THE NEW ATLANTIC:
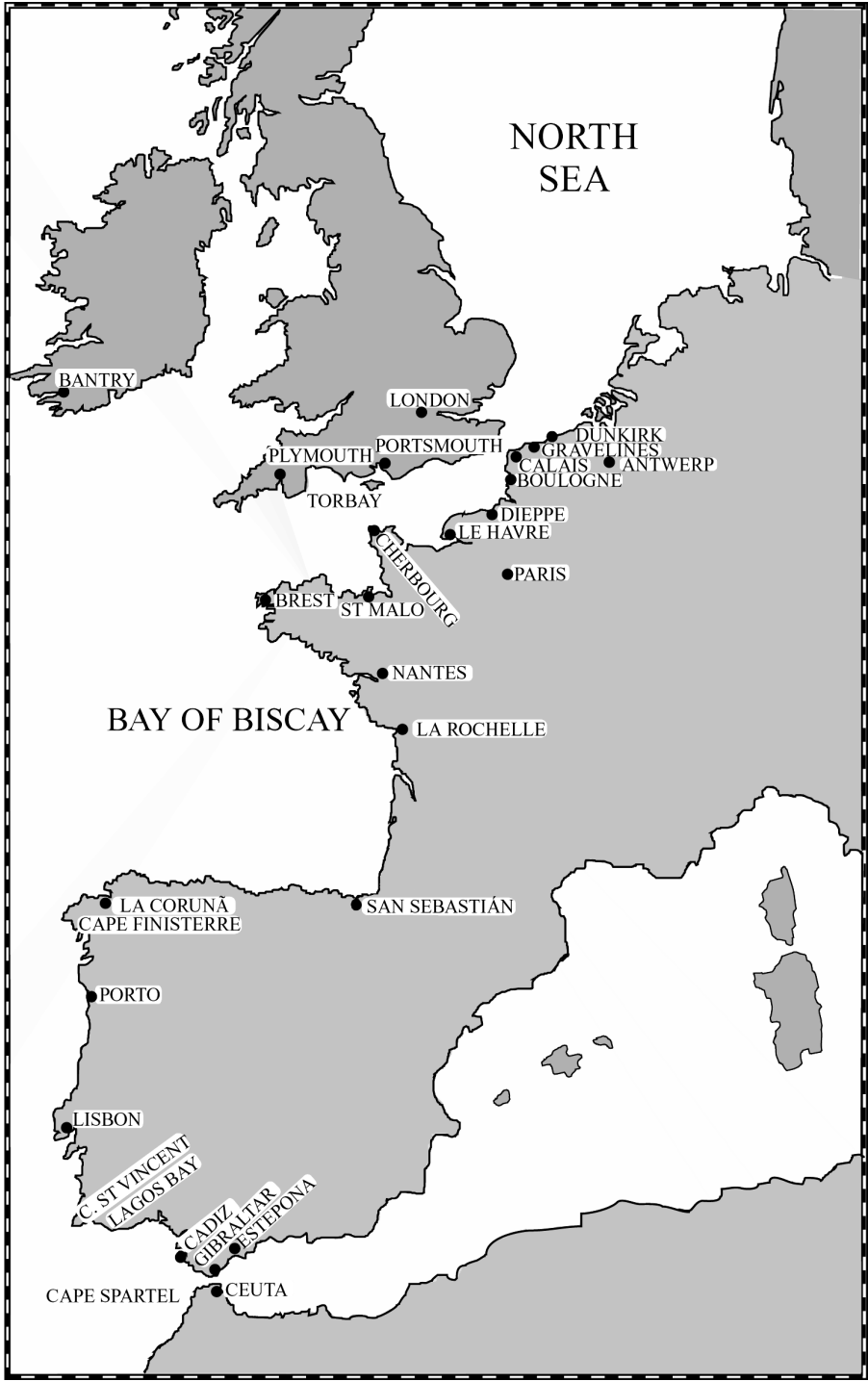## NAVAL WARFARE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

N. A. M. Rodger

It has long been customary to regard naval warfare as the business of navies, and it usually still is. This creates an obvious problem, for navies, as the word is generally understood today, are instruments of the state; permanent fleets of warships, manned by professional officers and men, supported by an elaborate infrastructure and maintained from the revenues of central government. These are the normal instruments of naval warfare in the modern world, and it is easy to assume that they are the natural if not the only ones. Yet even a superficial knowledge of European history will show that navies in this sense were unusual if not unknown before the Renaissance. Byzantium and Venice have some claims to have possessed navies in something like the modern form, at some periods, but medieval naval warfare was generally conducted without navies. Historians have been reluctant to confront the fact. In the British case, Sir William Laid Clowes in the 1890s began his history of the Royal Navy in the third century BC, though he believed that the Navy, as an institution, had been founded in the sixteenth century AD.[1] Even a modern publisher might hesitate at so wide a discrepancy between title and contents, yet a century after Laird Clowes, the *Oxford Illustrated History of the Royal Navy*[2] adopts the same approach on a slightly more modest scale, beginning eight hundred years before the foundation of the Royal Navy. The basic confusion arises from a refusal to acknowledge that navies, in our modern sense of the word, are a modern creation, a product of the early modern and modern state. Naval warfare existed long before navies, but it took other institutional forms.

