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# Piracy: The World's Third-Oldest Profession

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Dear Readers: We are instituting with this issue a new type of article: the Historic Review Essay. The process for publishing essays will run parallel to that now existing for peer reviewed papers, but the essays will not be submitted for anonymous peer review. The point of the essays will be to present challenging or thought-provoking theories or ideas or histories that may not necessarily be congruent with prevailing scholarship. The essays will be read and scheduled by the editorial board of the journal.

The first such essay is printed below.

Joseph Drew

## HISTORIC REVIEW ESSAY

### **Piracy: The World's Third-Oldest Profession**

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The world has seen a reemergence of piracy during the past few decades—an activity that had seemed obsolete. I propose exploring the origins of piracy, its most significant appearances during history, and its strange modern reincarnation.

#### **Origins of Civilization (City Building)**

Historians always remind us of the Agricultural Revolution that created civilization. Our most ancient ancestors were hunter/gatherers who spent all of their time finding food. But once a new variety of grass mutated that had enough nutritious seeds to feed whole clans and such seeds could be stored, human population expanded and the first permanent villages emerged. Along with grain (wheat, barley, millet, and rice), our hunter/gatherer ancestors began to domesticate some animals, among them sheep, goats, pigs, and cattle. These provided us with wool, hides, milk, cheese, and meat—and along with grain, made these ancestors stronger.

At the same time that agriculture and animal husbandry were increasing, another food revolution was born—commercial fishing. The ancestors of the Spanish and Portuguese began fishing in the great Atlantic cod regions—bringing home huge catches and learning to salt and air-dry the fish. This preservation was as important for the diet of our early civilized ancestors as were stored grains, cheeses, preserved

meats (sausages), preserved olives, and such dried fruits as dates. When wine was made, the very basis of Europe's and North Africa's foods became the sustenance of these people, even today. This is the healthy "Mediterranean" diet that we all praise and emulate.

The origins of our better diet (and population explosion) also gave rise to three other much darker institutions—warfare, slavery, and piracy. Farmers and herders often traded and collaborated, but not always. Towns that stored grain (and wealth) became targets of those who tamed the horse—and who could invade and steal the harvest. Towns had to learn to defend themselves, and they did. This is one of the most ancient roots of warfare.

Just as horsemen could threaten towns, ships that went to sea to fish found an equal advantage: they could raid seacoast towns to steal wealth, food, and slaves.

Slavery was never useful to hunter/gatherers—other than the capture of wives, who were always in short supply. Keeping slaves requires force and enough food to keep them alive. Slavery is not worthwhile until there are tasks needed by a community that the regular citizens do not want to do: such as mining. Smelting ores created the first significant weapons industry, something one needs for both offense and defense, not to mention tools and gemstones, the ornaments of the wealthy.

Unlike most traditional historians, I would include the capture of women as wives, not to mention other unpaid labor, slavery. The traffic in women slaves has always been a large enterprise everywhere in the world, without exception, and still is.

### **The Downside of New Technologies**

Every advance made by humanity increases our numbers and ability to survive, but each has a price. Agriculture brought storable grain—but also made the lives of peasants less healthy than those of their hunter-gatherer ancestors. Anthropologists look at the bones and teeth of those who adopted agriculture—and these people were inevitably smaller and had bad teeth. Also the concentration of population in one place made possible by agriculture and the storing of food created health problems—sewage, diseases, and water contamination. It took a long time for these things to be fixed. And, of course, more labor was needed for farming, making slavery feasible.

The emergence of herding gave rise to mobility and warfare, which was met by the need for military defense of villages and towns. The herders also began to mine ore to

use for making better weapons and the cities with increasing wealth valued gemstones in mines. Mining also required an involuntary labor force.

Sailing ships and fishing added greatly to the food supply and also provided more rapid trade than possible on land routes. However, warfare was also made possible by sea—beginning with piracy and ending with navy power. Every door that opens, then, leads to another door with bad things behind it.

### **Origins of Piracy**

What began as a part-time activity of fishermen and traders emerged in the Mediterranean world during the dark ages of Greece in the northern Mediterranean, mostly among the Greek Islands, and among another ancient population in the south Mediterranean—first described as “the Sea People” who attacked mighty Egypt—and for a short time ruled. These were pirates who went beyond just stealing; they took control. The Sea People have been tentatively identified as relatives or predecessors of the Phoenicians, the third powerful Mediterranean group after the Romans and Greeks.

