

16th Century Piracy, Commodity Trades, and Labor Regimes



Introduction

In this lesson, we are going to learn about how global political shifts and evolving trade routes continued to draw men (and women) into piracy throughout the Atlantic World, the communities and spaces that connected and were shaped by Europe, Africa, and the Americas. We will also consider the labor regimes and commodity trades that came to characterize this Atlantic world and how these patterns of work and exchange shaped piracy. We will focus on piracy's essential role in early English Atlantic explorations and shine a spotlight on the actions of two of the era's most famous English imperial servants, John Hawkins and Francis Drake. These two men were viewed as pirates by the Spanish and as imperial heroes by the English. What does this difference of opinion tell us about the role of perspective in accusations of piracy? We will also consider the role of self-emancipated Africans – formerly enslaved people who fled bondage, known sometimes as *cimmarones* in Spanish or “maroons” in English – in helping English pirate attacks succeed. How does the history of piracy illuminate the tensions and conflicts in early colonial societies and help us understand how diverse people living in that time period thought about opportunities and risks?

16TH CENTURY PIRACY

INTRODUCTION

SAILING A RICH AND DANGEROUS
OCEAN IN THE SIXTEENTH
CENTURY

THE GROWING PROBLEM OF
PIRACY IN THE ATLANTIC

ENGLAND TAKES AIM AT THE
SPANISH ATLANTIC: SLAVE
TRADING, PIRACY, AND EMPIRE

JOHN HAWKINS, FRANCIS DRAKE,
AND ENGLAND'S OUTSOURCING
OF EMPIRE TO PIRATES

Sailing a Rich and Dangerous Ocean in the Sixteenth Century

The Atlantic became a hotbed of piracy because of the changing politics, economics, and demographics that characterized the Atlantic World in the decades following Columbus's 1492 voyage. When sailors from Spain and Portugal first encountered the Americas, they incorrectly viewed these territories as unclaimed. They quickly labeled everyone else who entered these territories without their permission a "pirate," and with the support of the Catholic pope, the ruling monarchs of Spain and Portugal quickly divided ownership and rule of these areas between them. In the Americas, everything went to Spain except for Brazil, which went to the Portuguese. Portugal also claimed outposts in Africa and Asia.

But neither the Spanish nor the Portuguese government could ever really enforce these arbitrary rules. This lack of enforcement capability (it is important to keep in mind how far away European governments were from these distant waters and territories), combined with the great wealth that began to be transported across oceans, meant that piracy became a constant problem for the next two hundred years and beyond. Non-Iberians (anyone who was not Portuguese or Spanish) rejected these two kingdoms' claims to exclusive control of the Americas. In the Atlantic and globally, European imperial competition and American indigenous, Asian, and African power limited Spain and Portugal's ambitions.

Key Terms:

Pirate

Privateer

Spanish and Portuguese Colonialism

French, Dutch, and English competition

Queen Elizabeth

John Hawkins

Francis Drake

Thames River

East India Company



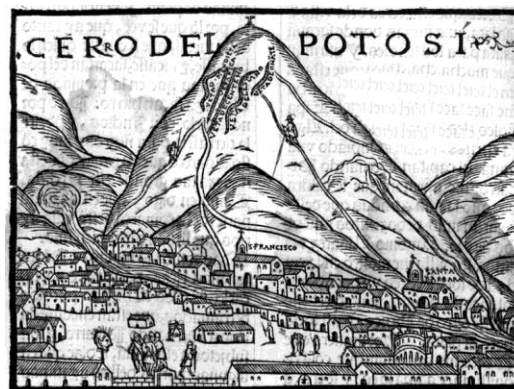
Portuguese colonial empire in the 16th century



16th-century Spanish (white) and Portuguese (blue) trade routes

Over the course of the sixteenth century, the circuits of world trade expanded as commerce flowed across and between oceans. Pirates operating on the world's seas sailed alongside ships carrying sugar from Brazil, spices from southeast Asia, cotton textiles from India, silks from China, and enslaved African laborers bound for the Americas. These goods, and enslaved people treated as goods, did not all travel the same routes: pirates soon learned the sailing patterns determined by winds and currents and seasonal storms, such as hurricanes in the Atlantic and monsoons in the Indian Ocean in order to better plan their attacks on ships.

