

The Dawn of a Golden Age of Piracy in the Emerging Atlantic World, c. 1500



The Emerging Atlantic World

For millennia, the Mediterranean had been Europeans' dominant sea, but in the years following Columbus's 1492 voyage, the Atlantic Ocean began to challenge it. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the Atlantic Ocean ceased to be a barrier to contact between the Americas, Europe, and Africa, and instead became a bridge linking these three continents. Historians who study the centuries of contact and exchange between c. 1500 and c. 1800 refer to the connected lands and seas that linked the American mainland, as well as the Caribbean, West Africa, and Western Europe, as the Atlantic World.

THE DAWN OF A GOLDEN AGE

THE EMERGING ATLANTIC WORLD

THE EASTERN ATLANTIC ISLANDS AND THE LAUNCH OF THE AGE OF ATLANTIC PIRACY

THE POLITICS OF PIRACY, IMPERIAL RIVALRY, AND DISCONTENT IN THE EARLY CARIBBEAN

The emerging Atlantic World was, from the very beginning, embedded in global circuits of exchange. People and products of the Americas were transported eastward over the Atlantic and beyond while increasing numbers of enslaved Africans and Europeans moved westward to the Americas. The exploitation and suffering that very quickly came to characterize the Americas in the aftermath of 1492 meant that there would always be people resisting and seeking to change the realities that oppressed them. It is no surprise that piracy increased during an era characterized by both immense wealth and by immense inequality.

Although Portugal laid early claim to several of the Atlantic Islands off the coast of West Africa and the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century, the arbitrary division of the world by the pope in 1479 through the Treaty of Tordesillas (in which an imagined line was drawn north-south through the Atlantic Ocean, with Spain assigned all lands west of the line and Portugal all lands east) meant that Spain held the earliest European claims to unfamiliar territories in the western Atlantic. A Portuguese sailor named Pedro Álvares Cabral inadvertently bumped into the coast of Brazil in 1500 (the bulk of which fell to the east of the Tordesillas line), but the Portuguese crown did not immediately pay much attention to Brazil. It was only the presence of French pirates along Brazil's coast in the 1530s that forced the Portuguese crown to take this new territory seriously or risk losing it to European rivals.

Key Terms:

