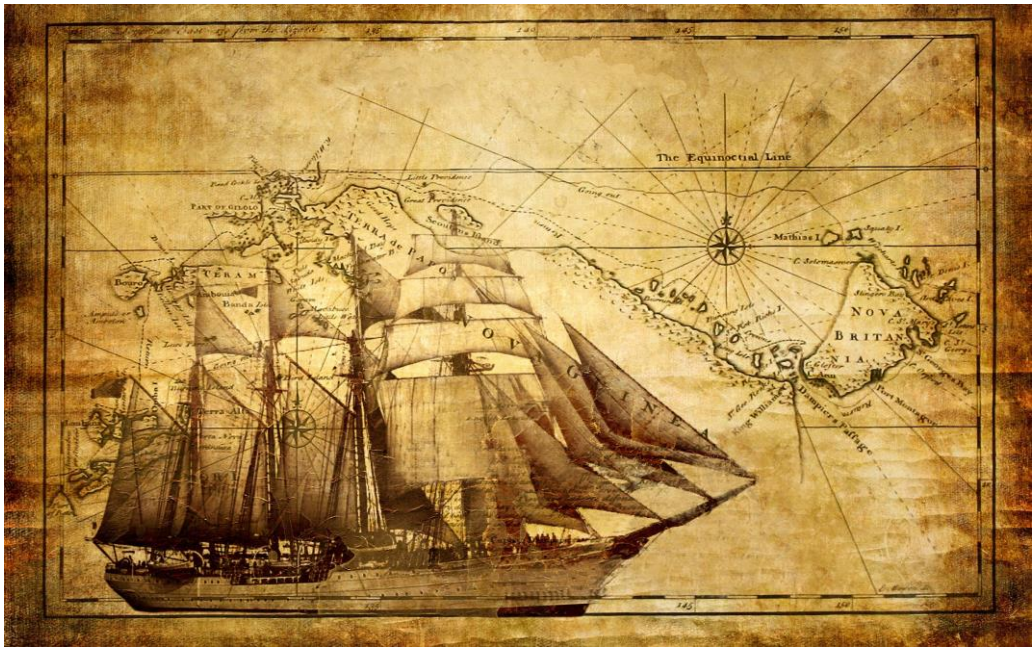
THE GOLDEN AGE OF PIRACY

Were Pirates really such Barbarians or just ahead of their time?

TRAVAIL PERSONNEL 2025/26

TUTRICE: ANNICK MEIERS

LILY DEGRAND WALKER 4C5



Contents:

Introduction

1. ***Piracy: Definition***
2. ***Why would you want to pursue a life of Piracy?***
3. ***The Pirate Code of Conduct***
4. ***The Importance of Folklore and Music aboard ships***
5. ***'A General History of Pyracy' by Charles Johnson***
6. ***The Evolution of Piracy***
7. ***Famous Pirates:***

    7.1 Edward Teach

    7.2 Mary Read

    7.3 Anne Bonny

    7.4 John Rackham; Calico Jack

    7.5 Zheng Yi Sao, The Pirate Queen

    7. 6 Bartholomew Roberts; Black Bart

    7.7 Grace O'Malley

8. ***From Treasure Islands to Pegs and Parrots; Separating Fact from Fiction***
9. ***Piracy in the 21st century***
10. ***Conclusion; Where Pirates really such Barbarians or just ahead of their time?***

Introduction:

At the beginning of the year, I had set my mind on writing about female pirates in history. However, during my research about the pirate code and general maritime piracy I became very intrigued as to why anyone would want to become a pirate at all and how it was possible for women to do so.

At which point I started deeper research about specific pirate laws, and I found instances in which I could see a lot of inclusivity and fairness in these supposedly so 'barbaric' people. This led me to question my own knowledge and the general knowledge about pirates as – ruthless though they are – they seemed to have figured out a systematic way of sharing and caring for each other with little to no mutinies within their crews. It made total sense that a captain would try and hinder these rebellions by being fair because, out at sea, it was them against a whole big ocean of enemies (literally).

I decided to turn it around and make the female pirates an honourable mention in a work about the golden age of piracy, and particularly their extraordinary system. After all it is partly thanks to this inclusivity that women were even able to partake in these activities. I am not saying it was a piece of cake, but it did make a difference. I am also not implying that the life of a pirate was an easy one and something you chose to do when you got bored, many children and young adults (this was especially practised in China) were abducted and forced into a life of piracy. However, for many it was an escape from a worse fate or judgement on land.

The Definition of Piracy:

Before I start rambling about all the complicated pirate stuff, I should probably give a general definition of piracy and what kind of piracy I will be talking about followed by a short glossary of maritime pirate vocabulary that might be new to someone reading about this subject for the first time. The following definition comes from Article 101 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and is the current law considering pirates:

Any illegal act of violence, detention, or depredation committed for private ends by the crew or passengers of a private ship or planes, and directed against another ship, planes, persons, or property on the high seas or outside the district of any state.

We tend to think of pirates as cutlass-wielding, eye-patch-wearing swashbucklers who raided ships and generally misbehaved. However, whilst that reputation isn't entirely undeserved, running a successful pirate operation requires a more structured approach. Pirate ships were, in fact, businesses that had to be managed effectively. So how did pirate captains maintain discipline and order on a ship full of people who had already thrown law and order out of the window?
Piracy was a risky, sometimes deadly occupation, and strict rules and regulations were necessary for the survival and morale of the crew. These 'Laws' covered everything from how much each pirate earned from their loot to compensation for injuries, punishments, and even what kind of entertainment was allowed on board. These rules collectively became known as the 'Pirates' Code', which pirates had to publicly swear by.

Legally speaking, a pirate was someone who committed robbery or murder on any body of water and did not operate under any authority (unlike privateers who were authorised to act under a 'letter of mark').

Most pirates were made up of sailors or marginalised individuals who could not find work elsewhere, including freed or escaped enslaved individuals. Pirates were relatively progressive for their time, disregarding race or nationality. However, during the 'Golden Age of Piracy' and the early 18th century, many pirates were white Europeans. They chose piracy rather than enduring the terrible conditions aboard Royal Navy ships, which included harsh treatment, mediocre quality food, and withheld wages.

Pirate ships were self-governed but were far from perfect. Many people were coerced into piracy (or so they claimed), including skilled mariners such as carpenters and navigators. Others became pirates to get rich quickly. Successful pirates could plunder for a year and then, if fortunate, go home and live comfortably for a relatively long time.

Regardless, many pirates simply enjoyed the lifestyle of piracy, earning their own money and answering no one. They would spend their money on land, return to piracy when they needed more, and repeat the cycle.

Privateering

A major legal grey area of the time involved privateering. During wartime, governments issued letters of marque that legally allowed private ships to attack enemy vessels. However, if a privateer ran beyond the bounds of their commission, attacked neutral ships, or used a forged letter, they were treated as pirates. Many well-known figures of the era transitioned between privateering and piracy, depending on whether their actions aligned with state authority. Often, they weren't just assigned to attack enemy vessels but also to attack pirate ships. They would often work together with their respective navies to do so. Even if it was just an enemy trade ship they would lute or at least attack it to starve the enemy.

Why would you want to pursue a life of Piracy?

During the Golden Age of Piracy, piracy appealed to a wide range of people because it offered an unusual combination of personal freedom, economic opportunity, and a sense of equality that was rarely found in the rigid social hierarchies of the early modern world. For many individuals living under strict class systems and harsh working conditions, the pirate life represented not only a means of survival but also a chance to reshape their identity and gain control over their own destiny. These attractions become especially clear when examining the lived experiences of sailors and pirates during this period.

Life aboard merchant and naval ships was notoriously difficult and often brutal. Ordinary sailors were typically paid very little, and wages were frequently delayed or withheld entirely. Discipline on these ships was harsh and sometimes violent, with punishments such as flogging used to maintain order. Living conditions were cramped, unsanitary, and dangerous, with disease spreading easily and accidents common. In addition, many sailors did not choose this life voluntarily; through a system known as impressment, men could be forcibly recruited into naval service against their will.

In contrast, pirate ships operated under a very different system that many found far more appealing. Crews such as that of Bartholomew Roberts followed written agreements called "articles," which clearly outlined the rules and expectations for everyone on board. These articles were agreed upon collectively, meaning that every member of the crew had a voice. Pirate captains did not have absolute authority; instead, their power was limited, and they could be removed by a vote if they failed to lead effectively. Important decisions, such as where to sail or which targets to attack, were often made democratically. This system created a sense of shared responsibility and fairness that stood in stark contrast to the authoritarian structure of naval and merchant vessels.

Economic factors also played a major role in drawing people toward piracy. Many sailors spent years working honestly at sea yet remained trapped in poverty, with little hope of improving their circumstances. Piracy, on the other hand, offered the possibility of rapid and substantial wealth. Although it was risky and far from guaranteed, the rewards could be life changing. A well-known example is Henry Every, who captured the Mughal treasure ship Ganj-i-Sawai in 1695 and escaped with one of the largest fortunes ever taken by pirates. Stories like this spread quickly through ports and coastal communities, fuelling the imagination of struggling sailors and making piracy seem like a gamble worth taking—especially for those who had little to lose and few opportunities for advancement.

