Pirates of Empire

The suppression of piracy and other forms of maritime violence was a keystone in the colonisation of Southeast Asia. Focusing on what was seen in the nineteenth century as the three most pirate-infested areas in the region – the Sulu Sea, the Strait of Malacca and Indochina – this comparative study in colonial history explores how piracy was defined, contested and used to resist or justify colonial expansion, particularly during the most intense phase of imperial expansion in Southeast Asia from c. 1850 to c. 1920. In doing so, it demonstrates that piratical activity continued to occur in many parts of Southeast Asia well beyond the mid nineteenth century, when most existing studies of piracy in the region end their period of investigation. It also points to the changes over time in how piracy was conceptualised and dealt with by each of the major colonial powers in the region, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United States. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

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Pirates of Empire

Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia

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Contents

List of Maps
Preface
Acknowledgements

Introduction

1 Piracy in Global and Southeast Asian History 21
2 The Sulu Sea 42
3 The Strait of Malacca 96
4 Indochina 161
Conclusion 209
Epilogue: Piracy and the End of Empire 232

Bibliography 236
Index 257
Maps

1 Map of Southeast Asia  
2 Map of the Sulu Sea  
3 Map of the Strait of Malacca  
4 Map of Indochina

page 4  
43  
97  
162
Preface

Professionally, my interest in piracy began in the 1990s when I was doing research for my PhD thesis in Southeast Asia. Piracy and armed robbery against ships was relatively common in the region at the time, and just about every week the regional newspapers reported about commercial vessels being attacked by pirates in the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea or Indonesian ports. To be honest, many of the incidents were trifling affairs that hardly seemed to justify the dramatic label ‘piracy’. However, some of the attacks were serious crimes, including well-organised operations in which large ships, such as oil tankers and bulk vessels, were hijacked at sea and their crews, in some cases, ruthlessly shot or hacked to death and thrown overboard.

Piracy, I came to realise, was not a thing of the past, and the reality was a far cry from the romantic image of Treasure Island or Pirates of the Caribbean. As a historian, moreover, I began to wonder whether piracy, which seemed to have been so prevalent in Southeast Asia in precolonial and early colonial times, had really been stamped out in the nineteenth century and only recently returned, or if it had in fact never disappeared but only temporarily moved out of sight.

My attempts to make sense of contemporary piracy in Southeast Asia resulted in a postdoctoral research project at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies at Lund University in Sweden and eventually, in 2006, a book about the modern history of piracy in Southeast Asia, perhaps somewhat romantically entitled Pirates in Paradise. The focus was on the period from 1975 to 2005, which meant that I went further back in time than most studies of contemporary piracy published around the same time. Nonetheless, the question of what happened in the period from the middle of the nineteenth century until the last quarter of the twentieth century remained largely unexplored, not only by me but also by most other members of the small community of pirate historians.

The present study is an attempt to fill that gap. Although the period under study is long, going back to the onset of the European maritime expansion in Asia, the focus is on the period from around the middle of the nineteenth
The spelling of personal and place names follows, as far as possible, the Internet edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. All translations into English from the cited sources and literature are, unless otherwise stated, by the author.
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