"INFESTED WITH PIRATTS": PIRACY AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE
TRADE

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King James II was so alarmed that "…the Coast of Africa is greatly infested with Piratts Freebooters and Sea Rovers,"[1] that he commissioned a man-of-war with "full power and absolute Authority to apprehend seize and take into safe custody all such piratts Freebooters and sea rovers as well of our own subjects as of other nations…" in order to protect the Royal Africa Company's (RAC) monopoly on the slave trade in 1687. From the Company's beginnings, its slavers have fended off numerous attacks both at sea and on land in an attempt to preserve the assets to be found on Africa's lucrative coasts.

Many of the records of the Royal Africa Company that have remained intact from the 17th and early 18th century attest to the persistent issue of piracy and plunder in the slave trade. The allure of barrels of fragrant beeswax packed alongside ivory tusks, planks of exotic hardwoods, human cargo and chests of Africa's gold proved to be a prize commensurate to the coveted Spanish silver galleons; one that few pirates could resist.

Yet, no substantial work has been written on piratical involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, though many substantial works in both the fields of the slave trade and of pirate studies each acknowledge the existence of an intersection between the two. The slave trade and piracy are perhaps the largest and most overarching themes in Atlantic history, because the actions of pirates and of the actors in the slave trade created power dynamics that would forever mar the four continents that frame the Atlantic world. In this

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[1] King James II to Royal Africa Company, May 29, 1687 in British National Archives (BNA), T70/169 fos 47-48.

context, examining the interactions between piracy and those involved in the slave trade allows for a deeper understanding of the early modern Atlantic world.

Current historiography provides only a cursory mention of the subject of piracy within the context of the slave trade. The great majority of secondary works concerning piracy or the slave trade neglect to mention anything at all about slave ships being sacked by pirates, but those that do each list individual instances where the piratical menace interfered with slave ships in the Atlantic or factories along the African coast. Kris Lane's *Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas 1500-1750* is one such study. It lists several incidents of pirate attacks on slavers. The incidents Lane mentions are invaluable, as most occur in the Americas, and allow me to draw continuities and parallels between slave ships taken off the coast of Africa at the beginning of the intended voyages, as well as in the Caribbean towards the end. Kris Lane confirms the scourges of the pirate captain Avery along the Guinea coast who made his way to West Africa and terrorized a number of coastal African settlements, "enslaving and robbing local peoples who mistook them for merchants. Soon after, a pair of Danish slave ships were taken and destroyed and parts of their crews absorbed." [2]

Johannes Postma found several incidents of the Dutch West Indies Company's slavers becoming targets for opportunistic criminals on the high seas:

> Occasionally, the WIC also had to contend with pirates on the African coast. In 1685-6 two powerful pirate ships appeared on the Slave Coast and captured two WIC slavers at Ouidah, while a third company ship barely escaped.[3]

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[2] Kris Lane, *Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas 1500-1750*. (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 174.

[3] Johannes M. Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600 – 1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 79.

In 1719, the *Companies Welvaren*, a WIC slaver was grounded and wrecked off the Loango coast by pirates, and "as a result of this raid commerce stagnated along the entire Guinea coast."[4] Later still in 1721-2, a team of four large pirate ships menaced the Guinea coast, and four WIC vessels were robbed of their cargo before being released. The WIC slavers *Elisabeth* and *Rotterdam* were robbed of 10,000 pieces of eight while carrying payment for the slaves back from the Caribbean, and the *Emmenes* and the *Africa* were also taken. Despite this, Postma considers piracy in the slave trade "an occasional epidemic,"[5] and does not spend more than one page briefly listing these attacks as an interesting aside to his argument.