Commodity trades connected the emerging markets of the Atlantic world to global consumers. Silver in particular gave Europeans a commodity to exchange with Asian trade partners and began to shift the balance of wealth and power from east to west across the vast expanse of Afroeurasia. Silver also came to dominate interregional trade circuits. In the first half of the sixteenth century, enslaved and coerced native and African laborers produced great wealth for the Spanish crown by extracting mineral deposits from the Americas.



Potosí, a site of Spanish colonial silver mining

Traded globally, American silver remade the world economy and secured Spain's place as the era's dominant European power. Gold and silver bullion allowed the Spanish to dominate neighboring states. But Spain also was forced to spend huge amounts of money on warfare and armies to defend their vast territories and claims, which extended well beyond the Atlantic world on which this module is focused. Spain's wealth represented a great temptation to rival powers and individual renegades. Sometimes, the ships that attacked Spain's fleets in the Atlantic were officially licensed to do so by the governments of Spain's enemies (for example in the case of Dutch "pirate" and official admiral of the Dutch West India Fleet, Piet Heyn, discussed in Lesson 3). In these cases, the attackers were called pirates by Spaniards but legal naval "privateers" by their sponsoring country. Sometimes, rogue sailors and crews "turned pirate" and attacked ships despite peace treaties between their governments. These cases usually caused problems for everyone involved. Whatever their origins and loyalties, pirates of various backgrounds found plenty to covet in the Atlantic of the sixteenth century. Focused in particular on the ships that transported silver to Europe, these maritime predators haunted the Caribbean and Atlantic waters through which these vessels were known to pass. Throughout the Atlantic World in the sixteenth century, conditions were ripe for all sorts of sneaky activity and acts of violence.

The Growing Problem of Piracy in the Atlantic

In the Caribbean, the sharp and violent religious divisions of the Protestant Reformation (a period of religious upheaval that led to war through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) heightened tensions among European powers and encouraged hostilities across religious lines. That said, Reformation-related tensions did not define Caribbean conflict, which crossed all sorts of lines. The presence of increasing numbers of Europeans of various origins and affiliations did more to increase competition and violence—and piracy—throughout the Caribbean than European religious disputes.

The French first came into the region in the 1540s. The Dutch and English followed them some decades later. Some European new arrivals in the Caribbean came with the intention to attack while other came on voyages of trade or exploration or resource extraction (the Caribbean pearl fisheries, for example, drew pirates of all stripes from the earliest years of the sixteenth century.) In this context, conflicts between Catholics and between Protestants occurred as regularly as Protestant versus Catholic clashes. Many European newcomers to the region, whether they identified as pirates or not, later found themselves attacked or decided to take what they wanted through violent measure. The entire process of European colonialism was violent at its core, characterized by displacement of peoples and the seizing of land and resources. When viewed in this context, the violent and greedy nature of piracy was hardly unusual in an era already characterized by these impulses.