We may distinguish at least six different forms of naval organisation that existed in Europe alone at various times before the seventeenth century: (1) Requisitioning, (2) Ship Musters, (3) Chartered Squadrons, (4) Local Navies, (5) Feudal Navies, and (6) Private Forces.

1. Requisitioning. The simplest of all forms of naval organisation, this called for the prince to use his authority to call up unmodified (and usually unpaid) merchant ships for war service. Once assembled, fleets of this sort were used

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[1] *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present*, 7 vols. (London, 1897–1903).
[2] Ed. J. R. Hill (Oxford, 1995).

NORTH SEA

BANTRY

LONDON

PLYMOUTH   PORTSMOUTH
TORBAY

DUNKIRK
GRAVELINES
CALAIS   ANTWERP
BOULOGNE

DIEPPE
LE HAVRE

CHERBOURG

PARIS

BREST   ST MALO

NANTES

BAY OF BISCAY   LA ROCHELLE

LA CORUÑA
CAPE FINISTERRE

SAN SEBASTIÁN

PORTO

LISBON

C. ST VINCENT
LAGOS BAY

CADIZ
GIBRALTAR
ESTEPONA

CAPE SPARTEL   CEUTA

Map 1. The European Atlantic Coast

mainly to transport troops overseas, but the ships might also be fitted as 'warships', with 'castles' or fighting platforms, or simply by adding a number of soldiers to the usual crew. The system was incapable of providing any specialised warships, and it was extremely slow and cumbersome to operate, but it cost the prince very little and laid all the burden of naval war on his ship-owning subjects. This was the method by which medieval English kings assembled the large fleets that they needed to carry English armies overseas to France, Flanders, Scotland, Ireland and Wales.[3]

2. Ship Musters. In some countries, notably in Scandinavia but also in England before the Norman Conquest and in parts of the Celtic world, law or custom laid an obligation on coastal districts to build and man one or more warships each, available for national service in specified circumstances and for a fixed period. It is unclear to what extent, and when, the Scandinavian *leidang* existed as an operational force rather than a legal fiction, but the English equivalent certainly functioned in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Such a system was capable of providing a large national fleet of warships at no direct cost to the Crown, and with no known central organisation.[4]

3. Chartered Squadrons. Warships might be owned by private entrepreneurs who chartered their squadrons to the Crown, in some cases contracting to build as well as operate them. By this method the Crown subcontracted the organisational, and many of the operational requirements of naval warfare, retaining only the financial obligation to pay for them. Mediterranean galley fleets were often made up partly or wholly of such private squadrons, and Spain applied the same method to obtain the bulk of its naval forces in the Atlantic in the sixteenth century. The Genoese and Ragusans were noted specialists in this business, while Basque contractors built and owned much of the Spanish Atlantic fleet.[5]

4. Local Navies. Another approach to sea power was to create squadrons on the basis of local rather than national government. Provinces or individual seaports might organise their own forces, paid from their own revenues, to protect their

[3] N. A. M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain, Volume I: 660–1649* (London, 1997), 117–30, deals with the organisation of these English fleets.

[4] Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, 23–7; Hans Kuhn, *Das altnordische Seekriegswesen*, ed. Sigrid Engeler and Dietrich Hofmann (Heidelberg, 1991), 54–87; Lucien Musset, 'Problèmes militaires du monde scandinave (VIIe–XIIe siècles)', in *Ordinamenti militari in Occidente nell'alto medievo* (Spoleto, 1968), 229–91, at 279–84; Niels Lund, 'The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut: *leding* or *lið*?', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 15 (1986), 105–18; Hugh Marwick, 'Naval Defence in Norse Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review*, 28 (1949), 1–11; John Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh, 1974), 140–1.

[5] Kenneth R. Andrews, *The Spanish Caribbean: Trade and Plunder 1530–1630* (New Haven, 1978), 90–4; Huguette and Pierre Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique (1504–1650)*, 8 vols in 11 (Paris, 1955–9), VIII, i, 255–7; Francisco-Felipe Olesa Muñido, *La organización naval de los estados Mediterráneos y en especial de España durante los siglos XVI y XVII*, 2 vols (Madrid, 1968), I, 463–88; I. A. A. Thompson, *War and Government in Habsburg Spain 1560–1620* (London, 1976), 164–204 and 267–73; J. F. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1974), 26–34.

own interests. Depending on the power of the centre, these might also be combined on occasion to form a national fleet. Renaissance Spain again is an outstanding example of this approach: it had at least eight navies operational at one time or another. The galleys of Castile were paid for from Castilian revenues, and the galleys of Aragon from Aragonese revenues; the ships of the *Guarda de Indias* were provided by the *Casa de Contratación* of Seville and paid for by the *avería* charged to the merchantmen which sailed under their convoy; the *Armada de Flandes* in the North Sea, the *Armada de Barlovento* in the Caribbean and the *Armada del Mar del Sur* in the Pacific were paid for by the local authorities. Only the Portuguese royal galleons (acquired by conquest in 1580) and the *Armada del Mar Océano* could be regarded as elements of a national fleet, albeit the latter was largely provided by contractors.[6] The Dutch adopted the same approach with greater success. Five provincial admiralties (nominally federal institutions but in practice dominated by local interests) each maintained a fleet and a naval establishment from their own taxation. Two great joint-stock companies, the East and West India Companies, each financed substantial naval forces from their shareholders' capital. Six individual seaports provided municipal navies (the '*directieschepen*') to protect their own shipping. All of these forces could coalesce in wartime to make up a national fleet, but not until 1653 did the Dutch Republic possess any ships that had been directly paid for out of central-government revenues and were unequivocally the property of the Republic, and not until 1795 did it have a single national naval organisation.[7]

