Life Aboard Ship in the Golden Age of Piracy

The golden age of piracy spanned the years 1690 to 1730. During that time, pirates raided and plundered (robbed of goods by force) vessels and ports over a huge area, including the Caribbean Islands, the east coast of North America, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. Unlike the privateers of earlier times, who were authorized to raid enemy ships and ports by their governments during wartime, most golden-age pirates raided strictly for their own profit. By everyone’s standards they were criminals, and often violent ones. Some historians contend, though, that many young sailors became pirates in an attempt to escape the injustices and oppression they had experienced as members of the lowest classes in eighteenth-century society. Many pirates of the golden age ended all connections to their home countries, swearing allegiance only to their comrades on their pirate ships. Aboard a pirate ship, they formed a very different culture than the one they had left behind.

According to pirate historian Marcus Rediker, during the peak years of the golden age, the decade from 1716 to 1726, there were a total of forty-five hundred to fifty-five hundred pirates, with perhaps about one thousand to twenty-four hundred on the seas at any given time. The pirates hailed from many nations and ethnic groups, although the majority came from the British Isles. An example of this diversity can be seen on the pirate ship *Whydah* under the command of pirate captain Samuel Bellamy (c. 1689–1717). According to Kenneth J. Kinkor, in “Black Men Under the Black Flag,” the crew of the *Whydah* “included not only English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and British colonials, but also Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Spaniards, Swedes, Native Americans, African-Americans, and Africans.” Pirates came almost exclusively from the lowest classes of European and colonial society, and most had served as seamen for merchant or naval ships prior to becoming pirates. All pirates of this age were men, with the exception of only four known women.
Golden-age pirates left few written accounts behind. Historians like Rediker and Kinkor, though, have used existing evidence to piece together what their lives were like, what motivated them, and how they interacted with one another and with the rest of the world. Pirate historians today are greatly aided by *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, a contemporary history of the golden age written under the name of Captain Charles Johnson and first published in 1724. Johnson’s book provides a wealth of details about the lives and deeds of the pirates that might otherwise have been lost.
The life of an English sailor

The vast majority of golden-age pirates came from the ranks of ordinary eighteenth-century seamen. The wretched conditions experienced onboard naval or merchant vessels profoundly influenced them in their later careers. For an English sailor at that time, everyday work aboard ship was hard and extremely dangerous. Crew members were killed or maimed handling heavy cargo and climbing up masts in rough weather. Heavy rigging frequently fell from the masts, crushing sailors below. (Rigging is the system of ropes, chains, and other gear used to support and control the masts and sails of a sailing vessel.) In winter the seamen worked in freezing, windy weather in wet clothing. If the risky work did not kill the sailors, illness often did. The ships were full of rats, cockroaches, and other vermin (small insects or animals that cause harm and annoyance) that spread infectious diseases, such as dysentery, which caused severe diarrhea, and typhus, which caused high fever, rash, and delirium.

Food onboard an eighteenth-century vessel was meager and often rotten. The main foods, salted beef and pork and dry biscuits, were stored in barrels. After a few weeks at sea the dried meats began to rot, and the biscuits became infested with maggots (the larvae of flies). The water supply became foul and spread disease. To avoid illness, most sailors drank alcohol instead of water. A major killer of sailors was scurvy, a deadly disease caused by a diet lacking in vitamin C, which is found in fresh fruit and vegetables. Sailors with scurvy developed spongy, bleeding gums. They bruised easily and grew weak. Eventually their bones broke, their teeth fell out, and their sores stopped healing. Historians believe that scurvy killed more sailors than any other factor of life at sea.

Sailors were generally treated poorly by their employers. Once they signed on to a ship, they were under the control of the ship’s captain, and discipline was harsh. A common punishment for unruly sailors was flogging with a cat-o’-nine-tails, a whip with nine knotted cords. Some ship captains physically abused their crews. David Cordingly writes in Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates that a ship “could be turned into a torture chamber by a sadistic captain [one who derived pleasure from inflicting pain on others]. . . . The records of the High Court of Admiralty are filled with horror stories of the brutality inflicted on seamen.” Sailors’ wages for their work were pitifully low and greedy ship masters cheated many seamen out of what little they had earned. The laws of eighteenth-century England did not protect the seamen but rather empowered ship captains and ship owners.
The conditions of an English seaman’s life were so awful that physici- 
an and author Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) once remarked, as quoted by 
Marcus Rediker in Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant 
Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750, 
“No man will be a sailor who has contrivance [cleverness in planning] 
足够的 to get himself into jail: for being in a ship is being in jail with the 
chance of being drowned. . . . A man in jail has more room, better food, 
and commonly better company.”

