

Primary Sources: *Cabot, Staden, and Léry*



Introduction

The expansion of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the 16th century created opportunities for piracy to emerge and thrive in the Atlantic world. Piracy first exploded off the coast of Western Europe and West Africa, as well as in the Caribbean and American mainland where a rising trade in enslaved labor, indigenous dispossession and commodity trades transformed landscapes, societies, and economies.

Below are three primary sources illustrating the haphazard nature of early Atlantic colonization, as well as how varied early participants in it were. Italian born John Cabot sailed for England, while the German Hans Staden and the French Jean de Léry both sailed for Portugal. In addition, the backgrounds and experiences of these three individuals offer opportunities to reflect on what actions or actors could be termed “piratical” or “pirates” and how much piracy may be in the eye of the beholder.

PRIMARY SOURCE

INTRODUCTION

JOHN CABOT

HANS STADEN

JEAN DE LÉRY

Primary Source 1: *John Cabot's 1497 Voyage to North America*

John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto in Italian) was born in Genoa (on the Italian Peninsula) and lived from 1450 to 1499. Although a citizen of Venice, he obtained letters-patent from Henry VII of England in 1496 for a voyage of discovery. He crossed the Atlantic in 1497 and touched on the mainland of North America – probably the Labrador coast. The following document is a letter written by the fellow Italian Lorenzo Pasqualigo to his brothers Alvise and Francesco from London on August 23, 1497 discussing Cabot and his voyage.

As you are reading, consider the following questions:

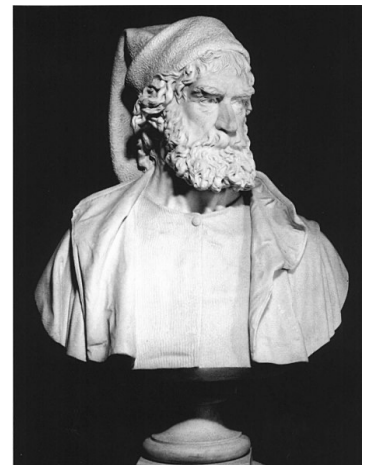
- *Who wrote this letter and what kind of information does it convey?*
- *The author of this letter is Italian, writing to other Italians about an Italian man sailing for the English crown. What does this kind of collaboration make you think about the nature of political boundaries in this period?*
- *How does the author describe the men who sailed with Cabot? Could we call them “pirates”? Why or why not?*
- *What was the relationship between individuals and crown goals for “empire” as depicted in this source? What impression does it give you of early English empire?*

Source: Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1497cabot-3docs.asp>

London, 23rd August, 1497

Our Venetian, who went with a small ship from Bristol to find new islands, has come back, and says he has discovered, 700 leagues off, the mainland of the country of the Gran Cam, and that he coasted along it for 300 leagues, and landed, but did not see any person. But he has brought here to the king certain snares spread to take game, and a needle for making nets, and he found some notched trees, from which he judged that there were inhabitants. Being in doubt, he came back to the ship. He has been away three months on the voyage, which is certain, and, in returning, he saw two islands to the right, but he did not wish to land, lest he should lose time for he was in want of provisions.

This king has been much pleased. He says that the tides are slack, and do not make currents as they do here. The king has promised for another time, ten armed ships as he desires, and has given him all the prisoners, except such as are confined for high treason, to go with him, as he has requested; and has granted him money to amuse himself till then. Meanwhile, he is with his Venetian wife and his sons at Bristol. His name is Zuam Talbot*, and he is called the Great Admiral, great honour being paid to him, and he goes dressed in silk. The English are ready to go with him, and so are many of our rascals. The discoverer of these things has planted a large cross in the ground with a banner of England, and one of St. Mark, as he is a Venetian; so that our flag has been hoisted very far away.



Bust of Giovanni Caboto

* This refers to John Cabot.

Primary Source 2: *Hans Staden, Piracy in the Portuguese Atlantic, c. 1548*



Hans Staden

In the 16th century, Spanish and Portuguese vessels sailed the Atlantic loaded with spices from Asia, gold and silver from the Americas, and enslaved African peoples. These ships were targeted by French, English, Dutch, and Moroccan corsairs, especially during times of war. The following document illustrates the ways imperial conflicts offered a pretext for such attacks.

