1

Setting a Course toward an Archaeology of Piracy

RUSSELL K. SKOWRONEK

The heavily laden merchant vessel easily nosed its way through the low waves of the open sea. On board the crew members busied themselves with the myriad details associated with taking a vessel to a distant port. Twenty-four hours a day they had courses to lay, meals to prepare, and a vessel to be maintained. The crew, numbering thirty or fewer, was barely adequate to manage the ship. It was small because every extra hand who was not absolutely necessary to shipboard operations would cut into the profits to be realized from the cargo, which the owners of the vessel were loath to do. Merchant sailors, usually poorly paid, do not have a vested interest in defending the cargo of their employers. Arming a merchant ship might be an option, but it had both positive aspects and major drawbacks. An armed vessel could be defended, thus better ensuring the successful delivery of a cargo. The cargo carried would be less and costs would rise, however, as space would need to be allocated for weapons and ammunition and the men who would serve in this defensive capacity as well as their belongings and victuals.

The waters that the vessel traversed were said to be infested with pirates. Any concern was mitigated by the realization that the merchant vessel was large and the crew members were vigilant for strange vessels. To avoid running afoul of this danger, the captain steered a course that would carry them far beyond the coast, where sheltered coves and inlets might hide the miscreants. Other vessels might pass unnoticed on the horizon, however, or smaller fishing boats might bob on the swells. Under cover of darkness small, swift boats might appear, carrying heavily armed men desperate to sustain themselves through thievery. Approaching from the stern, the crews of these boats would clamor over the counter rail and seize control of

the undefended ship. The captured vessel and crew might be set free once the ship was plundered of both mundane, personal items (watches, rings, clothing, shoes) and ship's stores as well as more valuable cargo. At other times the ship might be kept, with hostages taken for ransom.

Vignettes such as this might easily characterize the activities of Somali pirates in the twenty-first century: the 2008 hijacking of the *Sirius Star* (an oil tanker carrying 2 billion gallons of oil) and the *Faina* (a cargo ship filled with munitions, tanks, and anti-aircraft guns) and the 2009 capture of the *Maersk Alabama*, a container ship made famous in the 2013 film *Captain Phillips* with Tom Hanks (Heintzelman and Rainey Marquez 2013:8–11; Phillips with Talty 2010; Sekulich 2009:276–77). These were all unarmed merchant vessels with fewer than three dozen crew members. More than $6 million was paid as ransom for the first two vessels and their crews. The four pirates who captured the *Maersk Alabama* did not fare as well: they were either captured or killed.

The Russians have had a naval task force in the Indian Ocean conducting pirate patrols. In retaking vessels they have killed pirates and taken others to Russia and sometimes to Kenya and other states in the region for trial. It is suspected that many simply "disappeared" and returned to Somalia (Rivkin and Ramos-Mrosovsky 2010). In 2009 Russia hinted that its navy would "take no prisoners" (Hellmer 2010). In May of 2010 the Russian oil tanker *Moscow University* was captured by Somali pirates. It was retaken by the Russian navy, wounding one pirate. Articles dated May 12, 2010 (Anonymous 2010a, 2010b) reported that the ten captured pirates were dead, following their release by the Russian navy after they were returned to their boat. A seven-minute video titled *Without a Trial* was posted in May 2010, purporting to show what happened in the wake of that action. In the film some two dozen Somali pirates, one of whom is wounded, are held at gunpoint on their boat. The videographer shows AK-47s, handguns, Molotov cocktails, and a long boarding ladder. The pirates are then handcuffed to the boat. In the last scene, ostensibly shot from the deck of the Russian destroyer, the boat appears to explode, taking the pirates with it. Is it real or a hoax? In any case these accounts all underscore the dangers associated with piracy.

The International Chamber of Commerce International Maritime Bureau has reported more than 5,000 pirate attacks since 1992 (Skowronek 2006). Currently it is estimated that those represent an annual loss to the global economy of $15 billion in losses, insurance premiums, and delays (Sekulich 2009:80). Off Somalia alone 179 ships were captured by pirates

between 2005 and 2012. To free these vessels and their crews an estimated $400 million in ransoms was paid. The average pirate received about $30,000. This is more than fifty-four times the $550 per year income of the average Somali (Harress 2013).

