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

0.0 – Module Lesson Plan

This module is part of the History for the 21st Century project (H21). History for the 21st Century is a collaborative project designed to serve students in introductory college history courses and their instructors. Together, we build, assess, and progressively improve free, online educative, enquiry-based curriculum. You can find out more about H21 by visiting <https://www.history21.com/>.

**Module Overview**

This module asks students to think about Atlantic piracy in the context of early globalization and to consider how the history of piracy in this period reflects the opportunities and costs of a more tightly connected world. It has two primary pedagogical goals:

First, it introduces students to the factors that made piracy attractive and possible between c.1500–c.1750, during the early modern era. Characterized by growing competition, violence, innovation, and global interconnection, the early modern era was a golden age for piracy. This period saw the consolidation of larger states and the emergence of new powerful empires around the world. In Europe, as elsewhere, political upheaval was constant as dynastic struggles combined with political, economic, and environmental pressures, which led to many regime changes. As European competition increased and colonization expanded into the Atlantic, indigenous demographic collapse, the rise of racial slavery, mass movements of peoples, and the extraction of wealth transformed the Americas. By the 16th century, treasure ships made predictable oceanic crossings that pirates could plan for; port cities were filled with stolen goods and eager buyers; and violent maritime actors could often find legal or semi-legal employment with navies looking for warm bodies to fight enemies at sea. Pirates operate—then and now—on frontiers. They thrive in areas of murky control. The early modern Atlantic was a lucrative and murky frontier indeed.

The module’s second pedagogical goal is to explain why piracy was first welcomed by emerging European empires and later viewed as a costly threat. As the era of Atlantic competition dawned c. 1500, pirates could at times serve empire, and while there were good technologies for waterborne trade, the technology to support large navies to suppress these maritime renegades was not yet available. However, as piracy increased, so too did the threat it posed to imperial power and the tools available to combat it: armies grew bigger and more expensive, and navies grew from small local patrols to major ocean-going fleets, with new ships large enough to support heavy cannons. Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and later Britain led this transformation. Eventually, the growing naval power of states violently ended the age of piracy, but contraband trade always persisted. Students will explore these changing views of piracy from imperial governments’ perspectives as well as the central continuity of piracy as an act of resistance to empire, regardless of period. By the end of the module, they will have come to see that piracy was not an unimportant sideshow in an era of imperial expansion but rather an essential reflection of its central realties.

Students will begin the module by considering their own ideas about piracy. Over the course of the four lessons, they will be introduced to various factors that influenced what acts of so-called “piracy” meant to different people at different points in time in different imperial settings, with the aim of answering the following key questions:

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

As students learn about the history of early modern Atlantic piracy, they will also practice analyzing primary source material from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries to help them answer these questions. At the conclusion of this module, students should understand how piracy in the period c. 1500-1750 was a fundamental reflection of emerging Atlantic empires, global trade networks, and the people, places, and things upon which these networks depended, and will be asked to contemplate how their perceptions of the meaning of piracy have changed considering what they have learned.

**Module Map**

**Lesson 1 – Piracy in the Emerging Atlantic World, c. 1500**

* explore and define piracy and the “Atlantic World”
* examine why piracy surged in the Atlantic c. 1500
* learn about Spanish and Portuguese wealth and piracy in the “Atlantic Triangle”
* consider who are the pirates, and what they “pirate”

**Lesson 2 – 16th Century Commodity Trades, Labor Regimes, and Piracy in the Atlantic**

* examine how sixteenth-century piracy reflected emerging imperial patterns of labor and trade in the Atlantic from indigenous demographic collapse to the rise of the trade in enslaved Africans
* examine the relationship between commodity trades and Atlantic-global networks of exchange and piracy

**Lesson 3 – Imperial Competition in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic and Piracy on Land and at Sea**

* examine how piracy changed with the arrival of more European competitors in the Caribbean
* explore how on-land networks in Europe and in the mainland Americas helped piracy to flourish
* consider why the buccaneers came to characterize the Caribbean in the seventeenth century

**Lesson 4 – Piracy, Plantations, and Global Markets in the Eighteenth Century: Crackdowns and Persistence**

* explore the “golden age” for pirates in the Atlantic and efforts to stop piracy by the global British Empire
* examine the persistence of piracy in colonial economies and the romanticization of piracy in the 18th century
* consider what really brought the “golden age” of piracy to a close

**Conclusion**

* reflect on the central causes of piracy in the early modern Atlantic World and today
* consider cases of piracy and how we perceive and define it in the present