5. Feudal Navies. It was possible for the military obligations of feudal or quasi-feudal systems to be discharged by naval service. In such a system landholders built and manned warships, which they were obliged to put to sea at their lord's command under specified conditions. Feudal naval service of this nature existed in Norman Sicily, and in the West Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland it provided the fleets that preserved into the seventeenth century the naval architecture and fighting traditions of the Viking Age.[8]

6. Private Forces. In the majority of countries private ship-owners built or used ships for warlike purposes on their own account. This might be done in wartime, and the ships might be combined with forces raised by other methods, but it was very often done in peacetime. To understand this to modern eyes anomalous or improper situation we need to discuss the objectives of medieval and Renaissance naval warfare.

Just as the forms of naval warfare have been confused, so also have been the

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[6] Ricardo Cerezo Martínez, *Las Armadas de Felipe II* (Madrid, 1988); José Luis Casada Soto, *Los barcos españoles del siglo XVI y la Gran Armada de 1588* (Madrid, 1988), 25–34.

[7] J. R. Bruijn, *Varend Verleden: De Nederlandse Oorlogsvloot in de 17de en 18de eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1998).

[8] D. P. Waley, ' "Combined Operations" in Sicily, A.D. 1060–78', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 22 (1954), 118–25; Alexander Grant, 'Scotland's "Celtic Fringe" in the Late Middle Ages: The Macdonald Lords of the Isles and the Kingdom of Scotland', in *The British Isles 1100–1500: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections*, ed. R. R. Davies (Edinburgh, 1988), 118–41.

functions. A modern navy is an instrument of the state, and in peace or war, it is employed about the purposes of the state. Modern navies therefore are political animals, and their objects are naturally and properly understood in political terms, as they have been by theorists from Mahan to our own times. Medieval and Renaissance sea power, however, was often private rather than public, and served commercial rather than political ends. Even the public, political objectives of naval warfare were not usually those about which naval theorists since Mahan have built their analyses. The concept of 'command of the sea' had been known in the classical world (the Greek is θαλασσωκρατος) and, consequently, it was known to educated medieval writers, but it was not often of practical relevance to the naval warfare of their time. Some medieval examples can be found of maritime warfare as it has been understood in the modern era: the wars of the Venetians and Genoese, fought for the control of the trade routes on which the belligerents depended for their prosperity, can be plausibly seen in quasi-Mahanian terms as a struggle for command of the sea.[9] To some extent the Baltic naval wars of the mid-sixteenth century could be fitted into the same mould.[10] This is unusual, however, anywhere in European naval warfare before the seventeenth century.

Most medieval naval warfare fell into one of two broad categories, which we may call public and private, or military and commercial. Public, military naval warfare was auxiliary to the operations of armies on land. The function of the ships was to transport the troops to the theatre of war, or to support their operations. This was the most important duty of galleys and other oared warships, which were essentially short-range instruments of amphibious warfare. Even when they did fight one another, they did so in a military fashion, commanded by soldiers, using military tactics. The prestige of the galley, which rose in the seventeenth century to be the supreme symbol of royal power even as it declined into insignificance as a practical warship, derived from its intimate association with armies, and consequently with princes.[11] Sailing ships did not have this connection or this status, but they too were frequently employed in this sort of warfare, both in the Mediterranean and in northern waters. This public, military, sea warfare, being an aspect of the warfare of armies and princes, was normally conducted at times of public, declared war between kingdoms.

Private or commercial naval warfare, on the other hand, was a normal aspect of the use of the sea at all times. The objective of the private ship-owner was business, but few if any medieval ship-owners could expect to make money without being willing to fight for it. Modern historians often present an implicitly dualist contrast between the peaceful trader and the aggressive pirate, but in

9 John E. Dotson, 'Naval Strategy in the First Genoese–Venetian War, 1257–1270', *American Neptune*, 46 (1986), 84–90.
10 Jan Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500–1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe* (London, 2000), 133–44.
11 Marc Vigié, 'Galères et "Sea-power" en France au XVIIe siècle', *Revue historique des armées*, 182 (1991), 45–56.

medieval reality the two were usually the same. In northern waters the sea was often seen as a debatable land lying beyond the frontiers of settled society, where no sovereign could impose his peace, and no court had jurisdiction. Though at various periods English and French kings claimed some jurisdiction over the sea or those who used it, the claim was difficult or impossible to make good.[12] Robbery under arms was a normal aspect of sea-borne trade. All merchant ships went armed, and were prepared to gain a good cargo by paying for it or not, as opportunity might offer. There were no non-combatants at sea. Even in periods of profound peace, ships of rival nations, or simply rival ports, frequently attacked one another. For English ships, it appears to have been almost a reflex action to attack all foreigners; in the case of the Cinque Ports, to attack other English ships as well.[13] The English were the most notorious pirates of northern Europe, but all ships, of all nations, had to be prepared to fight on occasion.

