Modern Age Piracy in the Arabian Gulf:
Rereading Narrative of Hegemony

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Abstract

A spur for this text was the rereading of a seminal work, written by ruler of the emirate of Sharjah, on the British accusations of piracy by the Qawasim during the modern period. The book represents an important advance in historiography, challenging a narrative according to which the East India Company had needed assistance against the aggression of supposed pirates in the Gulf area, during the transition from the 18th to the 19th century. This also recalls a number of similar allegations that were used since Antiquity, in many previous occurrences, expressing standard forms of propaganda, usually in order to argue for the swift deployment of military assets. It might be useful to provide an overview of comparable historical situations, in which claims of piracy functioned as a political spin in larger attempts for hegemony.

Keywords: Modern Period; Gulf Piracy; Maritime Security; Qawasim

Introduction

More than three decades ago, the publication of H.H. Sultan Muhammad Al-Qasimi’s “The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf” stimulated new discussions on the use of written sources on the modern Gulf history, and in particular, that of British documents on British anti-piracy actions. The precise events led to a major naval operation in the Gulf area, stretching from Qatar to the shores of Oman but ultimately focused on Ras al-Khaimah, centred on the activities of what British sources call “the Arab chief’s of the pirate coast”. In practice, this meant taking on the confederacy of Qawasim tribes, with whom East India Company ships had been engaging on multiple occasions.

The absence of a fundamentally ideological intent in ending piracy in itself, which had been the declared purpose of the entire endeavour, therefore strikes as somewhat surprising. One straightforward case argument is the apparently smooth and successful collaboration with Rahman bin Jabbar, well known in Western sources as the most prominent pirate in the Gulf (and recently portrayed in a historical novel; see Al Mahmoud, 2011), after a period of tension between both parties. The difference here was that he also protected British trade, and so one may conclude that...
the Company, and what might be called British public opinion in general, had no issue with piracy, unless it affected their interests (Bose, 2006).

Theoretical Overview

Circumstances seem indeed more of a geostrategic nature, a situation with plenty of comparable, albeit less well documented precedents throughout history. Ancient commercial exploits focusing the Arabian Peninsula have been long studied, from the strictly literary viewpoint (e.g. through the Periplus Maris Erythraei; Casson, 1989), counting on several historical essays, and especially the growing number of archaeological data that is becoming steadily available, partly based on a few older, comprehensive systematizations (e.g. Potts, Naboodah & Hellyer, 2003). The Red Sea in particular has been a longstanding case study for Roman-Arab commercial tensions, with classical authors; however, becoming vague and fundamentally unreliable on issues such as ethnic boundaries, federative allies and especially the internal evolution of regional economies. The Palmyrene Arabs, the Sabaens, the kingdom of Ma’in and later that of Himyar, and their own colonies and trade posts interacted over time in ways impossible to detail. Parthian-Sassanian pressures seem nonetheless to have led to a few local efforts in protecting the Red Sea and the Gulf area, an image backed by classical and especially some Chinese sources (Sidebotham, 1996). Both Byzantine and early Arabic texts mention piracy with little religious or ethnical specificity (Rotman, 2009).

Despite all this, the claim that piracy in the Gulf was a long-established tradition, since Assyrian times, has become a sort of a truism, based on fragmentary evidence such as the medieval accounts that provide a glimpse at people using the multifaceted dhow as a cargo, pearl diving, slaving and pirate vessel (Agius, 2005). Common imagination still depicts a somewhat romantic image of the Gulf pirate, and on the other hand, it is true that part of the regional economy did consecutively depend on irregular sea and port control. For centuries, ships sailing through the Gulf to Basra were regularly attacked and navigation was full of perils (Al-Khalifa & Rice, 1993). One might however, wonder if the term “pirate” is accurately employed in this context for pre-modern times, and even whether this designation fits people defending their trade from foreign exploitation (Nyrop et al., 1977), as arguably was the case against British or Portuguese efforts to secure maritime routes with India.

In theory, two useful and crucial concepts may be found since Antiquity, namely the fact that terminology itself is one-sided, in the sense that in the ancient world a pirate would not call himself a pirate, and second, that there might often be little practical difference between piracy and actual warfare (Souza, 1999). Early modern state intervention, for instance the extensive Ottoman-Venetian anti-piracy laws of the 15th to the 17th centuries, deals with legitimate corsairing as well but did not stop, or even enlarged, the number of legal accusations of piracy regarding strategic ports on Crete, Rhodes, and the wider eastern Mediterranean. Implicit in these laws is the proactivity to engage in naval battles to re-establish lawful order. It becomes clear that despite the pact many tried to deceive Ottoman authorities and
attack Venetian vessels describing them as pirates (White, 2012). This fact alone bears witness of a quite fluid interpretation on piracy, as these actions were sometimes sanctioned in courts of law. In strict terms, the historical principle of jurisdiction over pirates has more to do with the place than with the crimes, which are no more than common robbery. The high sea would prevent any given governmental authority to engage them, contrary to what would happen on dry land (Kelly, 2013). History, however, shows a multiplicity of cases in which pirates become essentially land-based and plunder cities and sometimes wider regions. Roman principles famously determine that pirates are a common enemy of all (Cic. Of. 3,39), and that they are to be denied access to harbours, as well as fought against.

