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AN ASPECT OF THE LIFE OF PIRATES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, A HISTORICAL STUDY FROM ENGLISH DOCUMENTS

Abstract:

The pirates in the Indian Ocean greatly threatened the trade activities that passed by. They were concentrated on a few islands in the Indian Ocean. From these islands, they sailed out to overtake ships and then came back to these islands loaded with booty looted from these ships. Since the English people had settled in India and established the East India Company, England came into conflict with these pirates in defending its trade and its position as a great sea power that was threatened by the predations of these pirates.

English records documented many aspects of the life of pirates at that time. This research aims at shedding light on aspects of the life of pirates on the islands of the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century. It also aims to show their way of life, their affairs and the nature of their activities during the period of their settlement in these islands. It is an attempt to understand this period in greater detail and to explore historical documents that may help to differentiate between reality and imagination regarding the life of pirates and related matters.

This study is composed of several sections:

The introduction discusses pirates in the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century and the reasons that their activity flourished. This introduction also indicates the places where they settled in the Indian Ocean and why they chose these places. Finally, the text discusses their activities during their settlement of these islands.

The study reaches the following conclusions: the pirates chose Madagascar and Mauritius and other islands in the Indian Ocean as places to settle due to the special features of their location and the lack of powerful neighbors to threaten them. These places were the destinations of pirates of every nationality. They considered these islands to be shelters to return to after attacking trading ships and loading up with looted merchandise which they quickly sold here and there or they might travel to sell it in the western Indian islands. The pirates often carried off hostages with them to these islands when they felt threatened or were chased. Pirates faced some threats especially when danger escalated and the East India Company began to pursue them to their hiding places.

Keywords:

Indian Ocean, Piracy, Pirates, East India Company

Introduction⁽¹⁾

The Portuguese managed to reach India and establish their commercial centres there in 1498, opening the doors for other Europeans. Following their lead, the Dutch, French, and English people established their commercial centres as well. Because of the escalated interest, the economical importance of the Indian Ocean increased. Traders from all corners of the world sailed to the new market to make their fortunes in the Indian Ocean. The pirates followed this wealth and attacked many of the passing ships. Both local and foreign pirates, from Europe and the Americas, trailed the loaded ships as they made their way through the Indian Ocean. (Alkhashil, 2015).

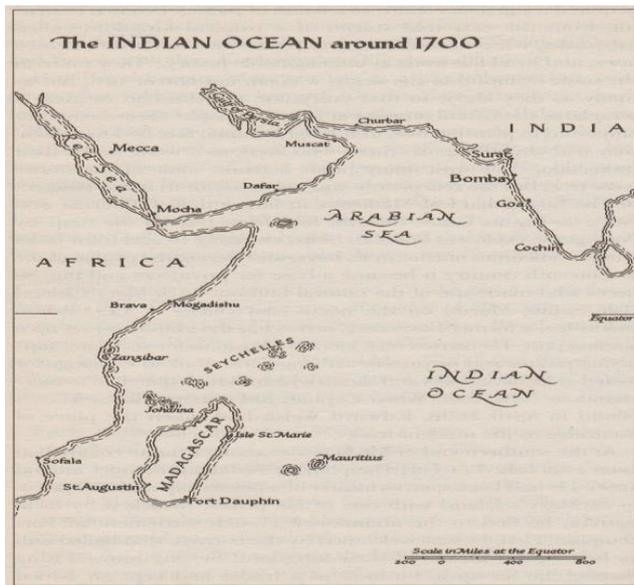
The pirates travelling from distant places, such as Europe and the Americas, found temporary settlements as they initiated their raids in the Indian Ocean. Some stories and books exaggerate, depicting the lives of these pirates in the east. They portray the east as a fascinating and extravagant place, with the pirates living excessive lives in protected fortifications among their followers and guards, multiple wives, and children. They tell stories of slave ownership—servants taking care of their farms and interests—and also depict the pirates as wearing looted, precious jewels and clothes (Cordingly, 2010:p. 173). This image is far from the truth. On the contrary, documents and books recording their time, news, and activities show us a different aspect. They recorded their attacks on ships and their clashes with authority, reflecting various aspects of their lives.