Insofar as any legal cover was necessary for this private naval warfare, it could be found in the doctrine of reprisals. In such attacks the crews of the victims were usually murdered, but if the shipmaster or ship-owner survived, it was open to him to seek legal redress in the courts of the nation or seaport from which his attackers came. Such a suit was usually a civil action for the recovery of losses, not a criminal prosecution for assault or murder. In English law piracy was not even recognised as a crime until 1536, and English courts intervened, if at all, only to moderate a settlement between disputants whom they regarded as being essentially on the same footing. It was rare in any country for courts to treat suits between foreigners and locals with impartiality. The aggrieved ship-owner who had failed to gain legal redress, however, like the merchant or traveller who had been robbed by bandits ashore, could appeal to his own sovereign to grant him a letter of reprisal under marcher law, a *lettre de merk* in French, which authorised him to seize goods up to the value of his losses from the fellow-countrymen or fellow-citizens of those who had robbed him. Reprisals under marcher law were by definition available only in time of peace; they assumed, however unrealistically, that the attack had been improper and that foreign courts were open to a suit for redress. Reprisals might be a diplomatic weapon in a time of tension between princes, but there was no reason in theory or practice why they could not coexist with peace and good international relations. Kings were not necessarily much interested in the private misfortunes of their trading subjects. Then as now, legal disputes between persons of different nationality did not oblige their governments to go to war on their behalf. Reprisals allowed a legal dispute to issue in private war, but this private war remained private, not public.[14]

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12 Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, 78–9.
13 N. A. M. Rodger, 'The Naval Service of the Cinque Ports', *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), 636–51, at 646–7.
14 D. A. Gardiner, 'The History of Belligerent Rights on the High Seas in the Fourteenth Century', *Law Quarterly Review*, 48 (1932), 521–46. René de Mas Latrie, 'Du droit de

In the Mediterranean world there existed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries a different system of private naval war, the *corsa* of the North African Regencies. Often misrepresented by English-speaking historians as 'Barbary piracy', their naval warfare was by no means piratical either in its legal status or its structure. The three Regencies of Tunis, Tripoli and Algiers engaged in open, public war against some Christian powers, and observed treaties of peace with others, generally with a more scrupulous regard for their obligations than the Christian powers showed in return. It was necessary for them to maintain permanent war against at least some of the trading nations of the Mediterranean for political rather than economic reasons. The Turkish Janissary garrisons of these quasi-independent states, nominally subject to the Ottoman Empire, were the leading factor in their internal politics, accustomed to make and unmake (meaning murder) the local rulers with uncomfortable frequency. The *corsa* provided a harmless and profitable outlet for their energies, which kept them out of mischief at home. Thus the naval warfare of the Barbary States, though declared public war, was largely or entirely conducted by private interests. It was a permanent necessity generated by the internal political structure of the Regencies, not a temporary response to external threats or opportunities. Moreover it differed from other private naval warfare in that the principal profit came not from ships or goods but people. Slaving, in turn, required and depended on extensive trade between enemies, for only poor and friendless slaves were retained in the labour force. The best profits were made by selling slaves for ransom, or trading them for Muslims enslaved by the Christian counter-*corsa* practised by the Knights of Malta, the Knights of St Stephen and other Christian navies. This traffic was made possible by slave markets on both sides of the Mediterranean, linked by extensive commercial and diplomatic contacts. The *corsa* differed from the naval traditions of the northern Europeans, but it had a similar effect in generating a system of warfare that blended symbiotically with trade. Though native to the Mediterranean, it was extended to the eastern Atlantic and even the Channel in the late sixteenth century, mainly by the Algerines.[15]

The *corsa* of the Regencies should in turn be distinguished from the activities

marque ou droit de représailles au Moyen Âge', *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, 27 (1866), 529–77, and 29 (1868), 294–347 and 612–35; Marie-Claire Chavarot, 'La Pratique des lettres de marque d'après les arrêts du Parlement (XIIIe–debut XVe siècle)', *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, 149 (1981), 51–89; Pierre Chaplais, 'Règlement des conflits internationaux franco-anglais au XIVe siècle (1293–1377)', *Le Moyen Age*, 57 (1951), 259–302; Florence E. Dyer, 'Reprisals in the Sixteenth Century', *Mariner's Mirror*, 21 (1935), 187–97; *Documents Relating to Law and Custom of the Sea*. Navy Records Society 49 and 50, ed. R. G. Marsden (1915–16), I, 119–24.

[15] Sir Godfrey Fisher, *Barbary Legend: War, Trade and Piracy in North Africa 1415–1830* (Oxford, 1957); Peter Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary* (London, 1970); J. de Courcy Ireland, 'The Corsairs of North Africa', *Mariner's Mirror*, 62 (1976), 271–83; *El comerç alternatiu: corsarisme i contraban (ss. XV–XVIII)*, ed. Gonçal López Nadal (Palma de Mallorca, 1990).

of Salee and other Moroccan Atlantic ports. They were not subject to the Sultan, nor affected by the same internal political pressure, but for long periods under weak or non-existent political control by the Moroccan emperor, and heirs to a private war against Spain and Portugal in particular. The style and legal status of this warfare fell midway between the *corsa* of the Mediterranean and the traditional private war of northern waters, while the cruising range of the Saletines reached far into both seas.[16]

Private, commercial war was fought by individuals for financial profit, not by states for political objectives. Medieval and Renaissance princes might find themselves in either category. Often they made war for identifiably political objectives, usually the conquest of territory, and their accompanying naval operations, if any, fell into the public, military category. But in political theory a Renaissance prince was simply an exceptionally great nobleman who was expected to support his state from his own revenues. Like his subjects, he badly needed to make money, and like them, he might engage in private, commercial war. Even at times of open war between princes, private operations might take place alongside public ones. The Anglo-Spanish War of 1585–1603, which was never formally declared on either side, was waged from the point of view of English law as a campaign of reprisals, in which Queen Elizabeth participated as an aggrieved party like her subjects. Though her primary objective (survival) was unequivocally political, she had an urgent need to make money to finance the war.

