

Philip de Souza. *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*. Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press [www.cup.cam.ac.uk; in USA, www.cup.org], 1999. xv + 276 pp., maps, illustrations, bibliography, indices. US \$59.95, cloth; ISBN 0-521-48137-6.

The author aims at “not merely a narrative of piratical events, but an historical analysis of the development of the terms piracy and pirate in the Graeco-Roman world from c. 800 BC to AD 700.” [2] To do this he reviews exhaustively the passages in ancient writers and the inscriptions that have to do with piracy.

Homer’s poems, written probably in the eighth century BC, reflect an age in which piracy had no stigma, but was simply another form of warfare at sea. By the fifth century BC warfare at sea and piracy were clearly distinct, and there was – no question about it – a stigma attached to piracy; its suppression even became a matter of political importance. One difficulty was determining which violent acts at sea were piratical; a nation at war, for example, invoking the rules of war to seize merchant ships carrying goods to the enemy’s ports, committed an act that to the victims was hard to distinguish from outright pirate attack. Both Athens and Philip of Macedon claimed to have taken measures against piracy but, de Souza holds, these were largely empty claims, propaganda to gain the political support of other Greek states.

In the Hellenistic Age, the third to the first century BC, piracy became even more virulent, in part because some of it acquired the colour of legitimacy. In the wake of Alexander’s conquests the Greek world had been consolidated into a number of large empires, and there were rulers who bolstered their naval strength by recruiting pirate gangs. The expansion of over-water trade and the increasing numbers of those preying on it made their suppression a crucial issue, and one maritime state, Rhodes, perfected a crack navy and achieved a certain amount of success. But Rhodes was small, her resources limited, and meaningful results did not come until Rome arrived on the scene in the first century BC. Rome’s suppression of piracy was no doubt the most effective the Mediterranean had yet seen – but, cautions de Souza, we must not overrate it because, as in previous centuries, claims of having suppressed pirates were used as a propaganda tool. The most celebrated action against pirates was the sweep, masterminded by Pompey in 67 BC, that ancient authorities unanimously assert cleared them from the Mediterranean. De Souza begs to differ: the achievement was celebrated by writers who were intent on magnifying Pompey and Rome; in point of fact, he asserts, it was a “rush job” [168] and left plenty of piracy going on.

The might of Rome’s empire, embracing the whole of the Mediterranean and boasting the resources to maintain a powerful standing navy, kept the waters free of piracy until the third century AD, although de Souza hints darkly that the bright picture may owe something to the pro-Roman prejudice of the writers who draw it. The advent of various barbarian peoples who took to the sea allowed the scourge to fester again, and it continued during the unending conflict between the Arabs and the Byzantine Empire in the last centuries that the book treats.

De Souza’s pages are aimed at readers who are thoroughly at home in ancient history, who do not have to stop and look up the meaning of such terms as *trierarchy*, *proxenos*, and *vexillations*. Even they will not find it easy going. The narrative consists mostly of analyses of passages and inscriptions, with extended probing of scholarly dispute, and readers must pick their way amidst these trees and get their glimpses of the forest almost incidentally. For instance, the reason ancient piracy was so hard to suppress,

a topic that surely deserves full exploration, gets a brief mention packed into the discussion of why Rhodes ran into such difficulty in her efforts. [91] Some trees are treated at a length not at all consonant with their importance: six pages [108-114] are given over to a single inscription whose sole contribution to our knowledge is that *ca.* 100 BC Rome had anti-pirate legislation on the books; seven pages [150-157] are given over to the ways in which Cicero in the Verrine orations inveighs against Verres as a pirate and associate of pirates. On the other hand, Pompey's action in 67 BC, the only anti-pirate campaign that we know about in detail, gets but a few pages [168-170] and these are mostly given over to de Souza's revisionist view that the story of Pompey's smashing victory must be taken with a grain of salt, for it reflects not historical fact but the politics of our sources, men who were out to glorify Pompey and Rome. De Souza brands the campaign as a rush job; it sure was, because swiftness of execution was the very key to its success. De Souza suggests that Pompey's celebrated act of *clementia* toward the pirates, the offer not to hang them if they forswore piracy, may have been a deal he cut to get them to capitulate; if so, it was a deal they accepted only because he had them by the throat.

In a section titled "Conclusions" [241-242] de Souza summarizes his key theme, the extensive propagandistic use made of the term pirate. It was attached as a pejorative label to opponents; thus the "enemies of Athens, Rhodes and Rome are regularly described as pirates." Rulers boasted of their suppression of pirates; such claims "appear to have more to do with a desire to be seen as powerful protectors than any effective control of piracy." His book closes with the statement that "the image of legitimate authorities taking strong action to clear the seas of pirates continued to be exploited for political ends, because it was such an appealing one to the inhabitants of the Graeco-Roman world." This formulation overlooks that, as de Souza's text itself makes clear, during all of the *pax romana*, the first centuries of the Christian Era, suppression of piracy was not at all a figment of propaganda: the action Rome's authorities took was totally effective.

Lionel Casson

New York University  
New York, NY, USA

Roderich Ptak. *China and the Asian Seas: Trade, Travel, and Visions of the Other (1400-1750)*. "Variorum Collected Studies" series; Aldershot & Brookfield, VT: Variorum Press of Ashgate Publishing [www.ashgate.com], 1998. xiv + 326 pp., illustrations, chart reproductions, index. US \$103.95, cloth; ISBN 0-86078-775-3.

Roderich Ptak. *China's Seaborne Trade with South and Southeast Asia (1200-1750)*. "Variorum Collected Studies" series; Aldershot & Brookfield, VT: Variorum Press of Ashgate Publishing [www.ashgate.com], 1999. xii + 336 pp., tables, maps, index. US \$107.95, cloth; ISBN 0-86078-776-1.

These two volumes contain no less than twenty-eight articles, originally published between 1983 and 1996. Together they testify to the tremendous productivity of Ptak and confirm his standing as the leading western expert on China's maritime enterprise and overseas relations between 1200 and 1750. Eighteen articles are written in English, ten in German. Reviewing the publications, in which they originally appeared, it is highly probable that only the author himself has ever seen this collection in its entirety. Although Ashgate has been roundly and properly criticized for the high cost of its Variorum series (in this case