Not surprisingly, not enough men voluntarily signed up to go to sea 
for the merchant or navy forces to function. England therefore authorized 
the Royal Navy to forcibly recruit sailors, a practice known as impressment. 
Press gangs, groups of men armed with clubs and led by a naval officer, 
were dispatched to harbors and cities where they rounded up sailors on 
streets, in their homes, at the tavern, and even some who were just returning
to port from another voyage. The sailors pressed into service had no choice but to go to sea, sometimes for more than one year at a time. Merchant ships often resorted to trickery to entice seamen, either by getting them thoroughly drunk and then signing them on or by lying about the terms of their service.

When pirates raided a merchant ship, they often gathered all its sailors on the deck and asked who among the crew wished to join them as pirates. In most cases, quite a few sailors instantly stepped forward. Notorious pirate Bartholomew Roberts (1682–1722), as quoted by Johnson, summed up why they chose piracy: “In an honest service [as a sailor] there is thin commons [little food], low wages, and hard labour; in this [piracy], [there is] plenty and satiety, pleasure and ease, liberty and power. . . . No, a merry life and a short one, shall be my motto.”

Pirate democracy

Sailors who joined pirate ships signed on as equal members of the crew. Almost all pirate ships practiced a rough form of democracy, following customs of social organization in which every shipmate had a say in important decisions. There were no social classes onboard, and the power that the ship’s captain held over the crew was very limited.

Ship’s articles, the written sets of rules and conditions under which pirates operated on any given expedition, were the foundation of pirate democracy. Ship’s articles had developed during the seventeenth century with the buccaneers of the New World. (For more information see The Buccaneers of the New World.) All pirate expeditions began with every member of the crew signing the articles. Although they differed in a few details, the articles of most pirate ships were remarkably similar.

A good example of ship’s articles were those of Bartholomew Roberts. Roberts’s articles ensured equality for members of his ship. They stated that every pirate onboard had a vote in important decisions. Everyone was equally entitled to whatever food and liquor was aboard. Division of the booty was nearly equal, though those who took the greatest risks got a slightly larger reward. (Booty is the goods stolen from ships or coastal villages during pirate raids or attacks on enemies in time of war.) The captain and quartermaster of the ship were entitled to two shares of the booty; the master, boatswain, and gunner received a share and a half; other officers received a share and a quarter; and all other crew members were entitled to one share.
The articles also contained provisions for medical care and disability. For anyone who was injured during a pirate raid, there was money to provide for him. If a pirate lost a limb or was otherwise crippled, he would receive eight hundred dollars; other injuries would be paid in proportion to how serious they were. There were also rules of conduct to keep order. There was no fighting allowed onboard the ship. Quarrels between two men were to be taken ashore and handled by a duel, or a prearranged fight with deadly weapons, conducted under specified rules. Deserting the ship was punished by death or marooning (stranding an individual on a deserted island or shore with few provisions). Everyone was to keep their weapons clean and in good order. No boys or women were allowed on the ship. Roberts’s ship’s articles had special rules about drinking at night and forbade gambling for money on his ship. Some ship’s articles forbade the pirates to harm women on the vessels they raided.

Roles of captain and crew

There were three levels of authority on a pirate ship: the captain, the quartermaster, and the pirate council. The captain and quartermaster were elected by the ship’s crew. During a pirate raid, the captain had complete authority over the crew, and his orders were to be obeyed without question. At any other time, however, a captain could be voted out of office by his crew if they were not satisfied with his performance. One of many instances of a pirate captain being removed by his crew occurred in 1718, when Captain Charles Vane (c. 1680–1721) decided to retreat when his fleet encountered a French warship. His crew, headed by English pirate John “Calico Jack” Rackham (1682–1720), felt Vane had acted in a

What Pirates Ate

Golden-age pirates experienced cycles of feast and famine while they were at sea. When they set out on an expedition, they packed their vessels with fresh foods, such as meats, eggs, cheeses, and vegetables, as well as longer-lasting foods, such as dry beans, pickled vegetables, salted beef and pork, and hardtack biscuits (hard crackers made of flour and water). The pirates brought along some livestock to kill for later meals and kept poultry in cages to provide eggs. During the first couple of weeks at sea, pirates feasted. After that, the remaining fresh food began to rot. The animals were killed and eaten.