Atlantic World

Treaty of Tordesillas

Spain and Portugal

Sugar Plantations

Enslavement

Diseases

Bullion

Piracy

Atlantic Islands

Jean Florin

Avería

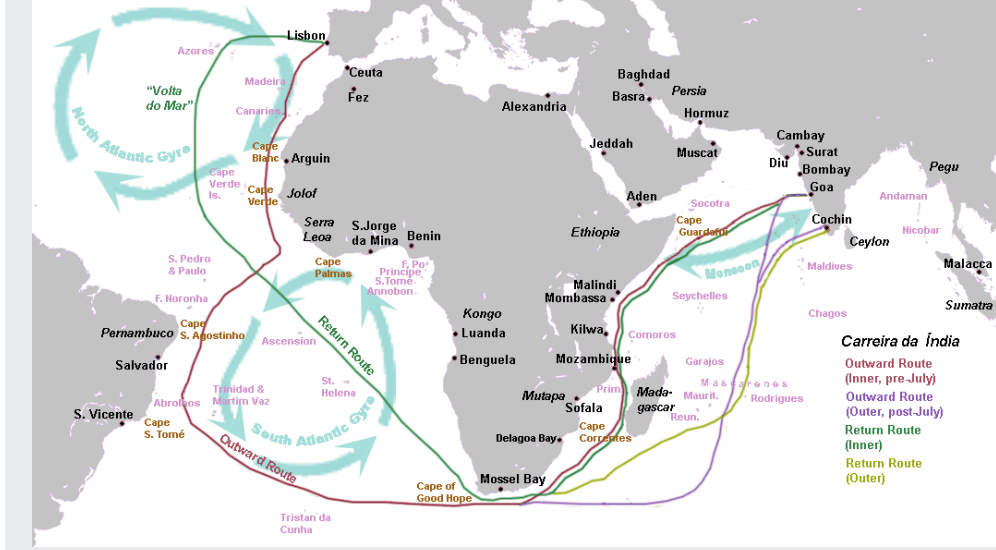
Colonial Residents



Map of the Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494

Map showing Portuguese routes, 16th century

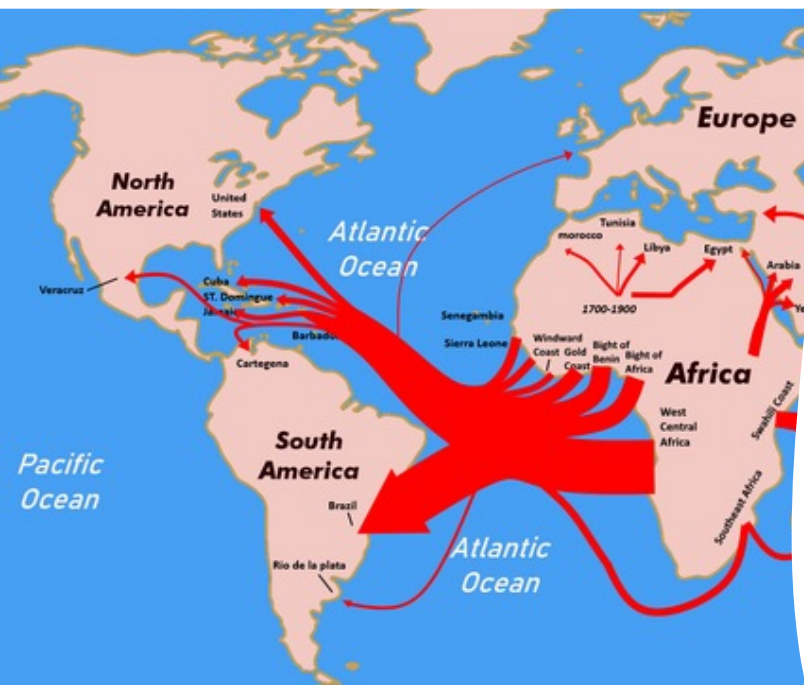
For the first several decades of the sixteenth century, the American mainland had relatively little appeal in Portugal's eyes, compared to the riches of the West African coast and the Indian Ocean world to which Vasco da Gama had charted a new route around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. Northern European competitors of the Iberian Catholic kingdoms of Spain and Portugal



were able to do relatively little in these early years to challenge the claims of their rivals. Faced with their own domestic political and economic problems, northern European powers could not devote much money or manpower to overseas explorations in the early sixteenth century. When they did do so, they usually hired more experienced mariners from the southern Europe to lead ragtag crews of men with little experience with Atlantic deep-water sailing.

Although the Atlantic World would be shaped by the movement of millions of people and multiple commodity trades, the combination of sugar cultivation and enslaved African labor would be perhaps the most transformative development of the early sixteenth century. Agricultural production developed on the Atlantic islands (Madeira and the Cape Verdes) off the west coast of Africa, and it was on these islands that the unholy combination of sugar cultivation and enslaved African labor first took hold, laying the groundwork for a plantation labor regime and commodity trade that would become central to the emerging Atlantic world.

Plantations were large-scale commercial farming operations worked by unfree labor. Plantations date back to ancient times, but large-scale production on plantations was new. Large-scale, race-based slavery was also new. European traders had transported 50,000 enslaved Africans to São Tomé by 1550, illustrating the rapid growth of this system. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in the Caribbean archipelago, approximately 30,000 enslaved Africans lived and worked on a single island, Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) by 1550. By the end of the sixteenth century there were approximately 135,000 enslaved Africans in the Caribbean.



These enslaved peoples came primarily from the Cape Verde Islands and from the West African coast, from Upper Guinea to Angola. The trade in enslaved Africans expanded at a rapid pace over the next several centuries. From 1550 to 1850, about 11 million Africans were trafficked to the Americas; by 1820, four enslaved Africans for every one European had crossed the Atlantic. White masters of these enslaved humans practiced extreme cruelty to maintain their control over the people they treated as property, and over time, the concept of "whiteness" became central to power, status, and citizenship throughout the Americas.

