



Summary :

The current paper is an overview of the piratical activities in Asia Minor from the age of Homer through to Roman times. The notion and the causes of piracy are explored from their earliest appearance in the Homeric epics to the emergence of the pirate states along the Anatolian coast which threatened the commerce of the Roman Empire. Particular emphasis is given to Roman written testimonies.

Date

Prehistoric, Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, Roman periods

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Piracy as social factor in written sources

If piracy is considered as a social factor, it should be understood that this act was not always badly reputed. Also those who practised it in one or another were not misjudged as it is presupposed. In fact both Aristotle and Thucydides reflect in their works a meaning different from the common traditional pejorative conceptions.¹ Secondly, as far as sea warfare is concerned, it has been stated that early piracy and Athenian Imperialism are part of the same evolution chain.²

However, negative perceptions are sometimes preponderant when this subject is mentioned. Plato, Cicero, and Strabo describe pirates in extremely negative terms and as practically dissocial people. Pirates, or groups of them stay devoid of the civilized process, if not openly hostile to it. Some other references describe piracy as a natural disease.³ Overall, during ancient times pirates received many designations, all of which reflect the reception that their activities provoked amongst their contemporaries.⁴

2. Piracy in Asia Minor

As far as Asia Minor is concerned, Strabo should be taken into account. He mentions that this particular zone, especially the Ionian coast, was badly reputed throughout its history, having become the constant scene of constant pirate activity.⁵ Places such as Miletus (Balat), Ephesus, Troad, the Black Sea Coast, Cilicia, and Caria have, on many occasions, borne witness to armed robberies involving the use of ships.

2.1. The Ages of Homer

However, during the age of Homer, not only were plundering and robbing common activities, but they were also performed by heroes in the main epic poems. Thus, they cannot be exclusively dismissed as immoral activities. So, amongst the heroes that conquered Troy, sacking and razzias were very common.⁶ Indeed it has been suggested that Homeric warfare is nothing more than a chain of activities bearing piratical features,⁷ fulfilling the need of Greeks during the siege. Furthermore, the aftermath of acts of piracy is embedded in the epics. It should be understood that "The wrath do thou sing, O Goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles..."⁸ is provoked by the loss of a slave that had been captured in one of the plunders he attempted. In effect, looting is considered an honourable act when the hero carries it out. What matters is not how or what is being done, but who is doing it. Homer's hero perceives his condition to be incomplete without the act of looting,⁹ especially if he faces difficulties in trade exchanges.¹⁰ Every protagonist of this works practise piracy or similar acts, so it does not come as a surprise that, when a stranger appears, the first question posed to him is "are you friend or pirate?"¹¹ As a result, it is deduced that everyone is a pirate and that such activities are considered bad when carried out against friends.¹² The Cretan hero that Odysseus incarnates¹³ is a pirate although he has already obtained the status and wealth he was seeking. So, it seems evident that participating in these acts is inherent to the social condition that our protagonist desired. Furthermore, in the passage where Odysseus tells us about his raid on Egypt from Crete,¹⁴ many scholars have observed a connection



with the end of Mycenaean world and the exploits of the Sea Peoples.¹⁵ It seems that eastern populations had expanded their economic and social activities to other geographical regions, where they acted according to traditional ways of conduct.

2.2 The Archaic period

This conception changed immediately after the beginning of the Archaic period when new social structures were established. The rapid economic flourishing of that time could be inhibited by piratical acts. Thus, robberies committed at sea were no longer considered heroic acts. In fact, the elite made enormous profits by trade. In any case, piracy was still carried out and relationships between traders and pirates were sometimes close and productive.¹⁶ The Ionian case is specially significant.

Pirate activity seems reserved for groups that outwardly keep out of the entire process. They are considered barbarians, the opposite of Greek people, who are defined as traders.¹⁷ Also, a pirate practises an uncivilized warfare.¹⁸ This notion of pirates that emerged during the Archaic period influenced modern investigations on this topic drastically.

