

7 Holy Warriors, Rebels, and Thieves

Defining Maritime Violence in the Ottoman Mediterranean

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Abstract

The essay takes a non-Eurocentric point of view and aims to highlight the concurrent concepts of piracy and other forms of maritime violence in the early modern Mediterranean. The author shows that a wide range of concepts were used in the early modern Ottoman Empire to conceptualize what Europeans termed piracy or privateering. As in Europe, there was considerable ambiguity in the use and interpretation of these terms, and the practices that they described. In contrast to the emphasis that contemporary Europeans put on the distinction between piracy and privateering, in theory if not always in practice, Ottoman Islamic law did not differentiate between foreign Christian pirates and foreign Christian corsairs or privateers.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, corsairs, legal interpretation, Islamic Law, conceptual variety

“Think of jihad as an island,” wrote the sixteenth-century Ottoman bureaucrat, historian, and social commentator Mustafa Ali: “On its right is a sea of wealth, on the left is corruption.”¹ Corsairing and piracy, holy war and criminal rebellion – the opposing legal poles of Mediterranean maritime raiding were not distinguished by tactics, equipment, or even personnel, but

¹ Mustafa Ali, *Mevā'idü'n-Nefāis fī kavā'id-i'l-mecālis*, ed. Mehmet Şeker (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1997), 288; *idem*, *The Ottoman Gentleman of the Sixteenth Century: Mustafa Ali's 'Tables of Delicacies Concerning the Rules of Social Gatherings'*, transl., Douglas Brookes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2003), 35. See also Cornell Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541–1600)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

by targeting and authorization, or its absence. Mustafa Ali argued that many of the holy warrior heroes (*gazis*, in Ottoman parlance) who had brought North Africa into the Ottoman fold, corsairs like Hayreddin Barbarossa (d. 1546) and Turgud Reis (d. 1565), had begun their careers as petty coastal pirates, preying on Christian and Muslim Ottomans in the Aegean. With time and success, they expanded their operations, improved the size and range of their craft, and only then transitioned to legitimate corsairing in service of the faith and the sultan. By repenting of their earlier sins and devoting themselves to maritime jihad against the enemies of Islam and the Ottoman dynasty, however, these corsairs earned their place in the Ottoman pantheon and their reward in the hereafter.

But, writing just before his death in 1600, Mustafa Ali observed that over the past generation it had become increasingly difficult to distinguish between the small-time pirates then following similar career paths along the Adriatic and Aegean coasts and the North Africa-bound corsairs they may have aspired to become.² The reorientation of Ottoman naval resources and a series of profound political, economic, environmental, and military challenges contributed to an explosion of piratical violence in the eastern half of the Mediterranean in the decades following the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus and the Ottoman defeat at Lepanto, both in 1571, and the Ottoman capture of the Spanish-held fort of La Goletta at Tunis in 1574, which marked the end of over half a century of naval conflict over the North African littoral and led to a formal truce with Spain that was ratified in 1581. As Ottoman naval defence efforts foundered in this era of endless land wars and fiscal crisis, a diverse assortment of Catholic corsairs and English and Dutch merchant-pirates poured into the Ottoman Mediterranean, while homegrown Muslim and Christian coastal raiders proliferated from the Aegean to the Adriatic. Ottoman-aligned corsairs based in North Africa and along the southern Adriatic and Ionian coasts also took advantage of the chaos, raiding the Ottoman subjects and shores they were otherwise expected to protect.³

This chapter considers the range of maritime actors circumnavigating Mustafa Ali's jihad island, the rich and varied terminology Ottoman administrators and jurists employed to classify and describe them, and the political and legal rules that could transform the erstwhile holy-warrior corsair into a rebel and thief in the eyes of the sultan's government. Conceptually, the

2 Mustafa Ali, *Mevā'idü'n-Nefāis*, 288.

3 For an overview of these developments, see Joshua M. White, *Piracy and Law in the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 6–12.

Ottomans shared much with their Mediterranean neighbours, particularly the Venetians, in how they understood the forms and practitioners of maritime violence. However, the ambiguity surrounding what separated legitimate corsairing from seemingly indiscriminate piracy – both often practiced by the same people, not only over the course of a career but sometimes on the same cruise – inflected the Ottoman vocabulary of maritime violence in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That vocabulary reflected the deep ambivalence Ottoman administrators felt towards those who might cheaply provide the state with intelligence and coastal defence and augment the imperial navy, but who might also be, have been, or become pirates attacking Ottoman ships and shores as well as those of the Ottomans' treaty-partners, thereby posing a grave challenge to Ottoman security and sovereignty.⁴

The two Ottoman Turkish words most frequently associated with the practitioners of maritime violence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were *korsan* and *levend*. In Ottoman administrative and legal documents, these could signify naval irregulars, corsairs, or sometimes unambiguous pirates – the full spectrum of scale, legality, and professionalization. The words *korsan* and *korsanlık*, derived from the Arabic *qursān*, which in turn was derived from the Italian *corsaro*, carried the meaning of “corsair” and “corsairing” in the early modern period and were then used much as their cognates were in Italian; in modern Turkish, however, they are typically defined as “pirate” and “piracy.”⁵ Corsairs, particularly those associated with the major enterprises, whether Muslim or Christian, whether based out of Algiers or Malta, could be referred to as *korsan*. In theory, a corsair or privateer enjoyed political and/or religious sanction to raid designated enemies – that sanction being what separated them from mere pirates – but use of the term certainly did not imply Ottoman (or Venetian) approval, or even acceptance of the legitimacy or legality of the *korsan*'s raiding, though it might indicate recognition of a degree of professionalization on the raiders' part. Thus, Maltese corsairs were routinely referred to in the same breath as “damned infidels” and “thieves,” and both the Ottomans and Venetians referred to Algiers- or Tunis-based raiders who illegally attacked

4 On the organization of the Ottoman navy in this period, see Colin Imber, “The Navy of Süleyman the Magnificent,” *Archivum Ottomanicum* 6 (1980): 211–282.