The legal regime of reprisals has been easily and frequently confused with the quite different system of privateering, as developed in English law in the mid-seventeenth century.[17] A privateer was a privately owned warship licensed in time of open war to attack the shipping of the public enemy.[18] As the name implies, a privateer was the private exception to what had become the public rule: it was inherent in the concept of privateering that ships not owned by the state might not legitimately engage in warfare, even in wartime, without licence. Warfare had become an exclusive activity of state; a formal, public undertaking entered into by a prince for a limited period, and concluded with proper ceremony. Privateering belonged to an entirely different legal and strategic system that evolved during the seventeenth century. There could be no privateering in the Elizabethan age or earlier, because there was no private exception; private, commercial warfare was the normal form of warfare in the open sea. Unfortu-

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16 Roger Coindreau, *Les Corsaires de Salé* (Paris, 1948).
17 But English law was slow in this respect. The Flemish or Dutch *kaperbrief*, for example, provided for privateering roughly in the modern sense from the late fifteenth century: Louis Sicking, *Zeemacht en Onmacht: Maritieme politiek in de Nederlanden 1488–1558* (Amsterdam, 1998), 214–21; C. G. Roelofsen, 'Grotius and the International Politics of the Seventeenth Century', in *Hugo Grotius and International Relations*, ed. H. Bull, B. Kingsbury and A. Roberts (Oxford, 1990), 95–131; L. H. J. Sicking, 'Recht aan zee. De afhandeling van prijszaken na het bestand van Bomy en de Vrede van Nice met Frankrijk (1537–1538)', *Stichting tot uitgaaf der bronnen van het Oud-Vaterlandse Recht: verslagen en mededelingen*, n.s. 10 (1999), 163–80. I am indebted to Dr Sicking for a copy of this article.
18 David J. Starkey, *British Privateering Enterprise in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter, 1990), 19–34.

nately the English jurists who devised the concept of privateering used the old term to name their new licences: they called them 'letters of marque'. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the '*lettre de merk*' and the 'letter of marque' were entirely different things. However often we may speak or write of 'Elizabethan privateers', the term is strictly anachronistic; there were no privateers in the sixteenth century.

In this and other aspects, however, this was a period of transition, in which the naval traditions of the Middle Ages developed and combined to create new forms of warfare at sea. It was a period of rapid technical change, in which ideas and terminology were in a state of flux. Contemporaries reached into the past in search of words and ideas with which to make sense of their situation, with limited success. Later historians attempted, and sometimes still attempt, to force the sixteenth century into the framework so familiar from the eighteenth.

Moreover the problem was not simply one of rapid change over time, reflected in anachronistic words and concepts. Geography was changing as well as technology. As Spain and Portugal expanded from the Mediterranean to the 'Mediterranean Atlantic' and thence to the transatlantic world, they carried the language and ideas of the Mediterranean into a different geographical and political situation. There in due course they came into collision with French, English and Dutch seamen who themselves were venturing into a new geographical space, a new legal and political context, armed with attitudes and concepts derived from the naval warfare of late medieval northern Europe. At the same time the *corsa* of the North African Regencies, and the raids of Salee, extended from the Mediterranean to cover most of the Atlantic world, and in the early seventeenth century blended with the quite different private warfare of the English to create a unique, and for a while uniquely effective, hybrid form of naval warfare. Thus words and ideas borrowed from the past were mixed with words and ideas borrowed from other cultures, all subjected to extensive mistranslation by contemporaries, and extensive misconstruction by later historians.

In the sixteenth century, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and northern Europe collided. The northerners brought the private, commercial style of war, combined with the new three-masted ship rig to give an instrument of much greater range and power than had been available to private owners before. The Mediterranean powers, above all Spain, brought the public, military tradition of naval warfare. They also attempted to apply the legal regime of the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Where seafaring was seasonal and coastal, the passage of ships could be controlled and taxed in much the same way as the passage of merchants was controlled and taxed ashore. Coastal fortresses such as Monaco, Villafranca, Gibraltar, Piombino, Amalfi, Messina, Durazzo, Cerigo, Monemvasia, Rhodes and hundreds of others divided the sea into jurisdictions like the land.[19] Whereas the northern seas were effectively lawless, the southern seas were subject to local and national government.

[19] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols, trans. Siân Reynolds (London, 1972), I, 103–8.