Map showing movement of enslaved peoples to the America from 1500 on

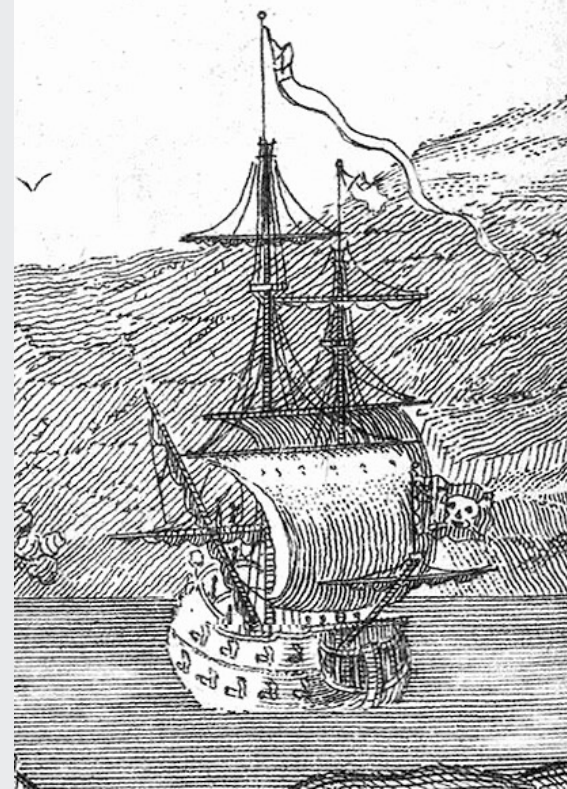
Further contributing to the spread of the sugar plantations throughout the Americas was the toll that sugar monoculture took on soil. Sugar cultivation rapidly depletes soil nutrients and thus regularly required fresh lands to be cleared for harvest. In the Caribbean, smaller islands' plantations became unprofitable over time as soil became exhausted and there were no new lands to clear, whereas larger islands (like Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Cuba) frequently practiced deforestation.

Along the West African coast and in the Indian Ocean world, the disease climate (among other factors) limited Europeans' ability to spend sustained time on land, as they risked getting sick and dying from diseases to which they had no immunity. In the Americas, however, the opposite was true: millennia of widespread contact across Afroeurasia (Africa, Asia, and Europe) meant that most adult Africans and Europeans were either immune or resistant to childhood diseases (such as smallpox, measles, mumps, whooping cough, and influenza) from which indigenous Americans had no defense. These pathogens (as well as African diseases such as yellow fever and malaria) arrived in the Americas with catastrophic impact on indigenous peoples. Enslaved peoples of African descent also died in great numbers in the Americas due to a combination of strenuous work, brutality, and sickness.

Indigenous demographic catastrophe, the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, and the arrival of plantation agriculture all resulted in dramatic and devastating ecological and political consequences for the Americas. These brutal and transformative realities shaped the world in which Atlantic piracy would occur—shaping not just the goods that people were trading and stealing, but the places where pirates could hide and the reasons why people became pirates or tolerated them in their communities. The shocking decline of indigenous populations, particularly in the Caribbean, meant that land that had been inhabited and cultivated in the past was now abandoned and grew wild, sustaining both communities of people fleeing colonial settlements as well as wild animals. The ability to survive far from colonial authority figures and to cohabit with (and hunt) animals proved critical to pirate communities in the Golden Age of Atlantic piracy. After all, piracy in this period was shaped not just by the forced and free migration of people across the Atlantic but also by the movement of plants and animals and microbes. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the global exchange of flora and fauna accelerated. Hogs and cattle, both of which had been introduced to the Americas by Europeans, reproduced in enormous numbers and made it possible for runaways to survive in the wild.

As Spanish and Portuguese ships began sailing the waters of the Atlantic with greater frequency, both from the Americas and from Portuguese trade routes in the Indian Ocean and beyond, their European rivals took notice. The discovery of major American silver deposits in what is today Mexico (1541) and Bolivia (1545) gave Europeans access to large quantities of bullion (gold and silver) that could be used to purchase goods in Asia, where European traders had long struggled to import any commodities that would appeal to Chinese consumers. By 1550, all of Europe's powers were scrambling for access to newly accessible Atlantic and global markets and their wealth. As European religious and political rivalries sharpened due to dynastic struggles and the violence of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the Atlantic World became an arena of competition and violence. Piracy was one important aspect of this era, shaped by the routes and rivalries that characterized the new maritime empires of the sixteenth century.