Even the numbers on David Eltis' Slave Voyages Database seem to allow the historian of Atlantic history to downplay the piracy/slave trade nexus. Of the 34,940 slave ships entered on the database (as of November, 2008), a mere 120 are listed as being captured by pirates/privateers. The incomplete nature of the database is to blame for this, however, as several of the ships I have found to be taken by pirates (the RAC slave ships *James* and the *Mary*, for example) are listed in the database, but their final destination remains unknown.[6] Also, of the slave voyages for which we have proof of pirate attack, not all are listed. For example, while there are records for these ships' existence, there is no record in the database for the voyages that sustained pirate attacks on the WIC slavers the *Africa*, the *Emmenes*, and the *Companies Welvaren* in 1719.

Furthermore, several historians suggest that the interlopers, the illegal slave traders with their privately-owned ships, were a better target for the pirates that made

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid, 164
[6] David Eltis. *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. Accessed November 10, 2008.

their living preying on slave ships.[7] Unlike RAC and WIC ships that had legal protection

from their governing bodies, and an established right to trade on the coasts, these

interlopers had no one to intercede on their behalf. They were freebooting adventurers

who took large risks for greater profits. If attacked by pirates, they could not expect any

assistance from the admiralty, because they themselves were as law-breaking as the

pirates. Postma estimates that 14,000 slaves were exported from Africa by Dutch

interlopers alone[8] and correspondence by the English RAC and Dutch WIC employees

indicate that interlopers of Dutch, Danish, English, French and Portuguese origins also

trawled the coast of Africa, hoping to skim some profit from these monopolistic

companies for themselves.

On account of interlopers' precarious positions, they would have made better

targets for pirates. This seems to be confirmed in several primary sources, which often

mention the plight of the interlopers. For example, RAC worker Collin Hunter wrote to

the Company's headquarters that he

> sent aboard to know what ships was to windward and there
> is none but one English interloper. He says he did fight the
> pyrate, since he came fro St. Thoma [Sao Tome], and killed
> six of their men, but received noe hurte himselfe nor noe of
> his men.[9]

Thomas Bucknell, another of the RAC's employees who encountered this interloper

further down the coast wrote

> …so that I can take nothing, but can receive by him noe
> intelligence of any of the Company ships nor noe other but
> one which he [the English interloper] suspects to be the

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[7] For more information, see major works by Postma, Inikori, Engerman, and Law.

[8] Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 81.

[9] Collin Hunter to RAC, 4 April 1686, in Robin Law, The *English in West Africa, 1681-1699: The Local Correspondence of the Royal Africa Company of England*, part 2. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 15

pyrate, which gave him chase but could not come up with
him.[10]

Even those RAC traders who made it to the Caribbean with their cargos intact knew of

the interloper's plights. Commander George Nanter from aboard the *African Merchant*

off the coast of Barbados wrote back to the company with some gossip that confirms that

interlopers operated on both sides of the Atlantic: "…and Mr. Ware gave us an account

that the pyrate had taken a Dutch interloper and 120 marke of gold in him…"[11] as does a

surviving extract of a letter from Edwyn Rreede in Barbados to the RAC that "Interlopers

that set out from Barbados escaped the pirats."[12]

There are numerous other times when persons along the West African Coast

spotted pirate ships, at times when neither the RAC nor the WIC reported an attack upon

their ships. For example, Jean Barbot, a traveler on the West African Coast between

1678 and 1712 mentioned

> I had advice from two pilotes who are friends of
> mine…[they] had just arrived from these regions, and in
> particular from River Cacho where they had the misfortune
> to have their vessel seized by pirates, when in sight of Cape
> Roxo.[13]

In addition to this, the WIC and RAC correspondents recorded every incident with pirates

or concerning piracy along the Slave Coast, whether they had engaged with said pirates

or not. The presence of these pirate ships, however, almost guaranteed the occurrence of

plundering, so even if the two official companies allowed to trade in slaves were not

being attacked by these pirates, numerous other slave ships along Africa's coast almost

certainly were. Therefore, despite deceptively small numbers in Eltis database, there is

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[10] Thomas Bucknell to RAC, 12 April 1686, Ibid, 15.
[11] George Nanter to RAC, 10 May 1686, in *The English in West Africa,* vol.2, 380
[12] Edwyn Rreede to RAC, 17 October 1683, in BNA T70/12 f.2
[13] P.E.H. Hair, et all, ed. *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678-1712*, Vol I & II. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1992), 160.

more to be uncovered before we can come to an understanding of the severity of pirate attacks on the slave trade.

