

‘PIRACY’, CONNECTIVITY AND SEABORNE POWER IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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ABSTRACT. *The author questions the widespread idea that piracy is a hindrance to maritime communication. He shows that piracy can reinforce connectivity, as defined by Horden and Purcell, by provoking human displacements and increasing ethnic diversity. The repression of piracy is carried out by means of the law, by the creation of institutions such as maritime insurance, or by diplomacy. The author examines the links between political power and piracy, especially in the case of thalassocracies.*

RÉSUMÉ. *L'auteur s'interroge sur l'idée généralement répandue que la piraterie est une entrave à la communication maritime. Il montre que la piraterie peut renforcer la connectivité, au sens de Horden et Purcell, en provoquant des déplacements humains et en accroissant la diversité ethnique. La répression de la piraterie s'effectue par la loi, par la création d'institutions comme l'assurance maritime, ou par la diplomatie. L'auteur s'interroge enfin sur les liens entre le pouvoir politique et la piraterie, surtout dans le cas des thalassocraties.*

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Maritime history is inextricably connected to seaborne violence, as Fernand Braudel prominently pointed out.¹ This also holds true for the Middle Ages. Just as the sea in its physical dimension had an enormous impact on coastal regions, so did maritime violence. Seaborne attacks changed the shape of urban centres and landscape alike, because they influenced both the defensive layout of settlements and induced the erection of watchtowers or other forms of warning systems.² Such measures were generally not so much taken against the effects of state-borne naval warfare, but rather against sporadic, but periodic attacks by maritime marauders, generally referred to as ‘pirates’.

¹ BRAUDEL F., *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris: Colin (1966), t. II, p. 191.

² MARTIN J. (ed.), *Zones côtières littorales dans le monde méditerranéen au Moyen Âge: défense, peuplement, mise en valeur*, Madrid, Casa de Velázquez, ‘Castrum, 7’ (2001), p. 578; MAFRICI M., ‘Mari, pirati, fortificazioni costiere’, in *Storia della Calabria*, ed. P. BEVILACQUA, Rome/Bari: Laterza (2001), pp. 37–57.

However, scepticism regarding this term is fully justified, because the term 'piracy' is clearly judgemental and historically loaded. Studies into the construction of Mediterranean piracy have sharpened the debate on the appropriateness or not of using it in modern scholarship.³ Such works have shown to what extent academic traditions of the 18th to 20th centuries were marked by the political and economic interests of dominant stakeholders, including when referring to pre-modern Mediterranean maritime violence. Allegations of piracy have been identified as a tool that was repeatedly employed on the part of modern nation-states in order to influence public opinion according to their own political and economic ambitions. These studies have also shown that a neat distinction between state-approved and semi-official seaborne predatory violence (corsairing), as opposed to privately undertaken maritime violence with the aim of obtaining economic gain (piracy), is not always possible.

All this has led to justified reservations against employing the term 'piracy' at all. Other languages can fall back upon a more fitting terminology. German for example possesses the less committed term 'Seeraub' or the extremely neutral, albeit technical expression 'gewinnorientierte Gewaltökonomie' ('gain-oriented economy of violence').⁴ Due to the lack of comparable English equivalents however, in this article 'piracy' will continue to be used, however in quotation marks in order to illustrate that we are dealing with a terminological convention that comprises both semi-official and private forms of seaborne predatory violence. Similarly, 'pirates' will be used for all individuals or groups that resorted to predatory violence at sea.

Firmly entrenched academic traditions have not only marked scholarly language, but also historians' basic notions as to the effects of 'piracy' in the Middle Ages. Echoing the complaints of medieval authors, historians dealing with maritime history have established the generally unchallenged notion that endemic 'piracy' strongly impeded or even entirely severed maritime communication.⁵ The objective of this contribution is to inspect this assumption. Its focus will be the medieval Mediterranean, with some side glances at the Indian Ocean.⁶

³ *Course et piraterie. Études présentées à la Commission Internationale d'histoire Maritime à l'occasion de son XV^e colloque international pendant le XIV^e Congrès International des Sciences historiques* (San Francisco, août 1975), ed. M. MOLLAT, Paris: Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, 'Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique' (1975), particularly MOLLAT M., 'De la piraterie sauvage à la course réglementée (XIV^e–XV^e siècle)', *ibid.*, pp. 162–184; BONO S., 'Guerra corsara e pirateria nel Mediterraneo: considerazioni storiografiche', in *Aspetti ed attualità del potere marittimo in Mediterraneo nei secoli XII–XVI*, ed. P. ALBERINI, Rome: Ufficio storico della Marina Militare (1999), pp. 75–84, especially pp. 63–65.

