thousands, raided everywhere from Syria to the Strait of Gibraltar. A Roman praetor was vanquished in Sicily, they raided Italy itself, and engaged the Romans in high-seas combat (Ormerod, 1922). They abducted Roman citizens both on land and at sea.

Julius Caesar, leaving Rome to rest and avoid attention, was taken prisoner by Cilician pirates. His friends paid a ransom of twenty talents, after which Caesar took control of a fleet, returned to the pirates' hideout, apprehended the group, and had them crucified in Rome (Ormerod, 1920). By 75 BC, the Italian coast was largely unsafe (Whipple, 1991). Pirates raided Ostia, burned a consular fleet, sacked towns and temples, kidnapped Roman ladies, and captured two Roman praetors (Bradford, 2007).

The End of Mediterranean Piracy

Eradicating piracy in the Mediterranean was extremely difficult because, even after the Romans vanquished pirates from one area, more would appear from another. Fighting men without a fixed

country or property was challenging. Anyone who went to sea risked becoming a slave or dying. Merchants often chose to travel during storms, when pirates were not active, rather than in favorable weather through pirate-infested waterways (Whipple, 1991). In an attempt to put a stop to the Mediterranean piracy, Pompey the Great was given a three-year mandate to exercise the *greater imperium*—authority to command all other commanders over the entire Mediterranean Sea, all contiguous waters, and all coasts up to twenty-five miles inland. The Senate sent letters to all kings, dynasties, peoples, and cities directing them to assist him. Pompey established a staff of twenty-five delegates with the lesser imperium, and the Senate voted to provide him with as many ships as needed (Cordingly, 1995).

Pompey assembled 270 ships and distributed them to his delegates, assigning them to several operational domains (Blondal, 1978). While Pompey, in command of a central fleet, moved methodically from area to area, driving the pirates before him, his delegates engaged pirates in various areas of operation, preventing them from fleeing to aid other pirates or seeking refuge elsewhere. Pompey's plan worked remarkably well. He permitted the repatriation of prisoners to their homes (Bradford, 2007). On the forty-ninth day after his departure from Brundisium, he had placed Cilicia under Roman authority. In roughly four months, he had taken 120 cities, forts, and safe havens, surrendered nearly 300 ships, captured 71 pirate ships, and killed approximately 10,000 pirates. Pompey found land for his prisoners, settling them inland in Cilicia, Asia Minor, and even Greece. He did not declare his mission accomplished until he had addressed the underlying causes of piracy, poverty, and necessity rather than inherent wickedness. He succeeded because he had access to Rome's vast resources and could coordinate a full-scale campaign against all pirates simultaneously.

The Roman Navy kept piracy in check as long as the empire remained stable. However, piracy flourished again during the Civil War between Pompey and Caesar, and then between Octavian and Antony. Octavian created a permanent navy, put the legions on a professional foundation, and limited military expeditions while building the empire. The Roman Navy was not overrun until the Germanic peoples, the Heruli, Goths, and Vandals, rose to power. The Heruli were pirates who only wanted to steal, whereas the Goths and Vandals wanted to steal but also sought land to establish their kingdoms. After the fall of Rome, the Mediterranean became vulnerable to pirates, but trade was so low that pirates had few victims. Until the Viking era, there were no significant marauders on the waters.

Medieval Piracy

The Vikings

Another group of merciless pirates and invaders, the Vikings, emerged in the eighth century AD. These pirates were Scandinavians from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. They raided the British Isles and other parts of Europe from the eighth to eleventh centuries AD (Underwood, 2009; Magnusson, 1980). The Viking Age began with the raid and looting of the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 AD and concluded with Harold's death at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 AD, when the Normans took control of England (Oxensteirna, 1959). In other words, the Viking Age ended with conquest and occupation, having started with sporadic raids on distant locations. The richest city in northern Europe at the time, Paris, was captured and plundered by a fleet led by Viking chieftain Bjorn Ironside in 857 AD (Wolf, 2004). Bjorn left only four structures intact, all of which were churches (Wolf, 2004). A technological advancement in Scandinavian boat construction contributed to Viking success at sea (Bradford, 2007). Pre-Viking craft were originally paddled like canoes; later, they were modified to be driven by oars and again to

accommodate masts and sails (Bradford, 2007). The Vikings' two-prowed design allowed for quick launching and manoeuvrability. The ships were small, fast, capable of crossing open oceans, traveling up rivers to London and Paris, and even being portaged over short distances. They could be beached on almost any level shore, giving the Vikings every tactical advantage (Hudson, 2005).

