

The Impact of Historiography: Piracy and Religion from 1590 to 1660

Kelley Littlepage

It is the year 1636 C.E., thousands of men and women awaken to the sound of a solitary bell. They pick themselves up off a stone floor, dispersed with straw and the occasional rodent scrambling across their feet, desperately searching for a scrap of food. The air is damp, and the only light in the rooms is a six by twelve inch slate, eight feet up the wall. A tattered, old wooden door, made of the remnants of a wrecked ship, opens, and three small loaves of rye bread are handed to every person in the room - they are the only subsistence of the long day of manual labor, building the very ships that have enslaved them. The only comfort to be found comes from the words of a Christian preacher, who is allowed to preach the gospel to his fellow Christians from his cell. Those that can write, send letters home to England, begging for the charity of family members to secure a quick release from the confines of Barbary captivity.¹

In England, the government was desperate for funds and thus had none to send, but amidst all of this chaos, an anonymous suggestion was made to King Charles I: that captives should be exchanged for British prostitutes at a rate of one prostitute for six sailors.² Though the suggestion was never implemented, it is reassuring to know the value of a good sailor, or more accurately, a good British whore. John Dunton observes that British women were especially prized among the Barbary States, entering into the Sultan's harem and one even became the favorite wife of the King of Morocco.³ This was the atmosphere experienced by those who fell victim

to the Barbary pirates, for captives were often a more lucrative source of income than the cargo.

The classic interpretation of piracy between 1590 and 1660 in the Mediterranean was that it was an outlet for religious animosity, pitting Christians and Muslims against one and other. Piracy was in simplest form the remnants of the Crusades. For the Christians, piracy was a Machiavellian technique to molest Eastern shores for their inability to recapture the Holy Land. For the Muslims it was a means to exact retribution for the Crusades. Unlike most of my predecessors, my thesis/Capstone will argue the contrary that piracy was driven by economics and politics and was not constrained by a dichotomy of religion and ethnicity.⁴ From 1590 to 1660 piracy in the Mediterranean surged to new heights as Christians and Muslims jointly engaged in piratical acts against rival economic and political powers despite their faith. During this time period, the Barbary States, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire engaged in mutually beneficial acts of piracy and forged alliances to surmount the political power of

⁴ In any study of the commerce and mercantile practices of this period, it is crucial to define the terminology of piracy and to identify the specific ethnic groups engaged in such practices. A corsair attacks vessels belonging only to countries that are enemies of his own; where states support piratical acts without publicly admitting to it. (Wolf, 113) Corsairs were often thought of as fighting a crusade or jihad through economic means, like the Knights of St John in Malta, who molested the Moors and Turks or like the British, who molested the Catholic coasts of Spain. These two examples revolve around Mediterranean and European politics rather than differences of religion. Sir Francis Drake, a reputed pirate, was a corsair, "though she lent Queen's ships to his later ventures and took a royal share of the profits, Elizabeth I was always quick to deny any knowledge of Drake's plans or any responsibility for his behavior" (Mattingly, 84). In contrast, pirates "were patently contemptuous of all rulers and state authority" (Hebb, 9). Pirates answered to no government authority, and would "attack indiscriminately the ships of any nation" who cross their path; their "sole object was loot." By the seventeenth century the need for corsairs had diminished as alternative diplomatic relations became prevalent. Corsairs naturally turned to piracy, where they could perform the same duties they had before under new leadership.

¹ This story was created by including descriptions of individuals living in captivity from the following sources: George Carteret, *Carteret's Barbary Voyage of 1638* ed. P. Penrose (Philadelphia: 1929); Robert Blake, *The Letters of Robert Blake together with supplementary documents* ed. J.R. Powell (London: Navy Records Society, 1937); and *Piracy and Diplomacy in Seventeenth Century North Africa* ed. Pennell, C. R. (London: Associated University Press, 1989).

² State Papers, England, 1635 16/13/f.9.

³ John Dunton, *A True Journal of the Sally Fleet, with the proceedings of the voyage* (London: Nicholes, 1637).

the Spanish and the economic might of the Venetian merchants.

Though an extensive review of primary and secondary historical literature, my thesis/Capstone paper will establish that economics and politics were the primary promoters of piracy in the Mediterranean. The historical literature consulted will include world renown academics, such as Edwards Said, Bernard Lewis, and Fernand Braudel, and the leaders of historiographical schools of thought, including Sir Robert Lambert Playfair and Sir Godfrey Fisher. The primary source material is predominately journals, official government documents, and memoirs from ambassadors. The final product will contain a discussion of the role of religion and a dissection of economic and political relations between the Ottoman Empire, the Barbary States, and Britain.⁵ While my thesis/Capstone paper focuses on the history of the time period and the interpretation of sources, this paper will concentrate on a discussion of previous historiographical approaches including Orientalism and the significance of my work to the historiography.