2.3. The causes of piracy

There are several reasons that led to piratical acts.¹⁹ Geography was mentioned earlier, which allows the assumption that the conditions of certain areas force their inhabitants to threaten commerce and to conduct robberies.²⁰ Naturally, when the residents of territories that were crossed by great trade and communication routes, or were accessible by the sea, lived in poverty, their economy was based on robbery.²¹

In a world like Classical Greece, where wealth guarantees social promotion, the desire to acquire it can be considered absolutely licit, regardless of the method of acquisition. But the city-states that arrogated the right to use violence at sea could not allow the lawful conduct of piracy. Whoever practises looting is an outlaw is seen as an outlaw, branded with the label "pirate". This is particularly the case if his attitude is opposed to the interests of the state he belongs to.

Social, economic and political conditions of several city-states also played a role in the appearance of this phenomenon. So, the exiled, the fled slaves, and others, developed or constituted groups of pirates on their own accord.²² Whenever the international scene becomes complicated and wars emerge and multiply, so does piracy in the same way as with mercenary.²³ In these circumstances pirate leaders, and their bands, rise to relevant places in the armies, where they are used as auxiliary sea troops.²⁴ There are also privateers, private sea fighters that risk themselves by participating in pirate enterprises under the auspices of their country and the chance of economic profits.²⁵ In this political context pirates move themselves with ease, exploiting certain states' weaknesses. The indifference, or the direct instigation, of their rivals should be noted here. They either support this act strongly or simply do not intervene at all.²⁶ The best example for this interaction between pirates and states is [Mithridates VI Eupator](#) who is accused by classic authors of an infamous alliance with the [Cilician pirates](#). This slanted view indeed reflects realities that have been previously mentioned. It is only a mere incorporation of pirates into normal warfare.²⁷

2.4. The Classical, Hellenistic and Roman times

Piracy manifests in Asia Minor in some different ways during the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods. Y. Garlan and M. Clavel-Lévêque define several kinds of pirates, all examples of Asia Minor;²⁸ C. Ferone differs by defining another way of sea predation related to the theme of legitimate use of violence at sea.²⁹ Piracy has a social impact not only on those who practice it but also on those who have suffered from it. Therefore, several measures were taken by the trade ships³⁰ and the city-state itself. Its eradication becomes a leit motiv for governing. Every city-state that is proud of its existence must be able to "keep the sea free of pirates", a propaganda linked to mythological traditions³¹ such as Minos' case. In this source we can find another significant concept. Since [August](#) defines the war against pirates as "servile", it is a declaration that suggests that piracy must be eradicated for the good of civilisation. If this is not achieved, the state's incapability to protect the sea would be in effect synonymous with malfunctioning of the



state itself. This fact has another principle because the elimination of piracy is used as a pretext to enlarge and consolidate conquests or influences on determinate zones.³²

There is also a direct link between piracy and the “legal” reprisal practises, that are equally as brutal. Legislation’s variations easily allow for plundering acts on one or the other side of the law.³⁴ Moreover, when an anti-piratical raid is made, its profits do not come back to their former owners, neither the slaves are freed. This leads one to raise the question of who is more of a pirate. Moreover, one might ask if it is really in the interest of states to eliminate that which brings them enormous amounts of money.³⁵

Piracy develops in societies whose legal components such as laws and treaties would not be born without its existence. The measures taken changed according to the characteristics and circumstances of people who adopted them. Therefore Greek *poleis* opted for *asylia* and *isopoliteia* as essential solutions to diminish the effects of pirates' activities. It seems strange that the Ionian *poleis* of the third century B.C. established such legal relations with the Aetolian and Cretan Leagues, the leading pirates of that time.³⁶

Concerning the Romans, the context of the *Lex de Piratis* points out that piracy was used as a way to regulate Rome’s policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, an area where fights against piracy allowed governors to commence proceedings aimed at expansion and self promotion.³⁸

In addition, Plutarch offers useful information regarding piracy.³⁹ For example, we learn that the elite was again interested in piracy due to its large economic output. Luxury and ostentation shown by the pirates in front of Roman austerity are not held favourably by the author.⁴⁰ Pirates are also characterized by their own alternative religion, that differs greatly to traditional Roman values, which are criticized and ridiculed constantly. This, as well as the plundering of temples and Mithra’s cult has been interpreted as an alternative religious form, deriving from the marginal sectors of Eastern Mediterranean’s society.⁴¹