One famous Roman was kidnapped by pirates—Julius Caesar himself. After the ransom was paid, he tracked down the lair and had them all crucified. This was the beginning of another Roman use for seagoing vessels: a navy. For centuries, the Romans kept piracy at bay and made the Mediterranean a safe sea for trade. They completely wiped out the ancient Phoenician pirate trade. For a long time thereafter, the only danger to sailing ships came from nature, not from men.

Because the history of Piracy in the China Seas in antiquity is not well documented, I will talk about this institution later, only in more modern times.

### **Islam Revives the Pirate Trade**

From 750-1900, the Mediterranean became as dangerous to shipping as it had been before Rome ruled. The Mediterranean was no longer under the control of Rome—nor even Christian Byzantine Rome. A new power emerged, the Islamic Empire, which had its beginnings in Arabia and then spilled out to eventually cut a swath in the world across North Africa to today's Spain and Portugal, and even for a time such northern Mediterranean islands as Sicily, Malta, and Sardinia, and all the way to the Spice Islands (today's Indonesia). Their eternal enemy was Byzantium, the inheritor of the Roman Empire, which they besieged at every turn. The main targets of Muslim

piracy were merchant ships and their cargoes, slaves (whom they used for mining), harem guards—castrated for this purpose, and women for their harems.

The ancient institution of slavery had been under attack for centuries as Rome converted to Christianity. It is apparent that even in the reaches of Roman Europe (today's France, Germany, and England), slavery, which had been the basis of agricultural labor in Ancient Rome, was replaced by a new system: feudalism.

The emerging Muslim world, however, was always in need of slaves for their enterprises and even for their armies. Their pirates roamed the Mediterranean and took what they could—and also made another alliance that has only now been explored: the Vikings, that scourge of Christian Europe all the way to Russia. (See *Holy Warriors: Islam and the Demise of Classical Civilization*, John J. O'Neill, 2009; and *The Forge of Christendom, The End of Days and the Epic Rise of the West*, Tom Holland, 2010.) Also see articles by Dario Fernando-Morera in Recommended Readings at the conclusion of this article.

It is well known that Vikings lusted for gold—and raided the churches and monasteries, not hesitating to kill monks. But they had another market to oblige—the vast Arab slave market—for which they were paid a great deal of money (found in Scandinavian gravesites today). There is no accounting for how many Europeans captured by the Vikings—in particular women—wound up in the Arab slave markets. Vikings themselves had no use for slaves; they did not have enough of a civilization to warrant it. It is obvious where their market was.

Pirate activities continued in the Mediterranean until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when President Jefferson—and later President Teddy Roosevelt—responded with war raids and put an end to it.

## Ransom

Another enterprise emerged during the 300-hundred year conflict between Islam and Christian Europe—the Crusades. If noble hostages were taken in battle, they were held for ransom and could be redeemed for ready money. This practice spread from land war to piracy and then was actually picked up by European warlords. A most famous example of this was the capture of England's Richard the Lion Hearted, on his way home from the Crusades, when picked up by no less than the Holy Roman Emperor (an Austrian who was neither holy nor Roman) and held for a "king's ransom." The English population came up with the money—painful as it was—

because it was even more painful to be ruled by the King's brother, Bad King John. Bad customs are contagious, it seems.

### **The Spanish Main**

Piracy went decidedly European after the Spanish looted the New World's treasure of silver and gold. Capture of a single Spanish treasure ship could enrich the pirates for a long time. The trade was made even more lucrative when Protestant England under Queen Elizabeth I, at war with Catholic Spain, gave licenses to sea captains to legally pillage Spanish ships. The Queen took a share and the pirates shared the rest. A famous Privateer was Sir Walter Raleigh, who was knighted for his services. The morality of this issue is in a strange netherworld—stealing the treasure from the Spanish who had stolen it from the Aztecs and Incas.

One new chapter in this story is that of the Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean. Jews expelled from Catholic Spain, along with those forced (by economic considerations) to convert or leave, had among their number sea captains and traders who had plied the Mediterranean from Roman times.