Historiography is the study of the way in which a historical event has been written and the changing interpretations of those events, rather than the actual studying of past events. A historiographical approach is the school of thought (of historiography) that a historian belongs to. Each school of thought has its own methodologies, theories, and patterns for studying, collecting, and interpreting history. Each school of thought privileges certain types of sources over others and encourages certain types of theories over others. For example the revisionist school of

⁵ Like the terminology of piracy, the individual ethnic groups that engage in piracy were frequently and mistakenly lumped together. The term Barbary was derived from the original Berber inhabitants who were Moors, not Turks. To most of the West, these two terms held little distinction: both were Muslim, both were believed to be the militant enemies of Christendom; the Moors because they were fierce pirates and corsairs and the Turks because they were the Ottoman invaders of Eastern Europe. The Moors were North Africans, were typically Muslim or Christian by birth with medium to fair skin color, and inhabit the Barbary States. The Barbary States were satellite states of the Ottoman Empire located on the coast of North Africa and include Algiers, Sale, Tunis, and Tripoli. The Turks, on the other hand, were the citizens of the Ottoman Empire, raise from birth to be Muslims and can trace their ancestry back to the Arabian Peninsula.

thought, to which I ascribe in this paper, argues that facts and historical information are like pieces of a puzzle. The pieces of the puzzle never change, but they can be rearranged to create different pictures based upon interpretation. In historiography, revisionism is considered to be the most controversial or extreme approach because pieces of the puzzle are often arranged in radically or extremely different ways than has been previously done. There are dozens of schools of thought including the Marxist approach, post modernism, metahistory, neo-revisionist, etc. and over the next few pages this paper will discuss the major historiographical groups that have influenced the way in which piracy in the seventeenth century Mediterranean Sea is written.

Prior to the late nineteenth century there were no firmly defined schools of thought and authors and movements were defined not by titles, but by common principles and conclusions. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Sir Robert Lambert Playfair and his work *The Scourge of Christendom* defined the popular approach to studying piracy in the Mediterranean.⁶ Piracy was deemed the profession of Muslim “heathens” who plagued the shores of good Christian countries throughout the West until imperialistic powers were able to conquer and “civilize” the East. Playfair, like so many of his contemporaries, customarily provides accounts of the Barbary States that cease abruptly with capitulations of the city of Algiers in 1830 and present a conventional happy ending, consisting of the deliverance of the Mediterranean from the scourge that had lasted for centuries into the hands of the civilized Westerners.¹ That Playfair choose *The Scourge of Christendom* as the title of his work signifies the religious connotations of his argument and the animosity that Playfair, a British consul to Algiers in the 1860’s, felt towards those he was supposed to foster a relationship with. Playfair’s image of the pirate was a Muslim or a Christian convert to Islam, as if Islam were the corrupting force driving good men to evil ends. For Playfair piracy was not centralized solely around the premise of

⁶ Sir Robert Lambert Playfair, *The Scourge of Christendom* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1884).

¹ Sir Godfrey Fisher, *Barbary Legend* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1957), pg 3.

religious differences, but rather that heathens and uncivilized nations engaged in it.

The following significant pattern emerges in the 1950's in Fisher's *Barbary Legend*.² Fisher belongs to the structuralist school of thought. Structuralist explores the inter-relationships to determine how meaning is produced within a culture. For historians structuralism usually involves the comparison of two cultures who define themselves based upon their relationship to each other or by rejecting the culture of each other. For Fisher the image of the East was falsely and intentionally belittled to inflate the image of superiority in the West. Fisher argues that "the alleged addiction of the peoples of North Africa to piratical attacks on southern Europe and the inclusion of them in the term 'Barbary pirates' appear to be merely a corollary to the nineteenth-century concept of a rigid dividing-line in the Mediterranean between Christians and Moslems, or between Western civilization and oriental or African barbarianism."³ Fisher's argument is a direct rebuttal to the eighteenth and nineteenth century trend; he explores piracy as a Christian phenomenon, not as the profession of Muslim heathens.

The Annales school began in the late 1920's in France, but did not have widespread popularity until the 1960's through Braudel's masterpiece *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.⁴ The Annales school of thought stresses the importance of geography, social histories, and sociological approaches to the study of history while downplaying the importance of war, diplomacy, and politics. Braudel was the first author to argue that piracy was perpetrated by Europeans, Moors, and Turks against any enemy, whether foreign or domestic, and of any faith. Piracy was the tool to combat differences of religion, political animosity, and cultural discrepancies.

Fisher was ahead of his times and it is not until the late 1970's in Edward Said's famous work *Orientalism*, that his conclusions reemerged and

produced widespread controversy and discussion.⁵ Said argues that the idea of us versus them, has existed to a greater extent in the minds of orientalists, than has actually occurred in history. While Said does challenge the archetypal Western standards of thought, "most historians, even those who are citizens of Ottoman successor states, feel more comfortable with western European than with Ottoman sources because they are trained in Western techniques, models, and thought processes."⁶ Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a critique of the application of Western values and standards on a non-Western culture.