The colder and drier climate in Scandinavia, which reduced agricultural output while increasing the birth rate, was another reason Vikings left their homes (Jones, 1984). More young males were being produced than the earth could sustain. Many became entangled in border conflicts between rival monarchs and, frequently on the losing side, were compelled to leave their homes to pursue their fortunes (Hudson, 2005). These violent young men all began raiding. The Vikings continued to slaughter, burn, and pillage while their fleet grew in size. The British Isles and all of Western Europe, including France, were vulnerable to looting or forced to pay the notorious *Danegeld*, a tax imposed to stave off Viking raids (Wolf, 2004). As fear spread, people lost hope and fled towns. Governments in Western Europe north of the Pyrenees were unable to mount a successful defense (Magnusson, 1980).

The Rus

The word *Rus* is a Finnish word meaning “ship” or “oared ship,” so the Russians or Rus pirates were men of the oared ships. According to Riha (1969), the Rus were young Vikings from Sweden who lacked land fortunes and secured positions in newly established Swedish kingdoms and had to travel east to trade, raid, conquer, and settle. They moved along the Baltic coast, including Gotland in a trade alliance, conquered and taxed Latvia, put down an uprising, and then proceeded to the Dvina and Dnieper rivers before heading to the Black Sea or, alternatively, down the Volga to the Caspian Sea, finally arriving in Constantinople (Riha, 1969). The local inhabitants comprising the Chuds, Slavs, Merians, Vesh, and Krivichians were ultimately subjugated by the Swedish invaders (Cross & Olgerd, 1953). The Rus occupied the area surrounding Novgorod, which became known as Rusland and later Russia (Cross & Olgerd, 1953). Viking attacks decreased as the Scandinavian nations became Christian in the ninth and tenth centuries, and kings established peace agreements under the Christian banner of fraternity.

Modern Piracy (1500–1800)

The Buccaneers

Spain established colonies in the Americas, instructing colonists to interact only with Catholics, trade only with Spain, and survive solely on profits from Spanish trade. As Spanish trade expanded, other nations hurried to create colonies in the Spanish New World. The Spaniards attacked and destroyed the first French settlement in Florida. Several French and English pirate ships were intercepted by the Spanish, who severed the crew members' hands, feet, noses, and ears, covered them with honey, and hung them to trees so that flies and insects might torture them (Beeching, 1982). The cruelty was rationalised as justifiable punishment for pirates (Beeching, 1982). In response, the French and English governments declared that the ships were staffed by law-abiding merchants and colonists, not pirates. They claimed they had not given commissions and that their subjects who became pirates were acting as private persons. However, in reality, the British and French were keen to secure a piece of the New World and promoted attacks on Spanish vessels to achieve their goals (Breverton, 2005).

French colonists arrived on Hispaniola in the mid-seventeenth century. They wore coarse-lined shirts and pantaloons soaked in the blood of animals they killed, round helmets, hog-skin boots, and rawhide belts for knives and sabres (Hess, 1978). They equipped themselves with firelocks that threw two-ounce projectiles (Lane, 1998). They were known

as *boucaniers* or *buccaneers* because of boucans, the places where they salted and dried meat. At first, they were hunters whose favourite food was raw marrow from the bones of animals they shot (Gosse, 1932). Five hundred to six hundred men, primarily French, made up the early buccaneers who sought wild cattle in Hispaniola (Bradford, 2007). They set up camps to follow cattle, hunting until all the men had killed a bull, then returning to camp to spread out the hides. The Spanish government was committed to eradicating the buccaneers, so their lives were hazardous and difficult. Unfazed, the buccaneers learned to despise the Spanish and fight to the death.

The buccaneers gave up hunting for the riskier life of piracy due to harsh living conditions and the Spanish determination to drive them off Hispaniola by attacking their source of income—wild cattle (Hess, 1978). The survivors gathered on the small island of Tortuga, established an egalitarian state, and turned to the sea, attacking local ship traffic and selling hides at a Tortuga market (Bradford, 2007). Later, they started assaulting Spanish ships (Bradford, 2007). Many were inspired by the success of Peter the Great, who captured a Spanish ship in 1602, massacred her crew, and sold the ship in France, spending the remainder of his life away from the sea. Due to the Spanish forming of convoys, the buccaneers found their pickings by sea reduced. Consequently, they began attacking Spanish settlements, spending days traveling up rivers, attacking, looting churches, holding high-ranking citizens hostage, and fleeing to impregnable sanctuaries.