Another important attraction of piracy was the relative equality and mutual support found among pirate crews. Unlike traditional ships, where injured sailors were often abandoned or left without compensation, pirates developed systems to care for their own. Many crews

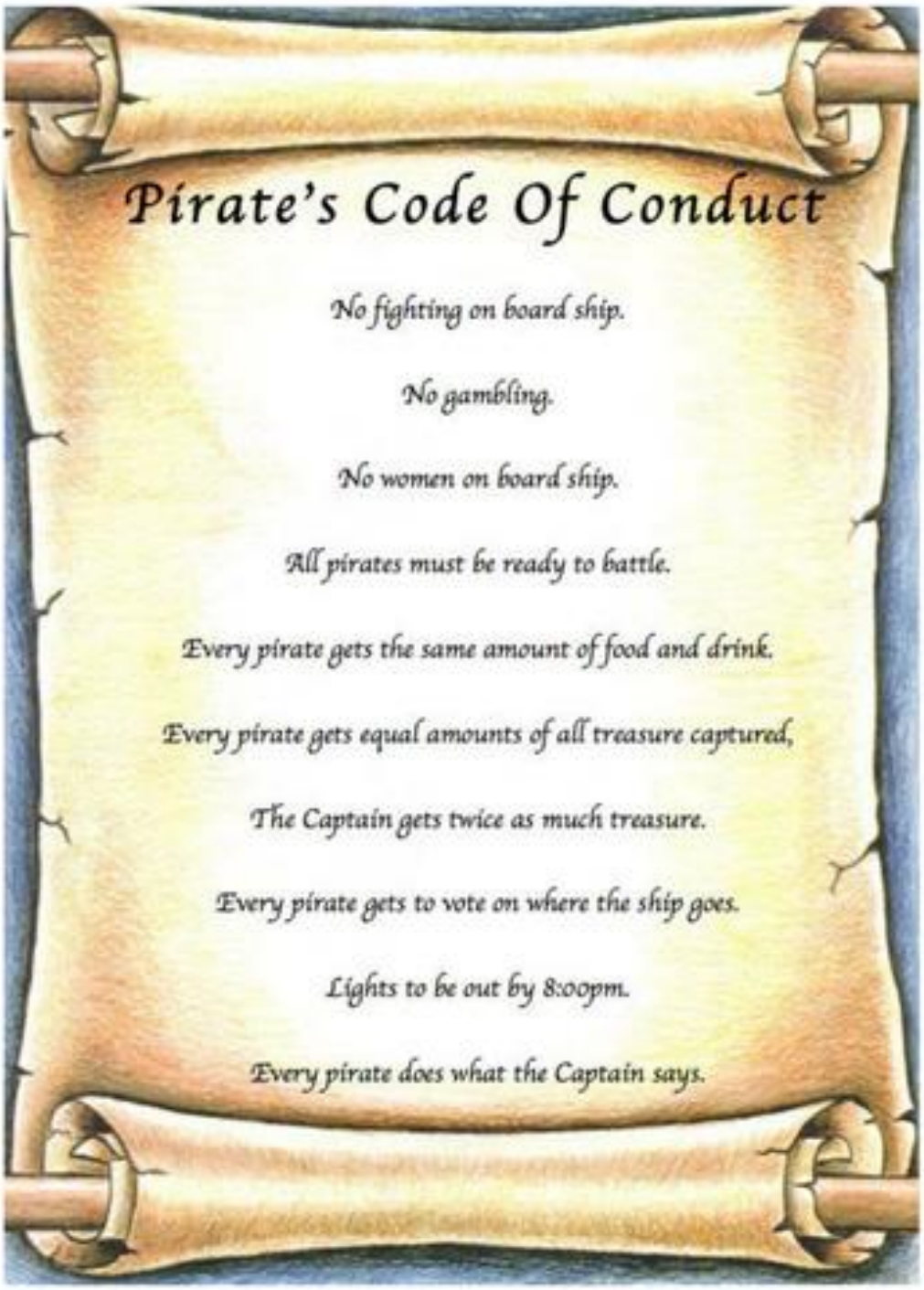
provided financial compensation for injuries sustained in battle, with specific payments assigned for the loss of limbs or other disabilities. This practice, seen on ships led by figures such as Blackbeard, demonstrated a level of collective responsibility that was rare at the time. Furthermore, pirate crews were often more diverse than those on legal vessels. Individuals of different nationalities, backgrounds, and even races could serve together, sometimes as equals. Leaders like Samuel Bellamy were known for commanding crews that included formerly enslaved people, offering opportunities and a degree of social mobility that were almost unheard of in mainstream society.

During this era, discrimination based on race, gender, and social class was widespread on land. People who did not fit into accepted norms could face exclusion, persecution, or even wrongful punishment. At sea, however—particularly within pirate communities—some of these prejudices were less strictly enforced. Although piracy did not eliminate inequality entirely, it did create spaces where individuals could sometimes escape rigid societal expectations. There are even accounts of women participating in piracy, occasionally disguising themselves as men or, in rare cases, openly taking on leadership roles. Additionally, many pirates and privateers were former naval soldiers who, after being discharged, found themselves without stable employment. Having spent their lives at sea and possessing few other skills, they turned to piracy as a practical way to continue earning a living while benefiting from better pay and a more equitable system of sharing profits.

Finally, piracy held a powerful symbolic appeal. It represented rebellion against established authority, including governments, empires, and wealthy merchant classes. Pirates openly rejected the laws and structures that they believed had exploited them, often flying the Jolly Roger as a declaration of their independence and defiance. Figures like Bellamy even framed piracy as a form of resistance, criticizing the greed and corruption of powerful elites and portraying pirates as individuals who refused to be oppressed. For many, the pirate life was not solely about crime or financial gain—it was also about autonomy, adventure, and the desire to live according to one's own rules, despite the significant dangers involved.

In conclusion, joining a pirate crew during the Golden Age of Piracy could be highly appealing for those seeking an escape from the hardships and limitations of early modern society. Piracy offered an alternative way of life that combined democratic decision-making, the possibility of wealth, and a stronger sense of equality and community than most people could find elsewhere. It promised adventure, travel, and independence, allowing individuals to break free from oppressive systems and pursue their own fortunes. Although it came with serious risks, including the threat of capture or death, piracy remained an attractive option for many who longed for freedom, fairness, and a chance to redefine their place in the world.

3. The Pirate's Code of Conduct



Since the beginning of the Age of Sail, life at sea required a certain level of organization and agreement between sailors and their officers. Merchant ships, naval vessels, and exploration

ships often relied on informal or semi-formal agreements between crew members and captains. These early “handshake deals” governed important aspects of maritime life, including job responsibilities, discipline on board, payment of wages, and how profits from successful trading voyages or discoveries would be divided. Because voyages could last months or even years and conditions were often harsh, sailors wanted some assurance that their labour and risks would be rewarded. These early agreements formed the foundation for more structured systems of rules that would later become common on pirate ships.

As piracy expanded from scattered maritime raiding into a more organized and widespread activity, these systems of rules became even more important. Pirates had been active in many parts of the world long before the seventeenth century, including the Mediterranean, the Baltic and North Seas, and the waters of East Asia. However, during the period known as the Golden Age of Piracy (roughly 1650–1730), piracy evolved into a large-scale phenomenon. Dozens of pirate ships operated across the Atlantic and Caribbean, and hundreds or even thousands of sailors abandoned traditional maritime employment in search of wealth, freedom, and adventure. With such large and diverse crews—often made up of sailors from different countries, languages, and social backgrounds—pirate ships required clear rules to function effectively.

To maintain order and fairness among the crew, pirate captains and sailors developed their own written systems of conduct known as pirate codes. Although these codes would later become romanticized in literature and popular culture, in reality they were practical and essential documents that allowed pirate crews to remain organized, disciplined, and operational. Pirate ships lacked the rigid hierarchical structure of naval vessels, where captains ruled with nearly absolute authority. Instead, many pirate crews operated with surprisingly democratic principles. Captains were often elected by the crew, and important decisions—such as where to sail or whether to attack a particular target—could be decided through a vote. Because of this relatively democratic system, written codes were necessary to clearly define the rights and responsibilities of every member of the crew.

The pirate code was especially popularized by the early Caribbean buccaneers, loosely organized groups of pirates who targeted Spanish ships and settlements during the seventeenth century. These buccaneers operated primarily in the Caribbean and along the Spanish Main, frequently attacking Spanish treasure fleets transporting silver and gold from the Americas to Europe. Over time, their customs developed into formalized systems of rules known by several different names. These included the Custom of the Coast, the Jamaica Discipline, Charter Party, and the Chasse-Partie. The most widely recognized term, however, became the “Articles of Agreement,” which described the official rules governing life on a pirate ship.

To become a full member of a pirate crew, each recruit was required to sign the Articles of Agreement. This document typically detailed the rules of conduct on board, the share of plunder that each crew member would receive after a successful raid, and the compensation provided to sailors who were injured in battle. Pirate codes often included surprisingly

specific systems for compensation. For example, sailors who lost a limb during combat might receive a larger share of treasure as compensation for their sacrifice. In addition to defining rewards, the codes also outlined punishments for breaking the rules. Theft from fellow crew members, cowardice in battle, gambling disputes, or bringing women aboard the ship were often punishable offenses. Punishments could range from loss of shares of treasure to severe penalties such as marooning a sailor on a deserted island.