While merchant vessels might command greater ransoms, pirates are known to be ecumenical in their attacks. In the middle of October 2009 Paul and Rachel Chandler's 38-foot yacht was taken by pirates and stripped of everything of value. The couple was then held for ransom (Hassan and Lawless 2009). The Chandlers were released 388 days and $440,000 later, following beatings and imprisonment (Gettleman 2011). Another example was the capture in April 2009 of the French yacht *Tanit* and its five crew members in the Gulf of Aden. Fearing that the pirates were about to take the hostages ashore to be held for ransom, French commandos retook the boat, killing two of the five pirates and the owner of the yacht (Hellmer 2010).

These contemporary accounts of piracy are almost identical to historic acts of piracy. Eighteenth-century 200-ton merchant ships had small crews numbering between thirteen and seventeen (Leeson 2009:10). In 1821 the *Zephyr*, a merchant brig with a crew of fifteen (carrying coffee, arrowroot, dyewood, and indigo and passengers including women and children) set sail from Jamaica to London. A few days into their voyage they were overtaken by pirates sailing a schooner. Ten heavily armed men cowed the crew and passengers and began their search of the vessel. In addition to confiscating portions of the cargo and some of the ship's stores including water, livestock, sails, spars, and other rigging items, they ransacked the living quarters, took earrings from the children, and threatened and beat the captain into surrendering his cash (Smith 2011: 13). They then forced the first mate, Aaron Smith, to accompany them for the next year. After witnessing and being victim of various tortures, he escaped his captors, was imprisoned in Havana, and later was tried and acquitted of piracy in London (Smith 2011).

A century earlier, in June 1722, fisherman Philip Ashton was working the cod fishery off the coast of Nova Scotia, three hundred miles northeast of Marblehead, Massachusetts, his home port. Ashton and his five fellow crew members were in their schooner at the end of a day of fishing when four pirates sailing with Edward Low boarded the vessel. The pirates took food and clothing and forced Ashton and his compatriot Joseph Libbey, like Aaron Smith a century later, to leave their schooner and join the pirates on their brigantine the *Rebecca* (Flemming 2014). Unlike Libbey, Ashton

did not join the pirates. He remained a captive or "forced" man for nine months until he made his escape in March 1723 while part of a "watering party" on Roatan Island in the Bay of Honduras. There he survived for sixteen months and finally returned to Marblehead in June 1725, some three years after being captured. As this was happening Libbey, his one-time fisher friend turned pirate, was captured. A month later, in July 1725, he was hanged in Newport, Rhode Island, for piracy. While it is debatable whether modern international law permits the execution of pirates by naval task forces without benefit of trial, in the eighteenth century captains had the right to hang the pirates (Turley 1999:46). Between 1716 and 1726 more than four hundred pirates were hanged following capture by the Royal Navy (Rediker 1987:283).

Studying Pirates and Piracy in the Past

In order to study piracy it is necessary to define it. Many terms are commonly used as cognates, including buccaneer, corsair, and privateer. These terms are often used interchangeably, but there are differences between them.

Webster (1981: 867) defines a "pirate" as one who commits robbery on the high seas or makes unauthorized use of another's idea or invention. A more colorful definition comes from the nineteenth-century *Pirate's Own Book*: "Piracy is an offence against the universal law of society. As, therefore, he has renounced all the benefits of society and government, and has reduced himself to the savage state of nature, by declaring war against all mankind, all mankind must declare war against him" (Maritime Research Society 1924:x). In other words, pirates robbed ships. Not all those who robbed ships were bad, however, at least not in the eyes of their home country. Some were accorded special honors.

A "privateer" is a mariner licensed by a sovereign state to attack enemy shipping. Privateers carried what are known as letters of marque, which made the privateers an auxiliary to the regular navy of the state. Letters of marque permitted the bearer to prey upon the shipping of an enemy country and split the prize with the authorizing government (Cordingly 1995:xvii). This makes the difference between privateers and pirates a matter of perspective. Sir Francis Drake was knighted by his government as a hero of the realm but at the same time was viewed as a dreaded pirate by the Spaniards living in the Caribbean, upon whom he preyed. Captain William Kidd went to the Indian Ocean carrying a letter of marque as an