This legal tradition was completely disconnected from the geographical and technical realities of the Atlantic. For a time Spaniards and Portuguese were the only deep-sea navigators in the world and their new empires were protected by distance, but by the 1540s French and Scottish ships were already crossing the Atlantic, followed a generation later by the English, and later the Dutch. There was no possible physical barrier that could prevent foreigners penetrating into the waters from which they were excluded by Spanish and Portuguese law. Spain did not simply reserve her colonial trade to her own shipping, as other colonial powers were to do; she pretended to forbid all foreign presence, even under pain of death. Moreover Spain's object was not to preserve a flourishing commerce in her own hands, as the Dutch and English were to do. The Spanish colonial system was not directed to promoting or preserving any sort of trade; it was designed solely to protect the flow of bullion. It served the private interests of the monarch, not the public interest of his people. Trade was permitted to use the convoys to reach the ports which they served, but almost nothing was done for the rest of the Spanish empire. Many Spanish colonial ports had in practice no legal means of exporting or importing anything. As the official convoy system declined, even the major ports ceased to have any legal trade. In 1707, the newly appointed Viceroy of Peru reported that it was more than ten years since his government (the whole of Spanish South America) had had any official trading contact with Spain.[20] This was an anti-colonial policy. The object was to preserve the Empire intact from the taint of foreign contact at any price. The Spanish government was even prepared to destroy and depopulate a colony (the northern part of Hispaniola in 1604) rather than see its people profit in any way from foreign contact.[21] The policy can perhaps best be understood in terms of the drive for *limpieza de sangre*, 'purity of blood', which marked Spain's internal policies in this era. The effect of the law was to criminalise all foreign activity or presence. Until 1670 Spain explicitly denied that any of her treaties with foreign powers had force west of the Azores or south of the Tropic of Capricorn. As a consequence there was literally 'no peace beyond the line', and no restraint on the activities of foreigners whom Spain had made outlaws.[22] By attempting to apply an inappropriate and unenforceable legal system to its overseas empire, the Spanish Crown contributed powerfully to justify and perpetuate a style of mingled war and trade in which violence, or the threat of violence, was always present. Thus, the medieval northern form of private, commercial warfare was artificially preserved long after it had disappeared from European waters. The raiders of the sixteenth century, and the buccaneers of the seventeenth, were not simply the offspring of Spanish colonial policy, but that policy acted to promote and prolong their activities, and to prevent them settling into

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[20] Henry Kamen, *The War of Succession in Spain 1700–15* (London, 1969), 145.
[21] Andrews, *The Spanish Caribbean*, 208–10; K. R. Andrews, *Elizabethan Privateering: English Privateering during the Spanish War, 1585–1603* (Cambridge, 1964), 183–4.
[22] A. P. Thornton, *West-India Policy under the Restoration* (Oxford, 1956), 76–7, 87, 97–101 and 122–3.

peaceful channels.[23] In particular it gave the English, later British and Dutch, governments powerful and plausibly legitimate reasons for supporting violence, which they would otherwise have cooperated to suppress. This issue brought Britain and Spain to war as late as 1739, more than a century after the English government had turned against all other forms of piracy.

While Spain carried the public, military tradition of naval warfare from the medieval Mediterranean to the sixteenth-century Atlantic, the Barbary 'pirates' spread their tradition of private, commercial war. Both the Regencies and the Moroccan ports were affected in the late sixteenth century by northern European influence. Christian renegades who had 'turned Turk' helped the Muslim fleets to adopt sailing ships in place of galleys, greatly increasing their cruising range and putting both coasts of the North Atlantic at risk of slave raids virtually from the Equator to the Arctic. Next, some northern pirates, chiefly English, started to operate out of Muslim ports, with the agreement of the local authorities. This movement reached its apogee after the Anglo-Spanish peace of 1603, and the accession of James VI and I the same year, which turned adrift many ships and men, especially in the West Country, who had been employed in raiding the Spanish Empire, and gradually made English ports less comfortable bases for private war. For about fifteen years Moroccan ports, especially Mamora and Sallee, became the winter bases of English raiders who in summer worked from West Country or Irish ports, and who combined the attack on Spanish ports and shipping to which they had long been accustomed with the slave-raiding they learnt from the *corsa*.[24] The most famous of these pirates was the lexicographer Sir Henry Manwaring. A maker of dictionaries, but by no means a harmless drudge, Sir Henry was in his day the most feared man in the North Atlantic.[25]

Thus the naval warfare of northern Europe and the Atlantic in the sixteenth century was shaped by the collision and mingling of public and private naval warfare in both their northern and southern versions. This alone would have been sufficient to generate a great deal of novelty and confusion, but there were several other new factors affecting, and changing, the nature of naval war. First among these was the fracture of the Christian world, and the civil wars that followed in several European states. Religion, which had always been a factor in the naval warfare of the Mediterranean, now influenced war at sea in northern waters as well. In particular there was in practice, though not in theological principle, a powerful connection between Calvinism and private naval war. The French Atlantic and Channel ports, especially Dieppe and La Rochelle, were

[23] Andrews, *The Spanish Caribbean*, 74–80 and 208–22; R. H. Boulind, 'The Strength and Weakness of Spanish Control of the Caribbean, 1520–1650: The Case for the *Armada de Barlovento*' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1965), 61–5 and 405–10.
[24] C. M. Senior, *A Nation of Pirates: English Piracy in Its Heyday* (Newton Abbot, 1976); D. D. Hebb, *Piracy and the English Government, 1616–1642* (Aldershot, 1994); Christopher Lloyd, *English Corsairs on the Barbary Coast* (London, 1981).
[25] *The Life and Works of Sir Henry Mainwaring.* Navy Records Society 54 and 56, ed. G. E. Manwaring and W. G. Perrin (1920–2).