Hans Staden was a German gunner and mercenary who sailed across the Atlantic and participated in the early Portuguese colonization of Brazil. Staden authored his memoir after returning to the German lands in 1557. In it, he recounts his time as a captive among the Tupi speakers of Brazil, as well as the many inter-imperial piratical scrapes he experienced during his time at sea, both off the coast of Brazil and one off the mid-Atlantic Azores islands. Early Atlantic pirates often targeted the Azores, where Portuguese vessels traveling from the Americas, Africa, and India stopped to refit and resupply. While Staden framed his memoir as a narrative of deliverance and survival, his account leaves us to ask: Was he a pirate, too?

As you are reading, consider the following questions:

- Do you think Hans Staden can be considered a pirate?
- Consider the map of trade routes provided in Reading 1. How did the position of the “Atlantic Islands” make them attractive to pirates and also to kings and imperial bureaucrats?
- How does Staden’s account of his trip reveal the mundane concerns and hardships that any kind of vessel—pirate ship or official imperial vessel—faced when sailing the seas?
- How does Staden’s account reveal the global connections that linked Atlantic imperial ventures with other oceans?

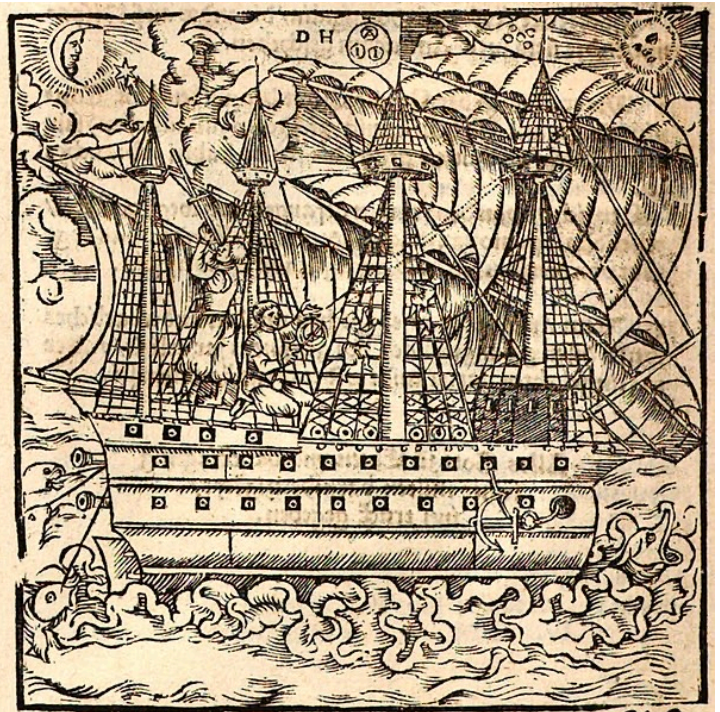
Source: “Piracy in the Portuguese Atlantic (c.1548)” in *Piracy in the Early Modern Era: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. and transl. Kris Lane and Arne Bialuschewski (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2019), pp. 9-10.



We sailed for 40 miles...to a harbor called Paraíba, Brazil, where we meant to load a cargo of Brazil wood and to raid the natives for more provisions. As we arrived there, we found a ship from France that was loading wood, and we attacked it, hoping to capture it. However, they destroyed our mainmast with one shot and sailed away; several on our ship were killed or wounded.