Henry Morgan, a Welsh sailor, was one of the legendary buccaneers of the 17th century. He led a group fifty French Calvinists who left St. Kitts in 1640 for the Americas. He was a ruthless pirate and a privateer. The buccaneers under Henry Morgan attacked and drove the Spanish out of Tortuga, and took control of the island (Ritchie, 1986). Tortuga flourished and became a pirate paradise. The French repelled Spanish ships by building an impregnable fort. For nearly a century, the settlement thrived, attracting more hunters, farmers, traders, pirates, and plunder. Henry Morgan also led the buccaneers that raided Panama. Henry Morgan was so well-known that all he needed to do was declare his purpose and specify a meeting spot, and a fleet would assemble. This time, there were 2,000 men in thirty-seven ships, a flagship with twenty-three guns, and lesser ships with twenty to four guns (Bradford, 2007). Morgan's commission provided legal justification for his retaliatory depredations (Bradford, 2007). He sent a small fleet of 400 men to capture Fort Chagres, raided St. Catalina, and took control of the fort (Lane, 1998). When they arrived in Panama and saw the Spanish troops outnumbered them, they burned the city down, destroying valuables and amassing silver caches (Lane, 1998).

Buccaneering ended in 1697. Spain and England joined forces to fight France. The governor of Hispaniola persuaded 650 buccaneers to join the French fleet attacking Cartagena (Williams, 1961). For two weeks, the "allies" stormed Cartagena, captured it, and seized great wealth (Williams, 1961). In exchange for their participation, the buccaneers demanded the loot. Refusing, the French admiral left for France. The buccaneers returned to Cartagena and looted the town, but on their route to their hiding place, they encountered a combined Spanish and English force and lost four ships and their riches (Langewiesche, 2004). The buccaneers never recovered.

Barbary Pirates

Except for sporadic Viking assaults, the Mediterranean was relatively free of piracy between the fall of Rome (476 AD) and the start of the Crusades (1096 AD). There was virtually no maritime trade, meaning no targets for pirates (Parker, 2004). Significant trade across the Mediterranean resulted from the Crusades, and pirates were drawn to the burgeoning trade. Initially, established nations were strong enough to defend their shipping, but as shipping developed, their resources became more limited, and pirates from the Barbary Coast of North Africa took advantage. These

pirates were driven primarily by a desire to obtain passing wealth and to further the cause of Islam by opposing Christianity (Pratt, 1959). Algeria, Morocco, Tripoli, and Tunis—the Barbary States of North Africa—had a cooperative relationship with the pirates (Wolf, 1979). Through ransom, slaves, and loot, the Barbary state rulers amassed wealth (Wolf, 1979) and gained reputation in the wider Muslim world (Forester, 1953). Because Christians were the piratical targets, Muslims never denounced the pirates' actions (Earle, 1970). The Mediterranean was in turmoil for five centuries due to the conflict between Islamic and Christian powers.

The European powers could not agree on the coordinated effort required to eradicate the pirates while the pattern of retaliatory attacks persisted (Lambert, 2005). The Barbary states persisted in piracy into the nineteenth century as European states gradually banned slavery and condemned piracy. The Barbary states were isolated and denounced as "barbarous," but they continued their activities. American political and military leaders had mastered the art of war by the nineteenth century, and American commerce reflected their achievements. A squadron of US warships was dispatched to the Mediterranean to defend American ships (Parker, 2004). Despite setbacks, the Barbary republics continued to send out pirates and brought plague to European ports in 1818 (Parker, 2004). The French dispatched an expedition to conquer Algeria in 1820, resulting from multiple factors including piracy, plague, loss of prestige in Napoleonic conflicts, and competition with Britain (Pratt, 1959). This invasion and the subsequent conquest of the remainder of North Africa by other European powers put an end to Barbary piracy.

