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Jolly roger flag

The pirate brand has long been tied to the skull and crossed bones - the Jolly Roger - as a symbol of terror on the high seas. A 2011 article in The New York Times hailed the ominous design as a stunning exercise in collective hybrid branding, noting that the economy drove pirates to adopt a version of this particular symbol to facilitate their intent to plunder. It's a fascinating discussion about the efficiency and power that good branding can deliver, but it overlooks the ways in which the power of the symbol as we recognize it draws in part in the acceptance and manipulation of the image by others. Piracy has probably long been a feature of the open sea, following the earliest trade routes of the Aegean and the Mediterranean. Cilicians were active in the Mediterranean and tolerated by the Roman Empire for the slaves they provided, and were only ruled in when they gained such a presence that a threat to the grain supply of the Empire in 67 BC. The Senate approved a comprehensive and systematic strategy and overcame an astute humane policy to eliminate Cilicians within a matter of months (1). Despite this historical legacy, the well-known skull and crossed bones that many of us associate with piracy is a recent development, occurring in the late 17th century with the rise of the pirates of the Caribbean. After the discovery of the New World, the Caribbean quickly gained status as a center of trade with sugar, gold and human capital flowing between the old and new worlds. The Spanish dominated the landscape, but soon other colonial powers followed. Pirates, many of whom were attracted to trade because it offered an opportunity to make a sustainable wage, found the waters of the Caribbean particularly attractive: largely unsettled, they would not be hindered by governing bodies; there were plenty of safe, natural ports; and many opportunities to free loot from the merchant ships of the Spanish (2). Tensions between the old world powers were not confined to their respective shores - traces of these conflicts echoed in the Western colonies, and English, Dutch and French sanctioned piracy - commissioning them as hijackers - as a means of protecting their claims and controlling the goods in the region. These men were national heroes: defenders of the nation on the high seas. Their songs included Francis Drake and Henry Morgan-praised as Gentlemen of the seas. Pirates have a bloodthirsty and lawless reputation. They are known for walking off the shelf, copious alcohol consumption, and lusty tendencies, but these were skilled men pulled out trade that had paid them poorly: Merchant sailors got a hard, close look at death: illness and accidents were commonplace in their profession, rations were often meager, and discipline was brutal. Each ship was a small kingdom whose captain had an almost absolute power which he often (3). Some pirates had served in the Navy, where conditions aboard the ship were no less harsh. The food supply was often short, wages were low, mortality was high, discipline severe and desertion consequently chronic (4). While hijackers often had better food and pay and shorter shifts, the long arm of the law was sometimes inexcusable and held them to strict standards. Pirates who did not seem to have loyalty to man or country could set their own terms, albeit under the guise of crime. These seafaring groups were far from disorganized- they operated under strict codes of conduct that reflected a highly organized social order governing authority, distribution of looting and discipline. Thus the loot were systematically distributed: captain and quartermaster received between one and a half and two shares; gunners, bootswains, mates, carpenters and doctors, one and a quarter or a half; all others each received one share (5). The captain served at the mercy of the crew, and could be removed from his position for acts of cowardice, cruelty, or failure to act in the best interests of the crew. A board managed the crew, which represents the highest authority on board the ship. In many ways, this order was necessary to prevent the survival of piracy. This group knew they were working on borrowed time and on the edge of the executioner's noose. Although they can be ordered, if they were captured by a counterparty, they were faced with death. The literally needed to hang together, or could find themselves hanging separately, which bred a sense of brotherhood that spread among pirates and manifested itself in cooperative tendencies at sea and in the harbor. In this context, flags emerged as identifiers: In April 1719, when Howell Davis and the crew sailed in the Sierra Leone River, the pirates led by Thomas Cocklyn were wary until they saw on the approaching ship its Black flag, then immediately they were easy in their minds, and a little time after the crews greeted each other with their Cannon (6). Although the conflict between pirate bands was not unheard of, the groups were largely cooperative, even across national borders. And they would defend each other. For example, when the survivors of the wrecked Whidah were imprisoned in 1717, pirates acquired a captain of the ship, who they told if the prisoners suffered they would kill every body [the pirates] took belong to New England (7). A version of the Jolly Roger was widely adopted by pirates for fraternal reasons that eventually led to economic blessings as discussed by the Times-about 2,500 men sailed under a version of a black flag with it of a white skeleton beat a bleeding heart with one hand and with an hour of glass. The flag was certainly