Where pirates settled in the Indian Ocean and reasons for choosing the locations:

The pirates who came from distant places looked to settle in places to process their activity in the Indian Ocean. They concentrated their operations close to the entrances of the Red Sea, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Eden Gulf, where ships went in and out loaded with precious goods, seeds, and money exchanged between India and the Arabic Peninsula, so pirates started to look for places close to these locations. In this ocean, they found some islands worth inhabiting. In particular, they chose the islands having all of their required conditions, such as being close to their targets, well-positioned beaches, and mild climates throughout the year. They also searched for places where they could find water and various cheap foods. They were encouraged by the lack of British authority among the islands (Course, 1966:pp.6-7).. The places pirates chose to settle in were: Madagascar; Antanavoula: the east coast of Madagascar; Antongil (Rantar Bay): northeast coast of Madagascar; and Comoro Islands: on the north side of Madagascar, the most important of them being Comoro, Johanna, Mayotta, and Mohilla. The French settled there in 1642 at Port Dauphin, St. Mary Island, an island next to the northeast coast of Madagascar and Mauritius (Grey, 1933:p. 51; Cordingly, 2010:p. 173; Course, 1966:pp. 9-10).

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Map No(1) Indian Ocean Islands



Source: (Cordingly, 2010:p. 174).

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the European people gradually settled in these islands while they completely settled in the east. These islands were an important station, connecting the east with the west. From these islands, travellers were provided with water, food, weapons, and other provisions needed for their journeys. Also, travellers went there for recreation, rest, curing themselves, and maintenance and repair of their ships. In this way, the area flourished economically. Gradually, pirates, who were attracted by the news of the enormous trade in the east, started to settle in different places on these islands. With time, their numbers increased, and they lived there on the basis of mutual benefit with local residents. Some of the residents indulged in trading and selling of looted goods. They also provided pirates with basic needs, such as weapons and provisions, as well as what they required for sailing. They traded slaves—a practice which pirates promoted greatly (Grey, 1933:p. 51).

Information shows that Adam Baldrige, a pirate who sailed many times in the east seas, was the first one to settle in this area and take shelter in it. His fortification was on Anta Marie Island. He succeeded in providing pirates with weapons, men, and provisions. He also provided them with shelter during their visits to the island. Gradually, this area became a destination for similar entrepreneurs or those who benefited from his service (Grey, 1933:p. 52; Course, 1966:p. 11; David, 2010:p. 173).

An outline of pirates' activities on these islands:

Pirates who settled on these islands lived under hard conditions, full of fear and worry. They were of many nationalities. They were foreigners. They survived by looting and

stealing. They lived in different groups, connected by only one factor: the search for treasures. There were leaders and followers. Leaders always faced new competitors, and in this way, there were many disputes that always ended in bloody brawls. It turned into survival of the fittest, with the winner taking the booty and more followers. On the other hand, their relations with local residents were based on mutual benefit. In some cases, disputes aroused between the two parties ended in bloody conflicts. Also, they were subject to fatal diseases in a new climate (David, 2010:p. 175).

It is well known that the lives of pirates on these islands were unstable. These lands were used by pirates to attack the ships crossing the Indian Ocean. They also used them as shelters after selling parts of their booty to the traders on the islands and taking some to sell on the western islands and coasts of the Americas (Grey, 1933:pp. 78, 87). In general, they stayed there temporarily. Their stays on these islands was relative to their activities. This life could not enable them to settle in the way the stories depict.

During their stays on the islands, pirates were occupied with selling their booty so that they would not be arrested for holding it. They sold or bartered their treasures and took what remained to far away markets on the American coast. They feared going back to England with eastern products because they could be labelled as pirates and arrested (Grey, 1933:p. 78). They also spent their time maintaining their ships, which were harmed while attacking their victims. In many cases, pirates kidnapped ships to these islands in an effort to end any pursuits by other ships. Once there, they dealt with their victims in a brutal way. They burned them, cut their noses off, killed them, starved them, or left them in the open air to die under severe conditions (BL:IOR/E/3/52, No. 6325; Grey, 1933:p. 72). In some cases, they kidnapped ships to the islands. An example of this was in 1635, when pirates kidnapped an Indian ship to Souktara and forced the travellers to get out. They searched inside the ship for seven days. The travellers were subjected to the brutality of pirates, forcing them to tell where they hid their money and belongings in the ship (Grey, 1933:pp. 82-83).

These islands became the epicentre for piracy. They were important service stations in the Indian Ocean where pirates came to be provided with weapons and ammunition or to repair their ships. An example: William Keed came to Madagascar to repair his ship after it had started leaking while he was capturing one of the Indian ships (BL: IOR/H/36:pp. 450-454).