5 Charles Pellat, Colin Imber, and J.B. Kelly, “*Qurşān*,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, B. Lewis, and C. Pellat (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 5:502; Idris Bostan, *Adriyatik'te Korsanlık. Osmanlılar, Uskoklar, Venedikliler, 1575–1620* (Istanbul: Tımas, 2009), 17–19.

their subjects as *korsan* (or *corsari*), even as they decried their actions as criminal and rebellious.⁶

Indeed, *korsanlık* in the seventeenth century was sometimes deployed in circumstances free of the religious and political baggage scholars normally associate with the term. For instance, in 1617, when a Greek Christian ship captain accused another Greek Christian ship captain in an Ottoman court of firing his cannon at his ship, driving him overboard, and stealing his cargo of wheat – piracy in its purest form – the scribe quoted the plaintiff as saying that the defendant had, in that instance, “done *korsanlık*.”⁷ The blurry semantic distinctions between the various forms and practitioners of maritime violence, and their accompanying shades of legality, are exemplified by the many meanings of the word *levend*.

A word of uncertain origin, sometimes translated as “adventurer” or “young man,” *levend* could denote officially recognized Ottoman corsairs, independent freebooters with no ties to the state, or naval auxiliaries more generally.⁸ A ship, its captain, and the fighting men on board could all be called *levend*. Although the word was usually used for Muslims, it carried no specific ethnic or geographic connotation in Ottoman usage and was employed both in the core Ottoman lands and in North Africa. For example, according to Antonio de Sosa, in late sixteenth-century Algiers, all “soldiers of the sea – whether renegades, janissaries who go privateering [...] or Turks [...] are commonly called *levends*.”⁹ The word was used for auxiliary or irregular forces on land as well, and by the second half of the sixteenth century, *levend* had also acquired the pejorative meaning of “bandit.”¹⁰ In short, both Ottoman and foreign (Christian) maritime raiders, including

6 See White, *Piracy and Law*, and below.

7 İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi (İSAM), Rumeli Sadareti Mahkemesi (RSM) 35, fol. 9r–v (Evasit/CA/1026); for more on this case, which intriguingly was heard fifteen years after the alleged attack took place, see White, *Piracy and Law*, 240–245.

8 Mustafa Cezar, *Osmanlı Tarihinde Levendler* (Istanbul: Çelikkilt Matbaası, 1965); both Italian and Persian etymologies have been proposed, on which see, Sophia Laiou, “The Levends of the Sea in the Second Half of the 16th Century: Some Considerations,” *Archivum Ottomanicum* 23 (2005/6): 233–247, here 233–234.

9 Antonio de Sosa, *An Early Modern Dialogue with Islam: Antonio de Sosa's Topography of Algiers (1612)*, edited by María Antonia Garcés and Diana de Armas Wilson (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 154; a reference to non-Muslim *levends* can be found in the Ottoman tale of the “Jailor Captain,” set in the late seventeenth century, in which a Maltese galleon recruits *levend kefere*, that is “infidel *levends*,” from the Aegean islands, Fahri İz, “Makale-i Zindancı Mahmud Kapudan,” *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 14 (1965): 111–50, here 139.

10 Cezar, *Osmanlı Tarihinde Levendler*; Laiou, “Levends of the Sea”; see also Nicolas Vatin, “Une Affaire Interne. Le sort et la libération des personnes de condition libre illégalement retenues en esclavage sur le territoire ottoman (XVIe siècle),” *Turcica* 33 (2001), 149–190. In modern Turkish,

those from North Africa and Malta, could be and usually were called *korsan*, but non-Ottomans were almost never called *levend*.

In Ottoman administrative documents, official views of such actors and their methods were clarified somewhat by context and through the use of various modifiers. For instance, the somewhat redundant *gönüllü levend korsanları* (literally “volunteer *levend* corsairs”) and similar such constructions could be used to describe corsairs or volunteer irregulars in imperial employ and stationed in an Ottoman port.¹¹ On the other end of the legal spectrum, *harami levendleri* paired the word for robber or thief with *levend* to indicate pirates, as opposed to loyal irregulars. *Harami* was also used, either by itself or as an adjective, to describe a ship or a captain, to mean pirate in maritime contexts. Another common combination, *levend eşkiyaları* (*levend* rebels, outlaws, or bandits), could be used to describe both pirates at sea and highwaymen on land; it could also denote auxiliaries gone rogue. Banditry, like piracy, was viewed as a crime against the state and thus bandits and rebels were virtually synonymous in Ottoman usage. Such people were also referred to as *ehl-i fesad*, villains or evildoers – literally, “people of corruption” – which spoke to the insidious impact of their illegal activities on the proper order of society and their exclusion from its ranks. So, for example, Kara Hamza, Captain Osman, “Gypsy” Manika, and the sixty men who manned their galliots for raids on merchant ships and Anatolian coastal villages in the vicinity of Mytilene in 1588 were described simply as *ehl-i fesad* when the Sublime Porte ordered that they and their ships be captured and that they be sent directly to Istanbul for exemplary punishment.¹²

Sometimes, Ottoman scribes employed only descriptions of the types of ship or their sailors, such as *harbi kafir kalyonları* (enemy infidel galleons) or *kayık levendleri* (*levends* with small skiffs, i.e. coastal raiders); frigateer (*firkateci*), viz. the sailor of a frigate, was an especially common byword for pirate, particularly those that preyed on Ottoman subjects.¹³ In short, piracy was defined situationally rather than occupationally, while corsairing was

levend has once again assumed a more positive meaning, namely a courageous, good-looking man, and is a popular first name.