⁴ JASPERT N. and KOLDITZ S. 'Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum. Bemerkungen und Perspektiven', in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum. Piraterie, Korsarentum und maritime Gewalt von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*, ed. N. JASPERT and S. KOLDITZ, 'Mittelmeerstudien', 3, Munich/Paderborn: Schöningh-Fink (2013), pp. 11–37, especially pp. 15–16, 31–32.

⁵ A broad overview of historiographical works on the subject is to be found in the bibliography of JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum, op. cit.*, pp. 439–478.

⁶ HOURANI, G.F., *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, 'Princeton oriental studies', 13, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1951); WINK A., *Al-Hind. The*

But the questions and the approach of this paper arguably might well be applied to other oceans in the pre-modern period.

ENDANGERED CONNECTIVITY

In recent years, maritime communication has come to be associated with the notion of 'connectivity', that is the ability of micro-regions to establish contact between each other in order to counter shortages in vital commodities that arose due to the often precarious circumstances of coastal life. This concept, developed by the English scholars Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell in their ground-breaking study on the Mediterranean (*The Corrupting Sea*),⁷ will here be understood in a wider sense as an intensified degree and multiform state of connectedness – one which is particularly resilient and durable precisely due to its complexity. Connectivity must therefore be analytically differentiated from connectedness, which is the effective state of being interrelated.

Undoubtedly, in the medieval Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean connectivity was hampered both by the action of armed seaborne robbery and by the very threat of such violence. References to 'piracy' abound throughout the medieval Mediterranean, and although it has been said that in the early middle ages 'in contrast to the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean was a sea of peace',⁸ there too, maritime marauding was at times rampant. According to the thirteenth-century Italian traveller Marco Polo, fleets of over a hundred vessels would set out from the Indian West Coast, patrolling the sea in long cordons of up to 30 ships that communicated via smoke signals. These groups of marauders, who travelled with their wives and children, operated during the summer months and posed a serious threat to maritime communication.⁹ As a recent study on medieval India put it, 'heavily armed pirates with rowing boats are mentioned everywhere'.¹⁰ In the Mediterranean, too, maritime predatory action was not only a recurrent feature during the Middle Ages, but also diminished connectivity between coastal regions.

This not only holds true for navigation at sea which was often obstructed or even suppressed by pirate attacks, but also for the terrestrial bases for maritime connectedness. For example, entire populations could be led into captivity by

Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Leiden: Brill (1996–2004); MARGARITI R., *Aden & the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press (2007); ALPERS E., *The Indian Ocean in World History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2013).

⁷ HORDEN P. and PURCELL N., *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford: Blackwell (2000), especially pp. 123–172.

⁸ HOURANI, *Arab Seafaring*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁹ *The book of Ser Marco Polo: the Venetian, concerning the kingdoms and marvels of the East*, trans. and ed. with notes by Henry Yule, New York: Scribner (1926), pp. 389, 392 (book 3, chapter 25–26).

¹⁰ A. Wink, *Al-Hind*, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 110.

'pirates'. The Catalonian village of Barenys was raided by Muslim attackers in 1406, and everyone who was not killed in the attack was taken captive. Similarly and vice versa, six years later the village of Cherchell west of Algiers was razed to the ground and its population led into captivity by Christians.¹¹ In these cases 'piracy' not only had a detrimental effect on demography, but effectively weakened connectivity by demolishing coastal settlements. Recent studies drawing on the rich, late-medieval documentation still extant in many archives of the North-Western Mediterranean (particularly in Italy and Spain) have shown to what extent the entire economy of port towns and coastal areas could be jeopardized by 'piracy', which led to economic depression and crisis.¹²

There is no need to amass further evidence to prove the detrimental effect that 'piracy' had upon commerce and other flows of commodities, because this interrelation is quite self-evident. But in fact, the link between connectivity and 'piracy' is much more complex than it appears at first sight. It therefore might be productive to analyse to what extent 'piracy' in fact not only impeded, but simultaneously strengthened medieval connectedness or even connectivity.

CONNECTIVE 'PIRACY'

A basic point that needs to be taken into consideration from the outset is the fact that seaborne marauding is in itself a form of maritime contact, quite independently from its violent nature. Both naval war and 'piracy' can therefore be seen as specific forms of maritime interaction, as means of connecting islands and coasts. Seen from this perspective, 'pirates' must be added to better-known agents of maritime connectedness. Merchants were admittedly the main such agents who established long-distance ties in the Middle Ages, but one need not rule the field of 'connective piracy' out entirely. In this sense, maritime predation can and should be considered as an integral part of medieval connectedness. Just as the sea offered the prospect of earning a livelihood through fishing or through the exploitation of other natural resources, it also possessed a less peaceful lure for societies and individuals with nautical skills if these groups were marked by a raiding mentality or driven to maritime foraging by economic need or interests.