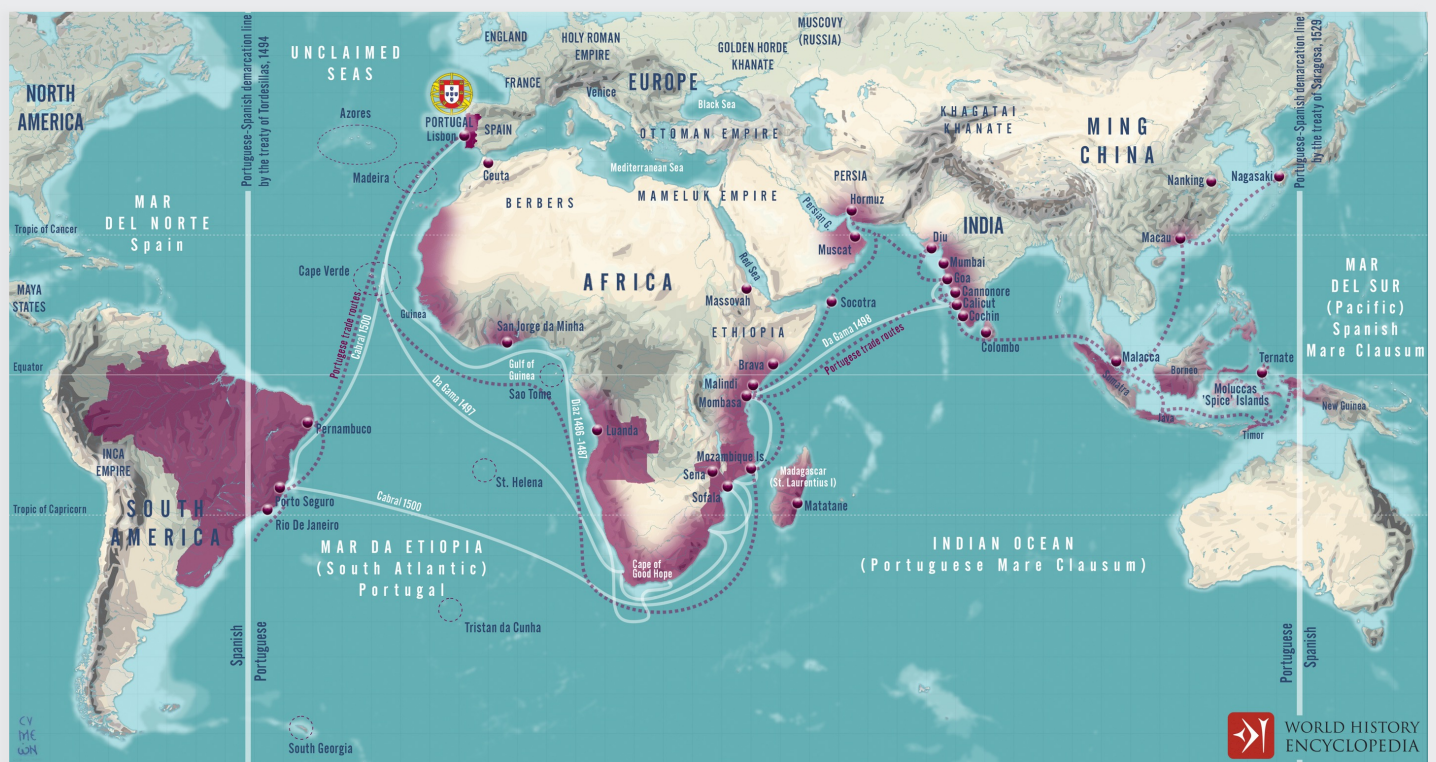
Woodcut depicting ships offshore, from Hans Staden’s 1557 book on his travel to the coast of Brazil

We then decided to set out once more for Portugal, for due to contrary winds we could not return to the harbor, where we had intended to get provisions. With unfavorable wind and very sparse supplies, we sailed to Portugal, suffering greatly from hunger; some ate the goatskins that we had on board. Each day they gave each of us a small scoop of water and a little manioc flour. We were 108 days at sea. On the 12th of August we arrived at the islands called the Azores that belong to the king of Portugal. There we anchored, rested, and fished. Here we saw a ship at sea, and sailed toward it to see what manner of ship it was. It was a pirate who defended himself, but we gained the upper hand and captured the ship. The pirates escaped in the boats, sailing toward the islands. The ship contained lots of wine and bread, which refreshed us.