Comparativeness of a Case Study

Perhaps the first example that comes to mind for the classical period would be the prestige gained by Pompey in his very successful campaigns against Cilician pirates. It is true that there was a recurring problem, and that Roman public opinion had become extremely sensitive to these attacks affecting daily life even on the via Appia (Dio 36, 21-22, Plut. Pomp. 24). Brigands and external aggressors were however, not new to the picture, and what did change was the fact that Rome was being cut off mainly from its grain supply, a point Cassius Dio is well aware of (Dio 26, 23). Public opinion provided the necessary support for Pompey to be appointed with a military command in a consuetudinary questionable way, but in any case confirmed by the plebeian council. The price of cereal decreased immediately (Plut. Pomp. 26), even before an astonishingly short three-month long campaign put an end, albeit temporary, to the issue of piracy. A second Roman example is much later, and involves the north African tribes sources call Mauri. “Moorish” forces had been well integrated in the Roman field army as light horsemen (Zos. 1,20,2) but during the later Empire a few peripheral tribes that had not been assimilated seem to have become more active again – hence the African campaigns of the tetrarch Maximian. What is presented in an epic narrative might in reality have been little more than one of the usual policing raids against frontier instability (Kulikowski, 2016). Yet if the land-based operations may need some rhetorical vindication, Moorish piracy was a factual problem that affected the Spanish provinces and indeed the entire Western Mediterranean, at least since Marcus Aurelius (Arce, 2005).

What becomes interesting in both cases is not the piracy or sea-connected banditry in itself. An overview of other regions shows that the Empire had to deal with pirates on a permanent basis (Elverhoi, 2010), as with other outlaws such as the famous bagaudae, or even with usurpers that presented much more serious threats. In other words, piracy represents a menace since the moment the first ship carried valuables and thus became a prey for thieves, essentially not differing from what happened on a land road. Across the entire Periplus-era geography, ships were presumably disturbed when participating in the so-called Indo-Roman trade, with archers being hired to protect them from pirates (Fauconnier, 2012). Such classical references lack detail though, and the main point to be made here is that of a selective labelling of a certain group as pirates, as a political instrument. As stated
above, Pompey managed to control events to not only solve what was perceived as a pressing security issue, but especially to successfully boost internal political ambitions. And Diocletian and Maximian both needed to publicly capitalize on what again was a reality, as part of a propaganda campaign to justify the tetrarchy.

An additional concern relates to the quality of classical sources, and in particular the standardized manner in which thieves and pirates are typified. Often, they are a literary construct, described in archetypical and repetitive ways, becoming almost fictional characters, as comparative studies have well shown (Grünewald, 1999). This classical appreciation about piracy is a fine starting point for the later sources that use similar techniques to dichotomise – simply put, to force a choice between good and bad, justice and crime, us and the others, and further similar simplifications. This is again a reality transpiring in abundant medieval documentation that opposed Christian and Islamic pirates, especially in the Mediterranean reality: it is not surprising that the sources usually qualify the other side as illegitimate, but of course, many Christian pirates opposed one another as well (e.g. corsairs backed by Italian cities such as Pisa, Venice, and especially Genoa; see Friedman & Figg, 2000). And on the other hand, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople led to successive agreements with the Venetians, as mentioned above, which indicates that there was no real cultural, social, or even religious contrast whatsoever. One additional piece of the puzzle is that states were heavily relying on private vessels for their maritime undertakings (Mott, 2003), and that commercial and purely military operations were often fundamentally one and the same.

Another pattern worth looking at may be the Portuguese concept of piracy in the Indian ocean. Simply put, this would be any activity hampering the trade control system, which in essence can be seen as local merchants trying merely to bypass the burden of European taxation (De Man, 2019). It is a problem well illustrated in the case of the Mapillah traders from Malabar; in this light, one might even argue that Portuguese policies actually increased piracy (Pearson, 2003). The Arabian Gulf in particular was raided since 1505 by Afonso de Albuquerque, officially in anti-piracy operations along the Baloch coast (Dashti, 2012). Subsequent investment in the Gulf was essentially based on the naval control around the Strait of Hormuz, and on the maintenance of allegiances as to ensure Indian trade communication. Only the combination of Safavid pressure, namely on Bahrain, Omani naval growth, and the more local phenomenon of Nakhilu piracy ended up forcing the Portuguese to deploy stronger garrisons along the Arabian coast (Cunha, 2009). On the latter issue, that of the Nakhilu and their regular attacks on Portuguese mercantile vessels, it again can be traced back to their customary activity of providing protection and convoys to ships sailing the Gulf, suddenly facing the interference of Portuguese galliots. The question of the Nakhilu raiders being pirates or not needs also to articulate the new Safavid context that encouraged initiatives against Hormuzi-Portuguese preponderance. The same Arabs from Nakhilu Portuguese considered as pirates remained very active after the fall of Hormuz. However, it is now questionable whether they represented a structural threat to commerce, especially for powers which
at this point are not (yet) interested in imposing trade monopolies - the Safavids, as well as the English and the Dutch (Floor, 2008). Portuguese dominance in the region started to be seriously challenged in the early 17th century. The 1608 founding of an East India Company trading station in Surat marks a turning point, and as a result, the British would also re-encounter the Nakhilu pirates. So this label does make sense from a European perspective; the same pirates might on the other hand, be considered rightful economical actors from a local standpoint.