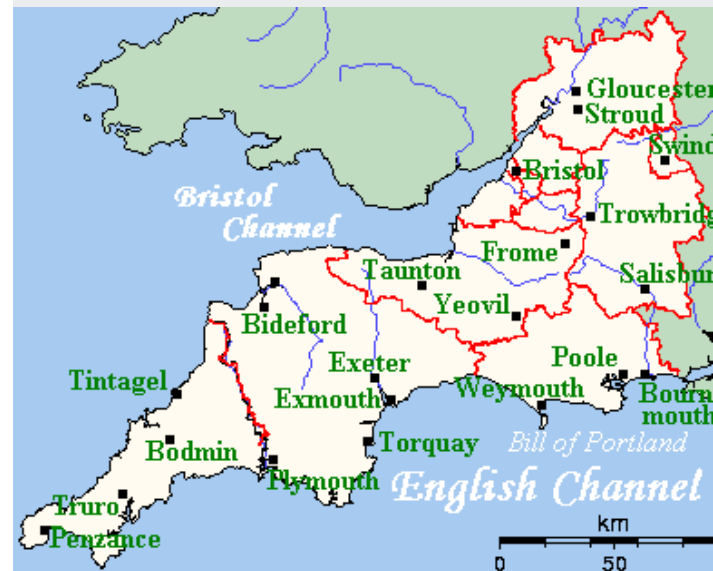
It was not only in the Caribbean and in the eastern Atlantic islands such as the Canaries and the Azores that piracy took place. Pirate ships occasionally targeted the Newfoundland fisheries in the northwestern Atlantic when they needed to pick up new crew members, but their vessels and cargoes were less attractive to pirates (even if fish was welcome as a way of restocking on board provisions for hungry crews.) From a pirate's point of view, the West African coast offered more attractive pickings in terms of potential boats to attack: ivory, gold, and enslaved people could be sold in the eastern Atlantic islands or taken to the American colonies. But African leaders controlled the trade in slaves in the African interior and at the port towns where transactions with Europeans occurred. Not only was the disease environment deadly for European traders (legal or not), they could also not do much to enforce their will without local arrangements.

It was more profitable for pirates to try to seize a ship carrying enslaved people once it left its African port or origin. When this occurred, the captured ships were usually taken to a friendly port where the enslaved people could be sold. This kind of raiding and illegal slave trading were how the famous English pirates (or imperial heroes, depending on your perspective...) Francis Drake and John Hawkins began their careers. They were not unusual in either their willingness to conduct illegal trade and commit acts of piracy, or to focus on the very lucrative trade in enslaved Africans, whose labor was already essential to the American colonies. Remember that the Dutch ship that sold enslaved people in Virginia in 1619, stole (or rather, pirated) the enslaved humans from a Portuguese slave trading ship, rather than trading for them directly in Africa.



England Takes Aim at the Spanish Atlantic: Slave Trading, Piracy, and Empire

In the mid-sixteenth century, in the absence of widespread support or funding for Atlantic ventures, England's crown turned to piracy to take a bite out of Spanish American wealth. In particular, the crown outsourced Atlantic endeavors to a handful of prominent southwestern English merchant families. The first Elizabethan pirates (called that because they were sponsored by Queen Elizabeth of England) were from England's West Country who had grown up around the sea: men such as John Hawkins, Francis Drake, Thomas Cavendish, and John Oxenham.



Map of England's West Country

These men, who would later be celebrated in England as imperial heroes, got their start as slave traders with an eye on Portugal's trading posts on the West African coast. Portuguese traders had been carrying African peoples from south the Sahara to markets in Europe and to Atlantic islands of the Azores, Madeira, São Tomé and the Canaries for over a century by the time Elizabeth was crowned queen of England. As the Caribbean developed in the sixteenth century as a growing market for enslaved African laborers, English traders and sailors sought to gain a piece of the increasingly lucrative Atlantic trade in human beings.