The signing of the pirate code was treated as a serious and symbolic act. New crew members were usually required to swear an oath of loyalty and honor to the ship and their fellow pirates. This oath was often taken in a dramatic manner to emphasize its importance. Pirates might place their hands on a Bible, a weapon, or symbolic objects associated with death and violence. Common examples included swords, axes, crossed cutlasses, cannons, or even a human skull. These rituals reinforced the sense that joining a pirate crew was not simply a job but a commitment to a dangerous and tightly bonded community. Once all members had signed the document, the Articles of Agreement were often posted in a visible place on the ship, such as near the main mast or in the captain's cabin, so that every crew member could easily be reminded of the rules they had sworn to follow.

Pirate crews were not always formed entirely of willing volunteers. While many sailors joined pirates willingly—often because pirate life offered greater freedom and the possibility of wealth—others were forced into piracy against their will. This happened most frequently when pirates captured merchant ships and discovered skilled specialists among the prisoners. Navigators, carpenters, surgeons, and other skilled artisans were particularly valuable to pirate crews and were sometimes compelled to remain with the ship rather than being released. These forced recruits could face a difficult situation, since refusing to cooperate might lead to punishment or death.

One of the most controversial aspects of piracy for these recruits involved signing the pirate code itself. Authorities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries showed little mercy toward pirates, and written pirate codes often served as direct evidence in court trials. If a sailor's name appeared on the Articles of Agreement, it could be used to prove that the individual had willingly joined a pirate crew. As a result, some recruits asked to be officially "forced" to sign the document so they could later claim that they had participated under duress. Others refused to write their names entirely and instead left a simple identifying mark, such as a cross or symbol, especially if they were illiterate. In some cases, these strategies could help sailors argue their innocence if they were captured and brought before a colonial court.

Despite their importance, very few original pirate codes have survived to the present day. Historians estimate that hundreds of pirate ships may have used similar Articles of Agreement during the Golden Age of Piracy, yet only four surviving sets of pirate codes are known today. This extremely small number can be explained by the practices pirates followed when they believed they were about to be captured. Because written codes could serve as incriminating evidence, pirates often destroyed them when authorities approached.

They might burn the documents, tear them apart, or throw them overboard before surrendering or abandoning their ships. This deliberate destruction means that much of what historians know about pirate codes today comes from second-hand sources such as trial records, witness testimonies, and accounts written by captured pirates.

Although the surviving documents are few, they reveal an important aspect of pirate society that contradicts the popular image of pirates as completely lawless criminals. Pirate crews developed complex systems of rules that emphasized fairness, shared responsibility, and collective decision-making. These codes helped maintain order on ships filled with armed men who lived under constant danger and temptation. By establishing clear expectations for behaviour and rewards, pirate codes allowed pirate crews to function as organized communities rather than chaotic groups of criminals. In this way, the Articles of Agreement played a significant role in the success and longevity of many pirate crews during the Golden Age of Piracy.

Another one of the terms of agreement of these pirate codes had to do with the compensation you got if you got injured at Sea. If you got injured during battle you received a healthy compensation plus a kind of pension – very modern for that age. In some of the codes you could legally marry your best friend (same sex) so that if anything happened to you, they would receive your share of the loot and take care of your family if you had one.

4. The Importance of Folklore and Music aboard ships

Life aboard pirate ships during the Golden Age of Piracy not only defined by violence, treasure hunts, and naval battles. Pirates also developed their own culture, traditions, and folklore that helped create a sense of identity and community among the crew. Music, storytelling, and shared legends played an important role in daily life at sea. Because pirate crews often consisted of sailors from different countries, cultures, and social backgrounds, folklore and music helped unite them and maintain morale during long and dangerous voyages.

Music was particularly important on ships because it helped sailors coordinate physical labor. Sailing ships required large groups of sailors to pull ropes, raise sails, and move heavy equipment at the same time. To keep everyone working in rhythm, sailors sang work songs known as sea shanties. These songs allowed one sailor to lead while the rest responded in chorus, creating a steady beat for tasks that required synchronized movement. Shanties made exhausting work easier and helped pass the time during long hours at sea. Over time, pirates adopted many of these songs from merchant sailors and naval crews, but they often added their own lyrics and humour, turning them into part of pirate culture.

Music also served as entertainment. Pirate ships could spend weeks or months traveling between ports or waiting for potential targets. During these long periods, boredom could become a serious problem. Instruments such as fiddles, drums, and flutes were commonly brought aboard ships, and crew members who could play them were highly valued. Musicians performed during celebrations after successful raids, during downtime, and sometimes even before battles to boost morale. Music created moments of relief from the constant danger of pirate life and helped strengthen the bonds between crew members.

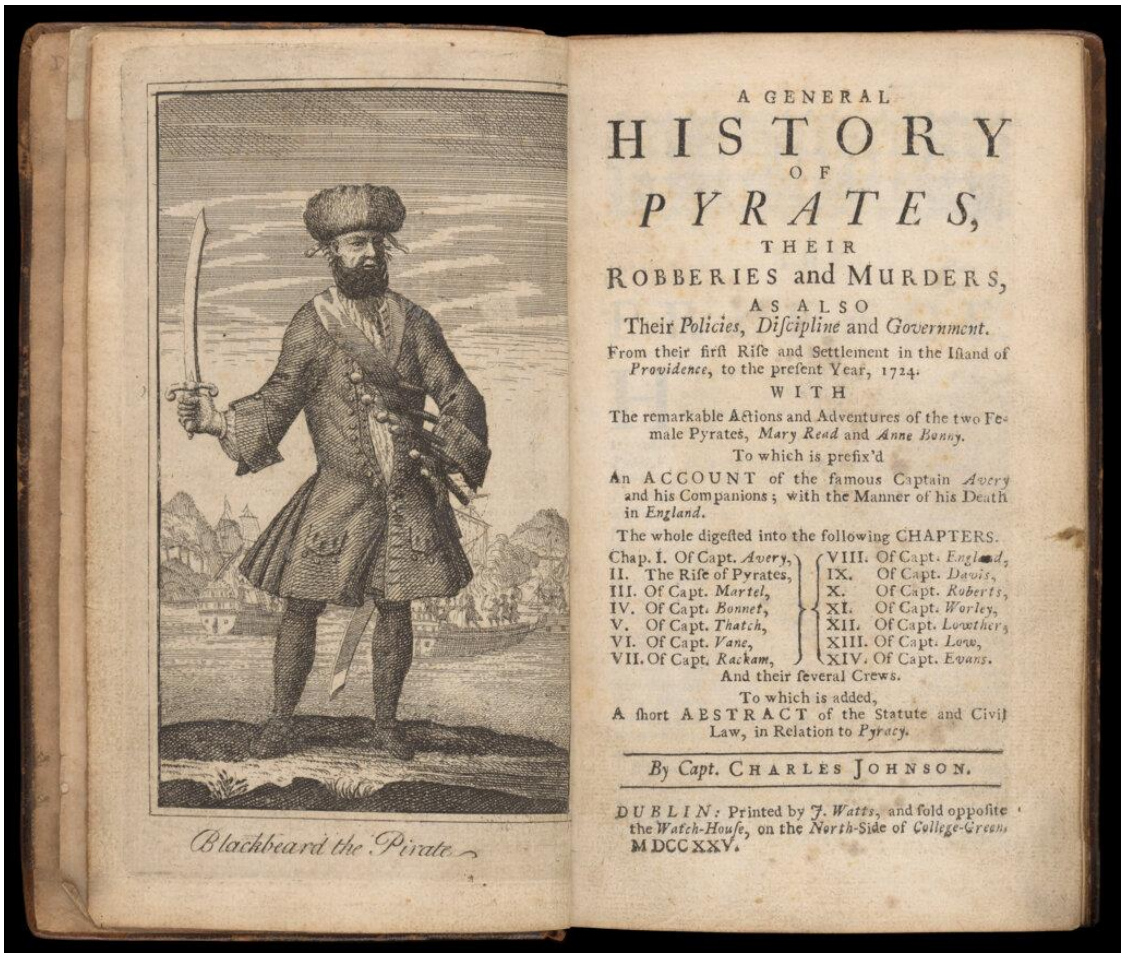
Storytelling and folklore were another essential part of pirate culture. Sailors passed down stories about legendary pirates, ghost ships, sea monsters, and supernatural events. These tales helped explain the mysteries of the ocean, which was still largely unknown and unpredictable during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, sailors sometimes spoke about ghostly vessels like the Flying Dutchman, a cursed ship said to wander the seas forever. Stories like this reflected sailors' fears of storms, shipwrecks, and death far from land.

Pirate folklore also included stories about famous captains whose reputations became larger than life. Figures such as Blackbeard were surrounded by myths and exaggerated tales of bravery, cruelty, and supernatural protection. These stories spread quickly among sailors in ports and taverns, helping to build the legendary image of pirates that still exists today. Some of these legends were intentionally encouraged by pirates themselves, as fearsome reputations could make enemy ships surrender without a fight.