A few weeks into the voyage, the food stored in the hold came out. Even the dried foods eventually went bad. Ship’s cooks used heavy spices to cover up the taste of rot. Pirates were known to eat only in darkened rooms, so they would not have to see the maggots (fly larvae) in their biscuits and dried meats. Water went bad on the pirate ship, too, and pirates generally only drank rum and ale. Alcoholism was a major problem among seamen and pirates. Some pirates died from alcohol abuse; others died performing dangerous tasks while their judgment was impaired by alcohol.

A pirate vessel quickly went from famine to feast when the pirates raided a ship full of fresh stores or stopped at a port where they could steal or purchase new supplies. Temporary satisfaction came when the pirates were able to catch sea turtles and fish. When possible, the ship’s cook prepared the favorite pirate meal, salamagundi, a salad or stew consisting of any ingredients available, usually some combination of chopped meat, fish, turtle, garlic, wine, boiled eggs, onions, cabbage, olives, oil, and lots of spices.
cowardly manner. They voted him out of office, elected Rackham as captain, and took over the fleet, sending Vane off in a small, unarmed vessel. Captains of pirate ships received very few special privileges. They did not have their own sleeping quarters aboard ship, and they ate with the crew. Seamen did not join the pirates to be controlled by a new set of authority figures.

The quartermaster was almost the equal of the captain. His role was to represent the interests of the crew. Along with handling any disputes, the quartermaster made sure that everyone received equal treatment, equal food and drink, and equal shares of the booty. The most important decisions made on a pirate ship, though, were not made by the captain or quartermaster, but by the pirate council, which was made up of every crew member. On many pirate vessels, the pirate council voted on every decision.

A ship’s crew was made up of seamen who had joined willingly and seamen who had been forced by the pirates to join when their ships were captured in a raid. Many seamen who did not initially want to join the pirates became willing participants after being forced to join. Others escaped at the first opportunity. Pirates were usually particular about the sailors they recruited. They needed people with specialties, such as surgeons, musicians, carpenters, and navigators. They preferred unmarried men who had no ties outside the pirate ship, and they admired courage above all things.

**Pirate vessels**

Pirates stole whatever types of vessels came closest to suiting their purposes. In the eighteenth century the word *ship* was more specific than it is today, meaning a large sailing vessel with three or more masts with square-rigged sails. Warships and large merchant vessels were ships. Pirate captains, such as Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard (c. 1680–1718), and Bartholomew Roberts, sailed in huge square-rigged ships, using them to head fleets of smaller pirate vessels. (Square-rigged ships had masts set at right angles to the ship’s hull.) Most pirates sailed in smaller vessels, usually sloops or schooners, that could escape from law enforcement authorities by darting in and out of coves and shallow inlets.

In the eighteenth century, pirates had a variety of ships to choose from. Some of the most common vessels are described below, listed from smallest to largest:
Sloop: The most popular pirate vessel. An eighteenth-century sloop was a fast vessel with a single fore-and-aft rigged mast, meaning that the mast was positioned for sails set lengthwise along the ship. Sloops had narrow bows (fronts) and were fast and maneuverable. They weighed about 100 tons (91 metric tons) and varied in length from 30 to 70 feet (9 to 21 meters). Sloops could carry up to seventy-five pirates and were often armed with four to twelve guns in the upper deck. Some of the best sloops in the eighteenth century were built by shipbuilders in Jamaica and Bermuda.

Schooner: A two-masted vessel, similar in size to a sloop, weighing 100 tons (91 metric tons), and carrying about seventy-five pirates. Schooners had narrow hulls, making them very fast, and a large bowsprit, a pole extending forward from the front of the vessel.
They were usually built in North America; those built in Baltimore, Maryland, were renowned.

**Brigantine:** A two-masted vessel with two sails rigged to each mast. This variety of vessel included brigs and snows. Brigantines were about 80 feet (24 meters) long, weighed about 150 tons (136 metric tons), carried about one hundred pirates, and were armed with about ten cannons. With their two masts, brigantines could be rigged with many combinations of square-rigged or fore-and-aft sails. They were heavier than sloops and were better suited to raiding and combat than hit-and-run attacks.

