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Disrupting Mughal Imperialism: Piracy and Plunder on the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

This paper examines five distinct events from seventeenth-century South Asia: a pirate raid, two battles and two more pirate raids, all of which represent varying acts of defiance committed against the great Mughal imperium. Perpetrated by the Portuguese, the Marathas and the British, on land and by sea, these events seen in sequence shed light on the evolution of geopolitical players and the aqueous shifts in power dynamics related to maritime supremacy in the western Indian Ocean. By taking a broad view of this area over the span of a century, this paper seeks to explore the how notions of piracy, privateering, imperialism and colonialism evolved and changed in correspondence with a diverse, vital and hotly contested seascape.

Keywords

pirate – Mughal – Indian Ocean – maritime trade – colonialism

1 Introduction¹

In this paper I propose to examine five distinct events from seventeenth-century South Asia: a pirate raid, two battles and two more pirate raids, all of which represent varying acts of defiance committed against the great Mughal imperium. Perpetrated by the Portuguese, the Marathas and the British, on

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land and by sea, these events seen in sequence shed light on the evolution of geopolitical players and the aqueous shifts in power dynamics related to maritime supremacy in the western Indian Ocean. The events began in September of 1613, when Portuguese pirates seized the *Rahimi*, a Mughal ship owned by Maryam Zamani, none other than the mother of the then Mughal emperor Jahangir. Next, the Battle of Surat in January of 1664, when Maratha forces led by Shivaji plundered and laid waste to the single most important Mughal port city of the day. Then in 1676 the failed Battle for Janjira, when Siddi warriors proved yet again that their island fortress was impregnable. And returning to pirate raids, the most celebrated pirate prize of all time, the *Ganj-i-Sawai* or *Gunsway*, a ship belonging to the Great Mughal Aurangzeb himself, was taken by the English pirate Henry Every in 1695. And just three years later, the famous capture of the Indian trading vessel the *Quedagh Merchant* by the Scottish privateer Captain William Kidd, who was branded a pirate, tried by his former English supporters and ultimately executed. What can we learn from these various events of resistance to imperial power? How and why did the sea become a critical locus for the contestation of such power? And how do maritime activities resonate inland, sending ripples and waves to landlocked interiors? The analysis of these five events will hopefully shed new light on some of these concerns, examining moments of rebellion and subversion as markers of imperial cleavage and rupture.

All five events were military attacks that directly or indirectly challenged Mughal imperial authority. Although not a colonial power, strictly speaking, the Mughal empire in the seventeenth century was the most powerful and far-reaching empire in South Asia, and likely the wealthiest single polity in the world. Its might and grandeur came from controlling an expansive land empire, spreading from Afghanistan to Burma, but the Mughals were notorious for their lack of a proper navy. And for an empire that boasted a significant coastline, Mughal hydrophobia was perhaps a remnant of their landlocked Central Asian roots. Their engagement with the sea was indeed complex, often linking trade and pilgrimage with diplomacy and foreign policy, but all without a military (let alone regulatory) naval presence of their own. During the reigns of the emperors Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, the Mughal state dealt with a number of maritime players: first the Portuguese, who in the early seventeenth century still maintained a tight grip over Indian Ocean travel, next the Marathas, who posed an internal threat to Mughal port cities and sea forts, and finally the British, who, by the late seventeenth century, were quickly supplanting the Portuguese for Indian Ocean supremacy.

Indeed, the Mughal state was never seriously concerned with developing a powerful navy. Barring a few exceptions like Shaista Khan's marshaling of naval

forces in his conquest of Chittagong in 1666, the Mughal state seems to have been rather complacent about maintaining a state-sponsored imperial navy, settling instead for paying exorbitant (sometimes exploitative) transport taxes and other tariffs to Portuguese and other European commercial entities. The comments of Edwardes and Garrett are indicative of the scenario: "it is obvious that the so-called naval strength of the Mughal Empire must have been negligible ... the emperor [Akbar] tacitly acquiesced in their supremacy by making no effort to challenge their [Portuguese] authority" (Edwardes and Garrett 1995, 182). In fact the Mughal state was so disinterested within the sea that by the mid-seventeenth century Aurangzeb finally outsourced his naval needs to the powerful Siddis, making Yakut Khan of Janjira the Grand Admiral of the Mughal fleet around the year 1670.

One thing seems to be for sure: the Portuguese, the British and the Marathas all knew and exploited the Mughal weakness in all things maritime. Sea empires came crashing down upon the shores of Asia's richest land empire, and it was only a matter of time until the tides of power would swash from empire to colony.

2 The *Rahimi*

In September of 1613, during the reign of the fourth Mughal emperor Jahangir, the *Rahimi*, an impressive Mughal merchant ship laden with both goods and people, was seized in the Red Sea and rerouted to Goa by the Portuguese navy. The incident was no small matter and it heightened the tensions already brewing between the Mughal and Portuguese empires. The ship itself was owned by Maryam Zamani, the emperor's own mother, otherwise known to us by her Rajput name Jodha bai. And like a few other powerful Mughal women at court (Nur Jahan for example), Zamani had the authority to issue official *farmans*, retain a sizable personal treasury and engage in considerable business activities both on land and at sea with local merchants as well as Portuguese, British and Dutch traders. As Findly puts it: "In general, Mughal noblewomen supported, encouraged, and even protected trade with Europe for it was in their best interest to have ships available to carry their goods and to have advantageously positioned trading partners" (Findly 1988, 234). Now in the seventeenth century, when Portuguese maritime supremacy was under threat from new European powers, it appears that the Portuguese were resorting to high seas piracy directed at the very heart of the Mughal imperium.