Those historians who are dubious as to piratical involvement in the slave trade also point out that slave ships were very well defended against such attacks. Again, the Eltis Database also demonstrates that a great many slave ships carried multiple guns on board, but with archival evidence, we find that pirates along the African coast were not outgunned by any means. The Slave Voyages Database contains guns data for only 555 slavers between 1640 and 1705, the years my primary source data comes from. Of these ships, roughly half had fifteen or less guns on board, and only fourteen had more than thirty. Also, because the RAC commissioned private ships, there was no standard for how many guns were or could be equipped on a vessel, and so there are occurrences of ships that are woefully underequipped, like the 35-ton brig *Mary*, for example, which had only two guns, and a crew of just 13-15[14], although she seems to be in the minority.

From the RAC correspondence, it is evident that pirates preying on the African coast were aware of how heavily armed the majority of slavers were, and equipped their vessels accordingly. William Cross wrote to the RAC that

> Here has been a flying reporte of a pyratt upon the coaste, with 100 men and 24 guns; and that he has tooke one of the Companies ships, called the St John, which does not any wayes seem credible, though some of the Blacks affirme it still.[15]

When the pirates were able to take such ships, they then had access to all of the prize's guns and were able to go after further ships. Commander Thomas James, of the *Mary* sent out a distress call to an unknown ship when he was faced with such a band of pirates:

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[14] BNA T70/125 f.2
[15] William Cross to RAC, 18 May 1687 in *The English in West Africa, part 2*, 113

If you be an Englishman, that these lines shall come to, I
am now King of the Englands ship, and have this day been
engaged with a pyrate and his prize, both of them having
about 36 gunns, and for want of a wind and currant setting
into the bay, I am now to leeward of them, therefore, if you
be an Englishman desire your assistance, and tomorrow
will certainly take them both, and in so doing, you will
oblidge your King, and the Royall African Company and
your servant, now commander of the Mary.[16]

Thomas James' optimism was short-lived, however. The *Mary* (not to be confused with

the 2-gun *Mary* mentioned above, they were separate ships) was later taken by

presumably the same pirates it had engaged with. This confirms that overall, slave ships

were not too heavily armed to avoid being the targets of the pirates who preyed on them.

Marcus Rediker has another theory to explain why prizes of slaves were "out of

the question" for pirates: "they simply had no way to sell them and hence no use for

them." Rediker bases this idea on William Snellgrave's 1719 letter to Humphrey

Morice.[17] Several incidents in the RAC Correspondence, however, demonstrate that

while some pirates were not engaged in the slave trade, and targeted the slave ships for

the gold, food, and other goods onboard, pirates existed that did in fact take Africans

from slavers and from coastal settlements on either side of the Atlantic, and that this

clandestine trade in slaves could be profitable.

There was an insatiable market for slaves in the Americas, and many places did

not question slave origins and took what was available to them. In the case of the Spanish

Caribbean at this time, for example, we find countless letters by governors asking Spain

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[16] Thomas James to Emmanuel Burgess, in Theophilus Blinsham's report to RAC, 11 November 1687 in
Ibid, 61
[17] Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates of the Golden Age*, (Boston: Beacon Press,
2004), 34, 184

to allow more slaves to be sent, yet Spain could not meet the demand.[18] Cornelius Goslinga also attests to the Spanish American market for illicit slaves, and the ease at which an unscrupulous trader could sell slaves of dubious origins.[19] If interlopers were able to illegally procure and sell as large numbers of slaves as Postma, among others, claims, then why could not the pirates as well?

