

# Real Pirates of the Caribbean

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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2012-13

**AMERICA *in* CLASS<sup>®</sup>**

*from the* National Humanities Center

## FROM THE FORUM

- Why should I teach about pirates?
- What can they tell us about the history of their age?
- What impact did Caribbean piracy have on colonial America?
- Did pirates serve any valuable purpose as explorers?
- How close is the fictional portrayal of pirates to reality?

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### Research Interest

The efforts of Caribbean slaves to escape  
bondage in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries

*Creolization and Contraband: Curaçao in  
the Early Modern Atlantic World*  
(2012)



## KEY QUESTIONS

- What can pirates teach us about the history of the Caribbean?
- What were the particular circumstances that provided a space for piracy to thrive in the early modern Caribbean?
- How did piracy change and develop over two centuries in the Caribbean?
- How was this related to larger changes in the region and in the wider world?
- How did pirates and piracy fit into the societies, economies, and cultures of the Caribbean at particular times? What was their relationship with other social groups?
- What were the different forms of piracy?
- How was piracy related to other forms of trade (both legal and illicit)?
- What was the relationship between pirates/privateers and governments?
- How did this change over time?
- What are some of the wider issues that the study of Caribbean pirates can teach us about the study of history in general?

## Historians see three major moments in Caribbean piracy:

- Attacking the Spanish Sea (+/- 1492-1630)
- The Age of the Buccaneers (+/- 1630-1680)
- The “Golden Age” and Pirate Suppression (+/- 1680-1730)

The article, “Pirates, Privateers, and Buccaneers of the West,” provides an excellent overview of each of these stages.

“Because I do it with a small boat, I am called a pirate and a thief. You, with a great navy, molest the world and are called an emperor.”

— Pirate captured by Alexander the Great in St. Augustine’s  
*City of the Gods* (5<sup>th</sup> century)

## Discussion Questions

- Although this quote is from ancient times, how is it relevant to Caribbean piracy?
- What issues does it raise about piracy and power?
- Who is a pirate?
- Who decides?

# Atlantic Winds and Currents



**Discussion Question**

➤ How does the map of Atlantic winds and currents relate to Caribbean piracy?

# The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus

## “How the Admiral Departed from Española” (1493?)

Our men brought the canoe alongside the flagship, where the Admiral gave thanks to God for revealing to him in a single moment, without any toil or danger to our people, all the products of that country. He took aboard the costliest and handsomest things in that cargo: cotton mantles and sleeveless shirts embroidered and painted in different designs and colors; breechclouts of the same design and cloth as the shawls worn by the women in the canoe, being like the shawls worn by the Moorish women of Granada; long wooden swords with a groove on each side where the edge would be, in which were fastened with cord and pitch, flint knives that cut like steel; hatchets resembling the stone hatchets used by the other Indians, but made of good copper; and hawk’s bells of copper, and crucibles to melt it.

