

Introductory chapter to *X Marks the Spot: The Archaeology of Piracy*, edited Russell Skowronek and Charles Ewen (University Press of Florida 2006)

Archaeology is the search for fact. Not truth. If it's truth you're interested in, Dr. Tyree's Philosophy class is right down the hall. So forget any ideas you've got about lost cities, exotic travel, and digging up the world. We do not follow maps to buried treasure and "X" never, ever, marks the spot! Indiana Jones. 1989. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Screenplay by Jeff Boam, Story by George Lucas and Menno Meyjes.

Sometimes it does. The authors of this book

Introduction

Pirate! The word conjures images that were formed during childhood, of somewhat scary bad men. Somewhat scary, but not real enough or scary enough to cause most children to lose sleep at night. Everyone who writes about “real” pirates agrees that this does not portray the truth about pirates. But what is the “truth” about pirates and will we ever know?

As we will read in several of the following chapters (especially Babits et al.), most people in this country get their first exposure to piracy in children’s literature such as *Peter Pan* and *Treasure Island*. Those first impressions never seem to leave us, despite what we learn later. It is curious that this image is so pervasive given the relative lack of good, recent pirate literature and movies. Although pirates are a staple in historical romances and children’s books, they are rare in serious fiction. When they do appear, they are largely derivative from the literature and artwork of Robert Louis Stevenson and Howard Pyle.

Pirates in the cinema are even more stereotypical. It’s all down hill after *Captain Blood*, to the point where the viewing public has lost interest and quit watching. This is not just personal opinion, but box office fact. Only the recently released *Pirates of the Caribbean* appears

to have made any money. Perhaps, since we already know the stories, we don't need to see them repeated on the big screen. And yet, we continue to be fascinated by these historical icons.

There is a third category of literature, besides romance novels and children's books, that deals with pirates: nonfiction historical studies. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of books that purport to reveal who the pirates really were have been published with more on the way (including this one!). Even the fictional works on pirates often have addenda that discuss the "true" nature of piracy. On the Disney DVD of "Treasure Planet" (an animated, loose adaptation of Stevenson's *Treasure Island*) there is an added section that the viewer can choose to learn about historical pirates and their ways.

The problem, though, with trying to characterize historical pirates is that piracy has existed for as long as humans have sailed the seas and found wherever there were vessels to be robbed. How do you characterize piracy through time and space? Surely not all of them had eye-patches and peg legs? That is the basic question that this book investigates. As archaeologists, we try and dispel popular misconceptions about the past by examining the material record that people have left behind. But is it even possible to recognize a pirate in the archaeological record?

A Pirate's Life for Me!

To look for a pirate, or a pirate ship, a pirate hideout, or even evidence of piratical activity, you must first know what you are looking for. What is a pirate? As you progress through this volume, you will notice that there are many terms for pirate (e.g. buccaneer, corsair, privateer) and that they are often used interchangeably when, technically, there are some not-so-subtle differences between them.

A pirate, as defined by Webster's, is one who commits robbery on the high seas or the unauthorized use of another's idea or invention. The former is most pertinent to this book. A more colorful definition comes from the 19th 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"(1924:x). So, in a nutshell, pirates were bad men who robbed ships. However, not all men who robbed ships were bad; at least not in their country's eyes.

A privateer is an individual licensed to attack enemy shipping. Such a mariner had a contract with a specific government (a Letter of Marque), which permitted the bearer to prey upon the shipping of an enemy country and split the prize with the authorizing government. This makes the difference between privateers and pirates a matter of perspective (though I suspect both would look similar in the archaeological record). Sir Francis Drake was knighted by his government, as a hero of the realm, while at the same time he was viewed as a despicable pirate by the Spaniards living in the Caribbean upon whom he preyed. The term corsair refers to sea robbers and can apparently be applied to either pirate or privateer. I'm not sure whether this lessens or deepens the confusion.

Buccaneer is a corruption of the French *boucanier* and can be seen as a sort of proto-pirate. When the Spanish abandoned the western third of Hispaniola in the latter half of the 16th century, French smugglers filled the vacuum by squatting on the uninhabited area. They made a living off of hunting the wild cattle that were plentiful in the region. The meat from these cattle was smoked over grills called *boucans* and sold to passing ships. It wasn't long before these *boucaniers*, supplemented their income by preying upon some of the passing ships. The term

later becomes anglicized into buccaneer. Tortuga Island, off the northern coast of Haiti became one of the early pirate lairs in the Caribbean.