Another reason folklore and music were important was that pirate crews often lacked the strict hierarchy found in naval or merchant ships. Many pirate crews were surprisingly democratic, with sailors voting on major decisions and choosing their captains. Because of this, shared traditions such as songs, jokes, and legends helped create unity among crew members who might otherwise have little in common. Folklore acted as a cultural glue that kept pirate communities together despite the dangers and uncertainties of their lifestyle.

In addition, folklore served as a way to pass down knowledge and warnings. Stories about cursed treasure, dangerous reefs, or haunted islands sometimes contained practical lessons about real hazards at sea. Even if the supernatural elements were exaggerated, these tales helped sailors remember essential information and remain cautious in unfamiliar waters.

5. ‘A General History of Pyrates’ by Captain Charles Johnson



A General History of the Pyrates, attributed to Charles Johnson and first published in London in 1724, is one of the most influential early accounts of piracy during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—an era often called the Golden Age of Piracy. The book presents itself as a factual chronicle of “robberies and murders” committed by notorious sea criminals, but it blends documented events, sailors’ tales, court records, and imaginative embellishment into a vivid and dramatic narrative designed to captivate readers. It's true authorship remains uncertain, and some scholars have speculated that the name “Charles Johnson” was a pseudonym, possibly even linked to Daniel Defoe, though this has never been conclusively proven.

The work is structured as a series of individual biographies, each devoted to a particular pirate captain or crew. These biographies trace the pirates’ origins—often describing humble beginnings, troubled youth, or service in legitimate naval or merchant ventures—before explaining how they turned to piracy. The book then details their rise to power at sea: how they seized their first ships, gathered crews, established reputations, and terrorized shipping routes in the Caribbean, along the American coast, and in West African waters. Battles are

described with dramatic flair, highlighting cannon fire, boarding actions, hand-to-hand combat, and acts of cruelty or bravado.

Among the most prominent figures described are Edward Teach, whose fearsome appearance and theatrical intimidation tactics are emphasized; Bartholomew Roberts, portrayed as one of the most successful and disciplined pirate commanders; Calico Jack Rackham, remembered partly because two women sailed in his crew; and those women, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, whose stories are told with particular fascination, focusing on their disguises, courage in battle, and defiance of gender expectations. The book also recounts the unusual career of Stede Bonnet, a wealthy plantation owner who abandoned his comfortable life to become a pirate captain despite lacking maritime experience.

Beyond recounting sensational crimes, the book offers insight—whether fully reliable or not—into the internal organization of pirate society. It describes pirate articles (codes of conduct agreed upon by the crew), systems of dividing plunder, compensation for injuries, and the surprisingly democratic practice of electing and deposing captains. These sections suggest that pirate ships operated with a form of rough egalitarianism, contrasting sharply with the rigid hierarchies of naval and merchant vessels. At the same time, the narratives dwell on acts of violence, intimidation, and execution, emphasizing the risks and brutality inherent in pirate life.

The tone of the book is morally ambivalent. On one hand, it frames piracy as criminal, sinful, and ultimately doomed, frequently concluding biographies with captures, trials, and public executions meant to serve as warnings. On the other hand, the lively storytelling often highlights pirates' boldness, wit, and independence, making them appear charismatic and rebellious rather than merely villainous. This tension between condemnation and fascination contributes greatly to the romantic image of pirates that later took root in literature and popular imagination.

The book's impact on modern perceptions of piracy is profound. Many of the details that people today associate with pirates—distinctive black flags, colourful nicknames, dramatic last stands, buried treasure legends, and codes of conduct—owe much of their popularity to the way they were presented in this work. By giving pirates vivid personalities and coherent life stories, the book transformed them from anonymous criminals into memorable characters. Later writers and creators drew heavily on its narratives, meaning that even contemporary films, novels, and children's stories often reflect the tone and imagery first consolidated here.

As a result, modern audiences tend to see pirates less as desperate maritime criminals and more as adventurous rebels who rejected authority and social hierarchy. The image of the pirate as a symbol of freedom, resistance, and anti-establishment defiance can be traced in large part to the dramatic storytelling and semi-heroic portrayals found in this book. Although historians continue to emphasize the violence and exploitation that characterized real piracy, the enduring cultural fascination with pirates—their style, independence, and mythic aura—

demonstrates how powerfully this early eighteenth-century work shaped the way piracy is imagined today.

6. The Evolution of Piracy

Piracy has existed for as long as humans have sailed the seas, evolving alongside trade, warfare, and the expansion of empires. Throughout history, pirates have appeared wherever valuable goods were transported by ship and where naval control was weak. Although piracy is often associated with the Caribbean and the famous "Golden Age of Piracy," its origins stretch back thousands of years, and its story is more complex than the popular image of male outlaws seeking treasure. The historical development of piracy reflects economic opportunity, political conflict, and social inequality, while the contributions of women within this world were often overlooked or deliberately minimized in historical records.

Early piracy can be traced back to the ancient Mediterranean. Seafaring raiders targeted merchant vessels and coastal settlements long before modern nation-states existed. Groups such as the Sea Peoples attacked trading civilizations around the eastern Mediterranean

during the late Bronze Age. Piracy was so common that even powerful leaders encountered it; the Roman leader Julius Caesar was famously kidnapped by pirates in 75 BCE before later capturing and executing them. During the medieval period, piracy continued in different forms. Scandinavian raiders during the Viking Age combined trade, exploration, and piracy, attacking ships and coastal communities across Europe. In these early eras, piracy was often difficult to distinguish from warfare or raiding, since many maritime groups relied on plunder as part of their economic survival.

A key stage in the development of piracy came with the rise of privateering in the early modern period. Privateering allowed governments to legally authorize sailors to attack enemy ships during wartime. Privateers were given official licenses, known as letters of marque, which permitted them to seize cargo and ships belonging to rival nations. One well-known example was the English sailor Francis Drake, who was authorized by the English crown to raid Spanish ships and colonies during the sixteenth century. While Spain considered him a pirate, England celebrated him as a hero. This system blurred the line between legal warfare and criminal piracy. When wars ended, thousands of privateers suddenly lost their legal status and income. Many of them still had ships, weapons, and experience at sea, and some turned to piracy as a way to continue making a living.

These conditions contributed to the rise of the Golden Age of Piracy, which lasted roughly from 1650 to 1730. During this time, piracy flourished in the Atlantic Ocean, particularly in the Caribbean, the American east coast, and along major trade routes connecting Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Several factors explain why this period produced so many pirates. First, global trade expanded rapidly as European empires transported enormous quantities of valuable goods such as gold, silver, sugar, and tobacco across the ocean. These shipments created tempting targets for pirates. Second, major conflicts such as the War of the Spanish Succession ended in the early eighteenth century, leaving many sailors and privateers unemployed. Third, colonial governments often lacked the naval power necessary to patrol distant waters effectively, allowing pirates to operate from remote islands and hidden harbours. Finally, life for ordinary sailors in merchant and naval fleets was extremely harsh. Sailors faced low wages, strict discipline, dangerous working conditions, and limited rights. Pirate crews, in contrast, sometimes operated with surprisingly democratic practices. Many pirate crews voted for their captains, shared plunder more equally, and even offered compensation to crew members injured in battle. For some sailors, piracy seemed like a better alternative than legal maritime work.

The Golden Age produced many of the famous pirate figures that dominate popular culture today. One of the most notorious was Blackbeard, whose real name was Edward Teach and who became famous for his intimidating appearance and dramatic tactics. Another notable pirate was William Kidd, whose career blurred the line between privateer and pirate and eventually led to his execution. Perhaps the most successful pirate in terms of captured ships was Bartholomew Roberts, who commanded a powerful fleet and captured hundreds of vessels before his death in battle. Despite their success, the era of large-scale piracy

eventually came to an end as European governments increased naval patrols, strengthened colonial administration, and aggressively prosecuted captured pirates.

While pirate history often focuses on male figures, women also played roles in piracy, though their stories were frequently ignored or distorted. Two of the most famous examples are Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who sailed with the pirate captain Calico Jack Rackham in the early eighteenth century. Historical accounts suggest that both women fought alongside male pirates and participated in battles. In some cases, women disguised themselves as men in order to join pirate crews, since most ships officially prohibited women onboard. Maritime superstition and strict social norms made it difficult for women to openly participate in seafaring life, even though they clearly did so in some cases.

The neglect of women in pirate history is largely due to the way historical records were created. Most written accounts of piracy were produced by male sailors, naval officers, or government officials who often viewed women as unimportant or unusual participants. Social expectations in early modern societies also contributed to this bias, since women were expected to remain in domestic roles rather than engage in dangerous maritime activities. As a result, female pirates were sometimes treated as sensational curiosities rather than serious historical figures. Additionally, pirate history itself suffers from a lack of documentation because pirates rarely kept official records. This makes it likely that other women participated in piracy but were never recorded or were mistaken for male sailors. Later writers in the nineteenth century further reinforced these biases by romanticizing piracy as a masculine adventure story, which pushed women even further out of the narrative.