3. Piracy in Roman ancient sources

Ancient sources present pirates as violent perpetrators of looting, bringing death and terror with them. Roman values are opposite, so a double perception appears in several authors’ works, like Cicero, who underlines the impossibility to deal with these people.⁴² According to other ancient sources piracy is synonymous with slave trade. Some places known to be pirate bases were directly related to this matter.⁴³ It has been argued that most of the slaves sold by pirates had this condition before they were captured and that pirates only interfered to make a “redistribution”.⁴⁴ This was tolerated by the Romans until Marius’ victory over the Cimbri and the Teutones who saturated the slavemarket. Faced with this pirates decided to alter the normal *modus operandi*; thus, kidnapping and asking for ransom became their main course of action.⁴⁵ Cilicians did this even in the Via Appia, which highlights the danger and terror brought by pirates to Rome and its citizens. All this caused an angry fight during the first century B.C.: Cilician pirates’ leaders did not differ much from the little monarchs of Asia Minor’s mountainous areas.⁴⁶ Amongst these people piracy became a sign of labour activity, reinforced by the possibility of growing profits. Because of its governed exercise, these groups were converted in states or “para-states”⁴⁷ from hierarchic societies. It is not strange that when sea powers menace its subsistence they organise their counter-war on a larger scale without abandoning their traditional ways of behaviour, meaning sea robbery. The so-called “Pirate International” in Cilicia can be explained in this way.⁴⁸

The cultural products of the Mediterranean’s people were also influenced by pirate activity. There are some literary genres where pirates are the protagonists.⁴⁹ According to them a pirate is villainous, silly and terrible at the same time, an outlaw, inhuman character. In rhetoric schools the kidnapped’s speech to pirates became one of the teaching’s models for a long time, for its importance and the possibilities it gave for eloquence.⁵⁰



1. Arist. *Pol.*, 1. 1256b, where piracy is defined as one of the licit production modes not related with trade; Tuc. 1. 5 , that shows this activity as a licit way to get profits. In this sense see Gabrielsen, J., "Economic activity, maritime trade and piracy in the Hellenistic Aegean ", *REA* 103 (2001), p. 219-240
2. This would link with typical scenes of piracy described by several ancient historians, like "Alexander and the Pirate" Augu. *De civ. Dei*, 4-6 cf. with Wolff, C. "Comment devient-on brigand?", *REA* 101 (1999), p.393-403.
3. Sen. *Ben.*, 1.5.4; **Dig. 4. 93.**
4. See Ormerod, H.A., *Piracy in the Ancient World* (Liverpool 1924), p. 72.
5. Str. 8.6.11, we can rely on him about stories for pirates in later times, until XIX century that Ormerod, *op. cit.* collects.
6. See *RE* 2 (1923), col. 1036 – 1042, s.v. "Seerauberei" (W. Kroll) with an extent list of piratical facts collected from Homer's Epic; Thuc. 1. 11. 1 where piracy is presented as an usual activity in Troy.
7. Hom. *Il.*, 1.152-154. About this definition see Finley, M.I., *The World of Odysseus* (New York 1977) and cf. with Jackson, A., "War and raids for booty in the world of Odysseus" in J. Rich – G. Shipley (eds.), *War and society in the Greek World* (London 1995).
8. Hom. *Il.* 1.1.
9. De Souza, Ph., *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge 1999) p. 20.
10. This theme has aroused large controversies, so Bravo, B., "Commerce et noblesse en Grèce archaïque...", *DHA* 10 (1984) as Ferone, C., *Lesteia. Forme di predazione nell'Egeo in età classica* (Napoli 1997) defends this idea, but Mele, A., "Pirateria commercio e arisocrazia: Replica a Benedetto Bravo", *DHA* 12 (1986), p. 67-109 is favourable to the existence of an aristocratic trade in this time.
11. Hom. *Od.*, 3. 72; 9. 252; **Him. Ap. Pyl., 275.** The inquired heroic appearance is not an obstacle to make the question.
12. Jackson, *art. cit.*, p. 69, argues that this conception remained alive as a reminiscence of past times in such important places as Athens.
13. Hom. *Od.*, 14. 199
14. Hom. *Od.*, 17. 424-433., Gabrielsen, *art.cit.*, supports that this passage regards a robbery's mentality that keeps on valid throughout Antiquity.
15. On the Anatolic components of these groups see Sandars, N.K., *The Sea Peoples* (London 1978).
16. Side, Eumelus of Pontus, the Slave market at Delos and some others are examples of this.
17. Diod. Sic. 20. 25; Str. 14.5.4. Piracy as reflex of barbarism see Ormerod, *op. cit.*. and Ziebarth , **Beiträge zur Geschichte des Seeraubs und Seehandels im alten Griechenland** (Hamburg 1929).
18. Braund, D., "Piracy under the principate and the ideology of Imperial eradication" in J. Rich – G. Shipley (eds.), *War and society in the Roman World* (London 1993). About the change in this mentality of war see Murray, O. Early, *Early Greece* (London 1980), p. 116-126.
19. See Wolff, *art. cit.*, for a detailed analysis.
20. Str. 12. 8. 8-9, although this passage is clearly opposite to 14. 3. 2, therefore Wolff speaks about socio-economic conditions more than geographical ones.



