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N. 5
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Fascicolo 19. Giugno 2024
Storia Militare Moderna



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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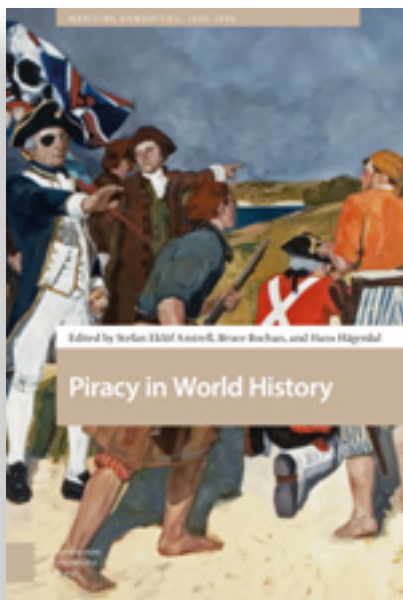


Banner With the Lion of St. Mark (banner) Italy, Venice, 1675.
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STEFAN EKLÖF AMIRELL, HANS HÄGERDAL & BRUCE BUCHAN (EDS.),

Piracy in World History

Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2021, pp. 290



In *Piracy in World History*, editors Stefan Eklöf Amirell, Hans Hägerdal and Bruce Buchan offer a collection of essays on the historically ubiquitous phenomenon of maritime predation. The volume belongs to the series *Maritime Humanities, 1400-1800* published by Amsterdam University Press.

In the introduction, the editors expose a series of interconnected aims such as unsettling ‘the conventional oppositions between piracy and sovereignty, toppling the *hostis humani generis* from its pillar of infamy’, contributing to ‘the global history of piracy and, in particular, to the global conceptual history of piracy, by highlighting both legal and theoretical perspectives and several empirical case studies involving colonial or imperial encounters in the maritime context’¹.

¹ Stefan EKLÖF AMIRELL, Hans HÄGERDAL and Bruce BUCHAN, ‘Introduction’, in idem (eds.), *Piracy in World History*, Amsterdam: University Press, 2021, p. 4.

In addition, the volume critically discusses whether the term piracy may be conceived as a European creation that has been applied to different contexts around the world, sometimes incorrectly, between 1500-1900. This time frame coincides with the period of European expansion that began during the fifteenth century with the first wave of Iberian explorations². To do so, the contributors delve into different ‘cross-cultural contexts’, showcasing the different realities and perceptions of piracy developing across spatial-temporal coordinates.

At the same time the volume problematises the blurred distinction between outright piracy and legitimate/legitimatised maritime violence such as reprisals, privateering and naval warfare³. It is today widely accepted that throughout the early modern period the ‘legal and intellectual discourse on piracy was literally a world apart from the reality of maritime encounters overseas’⁴. Pirates, far from being universally considered as ‘enemies of humankind’, often enjoyed support networks among coastal populations and authorities. Furthermore, fierce commercial rivalry between well-armed commercial expeditions made the opportunistic use of violence against competitors all too likely even in times of peace, especially on the high seas.

The contributors propose ten case studies examining piratical violence in Europe, the Philippines, modern day Indonesia, India, the Ottoman Empire, China and Vietnam. The volume is thus somewhat focused on South-East Asian waters and especially on ‘layered and complex political contexts’ often situated at the crossroad of European and non-European imperial powers⁵. More specifically, the first three chapters focus on piracy in international law and politics, the following four on piracy in the context of imperial expansion, while the last three delve into discourses and representation of piracy.

The volume builds upon pioneering studies that began appearing at the turn of the twentieth century⁶, which for the first time began to come to terms with

2 Ibidem. Cf. Stefano CATTELAN, ‘Iberian Expansion over the Oceans: Law and Politics of *Mare Clausum* on the Threshold of Modernity (XV-XVI centuries)’, *Historia et ius*, 18 (2020), 1-28, <https://doi.org/10.32064/18.2020.26>.