Despite these historical gaps, modern historians are increasingly re-examining pirate history to gain a fuller understanding of life at sea during this period. Research now emphasizes the diversity of pirate crews, which often included sailors from different nationalities, escaped slaves, and individuals from marginalized social groups. The story of piracy is therefore not only about criminals seeking treasure but also about people resisting harsh social systems and searching for opportunity outside the rigid structures of early modern society.

7. Famous *Pirates*

7.1 Edward Teach: Blackbeard

Not a great deal is known about Blackbeard's early life, but he is believed to have been born in Bristol around 1680. Blackbeard's real name is widely thought to be Edward Teach, but in

sources he variously appears as Thatch, Thache or Thack. Captain Charles Johnson's 1724 book A General History of the Pyrates – the source for much of what we know about Blackbeard's life and exploits – suggests that Teach was a British privateer during his early career at sea.

Teach's privateering reportedly turned to piracy under the instruction of Captain Benjamin Hornigold. Hornigold had been active as a pirate since 1713 and was a key player in the establishment of the Republic of Pirates in the Bahamas. Teach rose quickly through the ranks until around 1716, when Hornigold made him captain of a captured ship with a small crew of his own. Another ship, the Revenge – captained by the 'gentleman pirate' Stede Bonnet – later joined their growing flotilla. Johnson's History of the Pyrates relates how Blackbeard removed Bonnet as captain of the Revenge, reportedly telling him that "as he had not been used to the Fatigues and Care of such a Post", Bonnet should instead join him on board his own ship and "live easy and at his Pleasure".

Blackbeard's flagship: Queen Anne's Revenge

In November 1717, Teach captured a merchant ship named La Concorde, which was being used as a slave ship by the French. He renamed the vessel Queen Anne's Revenge. While the ship was only in use for a year, it was Blackbeard's flagship vessel, he equipped it with an imposing 40 guns. Capturing ships and pillaging his way around the Caribbean, Teach built up a flotilla crewed by an estimated 300 men and accumulated a vast fortune.

Blackbeard's appearance

Early descriptions of Blackbeard have inspired generations of storytellers – and helped make Edward Teach one of history's most notorious pirates. Captain Charles Johnson in his General History says that "imagination cannot form an idea of a fury from hell to look more frightful." As you might assume from the name, Blackbeard had a long, bushy black beard, which was reportedly plaited and tied with ribbons. He even placed slow-burning, smoking fuses in the beard when attacking ships – a terrifying sight for potential victims. Blackbeard was also armed with three pairs of pistols strapped across his chest, and cutlasses and knives hanging from his clothes. His fearsome appearance was likely designed to encourage crews of victim ships to surrender their goods without a fight – an ideal outcome for the pirate.

7.2 Anne Bonny

Anne Bonny remains one of the most intriguing and mysterious figures of the so-called Golden Age of Piracy, a period spanning the late 17th and early 18th centuries when piracy flourished across the Atlantic world. Although much about her life is uncertain—owing to scarce records and the blending of fact with legend—historians generally agree on a core narrative shaped largely by the 1724 book A General History of the Pyrates, traditionally attributed to Captain Charles Johnson.

Anne Bonny was likely born around 1697 in or near Cork, the illegitimate daughter of a lawyer, William Cormac, and his housekeeper, Mary Brennan. To conceal the scandal of her birth, her father reportedly dressed her as a boy during her early childhood. Eventually, the family emigrated to the Province of Carolina (in present-day South Carolina), where William established a successful plantation. Contemporary accounts describe Anne as strong-willed and fiery; one story claims she stabbed a servant girl in her youth, though such tales may be exaggerated.

In her late teens, Anne defied her father by marrying a poor sailor and small-time pirate named James Bonny. Disowned by her father, she moved with James to the pirate haven of New Providence, particularly the town of Nassau, which at the time was a centre of pirate activity. There, James Bonny became an informant for the colonial authorities, while Anne became involved in the vibrant and lawless maritime culture.

It was in Nassau that Anne met the charismatic pirate captain John Rackham, also known as “Calico Jack.” She left her husband to join Rackham’s crew, reportedly dressing in men’s clothing to blend in with the pirates—though accounts suggest her true identity was known to some. Among the crew was another remarkable figure, Mary Read, who, like Anne, lived and fought as a woman in a male-dominated world. The relationship between Anne and Mary has fascinated historians, with stories suggesting a close friendship and mutual respect forged through shared experience.

Anne Bonny quickly gained a reputation for her fierceness in battle. Witness testimonies from later trials describe both her and Mary Read as among the most courageous members of Rackham's crew, often fighting when the male pirates retreated. Their exploits, however, were short-lived. In October 1720, Rackham's ship was attacked off the coast of Jamaica by a vessel commanded by Jonathan Barnet, acting under the authority of the colonial governor Nicholas Lawes. Most of the crew, reportedly drunk at the time, offered little resistance, but Anne and Mary fought fiercely before being overwhelmed and captured.

The captured pirates were brought to Spanish Town for trial. In November 1720, Rackham was convicted of piracy and executed. Anne Bonny and Mary Read were also found guilty, but both women "pleaded the belly," a legal claim that they were pregnant, which temporarily spared them from execution. Mary Read died in prison in 1721, likely from fever. Anne Bonny's fate, however, remains one of history's enduring mysteries. No definitive records confirm her execution. Some historians believe her father may have intervened to secure her release, after which she may have returned to the American colonies, possibly remarrying and living a quiet life under a different name.

The primary source for Anne Bonny's life, *A General History of the Pyrates*, provides vivid but sometimes unreliable accounts, blending eyewitness testimony with dramatic storytelling. Modern historians supplement this with archival records, including trial transcripts from Jamaica and colonial correspondence. Notable secondary works include *Under the Black Flag* by David Cordingly and *Pirate Women* by Laura Sook Duncombe, both of which analyse Bonny's life within the broader context of piracy and gender roles.

Because of the limited and sometimes contradictory evidence, Anne Bonny occupies a space between history and legend. What remains clear is that she defied the rigid gender expectations of her time and became one of the few women recorded as an active pirate in the Caribbean. Her story continues to capture the imagination, not only for its daring exploits but also for the unanswered questions surrounding her ultimate fate.

7.3 Mary Read

Her transition into piracy appears to have been somewhat accidental. Around 1718, while traveling aboard a ship bound for the Caribbean, the vessel was captured by pirates. Mary joined their ranks—whether by choice or necessity is unclear—and later accepted a royal pardon offered to pirates by the British crown. Despite this, she soon returned to piracy,

joining the crew of John Rackham, also known as Calico Jack, in the pirate stronghold of New Providence.

It was aboard Rackham's ship that Mary met Anne Bonny. According to popular accounts, Anne initially believed Mary to be a man and developed a romantic interest in her, prompting Mary to reveal her identity. Whether embellished or not, the story reflects how effectively both women navigated life disguised as men in a male-dominated environment. Witnesses later testified that Mary Read, like Anne Bonny, was among the most formidable fighters on the ship, often showing greater resolve than their male counterparts.

Mary Read's pirate career ended abruptly in October 1720, when Rackham's ship was intercepted near Jamaica by forces led by Jonathan Barnet under orders from Governor Nicholas Lawes. During the attack, most of the crew were reportedly incapacitated by alcohol, while Mary and Anne resisted capture. Nevertheless, they were overpowered and taken to Spanish Town for trial.

At her trial, Mary Read was convicted of piracy and sentenced to death. Like Anne Bonny, she "pleaded the belly," claiming to be pregnant, which delayed her execution. However, she never regained her freedom. Mary died in prison in 1721, likely from fever, and was buried in Jamaica. Unlike Anne Bonny, whose fate remains uncertain, Mary's death is recorded in parish burial records, making her story somewhat more historically grounded.

Mary Read's life challenges conventional assumptions about gender roles in the early modern period. Her ability to pass as a man for much of her life allowed her to access professions—soldiering and piracy—that were otherwise closed to women. At the same time, the dramatic elements of her story, particularly those recorded in *A General History of the Pyrates*, require scrutiny, as the text often blends fact with sensationalism.

7.4 John Rackham; Calico Jack

John Rackham, better known as Calico Jack, was an English pirate active during the later years of the Golden Age of Piracy. Despite being one of the most well-known pirates in popular history, he was, somewhat surprisingly, one of the least successful in terms of plunder and achievements. During his relatively short career as a pirate captain, Rackham is believed to have captured only around 14 vessels, and notably, about half of these were small fishing boats rather than valuable merchant ships. This limited success sets him apart from more formidable pirates of his era, who amassed far greater wealth and notoriety through large-scale raids.

Rackham likely began his career as a sailor in the Caribbean and rose to prominence while serving under the pirate captain Charles Vane. When Vane chose to retreat from a powerful French warship, Rackham and much of the crew viewed this as cowardice. Exercising a form of democratic authority common among pirates, the crew voted to depose Vane and elected Rackham as their new captain. This moment marked the beginning of Rackham's leadership, although his command would not prove especially distinguished in terms of success at sea.

The nickname "Calico Jack" came from Rackham's distinctive style of dress. He was known for wearing brightly coloured clothing made from calico, a type of inexpensive cotton fabric that was popular in the 17th and 18th centuries. While many pirates dressed in practical, rugged attire suited for life at sea, Rackham's preference for patterned and colourful garments made him stand out, contributing to his memorable image and lasting reputation.