Contemporary Piracy

In the aftermath of World War II, the withdrawal of colonial naval patrols and the subsequent emergence of newly independent but weak Southeast Asian states precipitated a rise in piracy within the South China Sea. Between 1959 and 1962, North Borneo alone witnessed 232 recorded pirate attacks, driven by the proliferation of wartime weaponry, weak governmental authority in regions of Indonesia and the Philippines, and ongoing conflicts such as the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War (Sheeman, 2010). The conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975 led to widespread refugee movements, which, further exacerbated by the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979, created a vulnerable migratory population. These refugees became frequent targets for pirates, with 80% of new arrivals in southern Thailand in 1981 reporting attacks. This period illuminated the inability of regional authorities to address piracy effectively, with corruption among law enforcement, most notoriously in Indonesia, undermining anti-piracy efforts (IMB, 1995).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, piracy in Southeast Asian waters evolved, with indications of official complicity and new forms of state-linked maritime extortion. Chinese government vessels reportedly detained foreign ships under the guise of enforcing customs regulations, contributing to a surge in incidents. By 1995, China, Hong Kong, and Macau ranked second globally for piracy incidents, exceeded only by Indonesia (IMB, 1995). The Straits of Malacca and Singapore, vital arteries of world trade connecting the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, also suffered persistent piracy. However, a notable decline in attacks followed the collaborative security initiatives of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia post-2005, even as global piracy rates increased by 10% (Sheeman, 2010). Despite these advances, piracy remains a persistent threat to the stability and security of the region's maritime corridors.

The Gulf of Aden, positioned between Yemen and Somalia, stands as another critical maritime chokepoint historically plagued by piracy. This deepwater basin, integral to global energy supplies and trade, has been a conduit for commerce since antiquity (Schofield & Warner, 2011). A surge

in piracy off Somalia commenced around 2005, peaking between 2008 and 2012, with over 1,700 incidents reported in the western Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden (UNOSAT, 2012). Somali piracy, underpinned by poverty, unemployment, and the devastation of local fisheries by foreign trawlers, became a lucrative enterprise for criminal syndicates. Pirates diversified in origin, encompassing clan members, unemployed youth, and displaced fishermen, while masterminds financed operations for significant personal gain (Oceans Beyond Piracy, 2012). International responses included naval patrols and ransoms, but the absence of a functional Somali government allowed piracy to flourish.

The Gulf of Guinea presents a contemporary example of maritime insecurity, distinguished from the Somali model by its emphasis on violent raids, cargo theft, and crew kidnappings rather than hijack-for-ransom operations. By 2020, it accounted for the majority of global maritime kidnappings, with attacks perpetrated in territorial waters and exclusive economic zones, often targeting expatriate seafarers for ransom (Harper, 2011). The persistence of piracy is closely linked to endemic corruption, poverty, and weak governance in coastal states such as Nigeria, facilitating the integration of maritime crime into broader organised crime networks. In response, frameworks such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and national initiatives like Nigeria's Deep Blue Project have bolstered maritime security, resulting in a measurable decline in incidents. Nevertheless, unless root causes, socioeconomic disparity, governance failures, and environmental exploitation are addressed, piracy will remain a persistent symptom of deeper regional instability (Gill, 2011).

Conclusion

This historiographical review elucidates the evolution of piracy from its mythic roots in Greek and Roman antiquity to its complex modern iterations across Southeast Asia, the Gulf of Aden, and the Gulf of Guinea. Over more than two millennia, piracy has demonstrated remarkable adaptability, continually recalibrating its tactics, organisation, and geographies in response to shifting political, economic, and technological contexts. Despite this protean nature, enduring patterns emerge: economic marginalisation, political instability, weak governance, and the persistent lure of illicit profit remain the principal forces sustaining maritime predation. Historical analysis reveals that successful counter-piracy campaigns, exemplified by Pompey the Great's Roman efforts, which integrated naval action with social reintegration and economic resettlement, achieve lasting impact only by addressing piracy's structural causes rather than relying solely on military suppression. Contemporary strategies, such as multinational patrols in the Straits of Malacca and international naval coalitions off Somalia, have yielded tactical gains but faltered in eradicating piracy where state fragility and deprivation endure. The Somali experience, especially, illustrates the futility of force alone against a phenomenon rooted in systemic poverty and state collapse, affirming that piracy is an enduring symptom of global inequality rather than a vestige of history.

Recommendations

The paper, having found that sustainable counter-piracy requires a dual approach, hereby recommends the following:

1. Robust naval and law enforcement measures to deter and disrupt attacks.
2. Sustained investments in coastal development, good governance, legal capacity, and economic opportunity in piracy-prone regions.
3. Only by addressing both the symptoms and the causes, that is, the ships on the water and the poverty on the shore, can the international community move beyond the skull and crossbones

toward a more secure maritime future. Future research should focus on the intersection of piracy with other forms of organised crime, climate-induced maritime displacement, and the impact of emerging technologies on both pirate tactics and counter-piracy capabilities.

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