11 E.g. Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA) Mühimme defteri (MD) 14: 322/224 (15/S/979).

12 BOA MD 64: 274/98 (996).

13 Examples of all of these can be found in the Ottoman “registers of important affairs,” or *mühimme defterleri* (MD), held at the BOA in Istanbul; extant from the 1550s, the MD contain copies of much of the Ottoman administration’s outbound correspondence and decrees. See White, *Piracy and Law*, esp. 31–35, 45, 245.

treated semantically as a profession, though one whose practitioners were frequently seduced into rebellion and corruption in the pursuit of wealth.

These terms frequently came together, as in the following from a sultanic decree dispatched in July 1574 to the commander of the Ottoman forces defending the western Morea:

When the magistrates and governors on the Mediterranean coasts were ordered not to give provisions to the *harami firbate levendleri* (lit. “robber frigate *levends*”) and to capture them when they came ashore, the aforementioned persisted in corruption (*fesad*), continually raiding [Ottoman] tax-paying subjects and the subjects of the islands belonging to Venice and plundering merchant ships.¹⁴

That the central government considered these raiders to be engaged in illegal, piratical activity is clear enough. What is not clear is who these frigate-sailing pirates actually were, nor how they conceived of their own actions. Were these formerly licenced corsairs, left unemployed and disgruntled by the restoration of peace with Venice in 1573 after three years of war? Were they local irregulars stationed in a nearby fortress who, underpaid and deprived of legitimate plunder in peacetime, chose to raid their neighbours? Or were they simply local amphibious bandits who had made, or coerced, relationships with local officialdom? The broader body of Ottoman decrees from this period makes clear that the culprits included people from all three categories.¹⁵

From at least the 1480s, all Ottoman commercial treaties (*ahdname*) with European maritime powers included anti-piracy clauses that: prohibited attacks on each other's ships, shores, and subjects; mutually prohibited enslavement; required the parties to secure bonds from their corsairs to ensure their good behaviour; and provided mechanisms for the provision of restitution in the event of violations. They also embraced an attitude towards pirates akin to the Ciceronian *hostis humani generis*.¹⁶ For example, the 1482

14 BOA MD 26: 180/68 (17/RA/982).

15 See White, *Piracy and Law*, especially ch. 1.

16 For an introduction to the *ahdnames*, see Alexander de Groot, “The Historical Development of the Capitulatory Regime in the Ottoman Middle East from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries,” in *The Ottoman Capitulations: Text and Context*, edited by Maurits van den Boogert and Kate Fleet (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino, 2003), 575–604; for the original Turkish and Italian texts of the Ottoman-Venetian *ahdnames*, see Hans Theunissen, “Ottoman-Venetian Diplomats: The Ahd-names. The Historical Background and the Development of a Category of Political-Commercial Instruments together with an Annotated Edition of a Corpus of Relevant

Ottoman-Venetian treaty stipulated that if either side “captured the ships of thieves (*haramiler*) in any place, they should punish and execute them.”

In the sixteenth century, however, the texts’ authors begin replacing the sea-robber appellation with *levend* and *korsan*, and the Venetian Italian translations invariably rendered these as “*leventi et corsari*.”¹⁷ The changes in vocabulary were just one response to the dramatic developments in the Mediterranean maritime landscape, which in the half-century after 1482 had witnessed the Ottomans’ gradual dismemberment and absorption of most of the Venetian *stato da mar* and the rise of corsair-led imperial fleets on both sides of the Mediterranean.¹⁸ Petty local piracy remained a problem, and the influx of well-armed English and Dutch broadside sailing vessels into the Mediterranean beginning in the 1580s was a new and significant source of danger to, as well as of competition for, both Ottoman and Venetian merchant shipping.¹⁹ But it was the unrestrained rise of corsairing in North Africa, Malta, and later Livorno that led to heightened tensions and increased the opportunities for conflict, with both sides considering the other responsible for restraining their co-religionists. While Venice clamoured for the Ottoman admiralty to clamp down on North African corsairing and petitioned for the release of Venetian captives and the return of goods illegally seized by Ottoman-aligned corsairs, Istanbul complained repeatedly about Venice’s failure to interdict the Maltese and other Catholic corsairs, including the Uskoks in Dalmatia, who stopped in or traversed

Documents,” *Electronic Journal of Oriental Studies* 1 (1998): 1–698; on the *ahdnames*’ treatment of piracy, see White, *Piracy and Law*, ch. 3. The “enemy of all” is a paraphrase of remarks found in Cicero’s *De Officiis* (Book III, Ch. XXIX) but was popularized in the works of early modern jurists, beginning with Alberico Gentili in his *De iure belli libri tres*; see Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations* (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 13–22.

17 E.g. Theunissen, “Ottoman–Venetian Diplomats,” 533–4.

18 Palmira Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); Andrew Hess, *The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453–1525*, *American Historical Review* 75, no. 7 (1970): 1892–1919.

19 On the “Northern Invasion,” see Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. I (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 615–642, as well as the reassessments by Molly Greene, “Beyond the Northern Invasion: The Mediterranean in the Seventeenth Century,” *Past and Present* 174 (2002): 42–71; and Colin Heywood, “The English in the Mediterranean, 1600–1630: A Post-Braudelian Perspective on the ‘Northern Invasion,’” in *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel’s Maritime Legacy*, eds. Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed-Salah Omri (London, 2010), 23–44; on the impact of “Northern” piracy on Venetian trade, see Alberto Tenenti, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice, 1580–1615*, transl. Janet Pullan and Brian Pullan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 56–86.