They can also illustrate what inspires this text, the British allegations of piracy, against the Qawasim that started in the final years of the 18th century, that some twenty years later led to the methodical deconstruction of the traditional maritime power, and ultimately to the heavy involvement of Britain in the politics of the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Qasimi (1986) started to challenge a dominating narrative that had reduced the entire situation to a clear-cut picture of legality engaging piracy by going back to British documentation. One credible assumption is that pirates, whether in Ancient Rome, the medieval Mediterranean, or in the port of Ras al-Khaimah during the early 1800s, are a construct, an immediate label for mass consumption that requires further analysis. In the present case of the Qawasim, historiography built almost exclusively on sources such as Lorimer (1915), and then Wilson (1928) and Kelly (1968), who draw slightly different conclusions but emphasize a similar storyline centred on the issue of piracy. A few later studies put into question some all too simplistic perceptions retrieved from the British accounts, their phrasing and meaning (Abu Hakima, 1965 and Dubuisson, 1975; the latter concluding that “British official reports had oversimplified the causes of piracy, blaming the control of the Wahhabis and the Arabs’ ‘predatory nature’”, p. 76). It was, however, not until the late twentieth century that different angles were found worthwhile exploring. In essence, not the facts but rather the interpretation, in other words, the sheer piratical motives of the Qawasim were now being examined (outline and discussion in Davies [1997]). Indeed, more recent approaches conceive maritime raids in the Gulf area not as piracy in the Western popular understanding of renegade sailors and deserters, but instead as operations linked to intertribal conflicts, and to certain sheikdoms seeking larger control of the Gulf trade (Abdullah, 2001). Other authors, although admitting a potential overstating by British officials in portraying Arab piracy, maintain a more conservative tone (Pierzchala, 2015).

This discussion refocused the matter on two of the main premises for Sultan Muhammad Al-Qasimi’s 1986 book. One is that of motivation, that is to say the commercial reasons of the East India Company, and the second is one of pure and simple falsification of documents. On the former, Dubuisson’s citation above points towards one of the Government of Bombay’s main arguments, the Saudi influence that would have created a great piracy conspiracy, targeting international commerce. As a reaction, the subjacent goal and strategy were to be respectively, the extension of British trade operations in the Gulf, and the use of propaganda to portray a so-called Pirate Coast. Company resources were used to manipulate both regional rivals, such as the Omani, and especially to provide Westminster with selected information, to
foster British support in the cementing of India-bound trade routes, by eliminating competitors.

These geographically circumscribed, unique events, and the rather impromptu comparisons with classical antiquity and the modern period, lead to methodological questions on their comparativeness with other forms of pre-contemporary piracy. A reality equivalent to that of the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz may be that of the Straits of Malacca, for a number of reasons. The area had correspondingly known Portuguese, then other European dominance along the modern period, and all colonial sea powers engaged maritime threats as much through local non-state actors as through sultanates such as Aceh and Johor (Pinto, 2013). The East India Company also carried out successive anti-piracy campaigns in the mid-1800s, either against or with the help of pirate groups with quasi-governmental internal structures (Ke, 2006). The European perception would be that anyone challenging fiscal or navigational rules, from local merchants to real guerrilla-style groups, would be pirates, “cossarios” in many a Portuguese source (Malekandathil, 2011); adding to the conceptual elusiveness, some modern pirates were also from European origin (Yimprasert, 2004). Striking from a comparative stance is the chronological simultaneity, and types of colonial interference, in the monsoon trade (Freeman, 2003), and their piracy-branded threats.

Conclusion

In the end, there naturally is a vast, strictly legal area to be analyzed when dealing with the history of piracy. What is nowadays defined as such, for instance in the Gulf of Aden and the South China Sea, constitutes a completely different social reality, involving not only global shipping cooperation structures or the technology that goes with it, but especially the international crime syndicates and insurance aspects that transform piracy in just another genre of illicit endeavour. As seen above, this was not always the case in the past, and the label was used to countenance the use of force against organized, consuetudinary commercial practices. What this paper seeks to point out, following Sultan Al-Qasimi’s conclusions on the British accusations about the Qawasim, is the political convenience of employing the concept of piracy in certain cases but not in other. As mentioned, this selective use has many precedents in History. In practical terms, the starting point is always a factual incident that can be spun as an argument for military engagement. The outcome can of course be manifold; in the case of the Qawasims, it led to a dramatic, long-lasting power play that should continue to be discussed in academic terms.

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