21. Clavel-Lévêque, M., "Brigandage et Piraterie...", *DHA* 4 (1978), p. 17-31
22. Diod.Sic. 18. 8, Alexander realises that many exiled people practised piracy, so he orders their returns to their countries and *poleis*. See Gabbert, J.J., "Piracy in the early Hellenistic period..." *G & R* 33 (1986), p. 156-163.
23. Str. 10. 4. 10. See also Gabbert, *art. cit.*, p. 156.
24. For Asia Minor see Plb. IV. 6 and Iust. 9. 1. 5.
25. Jackson, A., "Privateers in the Ancient Greek World" in M.R.D. Foot (ed.), *War and Society. Historical Studies in Honour and Memory of J.R. Western 1928-1971* (1973), p. 241-253; C.D. 36. 9.
26. Str. 14. 5.2.; curiously Strabo apologises the roman behaviour in this subject.
27. App. *Mithr.* 92-93; Maróti, E., "Die Rolle der Seeräuber in der Zeit der Mithridatischen Kriege" in L. de Rosa (ed.), *Ricerche storiche ed economiche in memoria di Corrado Barbagallo*, vol. 1 (Napoli 1970), p. 480-493; Ballesteros-Pastor, L., *Mitridates Eupátor, rey del Ponto*, (Granada 1996).
28. Y. Garlan, "Signification historique de la piraterie grecque", *DHA* 4 (1978), p. 1-16 proposes five different kinds, while Clavel-Lévêque, *art. cit.*, speaks of three.
29. Ferone, C, *op. cit.*
30. Gianfrotta, P.A., "Commerci e pirateria: prime testimonianze archeologiche sottomarine", *MEFRA* 93 (1981), p. 227-242.
31. See Braund, *art. cit.*, p. 202; *R. G.* 25. 1. The repercussion of this ideal can be seen in Epictetus 3.13.9.
32. Dem. 7. 6-8; 7. 14-15.
34. Garlan, *art. cit.*, 8
35. Diod. Sic. 20. 84-86.
36. Garlan, *art. cit.* For Aetolians' performances in Asia Minor can be able Timarchus' example, Fronto 3.2.11 and Polyae. 5. 25.
38. Giovannini, A. – Gryzbek, E., "La lex de piratis persequendis", *MH* 35 (1978), p. 33-47.
39. Plut. *Pomp.* 24
40. The same negative appreciation of pirates' customs can be seen in Caesar's behaviour when he was captured by the Cilicians, Plut. *Caesar.* 2. 1-4.
41. About pirates' religion see Marasco, G., "Aspetti della pirateria cilicia nel I secolo a.C.", *GFF* 10 (1987), p. 129-145.
42. De Souza, P., *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge 1999), p. 132.
43. Strab. 14. 3. 2; De Souza, *op. cit.*, p. 58-59.
44. De Souza, *op. cit.*, p. 64.



45. Plut. *Pomp.* 24
46. Syme, R., "Observations on the Province of Cilicia" in *Anatolian Studies to W.H. Buckler* (1939), p. 299-322.
47. Maróti, *art. cit.*, p. 483.
48. Clavel-Lévêque, *art. cit.*, p. 22-27.
49. Some works of Xenophon of Ephesus, Apuleius, Plautus, Achilles Tatius... have pirates, robbery and plunder amongst their characters and themes.
50. Probably all this took the example given by Plutarch, *Caesar.* 2. 1-4.

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