¹¹ FERRER I MALLOL M-T., 'La defensa marítima catalana contra el cors barbaresc. La reacció després del saqueig de Barenys (1406)', in *La Corona catalanoaragonesa i el seu entorn mediterrani a la baixa edat mitjana*, ed. M-T. FERRER I MALLOL, 'Anuario de Estudios Medievales. Anejos 58', Barcelon: Consell Superior d'Investigacions Científiques (2005), pp. 101-134; MARZAL PALACIOS F., 'El ciclo de la esclavitud sarracena en la Valencia bajomedieval: esclavización, rescate y vuelta a casa de los esclavos de Cherchell (1409-1425)', in *De l'esclavitud a la llibertat: esclaus i lliberts a l'edat mitjana*, ed. M-T. FERRER I MALLOL and J. MUTGÉ I VIVES, 'Anuario de Estudios Medievales. Anejos 38', Barcelona: Consell Superior d'Investigacions Científiques (2000), pp. 493-509.

¹² DÍAZ BORRÁS A., *El ocaso cuatrocentista de Valencia en el tumultuoso Mediterráneo: 1400-1480*, 'Anuario de Estudios Medievales. Anejos 46', Barcelona: Consell Superior d'Investigacions Científiques (2002).

Coastal societies with particular expertise were thus prone to indulge in this form of predation. However, these people's terrestrial base generally kept its paramount importance in comparison with their life at sea. Although the inhabitants of certain Mediterranean areas such as the Venetians or the Genoese very much lived on the sea and its resources, one cannot identify any seafaring people in the medieval Mediterranean whom one could adequately term 'amphibious'¹³ such as the Orang Laut, the 'People of the Sea' of the Malacca Straits, or the Sama/Bajau of the Sulu-Zamboanga region.¹⁴ And in the Indian Ocean too, most 'pirates' were land-based, even though they often went to sea. Their actions, therefore, indeed have the effect of joining coastal areas with faraway goals, be it with ships on the high seas, with islands, or with other littoral zones.

Apart from this very general contribution to pre-modern communication, predatory violence enhanced maritime connectedness in several other ways. First, one needs to consider those fields in which the 'pirates' very actions had this effect. Such is the case of demography. 'Piracy' led to the forced migration of sometimes quite substantial numbers of people who were taken captive either on ships or as a result of coastal raids. During the entire Middle Ages, slavery characterised both the northern and the southern (as well as the eastern and western) rims of the Mediterranean.¹⁵ In fact, recent studies have shown that, at least during certain periods in time, capturing humans seems to have been the prime interest of Christian 'pirates' in the western Mediterranean when attacking Muslim ships, more so than seizing material goods, and probably the same holds true vice versa.¹⁶ In the eastern Mediterranean in contrast, this objective was less important, also because of the massive trade in Eastern and South Eastern European slaves via the Black Sea.¹⁷ Similarly, the capture of 'human

¹³ See the discussion of this issue by RÜDIGER J., 'Thalassocracies médiévales: pour une histoire politique des espaces maritimes', in *Construire la Méditerranée, penser les transferts culturels. Approches historiographiques et perspectives de recherche*, ed. R. ABDELLATIF, Y. BENHIMA, D. KÖNIG and E. RUCHAUD, 'Ateliers des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Paris, 8', Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag (2012), pp. 93–103, and *forthcoming: Über die Küsten hinaus: Thalassokratien im Mittelalter*, ed N. JASPERT and J. RÜDIGER.

¹⁴ WINK, *Al-Hind*, vol. III, pp. 105–108.

¹⁵ VERLINDEN C., *L'esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale 1: Péninsule Ibérique - France*, 'Werken uitg. door de Faculteit van de Letteren en Wijsbegeerte/Rijksuniversiteit te Gent, 119', Bruges: De Tempel (1955); VERLINDEN C., *L'esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale 2: Italie, Colonies italiennes du Levant, Levant latin, Empire byzantin*, 'Werken uitg. door de Faculteit van de Letteren en Wijsbegeerte/Rijksuniversiteit te Gent, 162', Bruges: De Tempel (1977); FERRER I MALLOL M-T. and MUTGÉ VIVES J. (eds), *De l'esclavitud a la llibertat. Esclaus i lliberts a l'edat mitjana*; GUILLÉN F. and TRABELSI S. (eds), *Les esclavages en Méditerranée: espaces et dynamiques économiques*, 'Collection de la Casa de Velázquez, 133' Madrid: Casa de Velázquez (2012). See in general: BALARD M. and DUCELLIER A. (eds), *Migrations et diasporas méditerranéennes (X^e–XVI^e siècles)*, 'Série Byzantina Sorbonensis, 19', Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne (2002).

