

Springboard

into
Comprehension



Main Idea Piracy in the Modern Age

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Information Report

Piracy in the Modern Age



Written by George Ivanoff

Piracy in the Modern Age

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What is Piracy?

Say the word *pirate* and an image immediately springs to mind – a rough-looking, bearded man in a long coat wearing a lot of jewellery. He has flintlock pistols in his belt, and he is waving a cutlass around. Maybe he has a wooden leg, perhaps an eye-patch, probably some nasty-looking scars. He sails a ship that flies the Jolly Roger flag. This common image of a pirate is inspired partly by the 1883 novel *Treasure Island*.

In reality, pirates varied in appearance and lived in many different eras. So, what exactly is a pirate? A pirate is someone who commits armed robbery at sea. A pirate is a criminal. People often think that pirates stole hoards of gold and jewels that they buried in secret locations for safekeeping. In truth, pirates often stole food, water, weapons, and clothing. Hence, they did not usually bury their loot. They sometimes stole gold and silver, but jewels were harder to sell and so not worth as much to the pirates as other stolen goods.

In some eras, there were other seamen who were a lot like pirates. These were men licensed by their government to raid or capture the ships of enemy countries, so-called **privateers**. Privateers had to give some of the loot to their king or queen but were allowed to keep the rest.

The difference between a pirate and a privateer often depended on a person's point of view. Needless to say, the victims of these attacks called the culprits pirates, not privateers. Some privateers became proper pirates when their other work dried up.



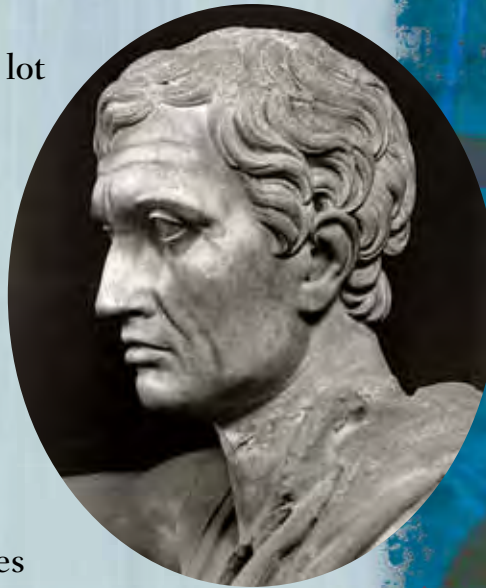
The character of Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean* is a modern invention, but pirates like him have long sparked the imaginations of novelists and filmmakers. Actor Johnny Depp is seen here in a film still.



The History of Piracy

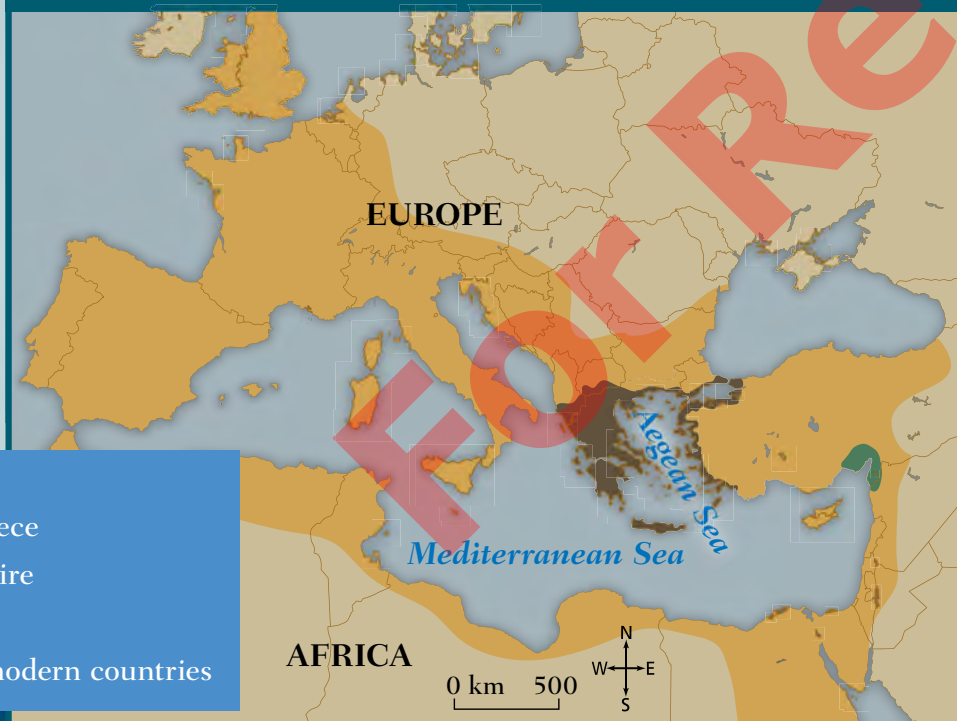
Pirates have been around ever since people started moving goods across oceans. Ancient Greece had a lot of trouble with pirates. Greek trading ships often sailed through the Aegean Sea, an area full of tiny islands where pirates hid. In time, some Greek city-states built up navies to combat these pirates. Others encouraged piracy as a source of wealth.