Brief History of Piracy

Given the scope of the topic and the extensive literature available, any synopsis of piracy is bound to leave out certain aspects and even whole arenas of piracy. In this book, for instance, pirates in antiquity, the Barbary pirates and piracy in the Pacific are not discussed. This is simply the archaeology of piracy is not as widespread as piracy, itself. All of the sites that we have been able to glean from the archaeological literature, with the exception of the Kyrenia ship, which may have been sunk by pirates in the ancient Mediterranean (Katsev 1980, 1987), are primarily products of the “Golden Age of Piracy” and excavated by North American or European archaeologists. Therefore the focus of the background history will be the Caribbean, North America, and the Indian Ocean and relying primarily on Angus Konstam’s excellent *The History of Pirates* (1999 Lyons Press) for general historical facts.

The riches that the Spaniards were hauling out of the New World proved an irresistible draw to the masterless men of many nations. The French buccaneers were among the first to systematically harass Spanish shipping and early in the seventeenth century had established a stronghold on Tortuga Island off the north coast of Haiti. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the ranks of these freebooters included many nationalities and numbered in the thousands.

The seizing of Jamaica by the British in 1655 prompted many of the pirates to relocate their base of operations to Port Royal. The story of this notorious pirate port is discussed in Donny Hamilton’s chapter of this book. It was during this time that the likes of Jean L’Olonnais, Sir Henry Morgan, and Sir Francis Drake terrified the Spanish Main. The depredations by these

pirates extended to the land as well as the sea causing the Spaniards to fortify their ports with imposing stone “castles” and sail their treasure fleets in armed convoys (see Skowronek & Ewen, this volume). However, even these measures were not entirely successful as is evidenced by the sack of Panama Viejo by Henry Morgan in 1671 (Mendizábel 1999).

The end of the seventeenth century ushered in what has come to be known as “the Golden Age of Piracy”. Though officially discouraged by the European powers, piracy actually increased its scope during the period between 1690 and 1730. The notorious Edward Teach (a.k.a. Blackbeard) and Samuel Bellamy spread the terror up the east coast of North America and beyond. Their exploits are described by Mark Wilde-Ramsing, Wayne Lusardi and Chris Hamilton later in this volume. This infamous era draws to a close as the colonial governments in the New World became stronger with increased peacetime trade.

At the same time pirates were seeking new plunder up the Atlantic coast of North America, several had discovered the rich booty to be had in the Indian Ocean. Captains William Kidd and Richard Condent (see John DeBry and Patrick Lizé this volume) preyed upon the treasure-laden ships of the Moghul Empire from their base off the coast of Madagascar. Ironically, it was the pirates’ toll on the shipping of the East India Company that brought down the wrath of corporate Britain and essentially ended this pirate reign, or at least that colorful era portrayed in literature. But the scourge of piracy has never really ended and continues as the bane of honest seamen to this day (see Skowronek, this volume).

With the distance of history and the softening by children’s literature, the atrocities committed by pirates seem less terrible than they actually were. They are more the stuff of scary bedtime stories than actual, horrific events. This is due, no doubt, to the imprinting in our minds of the stereotypical image promulgated by childhood stories (See Babits et al. and Skowronek &

Ewen this volume). Such terms as scoundrel, scalawag, rogue and even cutthroat don't truly portray the criminal nature of the pirate. Indeed, in today's romance literature, these are regarded as positive character traits in the leading male characters. Of the pirate books I have recently read, only Peter Benchley's novel, *Island* (Doubleday, 1980) really captured the terror that these men must have inspired. Yet, clearly the people of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were terrified. That is why there was an instant death sentence pronounced on anyone choosing to pursue piracy. Perhaps if we used the term *terrorist* to describe them, this might equate them more with the murdering thieves that most of them were.

The Archaeology of Piracy

In conducting the research for this book two things became abundantly clear: 1) there is no shortage of historical works about pirates, 2) there is very little in the archaeological literature about piracy. This was somewhat surprising in that the recent discovery of what is being touted as the wreck of Blackbeard's flagship has dominated the recent archaeological discussions in North Carolina. However, when looking beyond this site, only a couple of other pirate-related sites came readily to mind. It took some searching to find the few other examples of archaeology being performed on pirate-related sites and still more effort to get their investigators to commit to this volume. Why is this?

History is replete with people trying to find pirate buried treasure. Even though there is virtually no historical record of pirates burying their gold (the historical literature suggests that pirates most often stole commercial cargoes, which they then sold for gold and promptly spent as fast they could), this has not stopped folks from looking for it.