Much of Rackham's fame actually comes not from his exploits, but from the unusual composition of his crew. He sailed with two of the most famous female pirates in history, Anne Bonny and Mary Read. The presence of women on pirate ships was extremely rare, even in a culture that was otherwise more flexible than mainstream society. Both Bonny and Read were known for disguising themselves as men and proved to be capable and fierce

fighters. Their involvement with Rackham's crew attracted significant attention and helped secure his place in pirate legend.

Rackham's career came to an end in 1720 after he accepted, and then broke, a royal pardon that had been offered to pirates. He was eventually captured by a British naval force led by Jonathan Barnet near Jamaica. Reports suggest that most of his crew were drunk and unable to mount an effective defence at the time of the attack, although Bonny and Read reportedly resisted fiercely. Rackham was tried and convicted of piracy, and later that year he was executed by hanging.

7.5 Zheng Yi Sao: The Pirate Queen:

Born Shi Yang, Zheng Yi Sao became the best-known female pirate to ever walk the earth. I will call her Shi Yang so as not to cause any confusion, but she was known by many names including Shi Xiangguo, Shek Yeung, and Ching Shih. Zheng Yi Sao is the name she was most known by, meaning 'wife of Zheng Yi.' I will however not be calling her that because otherwise there will be a lot of confusion as her husband is called Zheng Yi. She went from a brothel worker to solo commander of approximately 400 junks (a specific type of Chinese sailing ship) and between 40,000 and 60,000 pirates.

Shi Yang was born in 1775 just outside of Xinhui, China. There is not much information about her early life, but she was probably a Tanka. Tankas are boat dwellers also known as Shuishangren who are a sinicised ethnic group of Southern China. She is often described as having worked on a Tanka brothel as a prostitute or a procurer however there is no actual evidence of this.

In 1801, Shi Yang married the pirate Zheng Yi. Zheng Yi had served as a privateer for the Vietnamese Tây Sơn dynasty during the Tây Sơn wars and later for Nguyễn Ánh (Gia Long), the first emperor of the Nguyễn dynasty. Under the Tây Sơn's patronage, Zheng Yi fought in his cousin Zheng Qi's fleet. Coming from a lengthy line of pirates whose origins dated back to the Ming dynasty, Zheng Yi had also taken in an adopted son, Zhang Bao, whom he had kidnapped in 1798 at the age of fifteen and forced into piracy.

As already mentioned, Zheng Yi was a privateer different to a pirate in several ways. Pirates are free sailors who serve no one and do not care about anybody's rules. They loot ships for their own benefit and take whatever they can. Privateers however have a contract with a specific person or company (in this case they served the Vietnamese Tây Sơn dynasty). They attack only the ships of the enemy whereas pirates attack whatever ship that seems to be worth the effort.

A year after Shi Yang and Zheng Yi got married, in February 1802, his cousin was captured and executed by the Nguyễn forces in Jianping. Later that year, on July 20, 1802, Nguyễn Ánh captured Thăng Long, bringing the Tây Sơn dynasty to an end. After Zheng Qi's death, Zheng Yi took command of his cousin's fleet and returned to the Chinese coast with the former Tây Sơn–aligned pirates.

Following a period of internal conflict among pirate groups, Zheng Yi supported by the capable and ambitious Shi Yang (later known as Zheng Yi Sao) successfully united the pirates under a single confederation through an agreement signed in July 1805. Each pirate leader agreed to give up some of their independence for the greater benefit of the group. The confederation was divided into six fleets, each found by a flag colour: red, black, blue, white, yellow, and purple. Zheng Yi commanded the largest of these, the Red Flag Fleet, which made up around 200 ships.

Zheng Yi tragically died by falling overboard or though there are theories that state Shi Yang was responsible for his death. To secure her place as pirate queen after Zheng Yi's death, she married Zhang Bao; her afore mentioned stepson. However, this was not just a political union as they did enter a sexual relationship and there are even rumours that this was already going on while her husband was still alive.

Zheng Yi Sao was extremely strict in enforcing the Pirate Code. Loot was to be registered and handed out equally. Desertion was punished by death and so was touching women who had been captured whilst looting. She successfully fought against the Qing Dynasty navy, the Portuguese Forces as well as the British navy and despite multiple attempts, none could successfully defeat her. She is known as one of the most successful pirates of all time for ruling an immense fleet; enforcing order and retiring not only peacefully but undefeated.

Unlike most Pirates, Zheng Yi Sao retired peacefully. She negotiated amnesty with the Qing Dynasty in 1810 and kept her wealth whilst simultaneously avoiding punishment. She later even ran a gambling house before dying in (probably) 1844 of natural causes making her one of the only Pirates to do so.

7.6 Bartholomew Roberts; Black Bart

Bartholomew Roberts, widely known as Black Bart, was one of the most successful and feared pirates of the Golden Age of Piracy. Unlike pirates such as John Rackham, whose fame exceeds their achievements, Roberts built his reputation on extraordinary success at sea. Over the course of just a few years, he is believed to have captured more than 400 ships, making him one of the most prolific pirates in history. His career demonstrates both the opportunities and the dangers of piracy during this period.

Roberts was born in Wales around 1682 and originally worked as a legitimate sailor. He did not choose piracy willingly at first; in 1719, his ship was captured by pirates led by Howell Davis, and Roberts was forced to join their crew. However, he quickly adapted to pirate life and proved himself to be a skilled navigator and capable leader. When Davis was killed in an ambush shortly after, Roberts was elected captain by the crew—a testament to his abilities and the democratic nature of pirate society.

As a captain, Black Bart was known for his discipline, organization, and strict code of conduct. Unlike many pirates, he enforced rules against excessive drinking and gambling on board, believing that order and control were essential for success. His ship operated under detailed “articles” that outlined expectations, punishments, and the fair distribution of plunder. This structure helped maintain efficiency and unity among his crew, allowing him to carry out highly successful raids across the Atlantic, from the coast of West Africa to the Caribbean.

Roberts’ nickname, “Black Bart,” likely came from a combination of his dark hair, stern appearance, and fearsome reputation. He cultivated an intimidating image, often dressing in elaborate clothing, including a red waistcoat and feathered hat, and sometimes wearing jewellery taken from captured ships. He also designed a distinctive pirate flag depicting himself standing over a defeated enemy, symbolizing his dominance over those who opposed

him. This carefully crafted persona helped spread fear among merchant ships, sometimes causing them to surrender without a fight.

Economically, Roberts' success was unmatched. While many pirates struggled to capture valuable prizes, he targeted large and wealthy vessels, including slave ships and merchant fleets. His ability to plan attacks and coordinate his crew made him exceptionally effective, and his raids brought significant wealth to those who sailed under him. For many sailors, joining Roberts' crew would have seemed like a rare opportunity to gain riches quickly, although it also meant facing constant danger.

Despite his success, Roberts' career was relatively short, lasting only about three years. In 1722, he was killed during a battle with a British naval ship off the coast of West Africa. According to accounts, he was struck by grapeshot early in the fight, dying instantly. Following his wishes, his crew threw his body overboard to prevent it from being captured. Without his leadership, the crew quickly lost morale and was defeated soon after.

7.7 Grace O'Malley (Grainne Maol)

Grace O'Malley, also known by her Irish name Gráinne Ní Mháille, was a legendary 16th-century Irish pirate, trader, and clan leader born around 1530 along the west coast of Ireland. She was the daughter of the powerful chieftain Eoghan Dubhdara Ó Máille, who controlled ships and coastal territories, and from an early age she showed a fierce independence, reportedly cutting her hair short so she could join her father's voyages at sea, earning the nickname "Gráinne Mhaol" or "Bald Grace." After inheriting her family's maritime operations, she commanded fleets of ships, engaging in trade, taxation, and piracy along Ireland's western shores, building a reputation as a formidable and strategic leader in a male-dominated world. She expanded her influence through marriage, first to Dónal an Chogaidh Ó Flaithbheartaigh and later to Richard Burke, known as "Iron Richard," securing control over key castles and territories. Her life was deeply intertwined with the growing English presence in Ireland during the reign of Elizabeth I, and in 1593 she famously travelled to England to meet the queen in person after English officials seized her lands and detained her family; the two powerful women reportedly spoke in Latin, and Grace's bold appeal led to the restoration of some of her rights. Throughout her life, Grace O'Malley balanced diplomacy, warfare, and seafaring skill, becoming a symbol of resistance and resilience, and she died around 1603, leaving behind a lasting legacy as Ireland's iconic "Pirate Queen."

From Treasure Islands to Pegs and Parrots; Separating Fact from Fiction

Pirates and their lives have been severely romanticised and overexaggerated over the centuries that we forget what it was really like to be a pirate. Between Pirates of the Caribbean and various video games, the 21st century is probably most responsible for this over-romanticizing of the pirates, but it has always been painted in this Robin Hood – Esque 'friendly rebel' light. But piracy was – and still is in some places – extremely intimidating and violent. For some it was an escape from stricter societal norms on Land but for many it was nothing less than slavery; a lot of pirates 'adopted' children from whatever ships or harbours they raided which they then put to work on their own ships. Although pirates tried not to get too violent in their own interest, it would often come to violent fights and mass slaughtering.