¹⁶ SALICRÚ I LLUCH R., 'Luck and contingency? Piracy, human booty and human trafficking in the late medieval western Mediterranean', in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 349–362, especially pp. 351–352.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 354; CHRIST G., 'Transkulturelle Pirateriebekämpfung? Venezianisch-Mamlukische Kooperation und Gefangenbefreiung im östlichen Mittelmeerraum im Spätmittelalter', in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 363–375.

commodities' was less rampant in the western Indian Ocean – where horses were at times far more coveted – than in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago.¹⁸

But independently of the uneven distribution of this practice and its variations over time, forced migration due to captivity increased ethnic diversity in maritime areas and covered regional economic demand by supplying required workforce. Setting aside the personal suffering intimately connected to forced migration, from a systematic viewpoint, the transfer of people from one area to another where they entered local economies as inexpensive labourers can be seen as a means of countering the unequal distribution of human resources in maritime regions.¹⁹ 'Piracy' as a form of redistribution therefore also catered for economic needs on a demographic level. It enhanced ethnic diversity on a very much smaller scale, too. For there is enough documentary evidence available to prove that in certain cases, the crews of 'pirates' ships were anything other than ethnically or religiously homogeneous; multi-ethnic crews arguably inhabited the semi-legal, hazy world of maritime marauding.²⁰

It would be of great interest to know which languages were spoken or even created by such composite groups. Is it possible that such products of Mediterranean connectedness developed a common language of their own? Sadly, references to a maritime 'lingua franca' – which effectively are extant – stem from a later age.²¹ Another question difficult to assess is to what extent 'pirates' themselves were agents of migration. We know that ancient Sicily was in part colonised by 'pirates'.²² It is, however, hard to determine if groups of predators were indeed the first to inhabit certain areas and even more difficult to substantiate if their sojourn at any given place lasted long enough to be termed colonisation.²³

Such questions are also difficult to answer because in the Middle Ages one can very seldom discern any such thing as a professional 'pirate'. Rather, men with nautical abilities turned to 'piracy' temporarily and under very concrete conditions. They could be induced to do so by political powers which contracted

¹⁸ Wink, A., *Al-Hind*, vol. II, p. 86; vol. III, pp. 112, 114.

¹⁹ As already pointed out by HORDEN and PURCELL, *The Corrupting Sea*, *op. cit.*, pp. 388–391. See BORGOLTE M., DÜCKER J., MÜLLENBURG M., PREDATSCH P. and SCHNEIDMÜLLER B. (eds), *Europa im Geflecht der Welt: mittelalterliche Migrationen in globalen Bezügen*, 'Europa im Mittelalter, 20', Berlin: Akademie-Verlag (2012).

²⁰ SALVATORI E., 'Corsairs' crews and cross-cultural interactions: the case of the Pisan Trapelincius in the twelfth century', *Medieval Encounters*, 13 (2007), 32–55; DOUMERC B., 'Cosmopolitanism on board Venetian ships (14th–15th centuries)', *ibid.*, 78–95.

²¹ CIFOLETTI G., *La lingua franca mediterranea*, Padoue: Unipress (1989); DAKHLIA J., *Lingua franca: histoire d'une langue métisse en Méditerranée*, Arles: Actes Sud (2008).

²² GABRIELSEN V., 'Warfare. Statehood and piracy in the Greek world', in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 133–153, especially p. 139.

²³ See the case of Normandy and the Uskoks of Senj: PLANCHON M., *Quand la Normandie était aux Vikings: De Rollon à Guillaume le Conquérant*, Paris: Fayard (1980); FLAMBARD HÉRICHÉ A-M. (ed.), *La progression des Vikings, des raids à la colonisation*, Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications de l'Université de Rouen (2003); STANOJEVIC G., *Senjski uskoci*, Belgrade: Vojnoizd. Zavod (1973); BRACEWELL C., *The Uskoks of Senj: piracy, banditry, and holy war in the sixteenth-century Adriatic*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1992).

them as corsairs, by economic need or as an act of retaliation in order to regain goods stolen from them in piratical acts. The latter group of ‘retaliatory predators’ necessarily comprised a high percentage of merchants, because these agents of maritime connectivity were most in danger of losing goods to foragers. This intimate connection between merchants and ‘pirates’, between commerce and ‘piracy’ is a trait not only of the Mediterranean or of the Middle Ages.²⁴ However, the legalized permission to recompense one’s losses by violent action is arguably indeed particular to the medieval Mediterranean.²⁵ Even when they were not personally affected, late-medieval merchants in certain cases also appear to have provided capital for raids, although they were careful to camouflage their language when signing contracts to fit such ships.²⁶