both Huguenot strongholds and the centres of a school of navigators, pilots and cartographers who were the first Christians outside Iberia to learn the skills necessary for oceanic naval warfare. Joined at an early stage by Scottish ships and navigators, these men expressed their religious sympathies and professional skills by mounting the first raids on the Spanish Empire. When the Wars of Religion broke out in France, the Protestant cause was heavily supported by the profits of private war conducted under the cover of letters of reprisal issued by Huguenot leaders like Condé and Coligny (as Admiral of France). By the 1560s the English, especially the West Countrymen, were keen participants in this war, sailing under French letters of reprisal, and learning the professional skills of their new allies.[26] A generation later the Dutch in turn attached themselves to the Calvinist International, sailing out of English ports under letters of reprisal issued by the Prince of Orange, and learning from the English the techniques of navigation which they themselves had but lately acquired. The break-up of kingdoms and empires multiplied the number of leaders willing, indeed desperate, to finance their war-effort and assure their survival by issuing letters of reprisal. The legal mechanism itself was easily flexible enough to accommodate itself to civil war and rebellion, while religious hatred endowed it with renewed moral legitimacy. The experiment of 'general reprisals' under proclamation, which permitted any ship to make any prizes of a named enemy without any restriction or supervision, was tried by the English three times, in 1544, 1557 and 1563,[27] but it proved unsatisfactory: indiscriminate, uncontrollable, and barely distinguishable from a public declaration of war, it carried heavy diplomatic and commercial penalties. The ambiguity, flexibility and profitability of private war much better suited the situation of the English, Huguenots and Dutch.

Overlaying all these changes in the motives and contexts of naval warfare were developments in ships and weapons. The forms of naval warfare, both in northern waters and in the Mediterranean, had remained more or less stable for several centuries, and were not essentially changed by the introduction of 'man-killing' guns in the fourteenth century. So long as all fighting was hand to hand, the size of sailing ships gave them an overwhelming advantage over galleys, with their exposed crews and low freeboard. As a result the two types did not often face one another in action, but fulfilled distinct roles in different forms of naval warfare. The galley was the instrument of coastal operations, raids and landings. Wherever shallow draught was essential and short range no obstacle, galleys were the natural choice. For long passages in the open sea, for carrying men and goods in quantity, and for fighting other ships, sailing ships, and above all the great carracks developed in the fifteenth century, were essential. When a ship fought at sea, the first necessity was to gain the weather gage,

[26] Martine Acerra and Guy Martinière, eds, *Coligny, les protestants et la mer* (Paris, 1997); N. A. M. Rodger, 'The Myth of Seapower in English Politics, 1568–1815' (forthcoming); Brian Dietz, 'The Huguenot and English Corsairs during the Third Civil War in France, 1568 to 1570', *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society*, 19 (1952–58), 278–94.
[27] Marsden, *Law and Custom of the Sea*, I, 155–8, 162–5 and 174.

from which position she bore up to attack. All available missile weapons, including guns, were fired as the two ships closed, and as they grappled together the issue was settled by hand-to-hand fighting.[28]

I have argued elsewhere that the adoption of the heavy gun by galleys about the beginning of the sixteenth century caused a crisis in naval warfare. By allowing galleys to engage and even sink ships outside small-arms range, it rendered them obsolete, without providing any effective alternative. The challenge for ship designers was now to devise an effective counter to the galley. The problem was much more acute in northern waters, for the limited range and sea-keeping capacity of the galley were much more serious disadvantages in these open seas. Moreover the adoption of the heavy gun pushed galleys to adopt the *a scaloccio* oaring system, which further reduced their speed and range, while increasing the demand for oarsmen which the northern powers (with no tradition of the *corsa* and no slave markets) found it impossible to meet.[29] Those who had very lately developed the three-masted ship rig, who had experience of the novel combination of power and manoeuvrability which it provided, were not prepared to abandon it in favour of oars. Their requirement was to combine two apparently incompatible novelties: the ahead-firing heavy gun which gave the galley its uncontestable military superiority, and the new ship rig whose speed and power made ocean passages possible. They were not looking for just any method of mounting heavy guns in a sailing ship, but one in particular. By the early years of the sixteenth century if not before, ships already carried stern-firing heavy guns in their gunrooms, and were beginning to mount some lighter pieces below decks on the broadside. But there was no method of attacking the enemy while sailing astern or sideways. Moreover contemporaries wanted to sink ships, as galleys could, by firing at the waterline, and at the very short fighting ranges of the period this required the gun itself to be mounted low.[30]

I believe that the solution to this problem was the development, apparently between the 1530s and 1550s, of the galleon. The essence of the galleon seems to have been the bow and lines of a galley, grafted onto the stern and hull structure of a ship, giving the characteristic crescent shape of the true galleon. This preserved and indeed improved the speed and endurance of the ship rig, while mounting a heavy armament of ahead-firing guns. The galleon could beat the galley at her own game, without sacrificing the capacity to make long sea passages at high speed. How and where the galleon first emerged is as yet obscure. It may have been in England, Scotland, Portugal, Denmark, Venice, Genoa or elsewhere. What is reasonably clear is that the new type was rapidly

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[28] N. A. M. Rodger, 'The Development of Broadside Gunnery, 1450–1650', *Mariner's Mirror*, 82 (1996), 301–24, at 302.

