

PIRATES IN MALTA

The Mediterranean with its rocky and barren coastline, with its small islands and rocks, has always been, since time immemorial, particularly favourable to the development of piracy. When the second Punic War had made Rome the leading naval power in the Western Mediterranean and when the eastern parts of the Middle Sea had been subdued, the duty of policing the Mediterranean fell clearly to the Romans. It was their responsibility to keep the seas clear of 'the common enemies of mankind' as Cicero chooses to call the pirates (1).

By the second century B.C. piracy had already been established especially in *Cilicia Tracheia* (modern *Itsch Ili*) for different reasons, not the least being that Rome had failed to create a standing fleet, as the former powers had done, to patrol the eastern regions of the Middle Sea (2). The corsairs carried their depredations to such an extent that Rome was forced to intervene. The campaign undertaken against them by M. Antonius in 102 B.C. obtained limited results. The successes of P. Servilius Vatia in 78-75 B.C. merely forced the pirates to shift their bases and activities to the more westerly parts of the Mediterranean. The invasion of Crete in 74 B.C. by M. Antonius, the father of the future triumvir Mark Antony, did not accomplish anything of importance.

The pirates who were called Cilicians but who in fact included desperate and adventurous individuals of every nationality, scoured the seas from the Pillars of Hercules to Syria in squadrons led by admirals. Plutarch alleges that their ships numbered a thousand and that more than four hundred cities were destroyed by them (3). Many islands once famous were being abandoned by their inhabitants. Commerce was at a standstill. Italy could neither send her products abroad nor receive corn from the provinces. The Roman treasury was making heavy losses. Travellers felt no more safe and many important Romans were being captured by the corsairs and forced to be ransomed by huge sums of money. Finally the pirates were ready at all times to render assistance to the enemies of Rome (4).

The Provinces were suffering no less than Italy. Cicero claims that during Verres' praetorship in Sicily (73-71 B.C.) very important cities and

1. Cf Cicero, *In Verrem*, Act. 11, 4, 21: *Fecisti item, ut praedones solent, qui cum hostes communes sint omnium . . .*

2. Cf Strabo, XIV, 667; H. A. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient World*, London, 1924, p. 199.

3. Cf *Pompey*, 24.

4. For a fuller picture of this state of affairs Cf Cicero, *De Imperio Gnei Pompei*, passim; Plutarch, *Pompey*; Dio Cassius, XXXVI, 23.

harbours were open to the marauders (5). The archpirate Heracleo managed to enter the harbour of Syracuse and burn the Roman fleet (6). We know from Plutarch that one of the Praetors of Sicily was beaten by the pirates in an engagement on the Sicilian coast (7). The island of Lipara paid tribute to the pirates to avoid being invaded by them (8). Finally, Cicero says that the pirates have been 'accustomed to spend the winter in Malta almost every year' (9).

Navigation in ancient times was at an end in October and was resumed in April (10). That means that the pirates used to remain on the island for about six months. The social consequences must have been very great.

It is easy to understand why the pirates stopped at Malta. The island with its many inlets and bays afforded them excellent shelter; they could repair and refit their light and swift vessels — the *myparones* and *hemiolae* — and using the island as a base they could plunder the opposite mainland whenever the weather allowed them to sail. What is not clear is why they were allowed to winter in Malta. It was customary for the Roman propraetor in Sicily to ask the different cities of the Province to provide ships and sailors to supervise the coast and the islands. Cicero charges Verres with having neglected the fleet. The orator also hints at collusion between the Propraetor and the pirates (11). There might also have been some sort of agreement between the Maltese and the Pirates as there had been elsewhere (12). Whilst the Maltese would allow the pirates to take shelter in Malta, the latter would undertake to respect the lives and property of the inhabitants. If this was the case, then it explains why the pirates who specialised in the looting and destruction of temples (13) left the temple of Juno in Malta untouched (14).

5. Cf *In Verrem*, 1, 4, 13: portus munitissimi, maximae tutissimaeque urbes piratis praedonibusque patefactae . . .

6. Cf Id, V, 16, 92: Una atque eadem nox erat qua praetor amoris turpissimi flamma, classis populi Romani praedonum incendio conflagrabat; ibid, 96: in urbem (Syracuse) dico atque in urbis intimam partem venisse piratas . . .

7. Cf *Pompey*, XXXIV, 1.

8. Cf Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2, IV, 3: Itaque qui (Liparenses) tot annis agellos suos te pretore redimere a piratis solebant, idem se ipsos a te pretio imposito redimerunt.

9. Dicunt legati Melitenses . . . ubi piratae fere quotannis hiemare soleant, *In Verrem* 11, 4, 104.

10. Cf Pliny, *N. H.* 11, 122: ver aperit navigantibus maria; also Vegetius IV, 39.

11. Cf *In Verrem*: Cum (Verres) praedonum duces accepta pecunia dimiserit; Id, V, 16, 64: istum clam a piratis ob hunc archipiratam pecuniam accepisse . . .

12. Cf Dio Cassius, XXXVI, 20; also Cicero, *In Verrem*, 11, 4, 21: qui (pirates) habent oppidum opportuno loco, quo saepe adeundum sit navibus.

13. Cf Appian, Mithr. 29-33, 51, 56; Cicero, *In Verrem*, 111, 91 93; Plutarch, *Antony*, 1.

14. Cf Cicero, *In Verrem*, 11, 4, 103: fanum est Iunonis . . . quod tanta religione semper fuit, ut non modo . . . sed etiam hac praedonum multitudine semper inviolatum sanctumque fuerit; Id, 104: quod neque praedo violarit . . .

We know that in the case of the island of Lipara the inhabitants paid tribute to the pirates who in turn abstained from invading them.

When Verres' term of office expired in 70 B.C. his successor, Lucius Matellus, defeated the fleet of the pirates (15). In the course of the same year a Cilician fleet agreed with Spartacus to transport 2000 men to Sicily (16).

In 67 B.C. when all the efforts to uproot piracy had failed, the command was given to Pompey — Caesar's future adversary — who divided the Mediterranean and the Black Sea into 13 districts placed under the control of *legati* or group commanders. Terentius Varro and Plotius Varus were commissioned to control the Sicilian waters which included Malta. In forty days Pompey managed to clear the western parts of the Mediterranean and in three months the *imperator* 'had restored the rule of the sea to the Roman people' (17).

15. Cf Orosius, VI, 3: eodem tempore Metellus, Siciliae praetor . . . maxime Pyrganione archipirata nefariis praedis et caedibus dilacerante, qui pulsa classe Romana Syracusanum portum obtinuerat, quem mox navalii terrestriique praelio comminutum Sicilia decedere compulit.

16. Cf Plutarch, *Crassus*, 10.

17. Cf Pliny, *N.H.* 7, 98 and Cicero, *Flacc.* 29: Pompeius classes praedonum, urbes, portus, receptacula sustulit, pacem maritimam summa virtute atque incredibili celeritate confecit.