In other areas, the individuals who turned to maritime violence were not agents of connectivity like medieval merchants cum ‘pirates’. For example, in the Indian Ocean ‘pirates’ often alternated between their occupation as fishermen and maritime marauders; conversely, in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and along the West African coast pastoral nomads could turn to ‘piracy’ at need.²⁷ In the medieval Mediterranean in contrast, many examples show that maritime marauders were often frequently situated at the upper echelons of sociopolitical structure as aristocrats or powerholders.²⁸ But, independently from the intensity and regularity of their actions at sea, ‘connective piracy’ could indeed enhance communication between coasts, even though the primarily disruptive effect of maritime marauding is completely indisputable.

MARITIME CONNECTEDNESS AND THE COUNTERING OF ‘PIRACY’

More important than these immediate effects of maritime predation on pre-modern connectedness are their indirect consequences. Medieval chronicles and administrative sources inform us that some acts of ‘piracy’ received wide, even trans-regional, attention. Evidently, this was above all true for spectacular cases which were either especially daring, violent or lucrative. In this sense, maritime predation furthered connectedness in the guise of information transmission, sometimes over large distances. More importantly, information about

²⁴ ‘Trade and “piracy” however were intertwined and co-existed together in ways which make them hard to distinguish’, WINK, *Al-Hind*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 182.

²⁵ DE MAS LATRIE R., *Du droit de marque ou droit de représailles au moyen-âge*, 2nd ed., Paris: Baur (1875); DE ALBUQUERQUE R., *As represálias. Estudo de História do Direito português (seculos XV e XVI)*, 2 vols, Lisbon: Faculdade de Direito, Universidade de Lisboa (1972).

²⁶ GERTWAGEN R., ‘Is there a typology of pirate crews and ships across the Byzantine and Medieval Mediterranean? (11th to 15th century)’, in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–82, especially pp. 72–74, 79.

²⁷ HOURANI, *Arab seafaring*, *op. cit.*, p. 5; WINK, *Al-Hind*, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 111.

²⁸ BASSO E., ‘Pirateria, politica, ceti dirigenti. Alcuni esempi genovesi del Tardo Medioevo’, in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 209–250.

pirate attacks was transmitted across the sea as a means of countering such threats. It was not the only instrument of defence against piracy to enhance connectivity. Such countermeasures that effectively contributed to communication and exchange pertain to three fields in particular: law, institutions of risk management and diplomacy.

Beginning with the area of law, it is worth noting that seaborne predatory violence was not principally repudiated. Only after the Middle Ages did the law of nations and the notion of human rights bring about a general proscription – the ‘piratisation’ – of predatory seaborne violence. But due to the detrimental effect of ‘piracy’ on economy and society, steps to curb its negative effects were nevertheless undertaken in the Middle Ages. Some of these measures indeed enhanced trans-maritime connectedness. For example, one can discern how in the 14th century, Italian jurists not only pondered the older distinction between legitimate booty and illegitimate theft, but also began debating the legitimacy of violent retaliation for pirate attacks.²⁹ Their criticism of this custom eased the path for ways of regaining ones losses which were less detrimental to maritime commerce and connectedness.

In the Middle Ages, elements of ancient maritime laws like the Rhodian legislation were transferred into contemporary codes such as the *Rôles d’Oléron*.³⁰ More importantly, the 13th to 15th century heralded the beginnings of international maritime law in the medieval Mediterranean.³¹ Compilations such as the ‘*Livre del Consolat de Mar*’ laid down rules which were accepted by seafaring merchants across the Mediterranean, and institutions such as the Barcelonese Sea Court (the ‘*Consolat de Mar*’) became the centre of a maritime network of trading professionals keen to solve conflicts amongst each other without interference by political powers.³²

The threat of violent assault and economic loss not only led to communication and connectedness in the field of law, but also fuelled institutions of risk management. These instruments could develop into a dynamic field of economic activity ruled by market principles. The creation of maritime insurance in the Middle Ages for example is intimately tied to the dangers that ‘piracy’ posed to

²⁹ TAI E.S., ‘Piracy and law in medieval Genoa: The ‘consilia’ of Bartolomeo Bosco’, *Medieval Encounters*, 9 (2003), 256–282; FAVREAU-LILIE M., ‘Diplomacy and legislation as instruments in the war against piracy in the Italian maritime republic (Genoa, Pisa and Venice)’, in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 281–305, especially pp. 295–301.

³⁰ KRAMPE C., ‘Der Seeräuberfall. Römisches Recht in Antike, Mittelalter und Neuzeit’, in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 307–326, especially pp. 315–317.