3 AMIRELL, HÄGERDAL and BUCHAN (eds.), *Piracy in World History*, p. 10.

4 Ibid., pp. 20-21.

5 Lauren BENTON, ‘Afterword’, in AMIRELL, HÄGERDAL and BUCHAN (eds.), *Piracy in World History*, 268.

6 E.g. Patricia RISSO, ‘Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the We-

two traditional features of the historiography on maritime raiding. First, the almost exclusive focus on the role of piracy in European overseas expansion and imperialism, i.e. what Peter Earle termed ‘piratical imperialism’⁷; second, the predominance of analyses centred on the role maritime predation played in the development of a Eurocentric body of law regulating interpolity relations, i.e. what the editors refer to international law (albeit anachronistically as the early modern period is concerned). As I suggested elsewhere, the proficiency demonstrated by European seafaring nations in maritime violence, both state-sanctioned and piratical, did play a pivotal role in the gradual ‘Europeanisation’ of ocean spaces⁸. Nevertheless, ‘Eurocentric international law’ became dominant only in the nineteenth century. Throughout the early modern period Europeans continued to constitute a comparatively small presence in pelagic spaces such as the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea.

Lauren Benton in her afterword notes that some of the contributions in the volume continue to emphasise ‘European understanding of piracy centering on representations of pirates as *hostes humanis generis*, enemies of all mankind’⁹. Indeed, the theme of European overseas expansion is still present in the essays at hand, but the contributors do bring valuable non-European – mostly Asian – perspectives to enrich the analysis of maritime predation. By discussing these competing, or concurrent, understandings of piracy as a historical, legal, and rhetorical concept, *Piracy in World History* shows how piratical violence and its cyclical suppression contributed to shaping imperial forms of domination, particularly across marine spaces and regions that have until now been less studied compared to the early modern Atlantic and Mediterranean basin¹⁰.

stern Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region During a Long Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of World History*, 12(2) (2001), pp. 293-319.

7 Peter Earle, *Pirate Wars*, London, Methuen, 2003, p. xi.

8 Stefano CATTELAN, *Challenging Empires: Pirates, Privateers and the Europeanisation of Ocean Spaces (c. 1500–1650)*, in Giuseppina DE GIUDICI, Dante FEDELE and Elisabetta FIOCCHI MALASPINA (cur.), *Soggettività contestate e diritto internazionale in età moderna*, Rome, Historia et ius, 2023, pp. 125-51; Louis SICKING, ‘The Pirate and the Admiral: Europeanisation and Globalisation of Maritime Conflict Management’, *Journal of the History of International Law*, 20(4) (2018), pp. 429-470.

9 Lauren BENTON, ‘Afterword’, in *Piracy in World History*, pp. 268-9. Cf. idem, ‘Toward a New Legal History of Piracy: Maritime Legalities and the Myth of Universal Jurisdiction’, *International Journal of Maritime History*, 23(1) (2011), 225-240

10 As an example of this persisting focus on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, see Gilbert

Within the time frame chosen for the volume (1500-1900) the 1720s-1730s constitute a useful partition. Those two decades coincided with the almost complete eradication of European piracy (not privateering) notably due to a series of antipiracy campaigns sponsored by various interests groups within the British empire¹¹. From that point on, piracy became a useful way of accusing non-European entrepreneurs of violence or anybody who resisted the burgeoning colonial empires of ‘savagery’. This had had as a consequence renewed European attempts to impose naval, commercial and imperial dominance in the second half of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century. The denial of the sovereign status to non-European polities was instrumental in defining all form of violence as piracy, and to deal with it as such.

In conclusion, *Piracy in World History* provides a welcome addition to the existing historiography on piracy. It has the merit of moving the history of maritime predation more firmly into world history. In addition, the volume succeeds in inviting new scholarly attention to the central role played by non-Europeans as both victims and perpetrators of such violence, attempting to escape the persisting eurocentrism in the conceptualisation of piracy.

STEFANO CATTELAN¹²

BUTI & Philippe HRODEJ (dir.), *Histoire des pirates et corsaires. De l'antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2016).

11 David Wilson, *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century. Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2021.

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A Smart Macaroni, Caricature from "Martial Macaroni", in Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection. Courtesy by Brown University (see West, «The Darly Macaroni Prints and the Politics of "Private Man.»», *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 25.2 [2001], pp.170-1.

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