**Frigate:** A three-masted, medium-sized warship. The sizes ranged greatly, from 250 to 500 tons (227 to 454 metric tons), and they could carry two hundred men or more. Frigates were more seaworthy, but slower, than sloops and brigantines. They had a raised quarterdeck and forecastle, where their twenty-four to forty guns were carried. They had good storage space and, with large stores of food and water, they could remain at sea for long periods.

Pirates altered the vessels they stole to fit their needs. They removed the cabins and the structures on the upper decks to make more room for guns and crew. Pirates almost always added more cannons to the vessels to gain the advantage during their raids. Using all the fire power of a pirate ship required a large crew, and pirate ships were always crowded.

Eighteenth-century vessels were made of wood, and the tropical seas teemed with shipworms, wormlike mollusks that could bore holes in the wooden hull (frame) of the vessel. If the shipworms were left to their work, the vessels began to leak. Careening, a regular process of cleaning the bottom of a ship, was required, preferably once every three months. Careening involved beaching (landing on a beach) the vessel during a high tide and then heaving it over onto one side on the beach. The pirates then cleaned the exposed side, removing barnacles and weeds. (A barnacle is a shell-like marine animal that attaches itself to the underwater portion of a ship’s hull.) They replaced damaged planks and then coated the hull with tar, sulfur, and tallow (animal fat commonly used in candles). Careening was a particular problem for pirates. With their vessels out of commission, their defense systems were down as well. If the pirates were unable to find a harbor where they would be safely hidden while they cleaned the vessel’s bottom, they delayed careening. This caused the vessel to become riddled with leaks, slowing it down and sometimes severely damaging it.
The Jolly Roger, the flag of a pirate ship, originated among the buccaneers of the New World in the seventeenth century. The buccaneers usually used solid red flags, and the French term *jolie rouge*, or “pretty red,” may have been the basis of the term *Jolly Roger*. The red flag signaled to ships under attack that “no quarter would be given,” meaning the pirates would grant no mercy if they met with resistance. In the eighteenth century, most pirates began to use black backgrounds for their flags, although red flags were still used. Each pirate captain designed his own flag, but they all carried the same basic images of death. Many had an image of a grinning skull with crossed bones, or crossed swords, beneath it. Others displayed an image of a dancing skeleton. Blackbeard designed a flag with a skeleton holding an hourglass in one hand (meaning that time was running out), while the other hand stabbed at a bleeding heart. The images were designed to induce fear.

Pirates used other flags besides the Jolly Roger when it was convenient. By flying a British, Dutch, French, or other national flag, a pirate ship might pass for a merchant ship and avoid pursuit by naval forces or pirate hunters. Pirates frequently tried to fool the ships they wished to attack into submission by displaying a friendly country’s flag. Unlike
privateers in earlier eras, though, pirates generally did not claim one nationality over another. Their flag was the Jolly Roger, and their ship was their nation.

**Pirate attack methods and weapons**

When pirates spotted a merchant ship they wished to attack, they usually began by raising the Jolly Roger. Merchant vessels, even the large ships, tended to have small crews of only about ten to eighteen men. The crews were not well armed or trained to fight. Pirate vessels, on the other hand, were likely to have seventy or more heavily armed pirates aboard. Most merchant ships surrendered without resistance when they saw a Jolly Roger raised.

Some merchant ships did resist pirate attacks, and for good reason. Certain pirate captains were known for their violence and gruesome torture techniques. There was no guarantee; even if a ship surrendered to the pirates without fighting, it still might suffer a terrible fate. Therefore, some merchant ships, when they could not escape from pirates, prepared to fight. Battle began when the merchant ship fired its cannons at the pirate vessel, which usually caused the pirates to counterattack with full force. They tried to do as little damage to the ship as possible, since it would soon be in their possession and might be of value to them. They were not always as careful with the lives of the merchant ship’s crew.