Venetian territory to attack Ottoman targets. Maltese corsair attacks on Ottoman ships were cited as *casus belli* for both the Ottoman invasion of Venetian Cyprus in 1570 and Venetian Crete in 1645.²⁰ Consider the following clause from the 1595 text of the Ottoman-Venetian treaty, which reflects the impact of these developments on policy:

If the *levend* galliots of North Africa and the *korsan* caïques of other places go by sea, or if other thieves go by land, and raid the islands and other places subject to Venice and capture their people and take them and sell them in Rumelia or Anatolia or in North Africa or in other places, or if they use them themselves; that sort of slave, in whoever's possession he is found, shall be taken from them without delay and be turned over to the Venetian Senate's *bailos* or their deputies or their agents and those robber *levends* (*harami levendleri*, i.e. pirates) shall be captured and strongly punished, and if that slave became Muslim, he shall be emancipated and freed.²¹

In effect, the treaty acknowledged that raiders might be considered corsairs in certain places, not least by the authorities in the North African port cities, but be viewed as pirates by the Ottomans and their treaty-partners when they violated the *ahdname* by taking protected subjects, for which reason additional treaty clauses explicitly permitted the Venetians (or the French or the English) to forcefully defend themselves against, pursue, and destroy any North African corsair ships that threatened them.²² This was because the religious justification Muslim corsairs claimed to raid and enslave “enemy infidels” (*harbi kafirler* – that is, non-Muslims from the “Abode of War,” the lands not ruled by Muslims) was always tempered by political and legal realities that identified people by their subjecthood as well as their religion and extended special protections to some to travel and trade.

20 Svat Soucek, “Naval Aspects of the Ottoman Conquests of Rhodes, Cyprus and Crete,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 98–99 (2004): 219–261; see also White, *Piracy and Law*; on the Uskoks, see Catherine Wendy Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth Century-Adriatic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992). For more on the Ottoman–Venetian relationship, see Eric Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Maria Pia Pedani, *In nome del Gran Signore. Inviati ottomani a Venezia dalla caduta di Costantinopoli alla guerra di Candia* (Venice: Deputazione editrice, 1994).

21 Theunissen, “Ottoman–Venetian Diplomats,” 569–570.

22 White, *Piracy and Law*, 126–133, 162–163.

The corsairs who raided and enslaved the designated enemies of the faith at the designated times were celebrated as holy warriors of the sea. In fact, all those who fought in the sultan's wars, including those waged against fellow Muslims, were lauded as *gazis* and *mücahids*, since Ottoman religious-legal authorities issued fatwas – legal opinions – declaring every Ottoman war a holy war.²³ However, when Ottoman corsairs attacked the sultan's own subjects or attacked the subjects of the powers to which the sultan had extended peace and protection – by 1612, a list that included Venetian, Ragusan, French, English, and Dutch subjects – they became rebels and, by extension, pirates. Sultanlic authorization was what consecrated the raiding of “enemy infidels” and kept the corsair on the right side of Mustafa Ali's jihad island.

This was in keeping with centuries of Islamic tradition, which held that the initiation and prosecution of jihad qua holy war was the exclusive responsibility of the leader (*imam*) of the Muslims and was embarked upon communally under his leadership, and so it was precisely this language that Istanbul employed when it admonished the leadership in Algiers and Tunis to restrain its corsairs and restrict their raids to targets that were acceptable to Istanbul.²⁴ For example, after a series of joint Algerian-Tunisian raids on Venetian possessions in 1624 – during the lengthy period of peace that separated the wars for Cyprus (1570–1573) and Crete (1645–1669) – the Ottoman imperial admiral sent a letter to Tunis that praised its corsairs for their past history as holy warriors but disparaged the participants in the raid as “rebel *levends*.” He explained his logic: “Their [the Venetians'] possessions are not like the possessions of other enemy infidels; theirs are not permissible (*halal*) for you.”²⁵ His letter was accompanied by a fatwa from the Ottomans' chief religious-legal authority (*şeyhülislam*) that declared that it was a violation of Islamic law to attack the sultan's friends. The Tunisians

23 Colin Imber, *Ebu's-su'ud: The Islamic Legal Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 65–88; White, *Piracy and Law*, 207–208; on *gazi*, see Colin Imber, “What Does Ghazi Actually Mean?,” in *The Balance of Truth: Essays in Honour of Professor Geoffrey Lewis*, edited by Çiğdem Balım-Harding and Colin Imber (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2000), 165–178.

24 On the meanings and practice of jihad, see Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); on early Hanafi approaches, see also Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan Shaybānī and Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī's Siyar* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966).

25 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe), Bailo a Costantinopoli (BAC), Carte turche 251/4, fol. 121v; the raids that led to this exchange and their aftermath are described in detail in Joshua M. White, “‘It Is Not Halal to Raid Them’: Piracy and Law in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Mediterranean,” in *Corsairs and Pirates in the Eastern Mediterranean, 15th–19th Centuries*, edited by Gelina Harlaftis and David Starkey (Athens: Sylvia Ioannou Foundation, 2016), 77–94.

would subsequently defend their raids against the Venetians with the secular justification of retaliation and reprisal, since the Venetians were proactive in their defence against the corsairs (as was their right according to their treaty) and were famously uncompromising to those they captured, who they frequently executed on the spot. In response, Ottoman authorities turned again to the language of Islamic law, not in support of raiding the “enemy infidels,” but as an explanation for why the corsairs could not, dispatching further fatwas to North Africa asserting the primacy of the sultan and the necessity of securing his permission to raid.²⁶

Yet, calls for North Africa’s corsairs to observe the sultans’ *ahdnames* had been dispatched with some regularity since the 1580s, as Venetian, French, and English vessels came under increasing attack, and Istanbul’s coercive capacity in the capitals of corsairing had only declined since then. Several decades of political, military, and fiscal crisis weakened the financial and administrative links to the North African provinces, which became virtually self-governing in the aftermath of provincial reorganization in 1587, while the Algerian and Tunisian corsairs with roots in the Ottoman Aegean and Adriatic whom Mustafa Ali had celebrated, like Hayreddin Barbarossa and his acolytes, had increasingly come to be replaced by European renegades – converted former captives, unemployed English and Dutch privateers, and entrepreneurial opportunists – who paid lip service to the old ideals (particularly the ancient and enduring hostility toward Spain) but had little connection and less loyalty to the distant Ottoman dynasty.²⁷