³¹ KRIEGER K-F., ‘Die Entwicklung des Seerechts im Mittelmeerraum von der Antike bis zum Consolat de Mar’, *Jahrbuch für Internationales Recht*, 16 (1973), 179–208; KHALILIEH H.S., *Islamic maritime law: an introduction*, ‘Studies in Islamic law and society’, 5’, Leiden: Brill (1998).

³² COLÓN DOMÈNECH G., GARCÍA A. and BORJA MOLL F.D. (eds), *Llibre del Consolat de Mar*, 4 vols, Barcelona: Fundació Noguera (1981–1987).

trade in the Mediterranean.³³ From the end of the 14th century onwards, merchants began buying insurance on their cargo or on parts of it, thus investing means to gain security in a hazardous professional field, whilst others – often their very colleagues – indulged in financial speculation by selling policies, that is by calculating the risks of sea voyages and betting on the outcome. Hotspots of maritime insurance such as the city of Valencia acquired trans-regional importance and further enhanced long-distance communication across political borders. While there are also some references to the signing of life insurances in the late Middle Ages, only in the Early Modern Era did the potential victims develop institutions geared at facilitating their manumission from captivity ('Sklavenkassen').³⁴

However, prior to that, other institutions were created in order to diminish the risks of seafaring by assisting the victims of maritime violence. In the Muslim world, charitable pious donations ('waqf') provided the means to ransom coreligionists from Christian captivity.³⁵ Conversely, in Christian-held territories bordering the dār al- Islām, private initiative and support by political powers laid the foundations for the religious orders of the Mercedarians and Trinitarians.³⁶ These brethren's prime aim was to free the Christians from Muslim captivity. They established contact with territories across the sea and also travelled there in person in order to alleviate the effects of Mediterranean 'piracy' and coastal raiding. The Mercedarians and Trinitarians were particularly active in the western Mediterranean, due to the harsh clashes between Muslim and Christian powers in this area. 'Piracy' also triggered less institutionalised trans-maritime networks, because certain individuals discovered a professional niche and specialised in mediating between cultural spheres in order to facilitate the release of captives.³⁷ The whereabouts of the captives needed to be determined, their captors or owners identified, the sum of the ransom as well as the exact

³³ MELIS F., *Origini e sviluppi delle assicurazioni in Italia: (secoli XIV-XVI) 1.: Le fonti.* - 1975, Rome: Ist. Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (1975); GARCÍA I SANZ A. and FERRER I MALLOL, M.T., *Assegurances i canvis marítims medievals a Barcelona*, 2 vols, Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans (1983); NEHLSEN-VON STRYK K., *Die venezianische Seever sicherung im 15. Jahrhundert*, 'Münchener Universitätsschriften. Abhandlungen zur rechtswissenschaftlichen Grundlagenforschung, 64', Ebelsbach: Gremer (1986).

³⁴ RESSEL M., *Zwischen Sklavenkassen und Türkenpässen. Nordeuropa und die Barbaren in der Frühen Neuzeit*, 'Pluralisierung und Autorität, 31', Berlin/New York: De Gruyter (2012).

³⁵ ABDEL WAHAB S.H., 'Captives Waqf in Syria and Egypt (491-589 H. / 1097-1193 A.D.)', in *La Liberazione dei "captivi" tra Cristianità e Islam: oltre la crociata e il Jihad: tolleranza e servizio umanitario*, ed. G. CIPOLLONE, 'Collectanea Archivi Vaticani, 46', Città del Vaticano: Archivio Segreto Vaticano (2000), pp. 559-570; MEIER A., PAHLITZSCH J. and REINFANDT L. (eds), *Islamische Stiftungen zwischen juristischer Norm und sozialer Praxis*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag (2009).

³⁶ BRODMAN J.W., *Ransoming captives in crusader Spain: the Order of Merced on the Christian-Islamic frontier*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1986); CIPOLLONE (ed.), *La liberazione dei "captivi" tra Cristianità e Islam, op. cit.*

³⁷ RODRIGUEZ J., *Captives and their saviors in the medieval crown of Aragon*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press (2007); KAISER W. (ed.), *Le commerce des captifs: les intermédiaires dans l'échange et le rachat des prisonniers en Méditerranée, XV^e-XVIII^e siècle*, 'Collection de l'École Française de Rome, 406', Rome: École Française de Rome (2008).

conditions of release had to be negotiated. Similar experts can also be identified in terrestrial frontier zones, but they appear to have been particularly active on both sides of the Mediterranean.