The pirate ship, Queen Anne's Revenge



The Eastern Atlantic Islands and the Launch of the Age of Atlantic Piracy

Although American wealth increasingly drew competitors to the Caribbean, the first burst of Atlantic piracy occurred in the so-called “Atlantic Islands” (the Azores, the Canaries, Cape Verde, and Madeira) off the coast of the Iberian peninsula and West Africa. In 1523, the French corsair Jean Florin captured several Spanish ships off Cape St. Vincent in southwest Portugal. The ships, which had already been attacked once by pirates in the Azores, were carrying a portion of Aztec treasure stolen from ruler Moctezuma. Florin took the lion’s share: some accounts said he made off with 62,000 ducats in gold, 600 marks (equal to roughly 300 pounds) of pearls and several tons of sugar. One of Hernan Cortés’s men, who had been in charge of seeing this treasure back safely, was captured and held prisoner by the French until 1525 before being ransomed.



The Atlantic Islands: Azores, Canary Islands, Cape Verde, and Madeira



17th-century woodcut depicting a pirate skirmish

With Florin’s attack on Spanish ships in the eastern Atlantic, the great age of Atlantic piracy had begun. Tales of piracy and the valuable booty generated by pirate raids circulated in port towns and beyond and were often the way that people learned about the new world of Atlantic exploration. Imagine the excitement that rippled through seaside towns as pirate ships sailed in with stolen goods and crews telling stories of battles and victories on the high seas. Think about how these stories would have landed in the ears and minds and hearts of people who were far away from the centers of imperial power: you didn’t need to know how to read or be a sailor or high-ranking official to understand that whatever was going on in the Atlantic was exciting and full of opportunities for money and adventure.

Even as they attacked official boats and settlements, pirates contributed to the success of empire by spreading excitement and news about Atlantic colonization alongside the plunder they took. Through their exploits, pirates generated thrilling tales about new places, new peoples, and new products from the emerging Atlantic World. Their bold outlaw behavior suggested that there was a place for personal ambition and an escape from the constraints of society. 500 years ago—like today—this was a very appealing fantasy to many people, for all sorts of reasons.

The Politics of Piracy, Imperial Rivalry, and Discontent in the Early Caribbean

With the development of sugar and gold mining in the Caribbean, the Portuguese began trading enslaved Africans to the new Spanish American colonies. The trade in human beings, whether taken by force or through trade on the African coast, was as profitable as it was barbaric; only the gold trade yielded higher returns. In theory, traders doing business in the Spanish Atlantic colonies were supposed to pass through Spain's trading capital, the city of Seville.

However, not everyone obeyed the laws. Some traders skipped paperwork, taxes, and extra sail time and sailed directly from the West African coast to the Caribbean islands of Hispaniola, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, as well as the American mainland. Poor and underserved residents in the colonies were often happy to deal with these contraband traders. Living thousands of miles from European centers of power, these colonists often didn't receive the goods they wanted from imperially-licensed traders, so many people were happy to deal with anyone selling things they wanted and turned a blind eye to where exactly these goods might have come from.

From the earliest days of Atlantic empire, the inefficiencies of European governments in providing needed goods and services to colonists across the ocean created big and enduring markets for pirates. Sea raiders, like illegal traders who skipped the required licensing processes and ignored official routes, did not struggle to find buyers for the goods (and sometimes enslaved humans who were treated like commodities) that they brought into underserved Atlantic ports.

As pirate attacks on ships returning to Spain from the Caribbean and the American mainland increased in the early decades of the sixteenth century, the Spanish crown tried to come up with ways to protect its American treasure fleets. The crown established a system of escorting treasure ships, called the convoy system, in 1525. Fleets were made to travel in convoys as early as 1525. By 1552, merchant ships were ordered to travel armed, at their own expense. Less than a decade later, in 1561, the crown established a new tax called the *avería* to help pay for a formal fleet system. The *avería* in theory financed protection fleets for official voyages. However, the merchants who had to pay this tax (and who were themselves the victims of piracy through the loss of their goods) did not support this new requirement. They objected constantly to the tax and found ways to cheat the system. Despite these measures, without a professional navy, Spanish protection for ships was limited. Spain's reluctance to finance a professional navy in the Atlantic would have lasting effects, even though at the time it seemed practical given the many financial pressures the crown was facing (of which the costs of the new settlements in the Americas were only one.)