The surviving correspondence of the RAC cites several instances of pirates not only attacking slave ships or coastal settlements, but also of specifically carrying away Africans. Thomas Bucknell was the first to make such a claim in 1686:

> I went down this morning to Captain Assum to know what answer they would return your Worship about the palaver [dispute]…for they make a palaver that the man came not to rob the factory but to dig for gold as he pretended at first, but he panyard [seized] the slaves because we shot him for nothing…they had made a promis upon the first panyaring of our slaves, to deliver the offender to me within eight dayes and have not done it…[20]

Others soon reported similar activities. Nicholas Sweerts of the WIC wrote to the RAC that on

> The 23rd came here two Negroes from Sucondee who said they had a letter from your worships factor directe to your worship, which according to their report did beare, that a ship with our colours had taken four Negroes belonging to Captain De Bastion and then afterwards sayled away.[21]

A third account, again by Thomas Bucknell, recounts the kidnapping of Africans by a suspected pirate ship:

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[18] Kenneth Andrews, *The Spanish Caribbean: Trade and Plunder 1530-1630*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).
[19] Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean*, 156-177
[20] Thomas Bucknell to RAC, 21 june 1686, in *The English in West Africa, vol.2*, 23
[21] Nicholas Sweerts to RAC, 27 May 1687, in Ibid, 425

> To understand that this evening came downe from
> windward a ship under Dutch colours, wich the Blackes
> thinking to be a Dutch interloper, went on board to buy
> brandy, butt the canoe were no sooner along his side but he
> lett downe a tackle and hooked upon the canoe and hosted
> itt aboarde with the men in her and fyred att the rest. What
> country he is I know nott, for since he anchored he hath
> putt outt boath English and French colours, which makes
> mee suspect him to be a pyratte.[22]

The year before this occurred, RAC worker William Cross discusses a Portuguese ship that came within view of the factory he managed at Commenda. He wrote that the Africans there thought that it was a pirate ship and refused to go near it[23]. Their fear is indicative of the frequency at which Africans were snatched off of the coast by pirates and other such maritime criminals.

It comes as no surprise then, to see a letter from Theophilus Blinsham to the RAC, that claims "The pyrate and the prize went to leeward yesterday, supposing to Comenda, as the Blacks say, to settle a factory there."[24] This demonstrates that the pirates that preyed on the slave trade anticipated and were prepared for the specific conditions of their plundering. Whether the pirate in question was an over-ambitious crew of interlopers that turned to piracy to stay competitive, or pirate crew turned slave-trader we may never know, nor can we be certain that there was ever a difference of these in the minds of the pirates, their prize, and the RAC, but the example does testify to intent—the intent of a sea criminal to deal in the trade of Africans for profit.

This intent is vital, as it eliminates the last reason historians have given for neglecting to study the phenomena of piracy in the Atlantic slave trade. Through the correspondence of the RAC, it is established that slave ships did not outgun the pirate

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[22] Thomas Bucknell to RAC, 12 May 1687, in Ibid, 47
[23] William Cross to RAC, 10 July 1686, in Ibid, 85
[24] Theophilus Blinsham to RAC, 19 November 1687, Ibid, 63

ships that plundered in their vicinity, and that there was an ample market for illicit slaves that pirates found on plundered slave vessels. Most importantly, while some historians, like Marcus Rediker, suspect that the inanimate cargo onboard slave ships was the most attractive component of the slave ship prize, there is primary source evidence that some pirates did in fact take Africans specifically from slave ships or along coastal regions.

Even those pirates that did not take Africans as a matter of course were still a serious threat to the slave business and the companies that profited from it the most in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Both RAC and WIC employees stationed on Africa's coast complained constantly about the threat that piracy had to their trade. In the letters from the various factories to the RAC headquarters between 1681 and 1699 alone there are forty-four mentions of piracy that related to the slave trade, and the bulk of pirate attacks did not even occur until the beginning of the 18th century!

