**Atlantic Piracy in Global Perspective, c. 1500-1750**

0.2 - About this Module for Students

**Introduction**

Everyone loves pirates. For many people, when they think of pirates, the image of Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean* comes to mind, or a similar figure of a white man with an eye patch and a parrot and a peg leg and a funny way of talking. But pirates didn’t all look like that, and in fact, piracy has played a major role in shaping the world we live in, from ancient times to today. What has piracy looked like in the past and who became pirates? This module will attempt to answer these questions by looking at one of the “golden ages” of piracy in world history as it unfolded in the Atlantic from c. 1500 to c. 1750. We will consider why piracy thrived during this period and how it reflected and shaped the rise of major European empires in this era.

*Overview of the Module*

The two and a half centuries from c. 1500 to c. 1750 (commonly referred to by historians as the “early modern” era) was a critical period in world history and, not coincidentally, a “golden age” for piracy around the world. The dawn of the sixteenth century saw the growth of competition among empires, the development of exploitative labor regimes, and the expansion of long-distance exchange of commodities, materials, ideas, and people.

All the world’s oceans became increasingly interconnected during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, and all of them saw many innovations in maritime trade routes. However, these changes were perhaps most dramatic in what historians call the “Atlantic World” – a term that refers to the increasingly interconnected peoples and places of the Americas, Africa, and Europe. During the early modern period, many diverse people around the globe participated in the era’s transformations of their free will, but many did so because they were forced to against their wishes. Piracy at sea was one way of the many ways in which people objected to the changing and unequal realities of the world they lived in. People became pirates for all sorts of reasons, and through their “piracy”—as their actions at sea were deemed by authorities at the time—they helped shaped the maritime policies and aims of emerging empires.

This module will consider the factors and motivations that led some people to become pirates and other people to label certain actions as acts of “piracy”. We will take piracy seriously, not as a sideshow to the politics of the early modern period but rather as a serious reflection of its opportunities and inequalities. In doing so, we will recognize that the increasingly globally connected early modern world was the product of many diverse people using a variety of different approaches and tools to shape the world they lived in.

*Defining Piracy*

Piracy as an act of armed robbery at sea has been around in human societies since the ancient world. But what exactly did piracy look like at any given moment in the past, and who became pirates? Are all pirates criminals? When is violence at sea not considered “piracy”? Can pirates stop being pirates or is it true that “once a pirate, always a pirate”? Are pirates different from corsairs and privateers (terms we will discuss over the course of the module)? And do pirates typically come from the same background, or have they been a diverse group? Did pirate crews all practice the same religion and speak the same language? Did they form pirate societies with laws and leaders or were they lawless communities of wild men? Could women be pirates? Why are some eras in world history considered to have been “golden ages” of piracy? The more you think about piracy, the harder it becomes to answer these questions and others like them.

Some big questions to keep in mind through this module are:

* What can history teach us about how and why piracy happens?
* Why was there a “golden age” of piracy in the Atlantic from 1500-1750 and why did it come to an end?
* Who became a pirate at that time, why, and what did they “pirate”?
* What led an action at sea to be called “piracy” and what does it mean when we call someone a “pirate”?

**Format**

In the lessons that follow, we will consider what “piracy” meant to different people in different places from c. 1500 to 1750, who became a pirate and why, and what was the relationship between Atlantic piracy and the rise of major European empires in this era. We will also think about why there was a “golden age” of piracy in this period and why it came to an end. Although our geographic focus will be the Atlantic World, we will also think about how global exchange and interconnection in this period shaped the practice of piracy.

This module centers on discussions of primary sources (documents written by and about pirates during the time period we are studying) about piracy and the context in which it occurred. We will also consider art and music from this period whenever possible. Each of the primary sources you will read is accompanied by a short introductory reading produced by a historian with specialized knowledge on the topic. These short introductions will help you understand and analyze the primary sources.

Together, we will learn:

* Why piracy in the Atlantic increased beginning c. 1500
* Why piracy and the growth of Atlantic empires went hand-in-hand in this era
* How labor regimes and expanding Atlantic and global trade routes shaped piracy
* Who became a “pirate” and why during this period
* How shifting imperial politics in the Atlantic World in the eighteenth century led to a “crackdown” on piracy

We designed this lesson to require about six hours of class time over two weeks and about twice that amount preparing for class. If it takes significantly more than that, you should talk to your professor. It may be that they can offer some useful guidance to you, or to the *History for the 21st Century* project to adjust the lesson for future students.

**Schedule and Readings**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Topic** | **Readings before the class** | **In-class activities** |
| **Before the module** | * About this module |  |
| **Lesson 1: The Dawn of a Golden Age of Piracy in the Emerging Atlantic World c. 1500** | * Reading 1: The Dawn of a Golden Age * Primary Sources: Cabot, Staden, and Léry | * Explore and define piracy and the “Atlantic World” * Primary source analysis:Cabot, Staden, and Léry |
| **Lesson 2: 16th Century Piracy, Commodity Trades, Labor Regimes** | * Reading 2: 16th Century Atlantic Piracy * Primary Sources: Nichols and Drake | * Primary source analysis: Nichols and Drake |
| **Lesson 3: 17th Century Imperial Competition in the Atlantic and Piracy on Land and at Sea** | * Reading 3: 17th Century Imperial Competition * Primary Sources: Frethorne, Esquemeling, Morgan, and Samuel | * Primary source analysis: Frethorne, Esquemeling, Morgan, and Samuel |
| **Lesson 4: 18th Century Piracy, Plantations, and Global Markets: A Changing Climate for Piracy** | * Reading 4: 18th Century Piracy, Plantations, and Global Markets * Primary Sources: Villany Rewarded, Bonny and Read, and Roberts | * Primary source analysis: Villany Rewarded, Bonny and Read, and Roberts |
| **Conclusion** | * Reading 5: Conclusion: Piracy Past and Present | * Discuss how our understandings of piracy have changed based on what we have learned about the history of piracy in the Atlantic World, and the persistence of piracy today |