The whole issue of Spain's situation when they won the 800-year war against the invading Muslims is complex and probably should be explored in context rather than in terms of our present values.

The prevailing historic attitude toward praise of Islamic Spain and condemnation of the Catholic *Reconquista* is only now being revised by a growing number of scholars with a much more jaundiced eye about the "tolerance" of the Muslims ruling Spain. Persecution of non-Muslims varied depending upon the nature of the ruling Sultans. There were times that the Christians, Jews, and Muslims seemed to get along peacefully—but there were many more times that the Muslims invoked the Koran, Hadith, and Sharia (their governing religious texts and laws) about the treatment of non-Muslims living among them. By law, these were persecuted subjects, taxed, abused without legal recourse, and living precariously, never knowing when such laws would be called down on them. (One scholar to consult on this is our colleague, Dario Fernandez-Morera, who has written voluminously on life in Muslim Spain, and who is about to publish a new book that examines the laws and lives of each of the three Spanish communities—Muslim, Jewish, and Christian.)

When Spain finally expelled the last Muslim principality (Grenada), they then worried about nation-building, making a Spain out of disparate kingdoms and a

contentious population. They were concerned about Muslim insurgency—not an unrealistic concern at the time—thus gave all Muslims an opportunity to convert to Catholicism or leave. Most left. Then there was the issue of Jews—who had always been used for divide and rule purposes by Muslim and Spanish rulers alike.

Some famous Jews served in the governments of both Muslim and Christian rulers, and there was even some intermarriage among the elites of these groups. This seeming favoritism outraged both the Muslim and Christian poor—particularly the peasants—and particularly when Jews were employed as “tax farmers” (collectors of taxes for the government). They were hated.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella therefore decided that the Jews should also be given an “opportunity” to convert or leave, a move that pacified the resentful peasants. This offer was met in several ways by Jews: some left out of genuine religious belief. Some Jewish elites converted—and quickly rose to positions of power in both the Spanish government and the church. Others converted under duress—and practiced Judaism secretly—and were called “Marranos” (pigs) by the Spanish. And the Spanish, despite triumphing by having these people give up their religion, called all such converts “Christianos Nuevos,” New Christians, a designation that was continued for hundreds of years thereafter. The book to read here is: *A History of the Marranos: An Account of the Origins and Fate of Those Spanish Jews who—Terrorized by the Massacre of 1391 and the Inquisition—Professed Christianity to Escape Persecution*, Cecil Roth, Harper Torchbooks, 1932 and reprinted 1966. See also Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)

One group of Jews, long-time sea captains, converted (under pressure), and, along with many other new converts, were happy to get out of Spain and hopefully away from the eyes of the Inquisition, which prosecuted converts who were accused of backsliding (or Judaizing) into their former religion. The Inquisition arrested many new converts accused by their house servants or greedy neighbors for Judaizing; these unfortunates were tortured for confessions and ultimately burned at the stake. What corrupted this system were the rewards given to the accusers and confiscation of the estate of the accused for the Church.

Hereby enters the amazing story of a group of the sea captains, converted under duress, and eager to find greener pastures—the recently discovered New World. The sea captains, along with many other “new Christians,” including the ships of Christopher Columbus, moved to the Caribbean for their new life. Columbus, who

took Jamaica for himself (gift of the Spanish Crown), even secured an agreement that the Inquisition would not set foot in Jamaica for the next 50 years.

The Spanish began looting the New World, shipping treasures back to Spain, which enjoyed a brief period of wealth. But since this was also a period of conflict between Catholicism and the new Protestant movement, there was motivation for waylaying the Spanish ships. This is where the Jewish captains come in to the story—looking for revenge against Spain and an opportunity to seize wealth and other advantages for themselves. (Note that vengeance was an integral element of the Muslim world—to this very day—and was picked up by all the peoples formerly occupied by Islam—Spain, Portugal, Sicily, and the Balkans). The Jewish captains turned to piracy against Spain.

When these pirates captured the entire Spanish treasure fleet in the Atlantic and towed it to Amsterdam, they changed history. The Dutch happily took the treasure, granted the pirates freedom of religion, and instructed their colony in New Amsterdam to accept these immigrants under the same terms. Freedom of religion was born at that moment. (*Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean: How a generation of swashbuckling Jews carved out an empire in the New World in their quest for treasure, religious freedom —and Revenge.* Edward Kritzer, Doubleday, 2008.)