Although individual decrees to free illegally enslaved European captives sometimes succeeded, the willingness of European powers to pay ransoms undercut the desultory Ottoman enforcement efforts, and most Ottoman and Venetian attempts to secure North African obedience to the sultan’s treaties, like that in 1624, came up short. Ultimately, those failures accelerated the process of diplomatic divergence that began in earnest in the early seventeenth century and culminated in the 1620s, with Algiers and Tunis concluding treaties directly with European powers and declaring war and peace of their own accord. From this point onwards, Algiers, Tunis, and

26 White, “It is Not Halal.”

27 On the changing Ottoman relationship with North Africa, see Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” *Turkish Historical Review* 1, no. 2 (2010): 125–163; on renegades, see Tobias Graf, *The Sultan’s Renegades: Christian-European Converts to Islam and the Making of the Ottoman Elite, 1575–1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Bartolomé Bennassar and Lucile Bennassar, *Les chrétiens d’Allah. L’histoire extraordinaire des renégats, XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris: Perrin, 1989).

Tripoli defined their own foreign policies, and as the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean began to shift northwards in the second half of the seventeenth century, they suffered repeated European bombardments – all with little complaint from Istanbul, which by mid-century had formally absolved itself of responsibility for the actions of “rebellious” corsairs it had long since ceased to authorize or rely upon.²⁸

The fact of the matter was that the same factors that had made naval irregulars valuable to the Ottomans made regulating them incredibly difficult, and this was not just true of those operating out of semi-independent North Africa. The Sublime Porte had relied to some degree on *levends* for maritime security and intelligence gathering since the fifteenth century, but its reliance on irregulars increased dramatically during and immediately after the 1570–1573 conflict with Venice and its Holy League allies. The defeat and near-total destruction of the Ottoman fleet at the Battle of Lepanto in October 1571 deprived the Ottoman government not only of hundreds of ships, but of thousands of experienced seamen, oarsmen, and soldiers.²⁹ As a result, Ottoman administrators turned to the *levends* of the Adriatic and North Africa who had missed or survived the debacle at Lepanto to fill the security gap while the navy worked to recruit fresh men and rebuild. In the disorder and fog of war, there were myriad opportunities for corsairs tasked with pacifying the Aegean islands to engage in illegal slaving raids, and for ambitious amphibious bandits along the Adriatic, Ionian, and Aegean coasts to grow their gangs and expand their range.³⁰ The end of the war in 1573 brought little peace to the Ottoman Mediterranean as erstwhile corsairs persisted in piracy, and the situation only got worse as rampant inflation, successive wars against Safavid Iran (1578–1590, 1603–1618, 1623–1639) and Habsburg Austria (1593–1606), the disastrous Celali revolts (1595–1609), and dynastic crisis vied for the attention and resources of Ottoman administrators between the 1570s and 1640s.³¹ The trade-offs facing Ottoman administrators relying on irregulars for maritime

28 White, *Piracy and Law*, esp. ch. 4; on the role the Ottomans' chief religious-legal authority (*şeyhülislam*) and his fatwas played in diplomacy between Europe and North Africa, see Joshua M. White, “Fetva Diplomacy: The Ottoman Şeyhülislam as Trans-Imperial Intermediary,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, nos. 2–3 (2015): 199–221.

29 See John Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Andrew Hess, “The Battle of Lepanto and Its Place in Mediterranean History,” *Past and Present* 57 (1972): 53–73.

30 White, *Piracy and Law*, 36–44.

31 For an overview of this tumultuous period in Ottoman history, see Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 196–228.

security, and the troubles and temptations facing those navigating Mustafa Ali's jihad island, are exemplified by the Ottoman raiding community of Aya Mavra fortress, located on the northern tip of the strategically located Ionian island of Lefkada.

Mustafa Ali named Lefkada among the chief destinations for an up-and-coming Anatolian pirate in 1599, and most of Aya Mavra's *levends* were volunteers who flocked there from distant coastal regions of the empire. Greek-accented Turkish, Greek, and lingua franca, the Romance pidgin understood in every Mediterranean port, could all be heard in the taverns and along the wharves of this frontier outpost.³² The fortress and its *levends* fulfilled legitimate security needs – until its reconquest by Venice in 1684, Lefkada was the only Ionian island held by the Ottomans – and they played an important role in harassing enemy shipping and the nearby Venetian islands in wartime. But in peacetime, the unruly and largely unsupervised *levends* of this insular 'Little Algiers', as the seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi (d. 1682) called it, often turned to piracy, plundering the ships and villages of both the neighbouring Venetian islands and the nearby Ottoman mainland and carrying off their inhabitants in order to build and row their frigates.³³

For example, as soon as the war with Venice over Cyprus came to a formal end in the spring of 1573, Aya Mavra-based *levends* were illegally building frigates with which they were raiding nearby Ottoman subjects. Although Lefkada's Ottoman magistrate was ordered to record the names of the *levends* "whose crime has been proven" and forward them to the Imperial Council for punishment, less than two months later the Imperial Council was dispatching yet another set of commands in response to complaints from the Ottoman governor of the Morea that some *levend* corsairs (*levend korsanlar*) from Aya Mavra had been plundering his district and taking Ottoman captives. Once again, Istanbul ordered that these *levends* be apprehended and put to the oar – a model punishment for pirates in a time when seasoned oarsmen were in dangerously short supply.³⁴

32 Mustafa Ali, *Mevā'idü'n-Nefāis*, 288; Evliya Çelebi, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi. Topkapı Sarayı Kütüphanesi Bağdat 308 Numaralı Yazmanın Transkripsiyonu* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1996–2007), 8:282.

33 Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatnâmesi*, 8:282. For more on this epic traveller, see Robert Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

34 BOA MD 22: 30/12 (21/M/981); BOA MD 22: 332/172 (26/RA/981); on the sentencing of criminals to galley service, see Mehmet İpşirli, "XVI. Asrın İkinci Yarısında kürek cezası ile ilgili hükümler," *Tarih Enstitüsü Dergisi* 12 (1982): 204–248.