Woodcut depicting ship at sea, from Hans Staden's 1557 book on his travel to the coast of Brazil

After this, we encountered five ships belonging to the king of Portugal. They were awaiting the ships from India, to escort them to Portugal. We remained with them, and helped to escort a ship arriving from India to the island of Terceira, where we remained. A lot of ships, all of which had come from the New World, had assembled at the island, some bound for Spain, some for Portugal. We left for Terceira in the company of almost a hundred ships, and arrived in Lisbon about the 8th of October, in the year 1548. We had been voyaging for sixteenth months.



Map of the 16th-century global Portuguese empire, showing Brazil, the Azores, and Lisbon

Primary Source 3: *Jean de Léry, Piracy in the North Atlantic, c. 1556*

Jean de Léry was a French Protestant Minister who traveled to the colony "Antarctic France" in Brazil's Guanabara Bay in the mid-sixteenth century. Though the colony failed, Léry's account of his time in the colony became (like Staden's) best known for describing his encounters with the Tupi-speaking Brazilians. Like Staden too, his account also recounted incidents of piracy. In the excerpts below, Léry tells about these encounters while heading into the Atlantic Ocean from the English Channel while en route to Brazil.

As you are reading, consider the following questions:

- Do you think Jean Léry should be considered a pirate? Why or why not?
- How does Léry's account reveal the coexistence of competing desires among people involved in imperial expansion?
- In your own words, what does Léry mean when he says that sailors respond to objections about pillaging other ships with the "common cant of our land soldiers"? What experiences linked soldiers and sailors in this period? What was unique about life at sea?
- How does Léry's account shed light on the role played by non-elite actors in the making of empire in the Atlantic?

Source: "Casual Piracy in the North Atlantic (c. 1556)," in *Piracy in the Early Modern Era: An Anthology of Sources*, Edited and Translated by Kris Lane and Arne Bialuschewski (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2019), pp. 10-11.

We were, then, tossed about, and we navigated with great difficulty until the thirteenth day after our embarkation, when God pacified the swell and storms of the sea. The following Sunday we met two English merchant ships that were coming from Spain. When our sailors accosted them, and saw there was much to be had aboard, they nearly pillaged them. And indeed, as I have said, our three vessels were well furnished with artillery and other munitions; our sailors therefore were overbearing and arrogant, and when weaker vessels found themselves at their mercy they were by no means safe.

I must say here, since it has come up in connection with this first encounter with a ship, that I have seen practiced on the sea what is also done most often on land: that is, he who has weapons in his fist, and who is the strongest, carries the day, and imposes the law on his companion. The way it goes for these mariner gentlemen, striking sail, and meeting with the poor merchant ships, usually claim that they have been unable to approach any land or port because of tempests and calms, and that they are consequently short of supplies, for which they are willing to pay.

But if, under this pretext, they can set foot on board their neighbor's ship, you need hardly ask whether, as an alternative to scuttling the vessel, they relieve it of whatever takes their fancy. And if one the protests (as in fact we always did) that no order has been given to pillage indiscriminately, friends as well as enemies, they give you the common cant of our land soldiers, who in such cases offer as sole reason that it's war and custom, and that you have to get used to it.

Woodcut of crossing ships

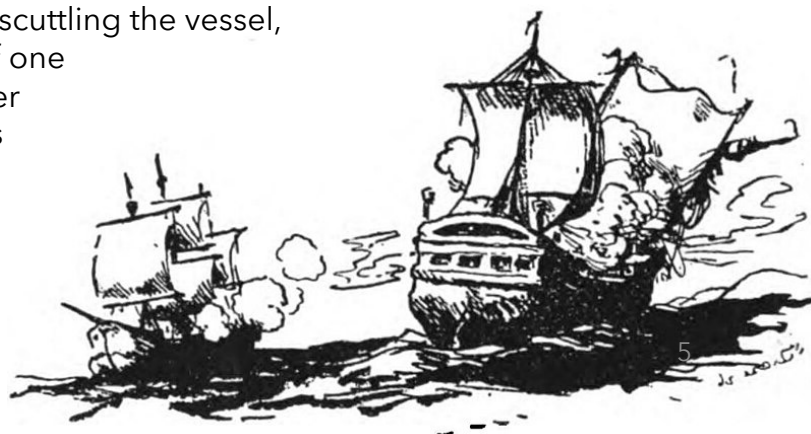


Image Citations:

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