### Discussion Questions

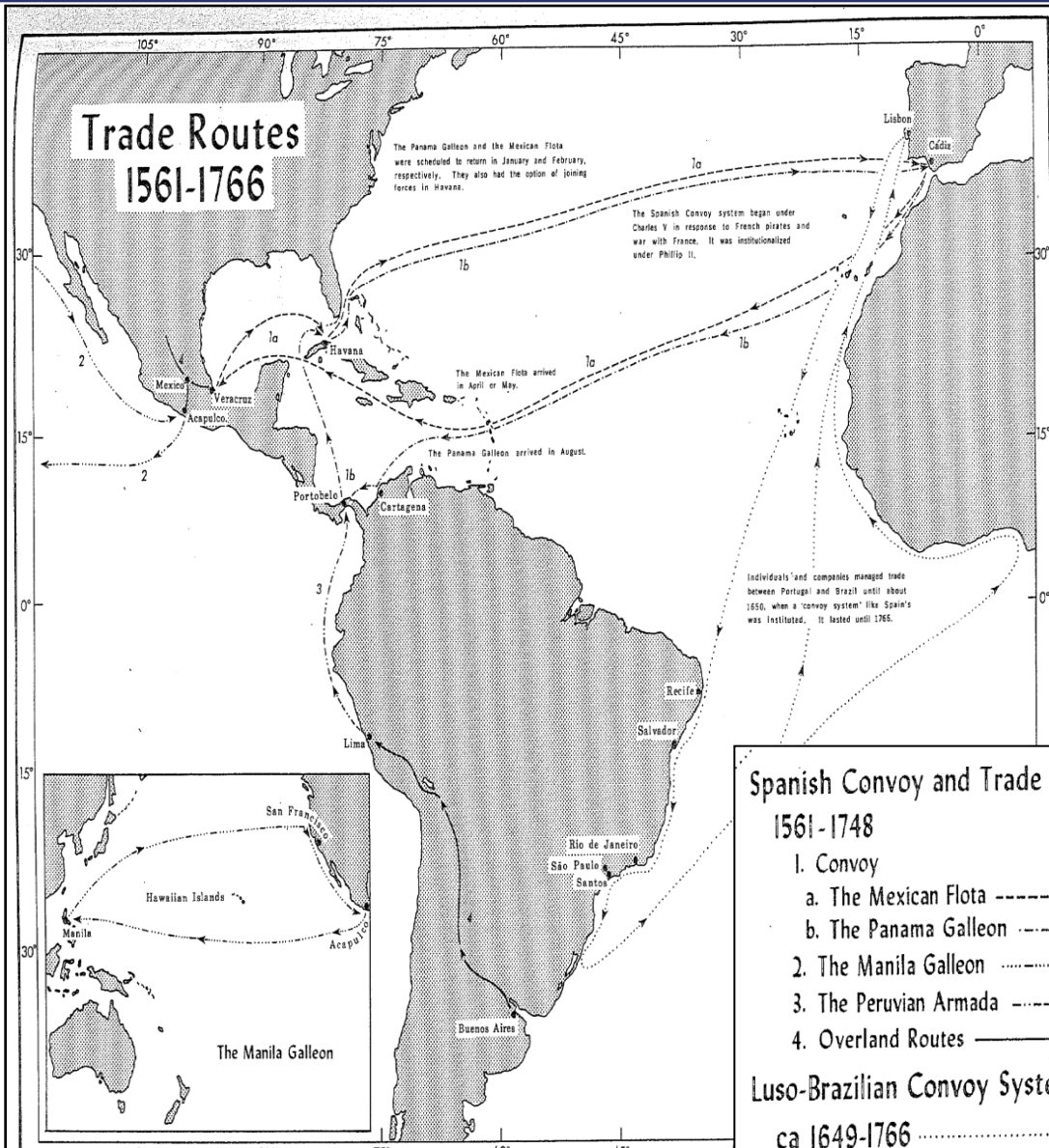
- Can this be considered an example of piracy? Why or why not?
- What does this encounter reveal about trade and power?



# “Pirates, Privateers, and Buccaneers of the West”

In the sixteenth century, because England, Holland, and France were latecomers to empire-building, the best they could hope for was to rob gold and silver from Spanish and Portuguese ships and settlements.

# Trade Routes 1561-1766



**Spanish Convoy and Trade Routes, 1561-1748**

1. Convoy
  - a. The Mexican Flota -----
  - b. The Panama Galleon -----
2. The Manila Galleon .....
3. The Peruvian Armada -----
4. Overland Routes -----

**Luso-Brazilian Convoy System, ca 1649-1766** .....

## Discussion Questions

- How exactly did these trade routes open up opportunities for piracy?
- How does this relate to what Anthony discusses in Section One of the overview article?

# “Pirates, Privateers, and Buccaneers of the West”

Although piracy was an illegal activity, it was considered useful because it provided communities with cheap goods and employed local toughs who might otherwise have engaged in robbing their neighbors.