Myth Nr. 1: 'X' marks the spot; Pirates constantly buried their Treasure

This mostly comes from stories like Treasure Island and such. In reality, pirates didn't usually bury treasure because it just wasn't practical. They needed money fast – for food, supplies and repairs – so they spent or traded loot very quickly. Only a few rare cases of buried treasure are known and even these are not very well documented.

Myth Nr. 2: Pirates were old Sea bears with a lot of maritime experience

The fact that the average pirate's career lasted only about two years—and that most pirates were in their early twenties—highlights how dangerous and short-lived this lifestyle was. Young sailors, already experienced from years at sea, were more willing to take risks and turn to piracy, but doing so made them immediate targets for naval forces and authorities. Constant threats from combat, disease, harsh conditions, and execution meant few survived long, making piracy less of a lifelong profession and more of a brief, high-risk chapter in a young person's life.

Myth Nr. 3: Pirates all had hooks and peg legs

While injuries were common in dangerous sea life, most pirates were not heavily disabled. They needed to be physically capable to climb rigging, fight, and handle ships. Prosthetics like hooks and peg legs did exist but were relatively rare. Fiction exaggerates these features to make pirates look more dramatic. In reality, a severely injured pirate often couldn't continue the lifestyle.

Myth Nr. 4: Pirates had parrots and/or monkeys

Parrots and monkeys, along with other exotic animals, were valuable trade goods during the era. Pirates might capture them from ships traveling from the Americas, Africa, or Asia. However, they were far more likely to sell these animals for profit than keep them as pets. Feeding and caring for such animals on a ship was inconvenient and impractical. The image of pirates with parrots or monkeys is mostly symbolic and comes from later storytelling rather than reality.

Myth Nr. 5: Pirates were rich and successful

Even famous pirates like Blackbeard didn't stay rich for long. They spent money fast, and their lifestyle was too dangerous to build long-term wealth. They would try and get rid of loot as quickly as possible, so it was harder to trace back to them.

Myth Nr. 6: Pirates wore eyepatches because they lost an eye in battle

Pirates did in fact often wear eyepatches but not because of injuries or infections. They would wear them so that one of their eyes would always be accommodated to the dark because there were no lights below deck; meaning that it would take a few minutes for the eyes to get accustomed to the dark. Pirates had a lot to do and needed to be able to move around quickly (especially during battle), hence the eyepatch.

Fun fact Nr. 1: Earrings were not just fashion

One of the most interesting pirate traditions is their jewellery. For safekeeping they often drilled holes into their coins and wore them on necklaces but the most known way of keeping some money was wearing gold and/or silver earrings. Many sailors and pirates believed that a gold earring could pay for a proper burial if they died at sea and were washed ashore. Another belief is that a gold earring could improve eyesight (this is obviously more seafarers' superstition and not a proven fact).

Fun fact Nr. 2: Psychological over physical warfare

Pirates generally preferred to scare their opponent into defeat rather than fighting (hence the jolly roger was so scary) because it was much more efficient and they were less likely to lose a crew member of their own in battle. They used methods such as enhancing their features to make them look scarier, shouting and waving about their cutlasses and (in the case of Edward Teach) put fuses into his beard to make it appear on fire.

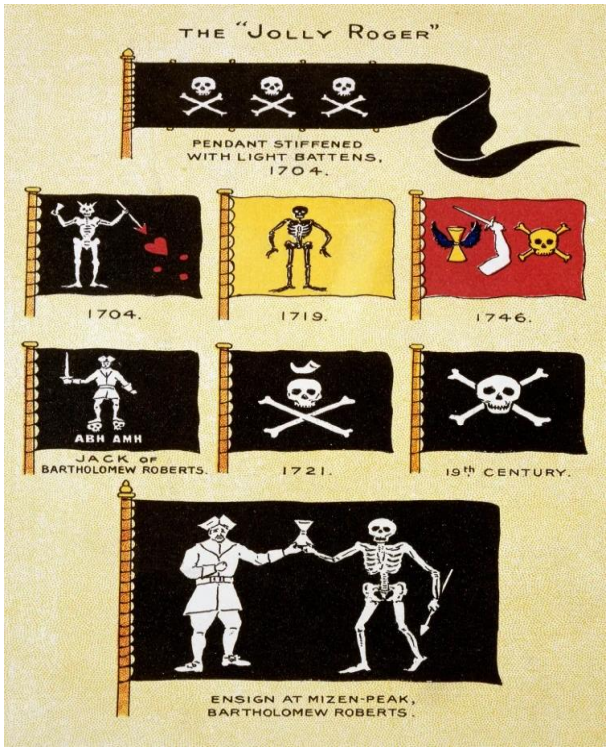
Fun fact Nr. 3: Pirate Justice could be very brutal

We have already established that pirates were not just chaotic criminals. If someone broke the rules of the Pirate code of conduct (stealing from a crewmate, desertion or cowardice etc.) they could face extreme punishments such as marooning – being left on a deserted island with minimal supplies – or even flogging. In my opinion the worst punishment was something called keelhauling; this practice consisted of a tying a person to a rope and dragging them under the ships keel from one side to the other naked. Because the ship's hull was almost constantly under water it was riddled with barnacles and rough would so receiving this punishment was an almost definitive death sentence.

Fun fact Nr. 4: Pirates were illegal trade masters

A lot of people think that gold is mainly what pirates were after and the classic ‘treasure chest’ filled with jewels and gold goblets were the most valuable thing at that time. However, often the real treasure consisted of silks, spices, sugar, tobacco, weapons and sadly, slaves. Making them into merchants with the difference that the earnings would be divided between crew members rather than it going to some company or trader.

Fun fact Nr. 5: There were a lot of variations of the Jolly Roger



Each crew often had their own flag. They showed motifs like hourglasses, implying that time was running out for their enemies, or skeletons holding cutlasses. Either way the message was the same 'Surrender now or face battle and death later'. What pirates also often did was put up fake flags of a nearby nation so that they looked all friendly until they were up close which is when they would fly the Jolly Roger, just to ensure maximum panic. The name Jolly Roger probably comes from the French 'jolie rouge' because pirates were also known to fly red flags – the colour of no mercy – which was then anglicised into 'Jolly Roger'.

Fun Fact Nr. 6: Some pirates specialised in specific targets

Not all pirates attacked randomly. Some focused specifically on slave ships (either to free, recruit or sell the people on) while others targeted treasure galleons for the merchants' goods and rare metals. For example, Bartholomew Roberts captured hundreds of ships by targeting specific trade routes at the right time of year. Some pirates even specified on coastal towns, the ideal being small towns where it was easy to stage a quick hit and run situation.

Maritime Piracy in the 21st century

Maritime piracy in the 21st century is a complex and evolving phenomenon that reflects broader global economic, political, and technological dynamics. While piracy is often associated with the romanticized image of wooden ships and treasure chests, modern piracy is a far more organized, strategic, and at times brutal enterprise. It thrives in regions where

governance is weak, economic opportunities are scarce, and maritime traffic is dense, making it both a symptom of instability and a contributor to it.

One of the most prominent hotspots of contemporary piracy has been the waters off the Horn of Africa, particularly near Somalia. Following the collapse of central government authority in the early 1990s, Somali coastal communities found themselves without protection or economic stability. Illegal fishing by foreign vessels and the dumping of toxic waste in Somali waters further eroded local livelihoods. In this environment, piracy initially emerged as a form of vigilante "coast guarding," but it quickly transformed into a lucrative criminal industry. Armed groups began targeting commercial vessels, hijacking ships and demanding multimillion-dollar ransoms for crews and cargo. At its peak in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Somali piracy disrupted major global shipping routes and forced international naval coalitions to intervene.

Another significant region affected by piracy is the Gulf of Guinea, off the western coast of Africa. Unlike Somali piracy, which has often focused on ransom-taking, piracy in this region tends to involve the theft of oil cargo and violent attacks on crew members. These operations are frequently linked to broader networks of organized crime and corruption. The Gulf of Guinea has become one of the most dangerous maritime zones in the world, with pirates demonstrating increasing sophistication in their tactics, including the use of insider information and coordinated attacks on offshore infrastructure.

Southeast Asia, particularly the Strait of Malacca and surrounding waters, has also experienced persistent piracy issues. This region is one of the busiest maritime corridors globally, making it an attractive target. However, coordinated patrols and improved regional cooperation among countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have significantly reduced the number of successful attacks. This demonstrates that piracy can be mitigated through strong governance, shared intelligence, and investment in maritime security.