The imperial centre understood that these *levends* and others like them worked closely with contacts on land to supply victuals and fence their plunder, and it repeatedly dispatched orders to provincial administrators not to supply criminal *levends* with grain, guides, water, or intelligence; all ships built without authorization or belonging to those suspected of engaging in piracy were to be seized and burned.³⁵ But such orders had little effect. The governors of the mainland district in whose jurisdiction Lefkada fell frequently colluded with the island's *levends*, bankrolled their operations, both legal (there was a surfeit of licit targets in Habsburg- and papal-controlled Italy) and illegal, and turned a blind eye to all but their most egregious offences.³⁶ The same was often true for the governors, fortress commanders, and customs officers of many of the Ottoman port towns of the Adriatic, Ionian, and Morean coasts, who either chose or were forced to collaborate with the local *levends*. Collusion may have been a choice for some officials, but for the soldiers and irregulars stationed along the Ottoman Empire's maritime frontiers who were paid, if they were paid at all, in debased coin at wages that had stagnated despite decades of inflation, participation in the raiding, whether legal or illegal, was a matter of financial necessity. And so the rash of piracy that began in the aftermath of peace in 1573 persisted until the Ottoman invasion of Venetian Crete in 1645 gave the *levends* a new war to fight.

Some of the *levends* based at Aya Mavra in this period harboured grander ambitions than sacking impoverished nearby fishing villages and plundering small coastal traders. It was still much as Mustafa Ali described; for many of the petty criminal *levends* who built piratical careers on the backs of their neighbors, whom they raided and enslaved, and then moved on to Lefkada to acquire a bigger ship in order to take bigger prizes, the next step on the aspirational career ladder was Algiers, where corsairing was wholly supported by the local administration even when it was frowned upon in Istanbul.³⁷ Relations between Algiers and Istanbul had deteriorated

35 See, for example, BOA MD 26:180/68 (17/RA/982); MD 31:184/75 (12/CA/985); MD 34:550/261 (986); MD 35 520/206 (986); MD 470/252 (12/S/988).

36 For some indication of the extent of the corruption: in 1617, Istanbul was informed that the previous district governor of Karlieli (which included Lefkada) had been kidnapping the residents of villages in his district, possibly with the connivance of Aya Mavra's *levends*, and then exporting them to North Africa, where they were exchanged for captives with legal provenance who were then imported into Karlieli; for more on this case and its implications, see Joshua M. White, "Piracy of the Ottoman Mediterranean: Slave Laundering and Subjecthood," in *The Making of the Modern Mediterranean: Views from the South*, edited by Judith Tucker (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 95–122.

37 Mustafa Ali, *Mevā'idü'n-Nefāis*, 288–290; for more on the *corso* in Algiers itself, see Fatiha Loualich, "In the Regency of Algiers: The Human Side of the Algerine Corso," in *Trade and*

dramatically by the mid-seventeenth century, following decades of disputes over the harsh treatment of administrators sent from Istanbul and mounting Ottoman frustration with the failure of Algiers' leaders to consistently supply adequate naval support during the interminable campaign to conquer Crete. But whereas Algiers' contumacious corsairs and rebellious leadership no longer held the exalted position in the eyes of the Sublime Porte that it had a century earlier, it and the other North African port cities still represented an alternative locus for the legitimate practice of maritime violence and the image of success in that pursuit for mariners across the Ottoman Mediterranean. So much so, in fact, that *levends* elsewhere began to adopt its corsairs' distinctive fashions.

In the 1670s, Evliya Çelebi observed that all of Aya Mavra's "frigateer *levends*" wore red fezzes and red vests with patterned silk sashes around their waists, just like the Algerine corsairs who sometimes cruised in Ionian and Adriatic waters and occasionally participated in joint ventures with the local *levends*. Evliya encountered the same styles being worn by the Albanian *levends* of the port towns of Durrës and Vlorë, located just to the north of the narrow entrance to the Adriatic. These *levends* were natives, unlike the motley crews on Lefkada, but they too provided maritime security and conducted reconnaissance missions and they too engaged in frequent piratical attacks (often carefully planned in advance) against nearby Ottoman, Venetian, and Ragusan targets.³⁸ By donning the costume of Algiers, the sometime-rebel *levends* of the Adriatic and Ionian coasts masqueraded as holy warrior corsairs, even when an inconvenient peace rendered them pirates.

Indeed, even though Evliya acknowledged that heavy drinking in the Greek-run taverns was the Aya Mavra *levends*' principal occupation on dry land, he declared that they were holy warriors and heroes (*gazis*) owing to their service in the recently concluded 24-year war with Venice (1645–1669), and he insisted that some were "very devout."³⁹ Nevertheless, just as had happened after the return of peace in 1573, the *levends* of Aya Mavra were disinclined to halt their attacks on Venetians after 1669, and they resumed raids on other Ottomans as well, once again transforming the culprits into evildoers, rebels, and thieves from the perspective of the Sublime Porte. The

Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy, edited by Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed-Salah Omri (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 69–96.

38 Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatnâmesi*, 8:282, 314; on piracy in this region, see Bostan, *Adriyatik'te Korsanlık*; White, *Piracy and Law*, 51–8.