(page 14)

## Discussion Question

- How might this have carried over to the European colonies in the Caribbean?

And since you will not come courteously to talk with us, without evil or damage, you will find your frigate spoiled by your own fault. And to any who courteously may come to talk with us, we will do no harm, under our flag. And who does not come, his be the blame.

(2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph)

## Discussion Questions

- What does this reveal about power relations between pirates and locals?
- How does it compare with the quote from 1493?

# “The City of Nombre de Dios to the Crown” (1573)

For the French and English corsairs have entered into league and amity with the *cimarrones* [run away slaves] in the back country, who number more than 3000. Although the Licentiate Diego Garcia is going to Spain to report all these events to your majesty (and credence may be given him, for in addition to being a cultured man, he is an old-established resident of this kingdom, and has had much experience here), nevertheless, we will here briefly advise your majesty of what is occurring in his kingdom.

(2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph)

## Discussion Questions

- What does this passage tell us about the kinds of alliances that pirates made with local groups?
- Why might these alliances be important?

## “The City of Nombre de Dios to the Crown” (1573)

We entreat your majesty to deign to hear us and to take promptly the action we hope for from your majesty, since haste is what is most needed for the welfare of this land and of the provinces of Peru and good of your majesty’s service. In the Meantime we will do our part by placing our persons and our property, as is our duty, at the service of your majesty, whose Catholic royal person God preserve many years with increase of more kingdoms and dominions.

(last paragraph)

### Discussion Question

- What does the tone of the language here say about colonial authorities’ relationship with the Crown?

# “Francis Drake on the Pacific Coast of America” (1579)

Testimony of Nuño da Silva:

On the 20<sup>th</sup> he took a small ship on her way to Lima laden with native products, all of which he threw into the sea, taking from each ship her pilot and releasing the ship. Running along the coast, he reached Arequipa where he found and seized a ship laden with a cargo of Castilian goods. He left this and only took her pilot, being in a hurry to look out for vessels laden with silver.

(2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph)

## Discussion Questions

- How do you explain Drake’s decisions re what to take and what to leave?
- What does this reveal about Caribbean piracy?

# “Francis Drake on the Pacific Coast of America” (1579)

Testimony of Don Francisco de Zarate:

The aforesaid gentlemen sit at his table, as well as a Portuguese pilot, whom he brought from England, who spoke not a word during all the time I was on board. He is served on silver dishes with gold borders and gilded garlands, in which are his arms. He carries all possible dainties and perfumed waters. He said that many of these had given him by the Queen.