meant to announce their presence, and the pirates, enterprising men who were, quickly found that they could convey their intention to put ships in their path path their banners: black flags indicated that they were pirates and that they would consider providing quarter, while a red flag with the described insignia meant that no quarter would be given and the friends meant to fight to the end. However, the images chosen for the flag is as much a reflection of the pirates and their lifestyle as it was a reflection of their terrible nature: The flag was meant to scare the pirates prey, but the triad of interlocking symbols-death, violence, limited time-at the same time highlighted meaningful parts of the sailor's experience, and eloquently tailored to the pirates' own consciousness of themselves as prey in turn. Pirates seized the symbol of the mortality of captains who used the skull as a marginal sign in their logs to indicate the account of a death. Sailors who became pirates escaped from one closed system to be in another. But as pirates - and only as pirates - these men were able to fight back under the gloomy colors of King Death against those captains, merchants and officials who waved banners of authority (8). By gathering under this sign, the pirates created a physical symbol that could be identified as a pirate. But perhaps this accepted branding suggested that this group had become too big and too powerful to go unchecked. Piracy was a business - an officially sanctioned company in many cases- but if the Cilicians were wiped out by the Empire once they were a significant threat, so too would these men be persecuted, and by the powers that once encouraged their numbers. Historian Douglas R. Burgess Jr. discusses the ways in which the perception of 17th-century piracy was shaped by governing officials, who used the media for this purpose after the conviction of the famous English pirate Henry Every. He was distinguished as a noble pirate, a title also awarded to the likes of Drake and Morgan in recognition of their bravery on behalf of English maritime interests (9). This reputation, which is firmly planted in the minds of the English people, proved difficult to undo. In fact, when Every was brought before trial for the capture and mistreatment of the Ganj-i-Sawai (Gunsway), he was acquitted by the jury, much to the shame of the English government, which had taken the stance-somewhat necessarily to restore trade ties with India and restore the power of the East Indian Trading Company-that he should be punished. On the national stage, this was a PR nightmare for England. The acquittal suggested that Britain was a nation of pirates for potential allies and trading partners, such as India, and encouraged English colonies to to sympathise and support in local waters, as it suggested that native England itself supported these individuals. The government has retry everyone's man on charges of mutiny. (He had had first-degree of Charles II. However, he seized the ship while in port (as he had not been paid) and renamed the Fancy, and proceeded to attack the Ganj-i-Sawai.) England effectively re-created the definition of piracy to bring him and his men to justice, and in doing so, sent the message that piracy itself would no longer be tolerated. While this would not be the end of piracy itself, it may be a point at which multiple meanings associated with the Jolly Roger begin to take shape. The noble pirate image remained: Each was treated as a folk hero in popular culture. For example, The Life and Adventures of Captain John Avery published in 1709, painted Elke as a gallant swashbuckler who falls in love with an Indian princess aboard the captured Ganj-i-Sawai who then decrees that his crew must also share dim brides in his joy (10). Next, playwright Charles Johnson would adapt the story for the stage in The Successful Pyrate, which portrayed Every as an empire builder and a tough but effective monarch (11). Each was often then depicted in military equipment-the idea of the defender persisted. The signing of the Treaty of Utretcht settled much of the discord that had driven privateization initially, reducing the need for these seafarers brigands as well as official tolerance for their actions (12). In this context, signs of piracy were outlawed, to fit the idea that pirates are bloodthirsty, ruthless, criminals. These ideas moved the symbols associated with piracy away from fraternal ties and self-identification, and moved the pirates themselves away from nationalist ties, making them targets of the state. And we were left with mixed symbolism - further diluted as it is appropriated for contemporary applications. For additional reading on contemporary piracy, readers are focusing on Andrew Thaler's Nothing to Plunder-The Evolution of Somalia Pirate Nation at Southern Fried Science. This post appeared on the original house of anthropology in practice. It was also featured in the Open Lab series with an emphasis on some of the best online science writing. I was glad that historical/anthropological selection was included. Do you have anything to say? Comments are disabled on Anthropology in practice, but you always join the community on Facebook. -- You might also want: The Stories Our Fridges Tell You Are What You Eat: Unraveling the Truth in Food Records A Right to Be Clean: Sanitation and the Rise of New York City's Water Towers The Story of Grand Central and the Taming of the Crowd Standards of Healthcare in Your Medicine Cabinet The Cultural Legacy of Postage The Story Henry Heinz's Condiment Empire -- Notes:

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