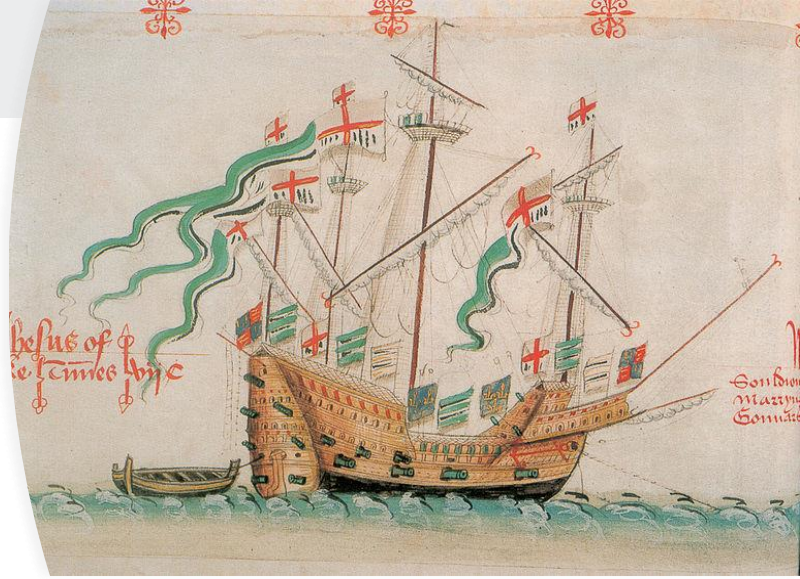
John Hawkins, Francis Drake, and England's Outsourcing of Empire to Pirates

John Hawkins was the son of a prominent West Country merchant family and a contraband trader who hoped to profit from the Spanish and Portuguese-dominated American and African trades. Hawkins aimed to bypass the Iberian monopolies and sell cargoes of Caribbean hides, sugar, ginger, and pearls wherever he wanted. Hawkins's shady dealings were well-known throughout communities in the Americas and in Europe, but given the growing demand for Atlantic riches and, in the Americas, supplies of sought-after commodities and enslaved laborers—he never lacked for trading partners.

Portrait of Sir John Hawkins, c. 1581

The Jesus of Lübeck, c. 1546

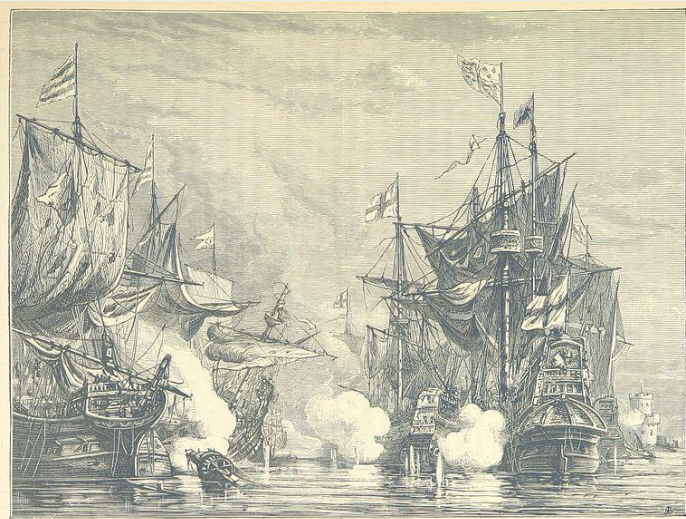
Wanting to break into the Portuguese slave trading monopoly, Hawkins set sail for the West African coast in 1562 from the port of Plymouth in England. The venture succeeded: he and his crew managed to seize some 300 enslaved West Africans who were already in Portuguese custody off Sierra Leone. Hawkins and his crew crossed the Atlantic with their enslaved cargo, hoping to sell them illegally along the north coast of Hispaniola. Spain's ambassador protested England's preparation of any voyage to the West Indies, including this one, but these diplomatic complaints fell on deaf ears: several high-ranking London merchants and English courtiers had invested in Hawkins's venture. Queen Elizabeth herself had donated a large carrack of 700 tons, the *Jesus of Lübeck*, to the Hawkins and his crew. This voyage was just the beginning of Hawkins's career: his second voyage in 1564 was even better organized. The Spanish and Portuguese were outraged but could do nothing to stop Hawkins or his influential supporters in England. Furthermore, Hawkins' success in selling illegally obtained enslaved cargo to Spanish colonists stands as an example of why imperial governments found it so difficult to prevent piracy: often, pirates were welcomed into colonial communities across linguistic, political, and religious divides as long as they were carrying goods that people wanted.