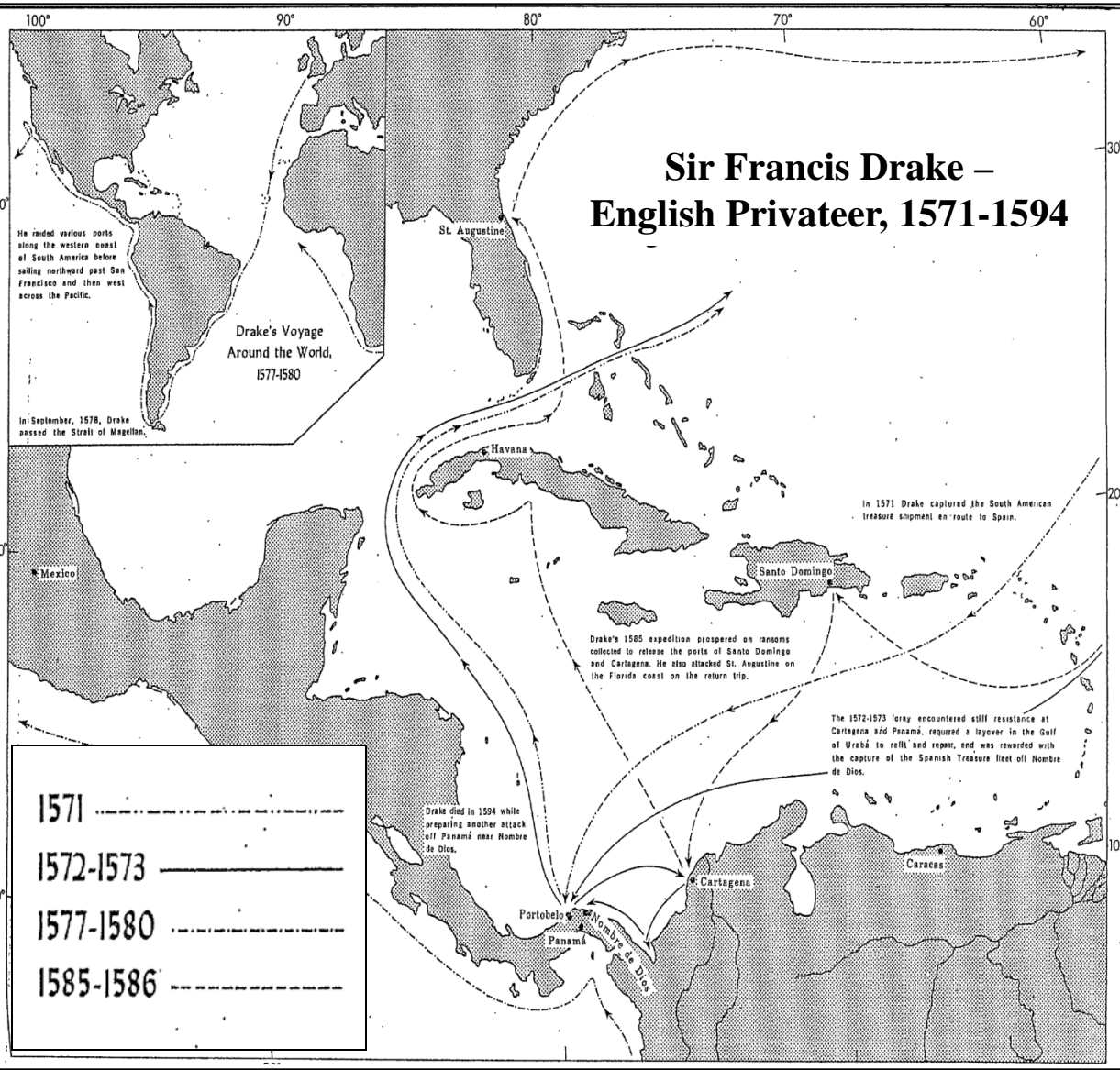
(2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph)

## Discussion Questions

- What does this document reveal about the background and social class of Drake and other members of this early group of Caribbean privateers?
- How does this relate to the points Anthony makes in the first section of his article?



# Sir Francis Drake



- ## Discussion Questions
- Compare the map of Drake's voyages with the map of Atlantic winds and currents. What do you notice?
  - How did Drake's voyages connect the Caribbean to the wider world?

## Buccaneers in the Caribbean, 1630-1680:

The buccaneers were a motley group of French, English, Dutch, and even Spanish and Portuguese renegades and misfits, whose prime targets were Spanish ships and towns in the Caribbean (Map 2).

(page 11-12)

### Discussion Question

- What does the rise of these buccaneer communities tell us about changes in the Caribbean in this period?

## The Golden Age of Western Piracy, 1680-1730:

Beginning in the 1680's those governments that had once supported, or at least tolerated, pirates now found no use for them and began to suppress their activities in the Caribbean and around the globe. The former “patriotic heroes” had become the “villains of all nations.”

(page 14)

### Discussion Questions

- What might account for this change in how nations viewed pirates?
- How would this change, in turn, affect piracy?