The third field in which actions aimed at curbing 'piracy' led to an increase in maritime connectedness was diplomacy. The case of the infamous merchant turned pirate Trapelicino/Triplicino might serve as an example. In the middle of the 12th century, this Pisan's assault against Muslims hailing from Fatimid Egypt led to a serious crisis in relations between both powers. In the face of this threat to Pisa's trans-maritime commercial ties, the commune took a number of measures, including diplomatic contacts with the harmed side.³⁸ Thus, Pisan efforts to settle the problem and pacify the irritated Muslim leaders enhanced contacts and arguably led to an intensification of bilateral relations. Scores of other documents show that one of the main issues of diplomatic negotiations throughout the entire middle ages was 'piracy'. In many cases concrete attacks even led to the establishment or intensification of trans-maritime relations.³⁹ The rich archival holdings of the northern Mediterranean rim contain many letters, instructions and agreements which provide very concrete insights into the challenges that 'piracy' posed to diplomatic relations and into the solutions that contemporary agents developed to contain this threat.⁴⁰ Treaties between Mediterranean powers regularly contained clauses referring to the liberation of captives, the curbing of violence and the freedom of transport across the sea. In some cases, one can even follow the diplomatic efforts undertaken to free certain victims of 'piracy', efforts which sometimes also led to transcultural cooperation, for example between Christian and Muslim powers. To name just one example: in 1409/1410 Venetian agents freed 150 captured Muslims in their home town and brought them to Egypt in a publicly staged propaganda campaign in order to facilitate trade with the Mamluks.⁴¹ Such cases show that, generally, economic

³⁸ BANTI O., 'I trattati tra Pisa e Tunisi dal XII al XIV secolo. Lineamenti di storia dei rapporti tra Pisa e il Maghreb', in *L'Italia e i paesi mediterranei. Vie di comunicazione e scambi commerciali e culturali al tempo delle Repubbliche marinare*, 'Edizioni Pisane di storia e d'arte', 3, Pisa: Nistri-Lischi e Pacini (1988), pp. 43–74, especially pp. 50–55; SALVATORI E., 'Il corsaro pisano Trapelicino. Un'avventura mediterranea del XII secolo', *Bollettino Storico Pisano*, 76 (2007), 31–56.

³⁹ AIGLE D. and BARESI P. (eds), *Les relations diplomatiques entre le monde musulman et l'Occident latin: (XII^e–XVI^e siècle)*, 'Oriente moderno N.S., 88', Rome: Ist. per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino [u.a.] (2008); JASPERT N. and KOLDITZ S., 'Christlich-muslimische Außenbeziehungen im Mittelmeerraum: Zur räumlichen und religiösen Dimension mittelalterlicher Diplomatie', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* (2014) (forthcoming).

⁴⁰ DE MAS LATRIE L., *Traité de paix et de commerce et documents divers concernant les relations des chrétiens avec les Arabes de l'Afrique septentrionale au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1865–68; DROCOURT N., 'Christian-Muslim diplomatic relations. An overview of the main sources and themes of encounter (600–1000)', in *Christian Muslim relations: a bibliographical history*, vol. 1: (600–900), ed. D. THOMAS, B. ROGGEWAARD and J.P. MONFERRER-SALA, 'History of Christian-Muslim relations, 11', Leiden, Brill (2009), pp. 29–72.

⁴¹ CHRIST G., 'Transkulturelle Pirateriekämpfung? Venezianisch-Mamlukische Kooperation und Gefangenbefreiung im östlichen Mittelmeerraum im Spätmittelalter', in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 363–375, especially pp. 369–371.



interests were the driving force behind such diplomatic enterprises. In other instances, military considerations as to the inopportunity or timeliness of trans-regional violence led the way.

It is difficult to determine what disturbed connectivity more: 'piracy' or corsairing. 'Piracy' often triggered reactions from several sides at once, as this form of violence was not directed against any single group. Therefore, one might expect a stronger effort to overcome 'piracy' than to overcome corsairing. On the other hand, precisely because corsairing was intimately tied to political power, it could become the object of regulation as a result of a diplomatic rapprochement. In all three fields presented – diplomacy, institutions of risk management and law – different and complementary forms of trans-maritime networks were deployed in order effectively to curb the effects of predatory violence at sea.⁴² Social networks were needed, that is the personnel to convey information about pirate attacks, to negotiate with foreign powers or to devise and agree to trans-regionally accepted laws. Information networks were also imperative in order to access and process data concerning occurrences at sea and to address the possible ways of reacting to them. The key to success in trans-maritime dealings, whether to impede pirate attacks or to ease their effects, was communication.

That being said, it is a matter of course that attempts at curbing 'piracy' were not necessarily successful. In some cases they even proved detrimental to maritime connectivity. For example: arming ships against 'pirates' could turn counter-productive when these weapons were used against other ships.⁴³ One might also pose the question whether the intricate system developed in the Medieval Mediterranean in order to free captives via institutions or specialized individuals ultimately even stabilised 'piracy'. Precisely the fact that such a complex system was developed might have made the capture and ransoming of humans an even more attractive source of income.