Unfortunately for Hawkins, his third Atlantic voyage was a gamble and a disaster. He was joined in this voyage by a distant relative named Francis Drake. Together they outfitted six ships along with the flagship carrack. Spanish diplomats protested as usual but nobody listened. After an initial scuffle with Spanish ships the port of Plymouth, Hawkins and his ships sailed for the Canary Islands and from there to the West African coast between Cape Verde and Sierra Leone where they stole captives from the Portuguese. The ships finally left the African coast with 470 slaves after three months, and probably only half to two-thirds of captives survived the Atlantic crossing, which turned into an unusually long 52-day trip to the Caribbean. After scuffles with hostile ships and settlers around Venezuela, Hawkins tried to trade at the port of Cartagena but he and his men were turned away. At this point, they made a fateful decision to try to sail for England, but unfortunately, it was July and hurricane season was at hand. Bad weather hit the boats in the Florida Straits and Hawkins's ships were separated in the storm. Those that survived limped around the Gulf of Mexico. Hawkins landed at the Spanish port of San Juan de Ulúa and after a hostage exchange (which was standard protection when ships needed to make landing in nominally hostile territory), Spanish officials gave the English pirates permission to fix their vessels.



Portrait of Sir Francis Drake, wearing the Drake Jewel at his waist given to him by Queen Elizabeth I



HAWKINS AT ST. JUAN DE ULÚA.

Illustration of the Battle of San Juan de Ulúa, 1568

While they were in port, however, the Spanish fleet arrived with the new viceroy of Mexico and a battle broke out. Only two ships—captained by Drake and Hawkins, respectively— made it out (and not the flagship). By the end of this 1568 disaster, Hawkins had lost three-quarters of its 400 man crew and the largest of its ships (as well as others). The failed voyage was such a blow to Hawkins’s reputation that in its wake, Francis Drake rose to prominence as the face of a predatory English empire in the last twenty years of the sixteenth century. Both Hawkins and Drake were celebrated as heroes in England and depicted in the press and in portraits as noblemen, not as what we imagine when we think of pirates. These contemporary images of men we know to have been pirates challenge us to adjust the visions we have of what a pirate looked like.

During Queen Elizabeth’s reign in England (1558-1603), the kind of maritime predation—piracy—practiced by Drake and Hawkins became associated with patriotism and Protestant service in the face of Catholic aggression. Many English saw attacking a Spanish or Portuguese ship as a religious act of service on behalf of the nation. The reliance of pirates to further England’s imperial aims was heightened by the fact that England still lacked an official navy and had no money to finance one, so the crown depended on private merchants or individuals to carry out overseas endeavors. The only payment for these officially-sanctioned pirates—known as privateers when they sailed with an official commission from a government—came in the form of the prizes (as seized enemy ships were known) they took on the high seas. Occasionally, particularly successful privateers were rewarded by the crown for the efforts with titles that advanced their social standing. Francis Drake, for example, was so successful as a crown-sanctioned pirate and explorer that he was knighted for his efforts by Queen Elizabeth in 1581.

Officially sponsored pirate ventures were not without risk for the crown, however. Sometimes pirates found the allure of a lucrative ship greater than the call of patriotic duty. For example, when England desperately fought off the Spanish Armada in 1588 (an enormous fleet of Spanish vessels sponsored by the Spanish crown to invade and conquer England), none other than Francis Drake served as the commander of one of the queen’s squadrons. Drake was supposed to lead other English vessels as they shadowed the Spanish fleet with the goal of attacking, but when he glimpsed a damaged Spanish ship, Drake decided that the allure of its riches was too great to ignore. He peeled off with his ship and seized it—and as a result, the English lost the chance to attack the Spanish fleet. Luckily for the English, foul weather and poor Spanish planning foiled the Armada—otherwise Drake’s pirate greed might have proved very costly.