The Money Pit on Oak Island off of Nova Scotia is a good example of a great deal of effort being spent looking for pirate treasure which may not exist. Captain William Kidd, the

only pirate who is actually recorded to have buried some treasure, allegedly careened his ships in the area. Couple this with a mysterious booby-trapped pit on the north end of the island and voila! Millions of dollars and at least 10 deaths attributed to treasure-seekers attempting find pirate booty.

I, personally, was involved in another, albeit less costly, attempt to locate pirate treasure. A homeowner in coastal Bertie, County, NC contacted me about doing some archaeology at his family's 18th c. ancestral home. After an extensive tour of the house and grounds, I asked what the owner had mind for an archaeological project. I was then treated to a somewhat long-winded story about the owner's grandparents, who were "very sober and conservative people, not given to wild tales". To make a long story short, during his grandparents' residence at the house at the turn of the 20th century, they were periodically visited by gusts of wind and an eerie rattling sound, which traveled through the house and ended at a large hollow sycamore tree in the front yard. The homeowner finished his tale with a dramatic pause and then showed me the sycamore in the story. When I appeared nonplused by this story, he added that it was well known that Blackbeard and other pirates frequented the Albemarle Sound during the early 18th century and he believed that the sounds were related to their ghostly visitations. He concluded this thought by looking meaningfully at the sycamore tree. With dawning comprehension I asked if I had been brought in so that I could look for pirate treasure?! I must have appeared skeptical (it was all I could do to hide my amusement/outrage) because the owner sheepishly nodded and said that when I put it that way it sounded foolish. I could not disagree and after assuring him that I possessed no technology that would allow me to see any farther beneath the soil then he had dug already, I departed. I have no doubt that my skepticism did not diminish his pirate gold fever one whit.

Any archaeologist who has worked on historic sites has heard these tales of treasure. Sometimes the treasure takes the form of gold coin-filled mason jars. Sometimes it is buried in secret tunnels beneath historic structures that lead to a nearby river. However, in the past 30 years of digging on historic sites, I have yet to actually find a tunnel or know of anyone who has, let alone recovered a jar full of coins more valuable than pennies. Is it because they don't exist? or are we "serious archaeologists" not wasting our time looking for them?

Is the hunt for treasure, and by association pirate sites, too popular to interest the professional archaeologist? Even the recent work by Texas A & M at Port Royal has downplayed the popular pirate angle. I had to promise Donny Hamilton that he could write the "rest of the story", sans pirates, about Port Royal before he would consent to contribute to this volume.

Curiously, the popular appeal of archaeology has been a problem for archaeologists. Until recently, any academic who wrote for the popular press was seen as having "sold out" and was in it for the media attention. Perhaps more importantly, publishing in the popular press (and I include Archaeology magazine and National Geographic here) did nothing to further the academic archaeologist's pursuit of tenure and promotion, so there was little incentive for the academic archaeologist to pursue sensational sites, like pirate shipwrecks. Cultural Resource Management archaeologists didn't dig pirate sites either, unless they happened to be in the right-of-way of a planned highway project or likewise threatened by destruction by a government agency (which considerably narrows the opportunities for CRM pirate archaeology-though it does happen! See Exnicios this volume).

A more serious reason that archaeologists have shied away from investigating pirate sites is that this is seen as the domain of treasure hunters. Many archaeologists feel that there is

something inherently wrong with digging on a site that might have artifacts of intrinsic value on them. It makes us feel “dirty” somehow and not the good kind of dirty that comes from laboring with a shovel for days on end with only a handful potsherds to show for it.

Archaeologists may not be anxious to work on treasure sites, but they are even less anxious to surrender them to treasure hunters. The legal licensing of treasure hunters by some states is anathema to most archaeologists. The aversion to treasure hunters is so strong that even collaborating with them in a required legal setting has been called a “Faustian bargain” (Elia 1992) and has threatened the careers of well-meaning archaeologists that were trying to salvage the data that would otherwise have been lost. Thus, anyone respectable archaeologist that was looking for a pirate site was also looking for trouble.

The ethics of collaborating with treasure salvors or pothunters is not a trivial one and is, in fact, a favorite question on comprehensive exams for students pursuing a graduate degree in archaeology. The conundrum is this: does one work with the commercial collector to salvage as much data as possible before the artifact collection is sold and dispersed or does collaboration tacitly endorse and legitimize the activities of the collector and encourage them to mine even more sites? The ethical tenets of the Society of American Archaeologists are ambiguous enough so that both sides can be argued (which is why this makes such a great exam question!). However, there is enough censure in the profession concerning looted data that usually only those senior archaeologists, above reproach (e.g. Kathy Deagan’s use of artifacts recovered by Mel Fisher from the Atocha – see Deagan 2002) attempt their use.