The Roman Empire had problems with pirates, too. It became so bad that in 67 BC, a Roman leader, Pompey the Great, led a huge fleet of ships in pursuit of them. The Roman army also attacked the pirate stronghold of Cilicia. Thousands of pirates fled, surrendered, or were killed in Pompey's siege, which freed the Mediterranean Sea of pirates for 400 years.



Pompey the Great

Pirates of the Ancient World



Much later, from the 1500s to the 1800s, the Barbary pirates plagued the Mediterranean Sea's southern coast. The Barbary pirates were Muslim pirates operating from the coast of North Africa, then called the Barbary Coast. When these pirates raided ships, they often took prisoners to sell later as slaves. One of the most famous Barbary pirates was a man named Aruj. He became known as Barbarossa, which means *red beard* in Italian. After he was killed by the Spanish in 1518, Aruj's even more famous redheaded younger brother Hizir acquired the name Barbarossa.



A portrait of the famous Barbary pirate Barbarossa (Hizir), painted about 1550

An old oil painting of Barbary pirates launching an attack on Spanish ships



The pirates that plundered the Caribbean in the 1600s and 1700s are the most famous pirates of all. This era is often called the Golden Age of Piracy because there were so many pirates operating at the time. One of the best known was Edward Teach, an Englishman nicknamed Blackbeard. From 1716 to 1718, Teach sailed aboard a stolen 40-gun French ship renamed the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. There are many stories about Blackbeard. Legend says he wore lighted cannon fuses in his hair during battles to appear fiercer. He may have sliced off the finger of a man who refused to surrender his diamond ring after Blackbeard boarded his ship. At the height of his power, Blackbeard was in command of four ships and more than 300 pirates.



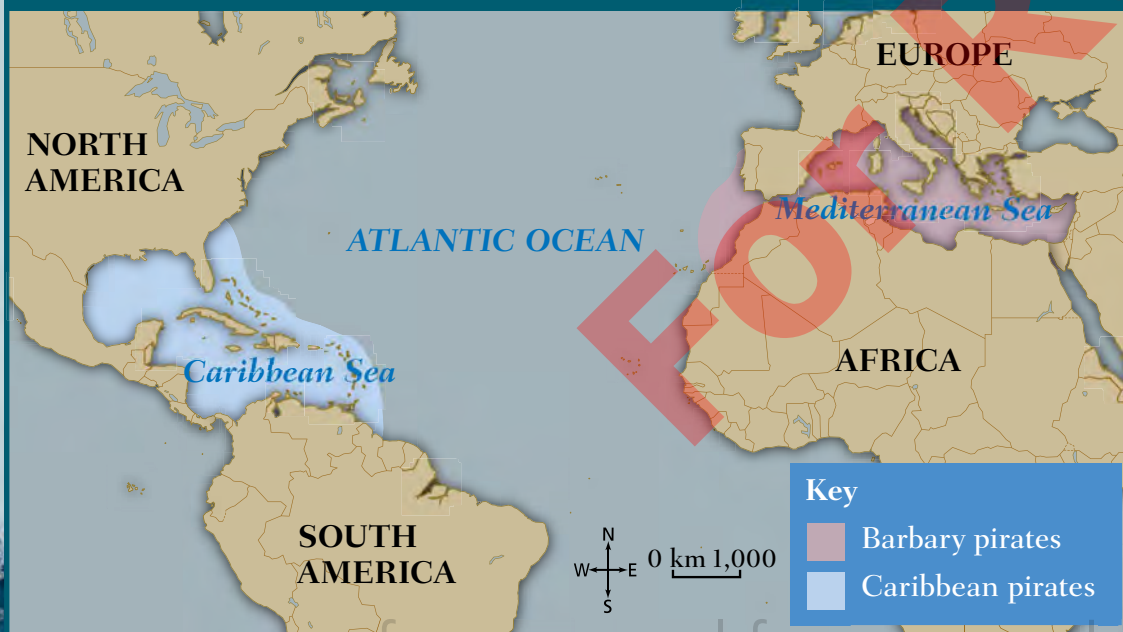
Blackbeard, a notorious pirate who captured 50 ships during his career

Still around Today

Many people think piracy is a thing of the past. They could not be more wrong. Pirates are still around today. In fact, acts of piracy are on the increase. Pirate attacks around the world tripled between 1993 and 2003. In 2008, there were about 300 pirate attacks, including more than 100 off the coast of eastern Africa, costing an estimated US \$60–70 million.

Pirates of the past are often associated with large ships flying the Jolly Roger flag. Modern pirates tend to use small, light boats with outboard motors mounted on the back, or speedboats. To make their attacks, the men launch these speedboats from a hidden base on shore or from a larger “mother ship” out in deeper waters. Modern pirates do not fly the Jolly Roger flag either. They do not want to alert other boats to their plans. They prefer to make surprise attacks, so they can seize control of the other ships before their crews have time to fight back.

Barbary and Caribbean Pirates



Men from the US Navy approach a suspected pirate “mother ship.”