39 Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatnâmesi*, 8:282.

dilemma for Istanbul was balancing the financial and political costs of the *levends'* piratical activities, both on Lefkada and elsewhere within Ottoman domains, against the military and even economic benefits of maintaining (or simply permitting) these inexpensive, self-sustaining, highly motivated defence forces that occupied strategic points and injected valuable booty into their communities, which were often otherwise marginalized ports that had been left behind by tectonic shifts in Mediterranean trade routes and patterns of licit commerce during the sixteenth century.⁴⁰

It was an unfortunate fact that the *levends* of Aya Mavra did “not have good relations with the people of other places,” as Evliya put it, “but they are brave and courageous and talented soldiers and they are a thorn in the eyes of Frengistan (the land of the Franks, viz. Christian Europe).”⁴¹ And that, at least, argued for a policy of responding loudly to serious incidents – calling for the arrest of the “rebels” and the destruction of their craft – but otherwise avoiding sustained enforcement efforts that might exacerbate the situation. Thus, even though the Ottoman governor of the Morea dispatched a force to Aya Mavra in 1675 to burn the *levends'* ships, their piratical attacks persisted until 1684, when the Venetians joined the new Holy League formed in the aftermath of the failed Ottoman siege of Vienna the previous year, declared war on the Ottoman Empire, and made the conquest of Lefkada their first priority.⁴²

But just as the *levends* of Lefkada dressed like the corsairs of Algiers, thereby associating themselves with the largest and most respected independent corsairing outfit in the Muslim Mediterranean, most maritime raiders looked for ways to legitimize their activities, to position their raids within the traditional practices and conflicts of the major corsairing organizations or to defend them with a variety of religious and secular justifications. As we have seen, when holy war no longer applied, self-defence, retaliation, and reprisal provided the most plausible explanations. The back-and-forth raiding of the Adriatic-Ionian frontier was often couched in such language, and Algiers and Tunis alike employed similar excuses when Istanbul demanded explanations for raids on Venetians. In the aftermath of corsair attacks on the Venetian Ionian islands in 1624, for example, the Tunisian leadership explained to the Ottoman and Venetian envoys sent to secure the release of the captives that its corsairs had no choice but to

40 On which point, see White, *Piracy and Law*, *passim*; Gonçal López Nadal, “Corsairing as a Commercial System: The Edges of Legitimate Trade,” in *Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader*, edited by C. R. Pennell (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 125–136.

41 Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatnâmesi*, 8:282.

42 The 1675 expedition is mentioned in George Wheeler, *Journey into Greece in Six Books* (London: Cademan, 1682), 37; on continuing attacks, see ASVe BAC, Carte turche 252/12 (Evail/R/1093).

sack the islands of Paxos, Antipaxos, and Cephalonia because some people on the shore had hurled insults at the passing ships and a couple had fired their arquebuses, while their fleets were wholly justified in seizing Venetian ships since they were simply compensating themselves for losses sustained from Venetian anti-piracy patrols. The Istanbul government rejected all these excuses – those responsible for the attacks were labeled rebels and criminals – but as the North African port cities arrogated to themselves the right to make peace or war as they saw fit, any naval entrepreneur could join them and benefit from the legitimacy and infrastructure they could provide. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Algiers and Tunis, which had their own political and religious leaders, the corsairs could continue to claim the political and religious legitimacy that Istanbul denied them.⁴³

Consider the example of the title character in the late seventeenth-century *Story of the Jailor-Captain Mahmud and His Victories over the Damned Hell-Dwelling Maltese*. Set in the 1670s, this Ottoman Turkish tale tells of a French corsair galleon whose jailor enlists his ship's Muslim captives in a mutiny. After they seize control of the ship, the jailor, now captain, explains to his mixed crew of Ottoman Muslims and French Christians that “we must join and take the flag of some power or an *ocak* [lit. “hearth,” the term used for the governments in North Africa]; it is not reasonable for us to continue alone like this.”⁴⁴ There is no question in this instance that the erstwhile Catholic corsairing vessel will continue in its former profession, but it requires a new sponsor, since independent piracy is not considered a viable option. They run through the possibilities: the Ottomans, they decide, would arrest them as pirates and imprison them; Algiers is too greedy and might well steal their ship; Tripoli is too poor and has little to offer them; and so they settle on Tunis, which is sufficiently wealthy, powerful, and welcoming. Eventually, like so many other North Africa-based European renegades, the French jailor adopts Islam and the name Mahmud, and battles Maltese

43 See White, “It is not Halal”; *idem*, *Piracy and Law*, 265–268; the Tunisians’ explanations for the 1624 raids and for their hostility towards Venice are recounted in detail in the report of the Venetian dragoman Giovanni Battista Salvago in his *‘Africa overo Barbaria’. Relazione al doge di Venezia sulle reggenze di Algeri e di Tunisi del dragomanno Gio. Batta Salvago, 1625* (Padua: A. Milani, 1937), 34–46. On the particular dynamics of the Adriatic frontier region, see Bostan, *Adriyatik’te Korsanlık*; Maria Pia Pedani, “Beyond the Frontier: The Ottoman–Venetian Border in the Adriatic Context from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Zones of Fracture in Modern Europe: The Baltic Countries, the Balkans, and Northern Italy*, ed. Almut Bues (Wiesbaden, 2005), 45–60.

44 İz, “Makale-i Zindancı Mahmud,” 129; on the story and its history, see Andreas Tietze, “Die Geschichte von Kerkermeister-Kapitän, Ein Türkischer Seeräuberromane Aus Dem 17. Jahrhundert,” *Acta Orientalia* 19 (1942): 152–210.

corsairs while capturing ships and men, but now from the other side of the political-religious divide of the Mediterranean – all without the knowledge, involvement, or approval of the sultan's government in Istanbul.⁴⁵

Many of those who were captured or accused of simple piracy had excuses at the ready as well. For instance, the janissary Mustafa Beşe bin Abdullah accused the Armenian Yorgi veled Anton of the island of Kos of having partaken in a piratical attack on his ship four years earlier when he sued him in the court of Galata in April 1616. Returning from a trading expedition to Egypt, Mustafa Beşe's ship had dropped anchor at a spot along the coast near Kos and the crew had tucked in for the night when Yorgi and his compatriots climbed over the gunwales, seized Mustafa and his crew, robbed them, and plundered the ship. They did this, Mustafa explained, "because the aforementioned Yorgi is a frigateer (*firkateci*).” But Yorgi defended himself by claiming that he himself had been the prisoner of a pirate, a notorious "frigateer" known as Ak Mehmed, and that it was Ak Mehmed who had directed the assault on Mustafa Beşe's ship. Yorgi claimed that he had not even participated in the raid and that he had been chained hand and foot in Ak Mehmed's frigate at the time of the attack.⁴⁶ Yorgi's denial echoed that of countless pirates, who claimed that they were simple sailors who had no knowledge of what the captain had planned, or that they were prisoners forced to participate under duress.⁴⁷