The Whydah project is an excellent case in point (see Hamilton this volume). This unequivocally identified pirate vessel was salvage, under permit, by Barry Clifford intermittently between 1982 and 1989. The project, troubled by turnover of archaeological personnel,

eventually came under the direction of Christopher Hamilton who completed reports on the previous work at the site (Hamilton et al. 1988, 1989, 1990). Although all the archaeologists entered into the project with the best of intent, the working relationship with the treasure salvors proved troublesome for all of them and the accompanying controversy further exacerbated the situation. However, it should be noted that, contrary to professional fears, the collections from the Whydah are intact and currently curated in Provincetown, MA.

The issue of the ethics of using data associated with commercial ventures is contentious and complicated and will not be addressed in this book as it is better discussed elsewhere. We acknowledge the controversy surrounding some of the data presented in this volume. The authors of this book do not condone the looting of sites and have only included data that was lawfully recovered in this volume.

The reasons above for the seeming aversion to pirate archaeology by most archaeologists may be more rationalization than reality. Perhaps the real reason that more pirate sites have not been reported in the literature is that they are so hard to find. Or, more to the point, they are so hard to recognize in the archaeological record. The contributions in this book demonstrate that the identification of the site with piracy was the foremost research question of each project and that the identification of those sites was not always certain (c.f. Wilde-Ramsing and Lusardi, this volume). In fact, without the historical documentation associated with the site, most of these sites would probably not have been associated with piracy by their investigators. This book will explore the question of identifying pirates sites, both on the land and under the sea.

This book

The organization of this book can be seen as two different approaches: method and theory. The first approach, methods, has to do with how pirate sites were found and identified.

This part has been broken down into Pirate Lairs (terrestrial sites) and Pirate Ships and their prey (underwater sites).

Pirate Lairs (land bases may be more descriptive, but how often does one get the chance legitimately use the word *lair* in an academic context?) begins with one of the best investigated, and best-known terrestrial pirate sites, Port Royal, Jamaica. Once known as the “wickedest city on earth”, archaeologists, primarily from Texas A & M University (<http://nautarch.tamu.edu/portroyal/>), have uncovered a great deal of information concerning late seventeenth-century life in the British Caribbean. Donny Hamilton recaps the work that has been done through the past several decades at the site and discusses the role that piracy did and did not play in the site’s history.

Port Royal was the home port of such notable pirates as Henry Morgan. The next contribution discusses the notorious Jean Lafitte, who was not a sea-going pirate himself, but rather dealt in the stolen booty that the brethren brought to him. Joan Exnicios explains how cultural resource management laws provided for the investigation of the remains of Lafitte’s smuggling base and settlement. The investigation included magnetometer, side-scan sonar, and fathometer survey of the bay behind Grande Terre island and prompted a reassessment of Lafitte’s activities in south Louisiana, based on primary documentation not previously examined in detail by scholars.

These relatively well-known pirate settlements are followed by a discussion of more historically obscure pirate bases in the Gulf of Honduras. In these chapters, David McBride and Daniel Finamore describe the history and archaeology of the seventeenth and eighteenth century British logwood/freebooter sites on Roatan, Honduras and Barcadares, Belize. Roatan was first used by pirates in the sixteenth century for rendezvous, careening, and resupplying. It was

briefly settled by Puritans in 1639, only to have the Spanish force them out in 1642. The island returned to its piratical ways and was a thorn in the Spanish colonies side for decades thereafter. McBride uses his survey of the island as a focus for a discussion of the power struggles between England and Spain throughout the eighteenth century. Daniel Finamore discusses the similar site of Barcadares, Belize. There, the freebooters left tantalizing traces of their lives, but no buried treasure. Finamore uses these data to address the question of whether this Bay Settlement was a kind of utopia or merely a last stop for debauched sailors.

The second section of the book begins with a wreck that is not well-known to English-speaking audiences. The *Speaker* sank off the coast of Mauritius in 1702 although the pirate, John Bowen, survived the wreck and continued his career in piracy in the Indian Ocean. Patrick Lizé was part of a French team that studied the site, which has the distinction of being the first pirate ship ever excavated archaeologically. The report has been translated into English and the author takes the opportunity to reflect on the project and how historical archaeology can illuminate the life of the pirate.

A more recent discovery in the Indian Ocean is the wreck of the *Fiery Dragon*. The wreck was first thought to be the *Adventure Galley*, associated with Captain William Kidd. However, initial excavations turned up materials inconsistent with Kidd's vessel and caused the author, John DeBry to consider alternatives. DeBry also examines the lives of the pirates in the Indian Ocean and connects them with those that formerly plied the waters of the Caribbean.