To start their attack pirates often threw grenados, an early form of hand grenade, onto the enemy’s deck. Grenados were small hollow balls made of iron, glass, or wood. They were filled with gunpowder and had fuses that were lit before they were tossed. When they exploded on the merchant ship’s deck, they killed and injured the people within close range. The pirates also loaded their cannons with grapeshot and fired it across the decks of the merchant vessel. Grapeshot is a cluster of small iron balls (looking like a bunch of grapes) that are loosely packed in a canvas bag. When fired, the iron balls spread out from a cannon’s muzzle at high speed and sprayed a large area with deadly missiles. If the merchant ship continued to resist after grenados and grapeshot were fired, the pirates resorted to using the big guns. Sometimes they fired on the main section of an enemy ship with cannons. At other times, they used their cannons to shoot down the enemy’s mast, thereby disabling the ship and creating chaos on the deck.
To board, pirates frequently approached the merchant ship in small vessels. They used grappling hooks and boarding axes to climb the sides of the ship. The axes also served as deadly weapons once onboard. The pirates carried many other weapons on their bodies as well. They had firearms, such as the flintlock pistol, a small and comparatively lightweight gun that loaded through the front of the barrel. A pistol only fired a single shot, so most pirates carried several pistols, often in sashes strapped over their shoulders. Pirates also carried the much larger blunderbuss, a short musket with a flared muzzle. Pirates usually had the upper hand in close fighting. They were experts with small knives known as daggers and with swords known as cutlasses, the most popular of pirate weapons. With their 2-foot (0.6-meter) blades and single curved edge, cutlasses were skillfully wielded to cut down the last resisting sailors.

**Violence and torture**

When a ship had surrendered and the crew was subdued, some pirate crews interrogated the sailors to find out how their captain treated them. Many pirates, having been employed as sailors in earlier life, had bitter feelings about ship captains. If the crew reported that their captain abused them, he was at great risk of being tortured or killed. One pirate, Philip Lyne, confessed after his arrest that during his pirate career he had killed thirty-seven ship commanders. In *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, Rediker describes the last words of another pirate, William Fly (d. 1726), who had killed a ship master. Fly announced from the gallows before his hanging that “all Masters of Vessels might take Warning by the Fate of the Captain that he [Fly] had murder’d, and to pay Sailors their Wages when due, and to treat them better; saying, that their Barbarity to them made so many turn Pyrates.” While abusive captains had cause for fear, the pirates’ interrogations of their crews could work in a captain’s favor if his crew spoke highly of him.

Revenge was behind many acts of pirate violence. Bartholomew Roberts, for example, swore revenge on all ships from the Caribbean colonies of Barbados and Martinique, because the governors of those two islands had tried to capture him. When he caught ships off Martinique, he cruelly tortured and killed their crews, whipping some to death, cutting off the noses and ears of others, and using some for target practice. Resisting a pirate attack was the most common way of infuriating pirates, particularly if any pirates were injured or killed in the struggle. At times, pirates slaughtered the whole crew of a resisting ship.
In their attitudes toward violence, pirates differed greatly. Many historians believe that, despite his fearsome image, Blackbeard consistently avoided killing or hurting his captives. The majority of pirates used violence and torture, or the threat of it, for a specific purpose: to find the ship’s treasures. A few exceptionally sadistic pirate captains of the golden age stand out. Charles Vane, for example, was known for cruelty. In a raid in 1718 Vane grabbed a seaman from a ship he had attacked and had his crew bind the man’s hands and feet to a pole. They placed a loaded musket into his mouth and then forced lit matches under his eyelids to force him to talk.

The two most infamously cruel pirates of the golden age were George Lowther (d. 1723) and Edward Low (c. 1690–c. 1724). When these two pirates met in the Cayman Islands, Lowther’s Jolly Roger already inspired terror in seamen far and wide. He was known for his unique methods of torture, one of which was putting slow-burning matches between his victim’s fingers and letting them burn through the flesh and into the bone if his victim failed to reveal where the ship’s valuables were.

Low, a mean-spirited bully and thief, served in Lowther’s crew before setting out with a pirate ship of his own. Low practiced unspeakable cruelties on his captives. In one incident, he got a small taste of his own medicine. Near the African island of Madagascar, a vessel resisted his attack. Low’s gang of pirates boarded and, according to Johnson, “cut and mangled them [the ship’s crew] in a barbarous manner.” When one of the pirates swung his cutlass at a sailor, however, he missed his mark and cut deeply into Low’s lower jaw, cutting away the flesh to expose his teeth. After that incident, Low was as physically disfigured as he was emotionally unbalanced. In a later incident off the coast of Brazil, a captain of a ship Low had attacked threw the ship’s treasures overboard rather than give it to the pirates. According to Johnson, Low “raved like a fury, swore a thousand oaths, and ordered the captain’s lips to be cut off; which he broiled before his face, and afterwards murdered him and all the crew, being thirty-two persons.”