### **China Seas Pirates**

As mentioned earlier, China has always had a problem with piracy in the China Seas. Remember the old comic strip, *Terry and the Pirates*? These stories were set in the China seas in the 1930s. It is easy for pirates to raid and then hide amidst thousands of islands. Historically, whenever China's central government was weak, piracy flourished; when strong, it was stopped. With the south China Seas serving as a major trade route for oil tankers, piracy has resumed on and off.

The last primitive form of piracy was seen in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, when hapless refugees were waylaid by pirates, many murdered, raped, and robbed. With no more refugees afloat, no more piracy. For these pirates, oil tankers and the international navies in the Sunda Straits were too much to take on.

### **Airborne Piracy**

A new form of piracy made its debut, peaking in the 1970s and 80s—airline hijacking. Planes were hijacked and passengers held for ransom: either money or for



terrorist prisoners to be released. This was the modern rebirth of Arab Mediterranean piracy—and for good measure even included one cruise ship on the water—in which an old Jewish man was murdered in his wheelchair and thrown overboard. Hijacking began to decline only when indulgent countries (Middle Eastern and Cuba) were pressured into refusing them landing rights.

However, in 2001, a horrific new kind of piracy resumed—again a continuation of the Arab tradition. This time there was no economic benefit sought—only suicide-murder of the passengers and as many civilian deaths possible when the planes were flown into buildings. Ostensibly the benefits were only those imagined by the religiously indoctrinated perpetrators—praise for the “martyrs” on earth and in heaven. There has not yet been a follow-up to this horrendous mayhem due to the outrage and vigilance of most of the developed world.

### **Somalia**

In 2008-9, oil piracy was reborn and moved from the Straits of Sunda to the horn of Africa, where the failed state of Somalia has spawned this business. Oil tankers are huge, but require only a small crew—and the crew is not permitted to be armed by the ship owners. (See *Stratfor*, Strategic Forecasts Newsletter, November 18, 2008.)

Young Somalis can find no work in their chaotic country. They are mostly fishermen whose fisheries have been depleted by commercial fleets from Thailand and China, leaving them with few options. For a while, they captured any ships afloat, holding them for ransom. But eventually, they found oil tankers the most lucrative. Financed by Somali warlords, they have acquired speedboats and weapons that can overwhelm an oil tanker before the crew can even gather on deck. The crews and cargo are held for ransom until the oil companies pay up.

Oil industry insurers had come to consider this extortion the price of doing business—much less expensive than hiring guards on the ships. However, when these pirates started to threaten American and European cruise ships, it was clear that something had to be done. The French and Indian navies were the first to go in hot pursuit to rescue these ships and kill the pirates. Then an American ship was taken and the crew and captain roughed up. Navy Seals took care of this situation, resulting in the rescue of the captain and crew and the death of all of the pirates except the negotiator—who has been brought to America for trial. Somali piracy has pretty much dropped off for the time.

## Pirate Mysteries

Several very strange stories have emerged recently to be added to pirate lore. The first has to do with a ship owned by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps with a cargo of “iron ore” from China, apparently intended for Palestinian Gaza. The cargo, Iran’s denials notwithstanding, was really highly radioactive spent uranium. The purpose seems to have been for HAMAS to make dirty bombs to use on Israel. Somali pirates boarded the ship and when warned by the crew not to mess with the cargo, they opened the hatches anyway—and within a few days, 16 of the pirates were dead. This story was inexplicably hushed up, and there is no information on where that ship is now, although Iran has offered \$200,000 to get the ship back. (*The Vancouver Sun*, October 27, 2008.)

Another mystery has to do with Russia, of all places. Eight men who commandeered a Russian cargo ship were locked up and declared to be pirates. The world press has been told nothing by Russian officials. There is no explanation for why this ship, supposedly carrying only lumber, was snatched by pirates in the Balkan Sea, and was chased by the Russian navy all the way to Cape Verde off the Atlantic coast of Africa. While being chased, the pirates tried to paint a name change on the ship to one registered already by North Korea.

Why would Russia send warships from its Black Sea Fleet to chase such a hijacking? There is speculation that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a surprise visit to Russia and told them that something else was on that ship—possibly missiles intended for a rogue country.