The concept known as Orientalism focuses on imperialism and the relationship between the dominating Western power and subjugated "Orient" culture. Said's work describes a bias against non-Western peoples, who have been classified as the oriental "Other". Said's work represents a challenge to the academic world to look beyond the predominate biases and assumptions, for if the historian fails to come to grips with use of dominate western models in the discourse of the "Other", then the historian is participating the continuing conquest and subjugation of the culture, despite their intentions. Said argues that since the eighteenth century, and perhaps even arguably before, Western culture has fabricated the image of the Orient. This image reveals more about the illusions and imaginations of the West, than it does about the culture of the "Other". The "'Ottoman peril' lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger" and the need for an inflated European sense of superiority in order to defeat them.⁷ The existence of the Orient serves the interests of the West, it is constructed by and observed in its relation to the West. The Orient is the image of everything inferior to the West. Orientalism is the methodology of viewing the Orient in this inferior position and transcribing this viewpoint into an academic or intellectual discourse. Western historian tend to judge the Ottoman Empire based upon Western standards, but it is also true that

² Sir Godfrey Fisher, *Barbary Legend* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1957)

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* vol. I & II (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973).

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

⁶ Daniel Goffman, *Britons in the Ottoman Empire, 1642-1660* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 11.

⁷ Said, 59-60.

historians apply these Western standards more rigorously to the “Other”, precisely because they are separate. As the “Other”, the need to prove themselves as an equal requires twice the effort. Western society judges everything according to their own standards, not allowing for great disparities in taste.

Orientalists writing from the eighteenth century through World War II tended to be generalists.⁸ He/she made general theories about the Orient as if all of the Orient could universally be explained by simple one size fits all answers. The generalization that something was Islamic did not account for the variances from one state to another in the Middle East. Generalizations were typically made about Islamic law, Islamic culture, Islamic literature, etc. Concepts or practices found in one nation in the Middle East were therefore viewed by colonial powers as typical of all nations in the Orient. This is like visiting France today and assuming that the strict separation of church and state is prevalent in all of Europe, when in fact countries like Germany have no separation of church and state to this day.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* became one of the key works to the school of thought known as post colonialism. Post colonialism strived to overcome the effects of imperialism and the one-sided histories created by authors like Playfair. Post colonialism endeavors to come to grips with the legacy of colonialism and the subsequent struggle for a new identity, with the removal of colonial rule. In the historical arena, post colonialism is concerned with the misguided acquisition of knowledge about the indigenous culture, either to inflate the image of the colonizers superiority or to view the culture merely through the prism of the colonizers standards. Post colonialism and Said’s work have influenced countless modern day authors.

My thesis is significant not for its conclusions, which are not unlike those drawn by my predecessors, but for the time and effort I have taken to reevaluate the motivations behind seventeenth century piracy in the Mediterranean. This attempt at a reevaluation makes sense once we add Said’s *Orientalism* to the historical discourse. Historians have long been taught to sift out corrupted or

illegitimate accounts of events. Said emphasizes that interpretive works advocating Western modes of thought should also be held up to scrutiny or completely distanced from affecting conclusions. The most popularly read primary source documents on piracy at this time were written by individuals who spent less than six months in either the Ottoman Empire or the Barbary States or were written by missionaries who were in perpetual conflict with Islam. My research is based upon a study of government documents and primary sources written by individuals who lived in the Ottoman Empire or the Barbary States for years. Over the past few months I have sifted through hundreds of primary sources looking for sources written by individuals who spent years living in the Ottoman Empire and/or the Barbary States, who experienced the Eastern culture, and who were specifically involved in piracy and/or its effects. Historians have allowed this culture clash between East and West to dominate the their discussions of the Mediterranean. In the process, piracy in the Mediterranean has been falsely epitomized as a culture clash between East and West. But according to the sources I consulted, 17th century piracy did not serve as an outlet for this clash; rather, it is better understood in relation to political and economic conflicts between sovereign states .

My capstone research has led me to challenge the archetypal relations assumed by historians, predominately that religion was the motivating factor to engage in piracy between 1590 and 1660. Through a careful selection and examination of primary and secondary sources, I have attempted to study historical events in a manner culturally, ethnically, and religiously sensitive to all sides. Following Said’s advice, I have tried to balance Western sources with Eastern sources, as well as to direct my focus away from sources that contain definite political and religious biases. Finally, I have framed my discussion of piracy as a function of political and economic relations between sovereign states rather than as a function of opposing cultural entities. How historians approach history is as important as the history they attempt to study. It is not merely enough to study history; the methods through which history is studied must be constantly questioned in the search for an improved methodology.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

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