Pirates of the golden age had very short careers as pirates. Most of the well-known pirate captains and a significant number of the rank-and-file pirates were dead by the early 1720s. Pirates were killed during attacks, caught by authorities and executed, or stricken down by ship-board diseases. For pirates of the golden age, the ideal was to live life to the fullest for the short time allotted to them and then to face their inevitable death bravely when the time came. With their tough attitude about their
How Pirates Dressed

The majority of pirates began their careers at sea as common sailors. Most continued to wear sailors’ clothing as pirates, particularly while onboard their ship. Sailors’ clothes were rough, and usually the clothes they were wearing when they signed up for an expedition. When these clothes wore out, the sailors often made clothes from worn-out canvas sails and blankets. Most of this clothing was coated with tar to make it waterproof. For pirates busy working on a ship, these simple clothes were practical.

In cold weather pirates wore a short, heavy coat called a fearnought or a canvas jacket. In warmer weather they wore a white-linen or cotton shirt, or went without a shirt. Their breeches, or pants, were wide and loose, usually reaching to midcalf in length and made of canvas or wool. Pirates usually went barefoot on the ship. Some pirates wore a small knitted cap called a Monmouth cap. Others wore a kerchief tied around their head. Many wore the popular tricorn hat, a three-cornered hat usually made from felt or leather, with a turned-up brim that provided protection from the harsh tropical sun and also kept rain out of their faces. Clothing worn in raids was often coated with tar, which was thought to slow down a sword thrust. Leather doublets, or tight-fitting buttoned jackets, were worn for the same reason.

Unlike common sailors, most pirates had a store of clothing and adornments they had stolen during their raids. Pirates tended to dress up for attacking ships and for their trips to shore. From the exotic textiles, jewels, feathers, and other ornaments they had acquired, they put together wildly colorful costumes. Some donned bright silk scarves, ribbons, gold hoop earrings, chains, and pendants before loading up with weapons for a raid. On shore, pirates often made a spectacle. In “The Golden Age of Piracy” Jenifer Marx writes, “They minced along in silver-buckled high heels, tricorn hats under their arms, clad in plundered combinations of rich-hued and often mismatched garments of embroidered silks and satins, velvets and lace, which often verged on the ludicrous.”

Pirate captains usually dressed in a more gentlemanly manner than the crew. This was partly because they sometimes needed to pass for merchant ship captains to avoid pursuit or to trick a targeted ship into submission. Many pirate captains wore wigs, which was the fashion at the time. Pirate captains Bartholomew Roberts and John “Calico Jack” Rackham were well-known for their fashionable and elegant clothes. But pirate crews and their captains were regarded as equals, and many captains, like Blackbeard, opted for the practical attire their crews wore onboard.

Libertalia

Despite the disturbing elements of piracy, some observers saw the promise of a bold new world in the pirate form of democracy. In the second edition of *A General History of Pirates*, Johnson describes a pirate utopia (an ideal country) called Libertalia (also spelled Libertatia), located on Madagascar.
Legends of a pirate paradise on the island had been around for a long time, but most historians agree that Libertalia never actually existed.

According to Johnson, Libertalia was founded by French pirate James Misson in the late seventeenth century. Misson despised the European social world, where the rich had all the power and the poor were forced to serve as laborers with few rights and little opportunity to improve their situation. On Madagascar Misson established a pirate nation based on the equality of all its residents. Libertalia was a socialist society; all property was divided equally, so there were no rich and poor classes. Its government was democratic, with everyone having an equal vote. Justice and rights extended to all, and freedom was a natural right.

The reality in Madagascar was far from this vision. By 1711 the scattered pirate bases that had arisen on the island a decade earlier had dissolved. (A pirate base is a place where pirates lived under their own rule and maintained their own defense system.) The pirates on Madagascar had fought among themselves and with the native people of the island. Their once thriving bases had turned into filthy camps lacking even the most basic necessities. In his travels privateer and pirate hunter Woodes Rogers (c. 1679–1732) spoke with seamen who had recently spent time on Madagascar. Rogers, as quoted by Cordingly, said, “They told me that those miserable wretches [pirates still living on Madagascar], who had made such a noise in the world, were now dwindled to between 60 or 70, most of them very poor and despicable, even to the natives.”