THALASSOCRACY AND 'PIRACY'

The relationship between political power and 'piracy' in the medieval period was extremely diverse, ranging from stark antagonism to more or less open support. This is not surprising, considering that 'piracy' could have both positive and negative effects for rulers and for ruling elites. Not surprisingly therefore, Mediterranean history provides countless cases for corsairing, that is for official maritime violence on the part of political powers, and in the Indian Ocean 'the

⁴² MALAMUT É. and OUFERELLI M. (eds), *Les échanges en Méditerranée médiévale: marqueurs, réseaux, circulations, contacts*, 'Le temps de l'histoire', Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence (2012); COULON D. (ed.), *Espaces et réseaux en Méditerranée, VI^e–XVI^e siècle 1: La configuration des réseaux*, Paris: Éditions Bouchène (2007); COULON D., PICARD C. et VALÉRIAN D. (eds), *Espaces et réseaux en Méditerranée, VI^e–XVI^e siècle. 2: La formation des réseaux*, Paris: Éditions Bouchène (2010).

⁴³ GERTWAGEN, *Is there a Typology of Pirate Crews*, op. cit., pp. 74, 77–78.

rulers of Hindu and Muslim states alike afforded protection to pirates, provisioned them, contributed to their equipment and shared in their booty'.⁴⁴ The question of the relationship between political power and 'piracy' is particularly relevant for realms that, to a large extent, relied on the sea or can even be termed 'seaborne empires'.

In the Middle Ages, no power had the means to monitor distant maritime thoroughfares effectively over a long period of time. In this sense, the influential definition of thalassocracy developed by the American maritime historian Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), according to which dominion over the sea necessarily means the control of waterways, does not apply to the Middle Ages. However, this limited potential was not due to the threats of 'piracy' but rather to a lack of nautical and financial resources – if potentates indeed ever contemplated achieving such control. However, if one does not adhere to Mahan's definition, then one might ask if thalassocracies indeed existed in the Middle Ages despite such shortcomings. Should one postulate the ability politically and economically to control substantial and distant territories beyond the sea – be they coastal areas or islands – with the help of maritime force to be the hallmark of pre-modern thalassocracies, then certain medieval powers such as Venice or the Crown of Aragon can indeed be understood as seaborne empires.⁴⁵

It is no coincidence that these powers were situated on the northern rim of the Mediterranean, which possessed comparatively large areas of woodland. Half a century ago, Maurice Lombard already attributed differing capacities to achieve maritime dominance to the uneven distribution of natural resources.⁴⁶ Indeed, it is precisely the lack of wood in certain areas that could also have detrimental effects on naval power. It is also a matter of course that trans-maritime political entities heavily relied on communication between their dispersed territories. Consequently the interruption of peaceful transport at sea was a serious handicap to effective rule. But conversely, precisely due to their trans-maritime nature, thalassocracies were particularly prone to employing maritime predators as instruments to further their political ends. The crown of Aragon and Venice in the Middle Ages are telling examples for this dichotomy. Here, the interaction between state and market, between 'piracy' and measures against it becomes particularly evident.

Arguably, medieval thalassocracies are the most rewarding political entities

⁴⁴ WINK, *Al-Hind*, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 113, cf. *ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴⁵ *Histoire maritime: Thalassocracies et période révolutionnaire. Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes 114 (1989)–115 (1990)*, Paris: Éditions du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques (1991); Rüdiger J., 'Thalassocracies médiévales. Pour une histoire politique des espaces maritimes', in *Construire la Méditerranée, penser les transferts culturels. Approches historiographiques et perspectives de recherche*, ed. R. ABDELLATIF, Y. BENHIMA, D. KÖNIG and E. RUCHAUD, 'Études de l'Institut historique allemand de Paris, 8', Munich: Oldenbourg (2012).

⁴⁶ LOMBARD M., 'Un problème cartographié: le bois dans la Méditerranée musulmane (VII^e–XI^e siècles)', *Annales ESC*, 14 (1959), 234–254; see FUESS A., 'Muslime und Piraterie im Mittelmeer (7.–16. Jahrhundert)', in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. JASPERT and KOLDITZ, *op. cit.*, pp. 175–198, here p. 176.



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of the pre-modern world when it comes to analysing the interplay between seaborne violence, political power, seaborne trade, naval warfare, nautical developments and communication. Within this complex and dynamic field of forces, seaborne predatory violence was mostly an element that disrupted communication; however, simultaneously – albeit ultimately to a lesser extent – 'piracy' heightened maritime connectivity in a number of often-neglected ways.