# “Pirates, Privateers, and Buccaneers of the West”

The captains and crews who served on privateers and on pirate ships were generally the same – during times of war pirates became privateersmen and in times of peace privateersmen resumed piracy. What one country viewed as legitimate privateering another country – usually the victim – regarded as outright piracy. Moreover, piracy proved to be an important component in state-building.

(page 7)

## Discussion Questions

- How were piracy and privateering intertwined?
- How exactly did piracy serve state-building?
- How did this change over time?

## “William Kidd’s Royal Commission” (1695)

Now Know Ye, that we being desirous to prevent the aforesaid mischiefs, and as much as in us lies, to bring the said pirates, free-booters and sea-rovers to justice, have thought fit, and do hereby give and grant to the said Robert [William] Kidd, ... full power and authority to apprehend, seize, and take into your custody ... all such pirates, free-booters, and sea-rovers, being either our subjects, or of other nations associated with them, which you shall meet with upon the seas or coasts of America, or upon any other seas or coasts, with all their ships and vessels ...

(page 77)

### Discussion Question

- What does this privateering commission reveal about the Crown’s major concerns?

# “William Kidd’s Royal Commission” (1695)

And we also require you to bring, or cause to be brought, such pirates, free-booters, or sea-rovers, as you shall seize, to a legal trial, to the end they may be proceeded against according to the law in such cases.

(page 78)

## Discussion Question

- Why would the Crown be so concerned about a legal trial?

By 1700 pirates were no longer viewed as patriots but as the enemies of mankind as well as of commercial expansion and capitalism.

(page 8)

## Discussion Question

- How might this change have affected how emerging states dealt with pirates?

Over the course of the centuries the social composition and nature of piracy changed dramatically. During the first phase, pirates were led mostly by petty nobles and “gentlemen adventurers” and gangs were organized along rigid hierarchical lines. They were neither democratic in the manning of ships nor the distribution of booty. Gangs too were divided chiefly along national lines. Later, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, nearly all pirates had been born into the lowest social classes and many were in fact “desperate Rogues.”

(page 19)

## Discussion Question

- What does the change in the face of Caribbean piracy suggest about wider changes in the Caribbean?



# “Pirate Articles” (1720, 1723)

Articles aboard Capt. Bartholomew Roberts’ Royal Fortune, 1720:

*[4] The Lights and Candles to be put out at eight o’Clock at Night: If any of the Crew, after that Hour, still remained inclin’d for Drinking, they were to do it on the open Deck[.]*

(page 92)

## Discussion Question

- Why would limiting drinking and getting a good night’s sleep be a concern to a pirate captain?

# “Pirate Articles” (1720, 1723)

Articles aboard Capt. John Phillips’ Revenge, 1723:

1. Every Man shall obey civil Command; the Captain shall have one full Share and half in all Prizes; the Master, Carpenter, Boatswain and Gunner shall have one Share and quarter.

(page 93)

## Discussion Question

- How do you explain this distribution?
- What does this careful distribution suggest about life aboard a pirate ship?

# “Pirate Articles” (1720, 1723)

Articles aboard Capt. John Phillips’ Revenge, 1723:

7. That Man that shall not keep his Arms clean, fir for an Engagement, or neglect his Business, shall be cut off from his Share, and suffer such other Punishment as the Captain and the Company shall think fit.

(page 94)

## **Discussion Question**

- Why is this article important?

# “Pirate Articles” (1720, 1723)

Articles aboard Capt. John Phillips’ Revenge, 1723:

8. If any Man should lose a Joint in Time of any Engagement, he shall have 400 pieces of Eight, if a Limb, 800.

(page 94)

## Discussion Question

➤ What does this article reveal?

## Major points about Caribbean piracy:

- Piracy changed over time, as the Caribbean and the wider world changed.
- Pirates went from being agents of emerging states in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to outlaws in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Even as they became outlaws, Caribbean pirates developed their own communities.
- Caribbean piracy responded to real market demands.

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**Thank you**