Map and illustrations of Sir Francis Drake's later West Indian voyage of 1585-6



English ships fight the Spanish, 1588

Francis Drake and John Hawkins continued to attack settlements throughout the Spanish Caribbean into the 1590s, but on a joint voyage in 1595, their luck took a turn for the worse. Hawkins got sick and died during the voyage and the Spanish in Puerto Rico somehow heard that Drake was on his way and strengthened the defenses around the city of San Juan. Drake failed to take it and lost many men during the battle. He then sailed for the Isthmus of Panama where he hoped to lie in wait for the Spanish silver shipment, but he was not successful. Drake died not long afterwards from illness.

Over the course of their careers, men like Drake and Hawkins also performed essential duties for the English crown during times of warfare. During just three years (1589–1591) of the Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1603), 236 privateers sailed for England as a sort-of ragtag navy and captured 200 valuable prize enemy ships). These English maritime predators ranged all around the Atlantic, raiding up and down the Brazilian coast and around the Caribbean. When the Portuguese king died in 1580 and Portugal became part of the Spanish empire (until 1640), Portuguese shipping became vulnerable to attack by Spain's enemies such as the English and the Dutch. Privateers had a harder time attacking the big fleets carrying gold, silver, and sugar (which usually traveled in convoy and with the protection of warships), but smaller ships carrying privately-owned cargo were easier pickings. English pirates in these years frequently captured edible cargo of fish, wine, oil, olives, oranges and other items, as well as manufactured goods that could be sold easily such as a lumber, hides, textiles, and more.



Spanish Commander surrendering to Drake, 1588 (above); Bronze relief of Drake's burial at sea, 1596



Sometimes pirate ships also took their stolen cargo to European ports. In British waters, coastal piracy had been a problem long before a wave of pirates attacks in the 1560s, 1570s, and 1580s brought the politics of Atlantic empire close to home. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the Thames River, one of England's most crowded commercial waterways, saw an increase in pirate attacks and gang activity of all sorts. As was the case in the Caribbean (or in any ocean, for that matter), the success of piracy along the Thames River depended on the pirates' ability to collaborate successfully with communities in land: pirates have always needed safe harbors where they can restock their food and fresh water, repair their ships, and unload their stolen goods, whatever they may be.

It was through this type of collaboration that many other people—women and men alike—found themselves complicit in pirate activities without ever leaving shore. Acting independently or in association with others, women often played an important role as receivers of pirated goods, sometimes taking them from the ships to sell them in friendly shops or markets where people wouldn't ask many—if any—questions about the goods' origin. Women also provided pirates with a variety of services, from company (sexual or otherwise), to housing, to food. In exceptional cases, women actually set sail with pirates crews, but this kind of direct involvement in pirate voyages was far less common than their more passive engagement with piracy on land. The Irish Grainne O'Malley was the most famous of such women from this period, described in 1577 by an English official as "a most famous feminine sea captain" and memorialized in song and folklore to this day.



Grainne (Grace) O'Malley and Queen Elizabeth I meeting, 1593

As the sixteenth century came to a close, England's approach to pursuing Atlantic empire shifted in important ways. Queen Elizabeth established the East India Company in 1600 and this new trading company had royal support and license to carry out English business in eastern markets. Although the EIC (as the company was frequently referred to) employed many of the same violent techniques that Atlantic pirates had long relied on, it was a legal commercial venture with the official backing of the crown. The East India Company was so successful in bringing wealth back to England from lucrative markets in China, Southeast Asia, India and beyond that the crown began to turn away from a public support of privateering and toward commercial enterprise—even when these commercial dealings involved many of the same violent and coercive measures that maritime predators like Hawkins and Drake had used in early years. Although piracy had brought a great deal of profit back to England in the sixteenth century, while also hurting England's enemy Spain through the increased cost of defense and the loss of valuable goods, the dawn of the seventeenth century brought an end to this early stage of catch-as-catch-can piracy. But piracy in the Atlantic was not dead, just different: a new era of privateering and buccaneering had begun.

British East India Company Ships



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