The documents produced by the Ottoman central administration shed little light on the motives of these raiders, whether economic or religious, personal or political, or some combination of all of them. Nor does the archival record tell us much, in most instances, about their background or origins. In the many decrees issued in the aftermath of an illegal attack—dispatched to provincial and district governors, local magistrates, fortress commanders, and naval leaders – it is often unclear where the implicated parties (most frequently referred to as *levends*) fell on the legal and professional spectrum. Were they formally, or formerly, licenced corsairs, who were theoretically required to post a cash bond or name a guarantor in their home port to ensure their good behaviour, or were they just an amphibious gang stealing indiscriminately? The Ottoman administrative and legal response to maritime raiding hinged on the subjecthood and religion of

45 İz, "Makale-i Zindancı Mahmud," 129.

46 İSAM, Galata 40, fol. 67v (Evail/R/1025).

47 See, for example, the Venetian interrogation record of a diverse crew of accused pirates captured off Crete in 1610, in Horatio Brown, ed., *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1905), 12:559–563.

both the raiders and their victims, and the wrong combination at the wrong time resulted in official condemnation. No further distinction between the various species of Ottoman *levend* and *korsan* was necessary when the targets they chose ran counter to the Ottoman central government's wishes.

If Ottoman administrative documents were often vague in their description of piratical actors, it is worth noting that Ottoman court records and legal sources were intentionally obscure when it came to the actions of foreign Christians, in particular. In the disputes over captured ships and cargo heard in Ottoman courts, the question of whether the "enemy infidel" doing the taking had authorization – of whether they were pirates or privateers – was irrelevant, in contrast with many European courts, where determining the legitimacy of the taking decided the disposition of the property seized. Thus, in the court context, Ottoman scribes usually did not differentiate between European "enemy infidel" naval vessels, corsairs, and pirates, any of which might seize Ottoman ships and subjects, nor did they record the aggressor's geographic or national origin, except in rare instances.⁴⁸

Therefore, while it is true that the designation of "pirate" is both a political and a legal one, there was in the Ottoman case a pronounced cleavage between the two arenas when it came to non-Ottoman sea raiders. Ottoman administrators might indeed brand them pirates (or "thieving corsairs") and reserve particularly harsh treatment for some, but to Ottoman jurists and judges, the home-country legal status of an "enemy infidel" ship that carried out attacks on Ottoman ships, subjects, and shores did not merit the slightest recognition. In terms of Ottoman Islamic law, there was no difference between the foreign Christian pirate and the foreign Christian corsair, even though in the secular realm of Ottoman international maritime law, enshrined in the *ahdnames*, those differences persisted.⁴⁹

The shoals surrounding Mustafa Ali's jihad island were dangerous and constantly shifting. The risks were real; whatever their origin, pirates apprehended during local crackdowns on land or the navy's periodic sweeps

48 See Joshua M. White, "Litigating Disputes over Ships and Cargo in Early Modern Ottoman Courts," *Quaderni Storici* 51, no. 3 (2016): 701–725; Lauren Benton, "Legalities of the Sea in Gentili's *Hispanica Advocatio*," in *The Roman Foundations of the Law of Nations: Alberico Gentili and the Justice of Empire*, edited by Benedict Kingsbury and Benjamin Straumann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 269–282; Guillaume Calafat, "Ottoman North Africa and *Ius Publicum Europaeum*: The Case of the Treaties of Peace and Trade (1600–1750)," in *War, Trade and Neutrality: Europe and the Mediterranean in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by Antonella Alimento (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2011), 171–188.

49 On Ottoman Islamic law concerning maritime violence, in theory and practice, see White, *Piracy and Law*, chs. 5 and 6.

of the Ottoman Mediterranean faced death, or a short, miserable life chained to the oar. Within the diverse maritime ecology of the Ottoman Mediterranean, the line between holy war and criminal rebellion, between legitimate and illegitimate sea robbery, was thin and easily crossed – the same individuals and groups could be responsible for both, not just at different stages of their career, but on the very same cruise. At the same time, the cessation of conflict instantly transformed privateers into pirates when they persisted in attacking their erstwhile enemies. This was certainly true for the Ottomans vis-à-vis Venice after 1573, just as it was for the English and Dutch vis-à-vis Spain after 1604 and 1609, respectively; what had been legitimate, respectable *korsanlık* became, in essence, piracy, to their former sponsors, even if we might hesitate to apply the label *pirate* to those Ottoman administrators called “people of corruption,” “rebels,” and “thieves.” Nevertheless, disavowed Ottoman, English, and Dutch privateers all found refuge in North Africa, where they received the authorization they sought to continue their war under new banners. And yet, a significant number of those active in the early modern Ottoman Mediterranean whom we might call pirates were not engaged in predatory raiding full time – they were coastal guards, merchants, or fishermen who did so whenever it was convenient, profitable, and relatively safe. As we have seen, from the Aegean amphibious bandit to the Algiers-bound corsair, all such people could simultaneously fall into one or more of the categories of *levend* or *korsan*, bandit or rebel, holy warrior or thief, frigateer or evildoer. The diversity of the practitioners and expressions of maritime violence and the ambivalence of the authorities towards them are reflected in the diverse and frequently ambiguous Ottoman Turkish vocabulary employed to describe them. And so, when surveying the landscape of maritime violence in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mediterranean, the right question may not be who or what was a pirate, but rather, at what point did raiding become piracy?

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