Spanish colonial holdings and maritime routes of the 16th century

Spain's treasure ships—which were limited in their schedule by seasons (particularly hurricane season in the western Atlantic) and by the need to travel in convoy—remained very vulnerable to pirates who knew exactly where and when they were likely to be and thrived alongside the predictable movements of the ships across the ocean. By 1561, the Spanish fleet system was in place: ships departed Spain twice a year, once in January and once in August. For this outbound voyage to the Americas, ships would sail from southern Spain southward along the Moroccan coast to the Canary Islands, where they would take on fresh water. In the Canary Islands they caught the northeasterly trade winds (so called because they originated in the northeast and carried ships westward across the Atlantic), arriving in the Caribbean within about a month. The ships would usually enter the Caribbean in the Windward islands (Dominica and Guadeloupe).

For the return trip to Europe, Spanish ships would leave Cartagena and Veracruz on the American mainland and meet up in Havana, Cuba. From there, they would catch the Gulf Stream (a warm ocean current that flows from the Gulf of Mexico northwards up the eastern coast of North America), passing through the treacherous Florida Straits until they found the southwesterly trade winds that carried the ships eastward across the ocean and back to Europe. Barring attacks from pirates or hurricanes, the return voyage from Havana to Spain took some 2-3 months, often broken up by a stop at Madeira or the Azores. In the absence of meaningful security measures for this seasonally-regulated Atlantic boat traffic, straggling merchant ships, like wounded herd animals picked out by wolves, would fall prey to packs of pirates without any real means of defense or retaliation.

Meanwhile, pirates also found it possible and profitable to raid and trade with on-land settlements. Caribbean towns that the Spanish crown didn't invest in fortifying were often left to defend themselves from attackers as best they could. Though a seemingly small portion of the Atlantic, the Caribbean Sea is enormous in its own right: its c. 1 million square miles were impossible to patrol. Given the financial pressures facing the Spanish crown, this do-nothing (or do little) approach to American defense was the only option. If merchants and colonists wanted to protect their lives, their businesses, and their goods, they would have to finance protection on their own. Meanwhile, contraband traders of all sorts, including pirates, could largely do as they pleased.



16th-century depiction of shipyards in Seville, Spain, where all traders were supposed to pass

Growing Merchant and Colonial Resentment

Ships traveling across the Atlantic faced many dangers at sea: pirates, storms, hunger, disease, and death. But the threats to the success of these maritime journeys also came from land, where colonial resentment grew. The imperfection of empire—with laws that were difficult to enforce across immense distances and never enough money or goods or armies or ships to meet all the demands facing the crown—became increasingly visible over the course of the sixteenth century. Colonial residents grew frustrated with the limitations imposed on them by the crown and the crown's failure to give them the support they wanted and needed. As we begin to think about the motivations people had for becoming pirates or simply tolerating them in their communities, we must consider how and why the pirate life—or even just doing business with pirates who sometimes seemed like less like murderous thieves than simply rough and tumble traders with highly desired goods—appealed to people of various backgrounds.

Underserved residents of the new colonies disliked having to pay taxes to protect the goods they would ship back to Europe, which often fell victim to pirates anyway. Colonists were undersupplied with goods they desired from Europe as well as from Africa (primarily enslaved laborers). In their view, they were overtaxed by this same underperforming imperial government. If we keep these tensions in mind, it is not particularly surprising that American colonists in the Caribbean and on the mainland became increasingly sympathetic to pirates and likely to welcome them into their ports.

European governments could never fully control the flow of humans and commodities into and out of American settlements. It is unsurprising that colonists, both free people and unfree people, found ways around the rules. Piracy was a part of life and a reflection of the inequalities and opportunities that characterized the emerging Atlantic world. Pirates and piracy emerged in response to imperial success—meaning the growing number of trade routes and treasure-bearing ships crossing the Atlantic—and in reflection of just how inadequate and imperfect these early empires were.



Imperial governments that were unable or unwilling to provide for, or supervise, their colonies in the ways people wanted became very vulnerable to rule-breakers of all sorts—including pirates. The growth of piracy in the Atlantic after 1492 reflected the opportunities and imperfections of emerging Atlantic empires. Piracy also helped to shape those empires by exposing their weaknesses and offering individuals and communities a way in which to express their unhappiness with the status quo.

Painting by Cornelis Verbeeck depicting a Spanish galleon firing its cannons, 17th century

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