The second section of the book continues with one of the more notorious archaeological projects, the excavation of the pirate ship, *Whydah*. The *Whydah* was a slave transport captured by the pirate Samuel Bellamy. Bellamy, sailed with Blackbeard, off the coast of North America until he lost his vessel in a storm off of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The wreck site was discovered

by Barry Clifford leading a team from Maritime Explorations, Inc. in the early 1980s and was subsequently excavated under a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Chris Hamilton discusses the fieldwork and some of the discoveries made at the site through the end of 1992. The chapter goes on to discuss the archaeological issue of site formation processes and some of the anthropological implications of studying social systems, ship architecture and trading systems using a limited selection of analyses and results presented in the data recovery report (Hamilton 1992). This project, as noted above, is also noteworthy in that it brought to a head, the ethical arguments concerning archaeologists collaborating with treasure seekers. The popular versions of the Whydah project have been widely disseminated (Clifford 1999). The scholarly side has had only limited circulation until this volume.

The next two chapters in this section concern the recently discovered wreck off Beaufort Inlet, North Carolina. The popular press and even the state legislature immediately identified the wreck as Blackbeard's flagship, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. The archaeologists involved were less quick to make a positive I.D. insisting that more data were needed, though mindful that the pirate cachet was a powerful fundraising tool necessary to continue the investigation. Mark Wilde-Ramsing, the project's director, looks at the historical and archaeological evidence and makes the case that it is consistent with what one would expect of the famous pirate's ship. Wayne Lusardi, the project's former conservator, examines the recovered artifacts and sees room for doubt. The reader can weigh the evidence, then reach their own conclusions and will be prepared to evaluate each new bit of evidence that is recovered in the future.

Mark Wagner and Mary McCorvie continue this section with an investigation of an alleged victim of a different kind of pirate, the river pirate. The Ohio River Valley of the late

eighteenth and early nineteenth century is renowned in American lore as the abode of pirates who operated from hideouts such as Cave-in-Rock, plundering flatboats, killing the crews and selling the cargoes. The authors have found that these tales are, indeed, larger than life. The recent discovery of an early 1800s flatboat wreck along the Ohio River shoreline in 2001 was popularly believed to be the remains of a boat plundered by a river pirate. However, the authors believe there is another explanation for the wreck, but found they had an uphill battle in getting the local populace to discard their cherished beliefs concerning local history despite evidence to the contrary.

The editors conclude the section by looking at the response to piracy by their potential victims in the Caribbean. One could make a valid argument that the face of settlement and commerce was shaped by the presence of pirates in the area. Ironically, it is the response to piracy rather than the pirates themselves that are most visible in the archaeological record.

Who were the Pirates?

The book concludes with a reappraisal of what it meant to be a pirate and how the popular perception of piracy today has influenced our interpretations of piracy's past. It also addresses the question of how you might recognize a pirate site in the archaeological record. In fact, the thread that runs through all of the contributions and is made explicit in the chapter by Babits, Howard, and Brenkle concerning recognizing pirate sites in the archaeological record. Are there any archaeological markers that give away a pirate site? If the archaeologist didn't have the documentary record to draw from, could a site be positively identified as a pirate shipwreck? In every contribution to this volume, the identification is only successful when there is good historical documentation. When the documentation is ambiguous or somewhat sketchy, as in the case of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, then the identification is open to question.

This is not an uncommon situation in historical archaeology. Archaeologists working on plantations sites have been searching in vain for the marker artifacts that definitely denote the presence of African-American slaves. A single blue bead or cowrie shell does not a slave site make. But blue beads or cowrie shells in a historical context where slaves are historically recorded to have lived lends credence to such an association. Such is the case with pirate sites.

Archaeologists are not so much interested in individual artifacts as in patterns in the archaeological record. Each pirate site that is identified, explored, and published takes the archaeologist one step closer to defining such a pattern. Perhaps the pirate ship is characterized by a pattern of armaments, reconfigured mast placement and a variety of cargo that differs from a merchant ship or naval vessel. If such a pattern can be discerned, then it would be possible to identify a pirate ship for which no historical record exists. In fact, two of the chapters in this book (see Wagner & McCorvie and Finamore) explicitly look for such a pattern at the sites they investigated. The value of bringing these chapters together is that it makes comparisons and, hence, identification of pirate sites possible. Until we can be sure of our identifications we will not be able to recognize patterns nor address questions relating the lives of pirates and their impact on the larger societies in which they lived.