In the 1950s, Kenneth Gordon Davies organized the records of the Royal Africa Company, and then published details of their contents. Davies confirms that there were pirates on the west coast of Africa in the later seventeenth century, and that the levels of piracy reached their height during Queen Anne's War between France and England, 1702 to 1713:

> Pirates were not unknown in Africa before the war. In 1683, for example, they plundered the company's ship, *Lisbon Merchant*, of 150 marks of gold, and were reported to have a fleet of seven vessels. Further outbreaks occurred in 1685 and 1686 when the *James* was taken. The most serious menace to shipping, however, came in the later stages of the war of 1689-97 and immediately afterwards, when the activities of [pirate captain] Avery and others eventually induced the Admiralty to send a man-of-war to the African coast.[25]

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[25] Kenneth Gordon Davies, *The Royal African Company*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1957), 211

Davies only had access to the truncated versions of the records available in the British

National Archives (BNA, formerly the Public Records Office, or PRO), but even they tell

an interesting tale of piracy. The remainders of the records (compiled by Robin Law, and

under personal collection at the Bodelian Library) are comprised of the more detailed

letters from the various West African forts/factories, and provide better context for the

truncated versions the RAC kept for posterity along with its other records (in the form of

the T70 series at the BNA). When read together, however, one can get an accurate idea of

the seriousness of the threat posed by pirates on the seventeenth and early eighteenth

century slave trade.

Pirate attacks were so feared by both the English RAC and the Dutch WIC that

although rival companies, they occasionally cooperated on issues related to the pirates.

Davies illustrates the generally poor relations between the English and the Dutch in West

Africa at this time: some of the disputes over the factories led to bloodshed between the

workers of the two companies.[26] Despite this, when the piratical menace became too

dangerous, the companies appeared to communicate. N. Sweerts, WIC employee at A

Mina wrote to the RAC several times informing them of the piratical dangers headed

their way:

> I cannot by any means leave giving you advice that their is a
> Ffrench pyrott up to windward, mounted with 28 or 30
> gunns, and 18 or 20 pattererors. He hath taken a Dutch
> interloper, and affter that an English Companys vessell; and
> now about three dayes agoe hath taken our vessell, named
> Seroosherk…[27]

The pirate had cleared the RAC vessel, the *James*, of its crew and landed them on the

coast, and then emptied out the *Seroosherk*'s crew and left them floating on the *James,* an

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[26]Ibid., 267-269

[27] N. Sweerts to RAC, 4 February 1686, in *The English in West Africa, part 2*, 420

inferior ship "and scarce left them soe many sayles as to bring them heither."[28] so the

pirates could make away with the WIC slaver. Sweerts wrote to clear up confusion,

inform the RAC of the fate of their men, and offer to purchase the *James* now that their

Seroosherk was gone.

At another point, Sweerts wrote a letter responding to the RAC's message of a

French ship at Anomabu suspected to be a pirate. Sweerts responded gratefully to their

warning but denied that the ship in question was a pirate, identifying it as the *Glorious*

from the French Company, appointed to Whydah.[29]

By no means do I suggest here that the companies warned one another of the

pirates. If anything, each must have felt relief when a pirate absconded with a vessel of

the other. The cordial nature of the relationship between Nicholas Sweerts of the WIC

and the Royal Africa Company was unusual. The pirate warning was a single occurrence

of reciprocity that illustrates the personal indebtedness to a WIC worker that had made a

goodwill gesture: the RAC felt it appropriate to share information that could perhaps

preserve the ships he was responsible for. Nicholas Sweerts' unusually grateful blessing

("I recommend you to God,"[30] which was absent from every other letter he sent the RAC)

shows that Sweerts was aware of the potential value in the warning, although it turned out

to be untrue.

From this, it is evident that pirates were a severe menace unto the seventeenth and

early eighteenth-century slave trade. The amount of loss sustained by the companies on

the West African coast was so great that several Royal interventions were put into place

in an attempt to eradicate the problem. King James II of England, furious that "our said

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[28] Ibid
[29] Nicholas Sweerts to RAC, 26 March 1688, Ibid, 426
[30] Ibid.