Piracy was originally backed by European authorities from the beginning of the modern age, when some European kings gave sailors permission to attack their enemies' ships and called these sailors privateers or buccaneers (Ward, 1974:p. 147), but after the Europeans settled in India and their commercial interests grew, it became dangerous and threatened European trade, so pirates could no longer sail legally. If caught, they were arrested and tried on charges of piracy. Their punishment was imprisonment, lashes, or being tattooed with the letter 'P'. Sometimes pirates were hanged. The East India Company

was assigned the task of following and arresting pirates in its capacity as the British authority in that area. Consequently, their settlement places in the Indian Ocean islands were targeted by the company patrols.

The East India Company issued its instructions to allocate ships to follow pirates and chase them to the islands where they settled. These ships were charged with the inspection of the ports, to arrest them, and to confiscate their ships and property (BL: IOR/H/36:pp. 332-4; Grey, 1933:p. 84). Their frequent visits to these places made it easy for The East India Company to follow them and get to know their names. Through collecting information about them, it was easy for the company to limit their activity and catch them, like what happened when the names of Henry Evry's men were listed with his ship, *Fancy*, after they attacked a Moghul ship carrying pilgrims at Bab Al Mandab port (BL: IOR/H/36:p. 196). And as happened with Captain Kidd after his attack on the Muslim ship, patrols started to search for them in their island locations with the help of many resources on the islands. As soon as pirates heard that the patrols were coming to their locations, they quickly left and escaped to the western Indian islands and the American coast, but they were not safe, since the British marine records reported having arrested them (BL: IOR/H/36:pp. 448-9; Grey, 1933:p. 112).

The following two documents show details of the lives of these pirates:

The first document (BL: IOR/E/3/52, No. 6325) is entitled *Information about the Ship Taken by Pirates in 1695*, and it was released in December 1696. It is a letter submitted to Sam Ansily, the head of the English people in Swart. This document tells a story of pirates kidnapping a Moghulian ship called *The Muddasa*. Owned by a noble Indian trader, his name was mentioned in the document as Al Mola Abdulghafor. While the ship was sailing back from the Arab Peninsula in 1695, it was attacked by pirates at an area mentioned in the document as Ras Daman. The document pointed out that these pirates were of different nationalities. Fearing that other ships could pass them while they were looting the unfortunate ship, the pirates decided to kidnap it to Comoros, near Madagascar. Here, the writer starts to mention details about the pirates on these islands.

The second document (BL: IOR/H/36:pp. 332-334) was sent by Robert Blackburn, secretary of the East India Company (1666-1702). Dated March 1697, it includes a display and a discussion of the best ways to deter pirates after their increased attacks, harming the English people and their trade. One of the ways suggested in this document was to send two English military ships to follow and chase pirates to their locations in Madagascar and the surrounding islands. The explanation shows that the pirates coming from the Americas and England stayed there after returning from their raids on the Mongolian ships and other trade ships crossing the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is also mentioned that they stayed in settlements and fortifications. The fact that they were so heavily guarded reflects their anxiety and constant anticipation of needing to hide or run. Their locations

included Comoros, Mauritius, and Madagascar. Pirates stayed there several months and then left with their booties to the Americas to sell them there.

The writer of this document follows their time staying on the islands, then leaving to raid, and then returning to Europe and the Americas. He points out it is not difficult to get intelligence information about the pirates on these islands. It is worth mentioning that they always recruited new members while they stayed on these islands.

The two documents contain important and fresh information about how the pirates harmed the East India company. It also mentions that the East India company was keen to arrest them, and it describes their lifestyles, movements, the places they targeted, and the ways they treated their victims. This information is distinguished because it was submitted by a person of authority at the time of the pirates.

Conclusion and main results:

We see that foreign pirates settled on many islands in the Indian Ocean starting at the beginning of the seventeenth century. They came from various countries in Europe and the Americas. They found that ships sailing between the Indian and the Arab Peninsulas were valuable prospective targets, so they were intent on watching and attacking them. Their lives on these islands were not lives of luxury. On the contrary, they dealt with much instability. They indulged in illegal actions, causing them to be targeted as criminals and treated thusly. They were chased, and if caught, arrested and punished severely.

The attacks on the ships in the Indian Ocean afflicted many people, causing a lot of harm. These attacks threatened the lives of the Europeans in India, especially the English people, so the East India company was given the responsibility to follow the pirates and arrest them. The pirates were targeted by the authorities. They were constantly worried and preparing for quick escapes.

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