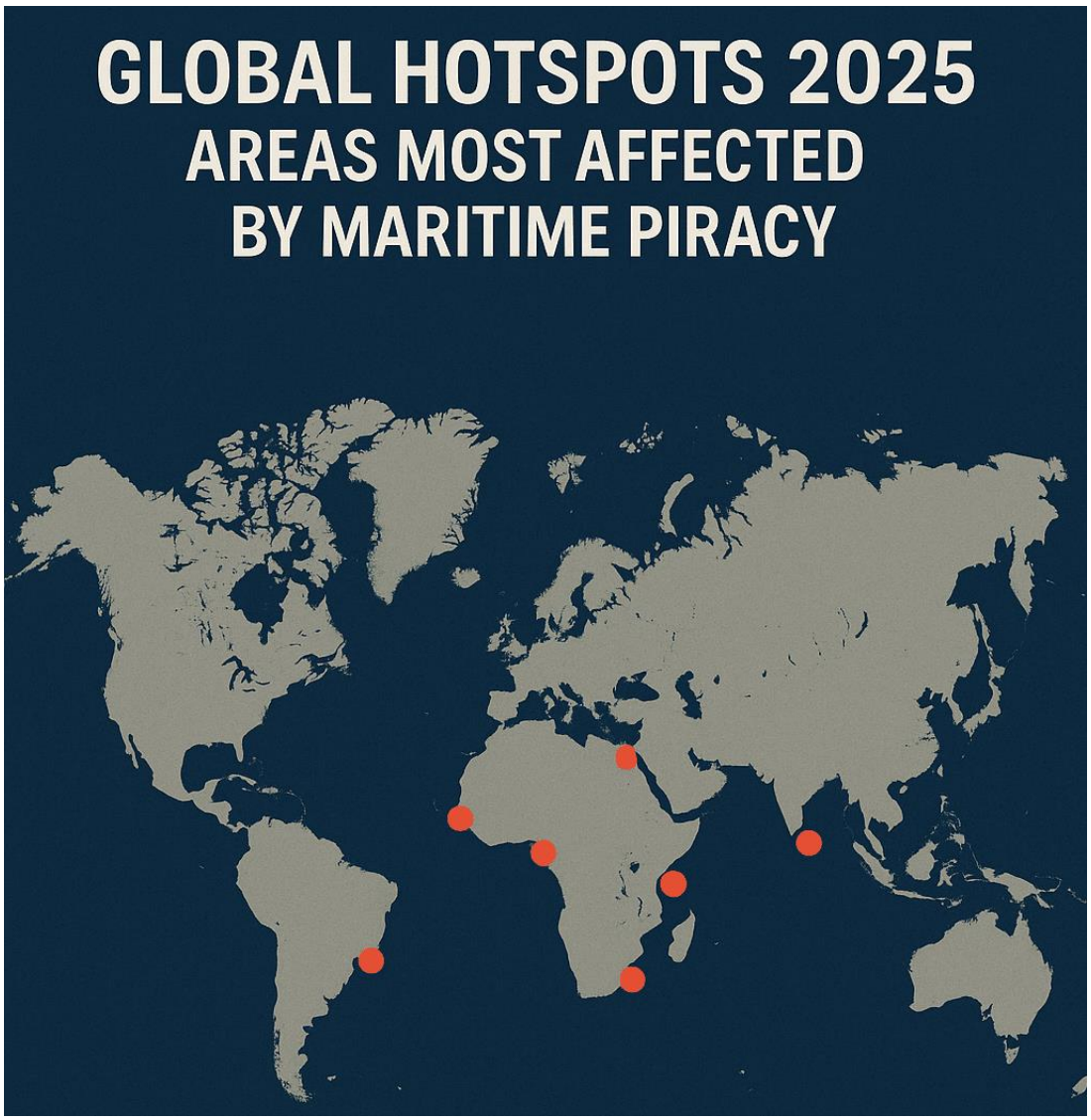
Technological advancements have played a dual role in shaping modern piracy. On one hand, pirates have benefited from GPS navigation, satellite phones, and intelligence networks that allow them to track and intercept vessels more effectively. On the other hand, shipping companies and governments have adopted countermeasures such as armed security teams, vessel tracking systems, and the use of secure transit corridors. The development of best management practices for ships transiting high-risk areas has also contributed to a decline in successful hijackings in some regions.

Despite these improvements, maritime piracy remains a persistent threat. It imposes significant economic costs on global trade, including increased insurance premiums, rerouting of ships, and the expense of security measures. More importantly, it poses serious risks to the safety and well-being of seafarers, who may face violence, kidnapping, and psychological trauma.

The root causes of piracy are deeply intertwined with issues such as poverty, political instability, and lack of economic opportunity. Addressing piracy therefore requires more than

just naval patrols and defensive measures. Long-term solutions involve strengthening governance, supporting economic development in coastal communities, and promoting international cooperation. Legal frameworks also need to be reinforced to ensure that captured pirates can be effectively prosecuted, as jurisdictional challenges have often hindered enforcement efforts.

In the 21st century, maritime piracy is not merely a relic of the past but a dynamic and adaptive challenge. It reflects the vulnerabilities of the globalized world, where vast networks of trade intersect with regions of instability. Combating piracy requires a comprehensive approach that balances security, development, and international collaboration. Only by addressing both the symptoms and the underlying causes can the international community hope to reduce the threat and ensure the safety of the world's oceans.



Conclusion: Were Pirates really such Barbarians or just ahead of their time?

Throughout this project I learned a lot of new and interesting facts about Piracy which have definitely altered my point of view towards pirates and their ways. Before I give my final answer, I would like to present both ‘sides’ of this question, if you will.

On one hand, they created democratic systems far before any other power figure did so. Almost anyone was allowed to join their ranks, showing a level of inclusiveness which was previously non-existent. So many chose to be pirates or privateers rather than joining the royal navy because the navy treated people extremely badly. They would get a very small wage, minimal food supplies and were kept very strictly whereas pirates equally divided the loot they got and were allowed to celebrate a win once in a while. If they survived long enough, they were provided with a decent pension and any injury was compensated. Pirates had created one of the first health insurance plans to ever exist. Some pirates targeted slave ships specifically to free them and others brought stolen wares back to their hometown and families to keep them alive. They would try and make the people they attacked surrender without a fight to avoid bloodshed and then often let them join their crew. You could say that these pirates were the Robin Hoods of the sea. Pirates were renowned but not always feared; some were seen as great heroes.

On the other hand, they were still criminals who stole and sometimes killed innocent people to get at cargo or any sort of valuable goods. They were not all very inclusive, some of them still believing in the superstition of ‘Having a woman on board is bad luck’ and some were also very racist. Deciding to leave a pirate crew was punishable by death so you couldn’t really change your mind about the decision and the life of a pirate was neither easy nor safe. A lot of people were forced into piracy when they were captured, especially young men and some pirates took ‘adoptive children’ whose parents they had killed. In the end they were just outlaws, not afraid to kill for what they wanted.

In my opinion, they weren’t as barbaric as they were made out to be at the time, I really loved researching the pirate code and they surprised me repeatedly with the amount of inclusivity and care for their fellow pirates. Even if they did some very bad things, I do not think that that singles them out from everyone else because a lot of the leading powers at the time (the Spanish, The English and the Portuguese) were doing very similar things and – let's be honest, it still happens today. Even though I do not support these actions in any way I think it hardly fair to make them out as ‘Barbaric’ while the people who called them this, did similar things if not worse.

Creating this Travail Personnel was definitely a struggle but one I was willing to fight for the result. I learned so many new things and am happy with my work.

Resources:

https://www.historyhit.com/the-pirates-code-laws-and-life-aboard-ship/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zheng_Yi_Sao

https://www.heritagedaily.com/2022/01/the-pirate-code/142542

https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/maritime-history/grace-o-malley-pirate-history-fact-fiction-legend

https://www.thewayofthepirates.com/pirate-life/pirate-code/

https://www.worldhistory.org/Anne_Bonny/

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_General_History_of_the_Pyrates/The_Life_of_Anne_Bonny

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_General_History_of_the_Pyrates/The_Life_of_Mary_Read

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Read

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piracy_in_the_Atlantic_World

https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2011/06/09/blackbeard-fiercest-pirate-them-all

http://thefemalesoldier.com/blog/anne-bonny-and-mary-read

https://www.connollycove.com/pirate-queen/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace_O%27Malley

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Every

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_General_History_of_the_Pyrates?utm

https://www.worldhistory.org/Bartholomew_Roberts/?utm

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bartholomew-Roberts

https://www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/grace-o-malley-pirate-queen-ireland-irish-history-biography-facts-grainne-ni-mhaille/

https://www.piratesinfo.com/history-of-piracy/golden-age-of-piracy/historiography-of-the-golden-era-of-piracy/?utm

https://www.piratesinfo.com/history-of-piracy/golden-age-of-piracy/golden-age-piracy/

https://sevenswords.uk/7-facts-myths-golden-age-pirates/?

https://kids.britannica.com/students/assembly/view/230577

https://www.reddit.com/r/pirates/comments/1kbmho3/the_golden_age_of_piracy/

https://www.virtualmaritime.academy/global-hotspots-2025-10-areas-most-affected-by-maritime-piracy/

https://www.youtube.com/shorts/BTbf-jLrMRQ

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4V0wGRACxo

https://www.arte.tv/de/videos/100170-036-A/flick-flack/

Books used for this project:

'Fluch der Weltmeere Piraterie, Völkerrecht und internationale Beziehungen 1500-1900' - Michael Kempe

'Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls-100 Tales of Extraordinary Women' - Elena Favilli & Francesca Cavallo