[29] Francisco-Felipe Olesa Muñido, *La galera en la navegación y el combate*, 2 vols (Madrid, 1971). Mauro Bondioli, René Burlet and André Zysberg, 'Oar Mechanics and Oar Power in Medieval and Later Galleys', in *The Age of the Galley: Mediterranean Oared Vessels since Pre-Classical Times*, ed. John Morrison (London, 1995), 172–205.

[30] Rodger, 'Broadside Gunnery', 303.

adopted by the Huguenots and the English, and formed a key element in their style of private, commercial warfare. These fast warships with their heavy armament, fine lines but limited stowage were designed to overwhelm the defences of individual merchantmen, convoys, and coastal forts, while avoiding close action with powerful forces. They suited those who penetrated the Spanish Empire to conduct raids or illegal trade, not those who sustained distant colonies and oceanic commerce themselves. They were better adapted to disrupting command of the sea than to gaining or keeping it. Though they were in structural terms the first true sailing warships and the ancestors of the eighteenth-century ship of the line, in function they were the last and most effective exponents of medieval private, commercial war.[31]

For these and other reasons the type, though successful, was also transitional. Though Huguenot sea power disappeared, the English and Dutch prospered by naval war against Spain. Soon they themselves were possessors, with rich home and colonial trades to conduct and protect, with waters of their own from which they aspired to exclude foreign traders. First the Dutch and then the English ceased to sponsor and began to suppress the private warfare of their subjects. In England the old style of warfare was briefly revived during the Civil Wars, partly because the Protestant radicals who created the English Republic warmly embraced the ideology of their Elizabethan predecessors. By the 1660s, however, the sixteenth-century style of naval warfare, the tactics and ship designs associated with it, were extinct everywhere except in the Caribbean. Only the word 'galleon' survived to be used with ever-decreasing precision down to our own day.

This has been the fate the naval warfare of the period as a whole; that is, to be dressed in clothes of the wrong period. Treating peace and war as mutually exclusive and coterminous categories, historians have described naval warfare in 'peacetime' as piracy, and private men-of-war in 'wartime' as 'privateers'. In reality war and peace were blended in various ways which have no modern parallels, and for which modern languages provide an inadequate vocabulary. There was, for example, and to an extent there still is a meaningless controversy as to whether Sir Francis Drake was or was not a 'pirate'.[32] This arose from the discomfort of Victorian popular writers like Charles Kingsley and Sir Henry Newbolt at the suggestion that their model of manly Christian heroism might have been a common criminal. It was an entirely bogus controversy, setting a figure who never existed against anachronistic legal and moral criteria, and it rested on mistranslation, the assumption that Drake's Spanish contemporaries had accused him of being a pirate, whereas they usually used the word *corsario*, not *pirata*. *Corsario* itself, of course, is a borrowing from another context, but it

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[31] Ibid., 305–6; and Rodger, 'Guns and Sails in the First Phase of English Colonization, 1500–1650', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume I: The Origins of Empire*, ed. Nicholas Canny (Oxford, 1998), 79–98, at 82–8 and 96–87.
[32] It has been revived by Drake's latest biographer: Harry Kelsey, *Sir Francis Drake: The Queen's Pirate* (New Haven, 1998).

is an intelligent adaptation of a word that does convey much of the style of warfare Drake undertook. Unfortunately the English word 'corsair' is now so encrusted with spurious Byronic romanticism that it is probably irrecoverable for any serious purpose. Moreover English historians have long been accustomed to echo the error of the Frenchmen who first applied the phrase *guerre de course* to the very different legal and strategic situation of seventeenth and eighteenth-century privateering – and thus made it harder to describe the *corsa* itself with any clarity.

Thus the limitations of language continue to baffle our attempts to understand the sixteenth century at sea, and it continues to be treated as a sort of historical junk-room from which historians may borrow all sorts of scraps to construct ambitious intellectual edifices. It has long been customary to see the period through eighteenth-century spectacles. Indeed it is often analysed in terms of categories which themselves are anachronistic constructs developed in the late nineteenth century in order to understand the eighteenth. In recent years attempts have been made to discover the line of battle in the sixteenth century and even earlier, generally by reading any use of the word 'line' (not even 'line ahead') to mean 'line of battle', in one case with the help of terminology apparently borrowed from fighter-aircraft tactics.[33] This ruthless perversion of language and confusion of ideas makes it impossible to speak or write clearly about a period of rapid change to which many of our natural modern assumptions are inapplicable. No prince or state then possessed or claimed any monopoly on the use of force, which remained a normal means of settling all sorts of private as well as public disputes. The distinction between sailing warships and merchantmen was only beginning to emerge, because, under sail at least, war and trade were still usually combined. None of these circumstances can easily be accommodated to our preconceptions or our terminology. We shall never understand this period until we cease to stage it in modern dress.

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[33] William Maltby, 'Politics, Professionalism, and the Evolution of Sailing-Ship Tactics, 1650–1714', in John A. Lynn, ed., *Tools of War: Instruments, Ideas and Institutions of Warfare, 1445–1871* (Urbana, Illinois, 1990), 53–73; Rodger, 'Broadside Gunnery', 301–2.