

Stefan Eklöf Amirell & Leos Müller (red.), *Persistent piracy: Maritime violence and state-formation in global historical perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014). 232 s.

Within the memory of man piracy has constituted a recurring phenomenon and in some cases even a persistent problem. At a conference on piracy control in Amsterdam several years ago one of the presenters, an experienced tugboat captain who had just given a harrowing tale of an attack in the Melaka Straits, ironically concluded in front of a rather embarrassed audience that thanks heavens in that region piracy had been brought to a sudden stop by the Tsunami of 2007: according to him the gigantic waves had simply swept away the pirates with their boats. How wrong he turned out to be. Report has it that piracy in the Melaka Straits has recently more or less returned to its former status. This raises the question what causes some types of piracy to be such a persistent problem?

In 2012 this vexed question was posed to a forum of specialists at a conference held in Stockholm. Although the organizers of the conference admitted that it would be impossible to formulate an all-enveloping master narrative that covers all types of piracy, varying from slave raiding and ransoming to private prize taking by privateers provided with letters of marque, they worked out a shared conceptual framework with a common set of research questions and invited a dozen leading scholars in the field to apply these theses to their subjects of choice. As a result the present publication is, rather than a mere collection of conference papers, a well-organized volume in which the authors have attempted to formulate and compare answers to the same set of questions. As such it is a very useful addition to the existing literature on the subject.

The history of persistent forms of piracy in Asian waters is covered by Robert Antony and James Chin on 17th and 18th Chinese piracy and James Warren on 19th century piracy in the Sulu zone, subjects which have earlier been covered by these area specialists in well received monographs. Philip Souza deals with the origins and the evolution of the concept of piracy in the writings of Greek and Latin authors of classical antiquity, inevitably referring to Cicero's famous dictum that "the pirate is the common enemy of all mankind", and Neil Price in a very lucid essay dissects to the bones the origins and development of the Viking expansion overseas. Joint contributions on corsairing in the Mediterranean by Wolfgang Kaiser and Guillaume Calafat and on British privateering in the Atlantic by David J. Starkey and Matthew Mc Carthy address forms of illegal and legal raiding in the Early Modern Western world. In a concluding article Stig Jarle Hansen focuses on the present problem of Somalian piracy in the Indian Ocean in the context

of such issues as security and state-formation in the western coastal regions of the Indian Ocean.

The editors suggest that apart from its persistent nature several general characteristics can be identified in enduring forms of maritime raiding: land bases from which the raids are launched, access to markets where the booty can be sold, activities of scale and relatively complex forms of organisation that might even result in embryonic state formation. This theorizing reminded me of Eric Hobsbawm's classical study on social bandits (1969).

Indeed throughout this volume the importance of states in the institutionalisation of piratical activities is stressed. If the raiding societies of Homeric Greece, Viking Scandinavia or the Southeast Asian port principalities were representative of embryonic state formation, James Chin very convincingly argues that three succeeding generations of the Zheng family created a veritable kingdom in Taiwan during the chaotic period of the transfer of power from Ming to Qing in China. In the case of the Tay Son rebellion described by Robert Anthony piracy rather seems to have been an auxiliary than the prime moving force towards the establishment of a new dynasty in Vietnam. In both cases these piratical activities occurred against the background of a transfer of dynastic power on the mainland. In this collection of essays we hear very little about the victims and the experiences of those who suffered the piratical raids and attacks. Yet Kaiser and Calafat pay much attention to the pacification of piracy and show how the Mediterranean became a testing ground for developing remedies against the endemic corsairing of the "Barbary States" along the North African coast. Initially the Muslim corsairs were quite successful at playing the various European states off against each other, but the latter finally eradicate the "common enemy".

If the Dutch tugboat captain dared to speak of the tsunami in terms of a blessing in disguise, because it had at least temporarily done away with the pirate attacks, Hansen shows in his concluding essay how the aftermath of the tsunami may actually have contributed to the rise in piracy in Somalia. Here the pirates got the best of the natural disaster: for their piratical pursuits they gladly took advantage the brand new, fast vessels that the Swedish government had bestowed on the Somali fishermen whose boats had been carried away by the tsunami.

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