Even stranger—the “pirates” claim that they were ecologists conducting research in the Baltic Sea when they ran into bad weather and sought refuge on that ship. Why then won’t the Russians permit the captain and three crew members to get off the ship? The families of these seamen have protested to the Russian government to no avail. (*Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Oct. 11, 2009, p. A10.)

Even more recently (May 11, 2010), a Russian oil tanker was seized by 11 pirates. Russian commandos stormed the ship, killing one of the pirates, and regaining control. Russian officials claimed that they considered bringing the pirates to Moscow for trial, but found international law too uncertain. So they placed the pirates in a boat without weapons or navigation equipment. The pirates, of course, disappeared off radar screens. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev said: “We will have to act as our forefathers did when they met pirates.” We certainly know what that means. Find

them and hang them. ([www.npr.org/blogs/the-two-way/2010/05/pirates-missing-after-russian.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/the-two-way/2010/05/pirates-missing-after-russian.html).)

Spain, much more timid, just paid \$3.3 million to free a tuna boat's crew from Somalis. (Nov. 18, 2009). Obviously they don't care about the implications of this.

Last amazing story: (*San Francisco Chronicle*, January 19, 2010): Somali pirates holding a supertanker and 28 hostages were just expecting ransom money to be delivered. Other pirates came quickly to get a cut of the ransom. The first pirates called the police to come protect them from the second pirates!

Pirates, ancient and modern, seem to endlessly fascinate us, apparently for good reason. They represent the most colorful underbelly of the criminal world—and there is no end in sight.

### Some Recommended Readings

Dario Fernandez-Morera, "Islam's Christian Captives," *Modern Age* (Winter 2008) at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0354/is\\_ai\\_n27927691?tag=artBody;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0354/is_ai_n27927691/tag=artBody;coll)

*Ibid*: "The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise," *Intercollegiate Review*, vol. 41, no. 2 (Fall 2006) at <http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/journal/issue.aspx?id=f6e1ad61-8699-4622-9d66-3d4aac01b072> and directly at [www.mmisi.org/ir/41\\_02/fernandez-morera.pdf](http://www.mmisi.org/ir/41_02/fernandez-morera.pdf)

*Ibid*: "The Truth About Islamic Spain" in *ISCSC Newsletter* (Winter 2010), p. 11. online at <http://www.wmich.edu/iscsc/newsletter.html>

*Ibid*: "Cervantes and Islam," part of the book *Cervantes y su mundo*, ed. K. Reichenberger at <http://books.google.com/books?id=NQz5W94fbysC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA137&ots=WAirwAnr1G&dq=christians+enslaved+cantigas&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html>

*Ibid*: "Don Quixote Redivivus" in *Cervantes in the English-Speaking World* (Kassell: Reichenberger, 2006) at [http://books.google.com/books?id=cl\\_ax1FAM64C&pg=PA181&lpg=PA181&dq=dario+fernandez-morera&source=web&ots=G1UTOPFsF4&sig=FCuPo-6TzOLXDTT2\\_J9piPEbQOo&hl=en](http://books.google.com/books?id=cl_ax1FAM64C&pg=PA181&lpg=PA181&dq=dario+fernandez-morera&source=web&ots=G1UTOPFsF4&sig=FCuPo-6TzOLXDTT2_J9piPEbQOo&hl=en)

*Ibid.* and soon to be published book: *The Reality of Islam in Medieval Spain: Muslims, Jews, and Christians in al-Andalus.*

Tom Holland, *The Forge of Christendom, The End of Days and the Epic Rise of the West*, Rubicon, 2010.

Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998

John J. O'Neill, *Holy Warriors: Islam and the Demise of Classical Civilization*, Pelican Books, 2009.

Edward Kritzler, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean: How a generation of swashbuckling Jews carved out an empire in the New World in their quest for treasure, religious freedom —and Revenge*, Doubleday, 2008.

Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos: An Account of the Origins and Fate of Those Spanish Jews who—Terrorized by the Massacre of 1391 and the Inquisition—Professed Christianity to Escape Persecution*, Harper Torchbooks, 1932 and reprinted 1966.

*Stratfor*, (Strategic Forecasts), November 18, 2008.)