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By Olivia Ward
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They've never spliced a main brace, uttered a yo-ho-ho or sported a black eye patch. And their drug habits give a whole new meaning to the High Seas.

While today's pirates, notably the well-armed gangs off the coast of Somalia, are far from the romantic figures of historical fiction, they have deep roots in the distant past, a buccaneering line stretching back to 1350 BC, the time of Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten.

"Some people say law and prostitution are the oldest occupations in the world," says Cindy Vallar, editor of the history column Pirates and Privateers. "But as soon as people learned to carry goods in boats, pirates were right behind them."

Pirates have been around as long as sea trade, and one of the most feared in the 18th century was Edward Teach, popularly known as Blackbeard.

Texas-based Vallar, who has studied piracy for a decade, says pirates have historically morphed from ragtag raiders to major political and economic forces that have undermined kingdoms and empires.

The Sea People, a confederation of eastern Mediterranean tribes, menaced the Middle Eastern coasts and set their sights on conquering Egypt more than two millennia ago.

Later, Vikings attacked the British Isles, Italy and North Africa, and terrorized waterways from the Baltic to the Black Sea and Persia.

Most early pirates were in it for the loot, but some went for power – and eventually national renown.

"Sir Francis Drake was a pirate and privateer who had immense power," says Vallar, of the 16th century explorer, warrior and looter extraordinaire who was knighted under Queen Elizabeth I.

But the real Golden Age of piracy, scholars say, was the late 17th century, when the legendary Blackbeard ravished the Caribbean and buccaneering spread to the coast of Africa, the Atlantic, and the South China Sea. And Sir Henry Morgan – well-known to rum drinkers – was knighted after a career of outstanding brutality.

But the romantic Hollywood image of pirates, glorified by Errol Flynn and Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean*, is often undeserved.

"I knew nothing about piracy when I was sailing through the Malacca Strait in 1992," says John Burnett, who had a too-close encounter with reality when a gang boarded his 10-metre boat, beat him, but left without doing major damage.

"I knew immediately they wanted my boat or my life," said Burnett, now a world-ranking authority on piracy and author of *Dangerous Waters: Modern Piracy and Terror on the High Seas*.

Unlike their plundering forebears, who elected their leaders, today's Somali pirates are reportedly hit men working for warlords or cartel leaders who live in Europe and the Middle East, stockpiling vast sums from hostage-taking.

Some of the loot goes back into weapons, which the pirates have to supply for themselves.

"We have to stop weapons coming in through the borders," says Moti Shapira, a Los Angeles-based security consultant and author. "They've turned (the Gulf) into a dangerous war zone because they have nothing to lose. They have assault rifles, GPS devices, and equipment that is not very high-tech. But if they start buying long-range missiles it could be the tipping point."

One difference between ancient times and today is the Somali pirates just want ransoms for their captives' lives, not their lives. But with the recent killing and arrest of pirates by the French and U.S. navies, that could change.

"This isn't something we can stop at sea," says Shapira. "We have to deal with it in the country itself. As long as they have no money, no education and no choice in life they'll turn to piracy. We have to send the pirates back to the storybooks."

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