Company is much impaired hindered & discouraged their ships and goods and the lives

of such of our subjects as are imployed by them in danger to be lost…"[31] commissioned

Nathaniel Bradley of the Ship *Mary* to the coast of Guinea in May of 1687 to "seize and

destroy all such Pyratts Freebooters & Sea Rovers…"[32] Later in 1700, he authorized the

Court of Assistants of the RAC to pass a resolution that pirates were to be tried directly

on the West African coast if it was "to be done upon reasonable terms…"[33] to expedite

their eradication.

The rulers of other nations with holdings on the West African coast had already

intervened. In January of 1685, Thomas Bucknell of the RAC informed his employers

that

> …a French man of war of 28 guns anchored here; the
> Leiutenant, merchant and purser came to shoar, who say
> the ship was given the French Company by the King of
> France, to clear the coast of pyrates, who he informed wore
> the French flagg.[34]

And while these measures may have helped in the short-term, the pirates could not resist

the allure of the slave ships. In 1721-2, four large pirate ships menaced the Guinea coast,

and in response, the English sent a warship to Africa which neutralized three of the pirate

ships, and a cruiser from the WIC captured the fourth, "thus ending the pirate attacks on

the African coast." [35]

While the most infamous of pirates to prey on the slave trade, Captain

Avery/Every, was never caught, many of the pirates that menaced the slave trade were.

One such unfortunate was Peter Dearlove, the carpenter onboard the ship *Carlisle*, which

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[31] BNA T70/169 f.47-48
[32] BNA Ibid f.48
[33] BNA T70/86 p.97
[34] Thomas Bucknell to RAC, 22 January 1685, *The English in West Africa*, *part. 2*, 7
[35] Pastma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 79

was formerly under the command of Captain Beeholt. Charles Blagrave's deposition to the High Court of Admiralty concerning Dearlove, claimed that

> …the capt: of the ship was left on shoar at *illegible* that he … + sev: [several] others of the Shipp company signed + sealed articles of piracy made oath for performance of the said articles + … declared he was the third or fourth person that signed such articles, that he had been guilty of sev: piracies particularly of robbin the Moro fleet out of which he delivered he had taken on board the p: [pirate] fleet weree forced to discover by reason lighted matches were put between their fingers and the Dearlove declared they robed along the coast of Guinea…and this deponent further saith that the Peter Dearlove told him that he had brought over several of her majesties subjects to turn pirate.[36]

With the evidence presented above, and this statement of the pirate Dearlove who plundered the Guinea coast, we can see that the pirate threat to the slave trade was very real. Those attempting to make their fortune in the Atlantic slave trade were aware and afraid of the pirates who preyed on their trade. Current historiography does not address the severity of this pirate threat, although several primary sources confirm that it was a serious one in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. While there is no way of knowing yet how indicative this time period is with the entirety of the Atlantic slave trade, I have demonstrated that there are several holes in the historiography of the slave trade that make any sort of claims as to the scale of the pirate menace dubious until further research has been done on the subject.

In this paper, I have only been able to refer to English sources, although the English owned only a rough half of the factories along the West African coast. The few items of correspondence from the Dutch forts with the RAC attest to the Dutch West Indies Company's problems with pirates, as well. As the gold/slave coast of Africa was

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[36] Charles Blagrave's deposition to the High Court of Admiralty, BNA HCA 1/16 part 2 f.78

peppered equally with both Dutch and English trading forts/factories at this time[37], it stands to reason that the Dutch ships would have also suffered pirate attacks, and that the WIC records will reveal the other half of the data this subject is crucially missing. Johannes Postma's use of the WIC records indicates that information on piratical involvement with the Dutch slavers is there, but has yet to be integrated into the historiography. With further research, it will be possible to determine the scale of the pirate-threat to the slave trade.

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[37] As demonstrated by "A Draught of the Coast of AFRICA from the Streights Mouth to Cape Bona Esprance", (London: 1680) from the Harvard Pusey Map Library, available from *Afriterra Maps Catalogue*, http://catalog.afriterra.org/viewMap.cmd?number=1212, accessed January 27, 2009.

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