**Slavery and black pirates**

Johnson’s description of Libertalia contains a speech by Misson in which he bans slavery from Libertalia, saying, as quoted by Kinkor, that “no Man had Power of the Liberty of another.” After going to so much trouble to assert his own liberty, Misson had no intention of enslaving other people. About people of African descent he said, “That however these Men were distinguished from the Europeans by their Colour, Customs, or Religious Rites, they were the Work of the same Omnipotent Being, and endued with equal Reason.” Since there is little solid evidence that golden-age pirates in general held anti-slavery attitudes, most historians agree that the speech probably reflects the views of Johnson more than those of the pirate population, but there are some reasons to believe that golden-age pirates differed from the mainstream on this issue.
Records show that a significant number of golden-age pirates were black men. According to Kinkor, of the approximately 1,000 pirates who were active between 1715 and 1726, about 25 to 30 percent were black. For example, in 1717 Samuel Bellamy had a crew of 180 men, of which 153 were white and 27, or 15 percent, were black. In 1724 George Lowther had a crew of 23, of which 16 were white and 9, or 39 percent, were black. In an estimate of Bartholomew Roberts’s crew of 267 men in 1721, 197 were white and 70, or 28 percent, were black. These are all far higher percentages of black men than would have been found on merchant ships or in the British Royal Navy.

When pirates raided a slave ship, they generally did not treat all slaves equally. Those slaves who had recently been captured from Africa and spoke a language unknown to the pirates were of little use to them. Some pirates released these unwanted slaves ashore or left them on the vessels they had looted; other pirates left the slaves with the slave traders or sold them. In 1721 Roberts showed complete disregard for the lives of hundreds of slaves. When the captain of a slave ship refused to pay the ransom he demanded, Roberts burned the entire ship, including all the slaves who were shackled inside. (A ransom is a sum of money demanded for the release of someone being held captive.)

Men of African descent who spoke English, usually those who had escaped slavery in the colonies, were often recruited as pirates. Those with knowledge of the sea were particularly desirable. There is little historic evidence about how these crew members of African descent were treated aboard pirate ships. While some historians contend that they generally served as laborers or servants, others argue that black men experienced the same liberty aboard pirate ships as everyone else. According to Kinkor, no rules forbidding people of African descent from carrying weapons exist in any surviving ship’s articles. Thus, it is likely that black pirates were fully armed. They were probably enthusiastic fighters, especially since pirates of African descent were almost always sold into slavery or returned to former slave owners when pirate ships were captured by authorities. Kinkor argues that “the deck of a pirate ship was the most empowering place for blacks within the eighteenth-century white man’s world.”

**Women pirates**

While men of various races and ethnic backgrounds were common on pirate ships, women were not. Many ship’s articles strictly forbade bringing
women onto ships. Only four women are known to have ever joined the ships of the golden-age pirates. The names of two of them, Mary Harley and Mary Cricket, appear in pirate trial records of 1726, but their stories are not known. The stories of Anne Bonny (1700–c. 1782) and Mary Read (c. 1690–1721), however, were made famous by Johnson’s book.

In 1720 John “Calico Jack” Rackham (so named because of his fancy manner of dressing) was on his ship, the *William*, recovering from a drunken spree with his crew off the coast of western Jamaica. A sloop commissioned to track down the pirates pulled up nearby, and shots were exchanged. As the pirate hunters began boarding the *William*, the male pirates remained below in the hold, where they had been drinking. Only two pirates staged a resistance, the heavily armed Bonny and Read. A disgusted Read called down into the hold, telling the rest of the crew to get back on deck to fight. When they would not budge, she shot her pistol into the dark, killing one of the crew.

Rackham and his entire crew were captured and taken to Jamaica to stand trial for piracy. They were convicted and sentenced to hang. Before his death, Rackham asked to see Bonny. According to Johnson, “all the
comfort she gave him, was, that she was sorry to see him there, but if he had fought like a man, he need not have been hanged like a dog.”

Bonny and Read were tried separately, and their trials were public sensations. Victims of their attacks testified that both women were willing pirates and very able ones. They dressed like men when they were attacking ships, but dressed as women the rest of the time. Bonny and Read were both convicted of piracy and sentenced to death, but after their sentences were read, both informed the court that they were pregnant. The laws of Great Britain prohibited pregnant women from being executed. They were spared hanging, but Read developed a fever and died shortly afterward. No one knows what happened to Bonny.

**The pirate life disappears**

By 1720 most pirates still raiding the seas were being hotly pursued by pirate hunters and naval expeditions. In their travels the last pirates of the era could not help but see the decomposing bodies of the renowned pirate captains that had been hoisted over harbors worldwide as a warning to others. Eventually the remaining pirates heeded the warning and began new lives doing something else.

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