But commercial/imperial interests were not the only factors in play here, for religion (and specifically Islam) was an ever-present reality for both sides. It

was quite common for merchant vessels sailing from northern India to Middle Eastern ports to carry large groups of *hajjis*, or pilgrims, on their journey to the holy city of Mecca. In fact Mecca itself, though known for its sanctity, was also a bustling trade city, and the “location of one of the world’s great commercial fairs which drew products from Europe, Arabia, and Asia” (Findly 1988, 236). The *Rahimi* was one such dual-purpose ship, boasting cargo worth approximately £130,000 and a passenger capacity of well over a thousand, many of whom were sure to be pilgrims (Farooqi 1988, 206; Findly 1993, 150). The ship’s name itself means “relating to the Merciful,” another name for Allah, while Europeans knew her simply as “the great pilgrimage ship” (Findly 1988, 234).

Like most Mughal vessels of the time, the *Rahimi* sailed west from Surat, likely heading to the vibrant port city of Mocha in the southern Red Sea. Her captain had by then secured, after much deliberation, a rather overpriced, but all the same compulsory *cartaz* or pass from the Portuguese authorities that guaranteed safe passage across the seas. But in the treacherous waters of the bottleneck that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the greater Indian Ocean, the Portuguese ruthlessly captured the great ship. In fact this critical maritime passageway soon become the favorite zone for later piratical attacks; it was the ideal location, as pirates could lie in wait, counting on the regularity of pilgrimage routes and schedules. We will return to this locale later, but for the time being it is important to consider the significance of seizing a pilgrimage vessel from the Portuguese perspective.

Since the beginning of Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean, the empire’s aims were clear: control trade routes and the exchange of lucrative commodities in order to monopolize all maritime commerce in and out of India. Their methodologies were often harsh and exacting, and their “perfidious brutality” soon garnered them a reputation among Asians as the “Portuguese menace” (Findly 1988, 236). Underlying this aggressive colonization was also a palpable antagonism towards Islam. King Dom Manuel himself encouraged his expeditionary leaders to freely attack and destroy Muslim ships on the high seas (Farooqi 1988, 200). The toxic combination of colonialism and Islamic xenophobia was felt even during the sixteenth century when “a leading *alim* of Akbar’s court issued a *fatwa* that the *hajj* was no longer obligatory for Indian Muslims, owing to the persecution suffered at the hands of the Persians by pilgrims going by land, and at the hands of the Portuguese by those going by sea” (Farooqi 1988, 203). Given this troubling background, Findly rightly concludes “that the capture of the *Rahimi* was more than a general act of Portuguese piracy, for it not only reflected Portuguese resentment at the coming of the British, who were certain to make the Mughals their allies, but was a deliberate act of religious persecution as well” (Findly 1988, 238).

Indeed, Jahangir was furious when he heard the news of the *Rahimi's* seizure, and once he had confirmed that the Portuguese had no intention of releasing the stolen ship's cargo, he exacted a vigorous response with the intention of sending a clarion message to the European perpetrators. He dispatched one Mukkarab Khan to ensure a moratorium on all maritime traffic in and out of Surat and also laid siege to the port city of Daman. Furthermore, he closed the Jesuit church in Agra and deprived the fathers of their previously granted allowances (Foster 1921, 192). And although Findly describes the *Rahimi* incident as the "first and only act of piracy against India which, on record, evoked a severe and intense response from the Mughal government," we will see later that this was not the end but rather the beginning of serious Mughal reactions to provocative imperial predations (Findly 1988, 228). For the time being, however, we will move to two acts of internal aggression led by the Marathas and aimed directly at disrupting Mughal maritime connectivity.

3 The Battle of Surat

In addition to the maritime predations of European colonialists, the Mughals also had to contend with internal dissension, most notably from the rising Maratha Confederacy under the charismatic rule of Shivaji Bhosle. Although the Marathas were a Deccan power with limited naval resources, they well understood the strategic importance of port cities and coastal forts. Shivaji was keenly aware that the port of Surat, where the Tapi River spills into the Indian Ocean just south of the Bay of Khambhat, was the most crucial Mughal connection to the sea, and in turn, one of the wealthiest cities in India.

It was during Akbar's reign in the late sixteenth century that the Mughal empire annexed Gujarat and its impressive coastline, effectively taking control of critical trade networks and vibrant port cities like Surat. Some years earlier the Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa described the city as a place where "they deal in many commodities, in which there is much trade. Hither sail ships in great numbers ... as this is a great port of traffic, and there are here many substantial merchants" (Barbosa 1918, 149). Thus, more than an acquisition of land and tax revenues, Gujarat's strategic importance for the Mughals lay in its vast and vibrant coastline and the centuries-old trade routes which it commanded. Surat therefore effectively became the Mughal empire's primary connection to the sea and the wide world beyond it.

By 1664 Shivaji's resources were depleted and he badly needed to replenish his treasury. A surprise attack on Surat thus served him a dual purpose: to plunder riches and to disrupt Mughal maritime trade. The crippling sack,

burning and looting of Surat began on January 5, 1664, and continued for six days. The city and its inhabitants were devastated. As the Dutch administrator François Valentijn described: “Everything existing in Surat was that day reduced to ashes and many considerable merchants lost all ... two or three Banian merchants lost several millions and the total loss was estimated at 30 millions” (Sen 1930, 361). In this context it is important to note that these merchants, Haji Zahid Beg and Virji Vora, for example, belonged to a variety of communities: Hindu, Muslim and Jain (Gokhale 1979, 24). It is clear that Shivaji’s raid was not directed at any particular group, nor does it seem that religious affiliations swayed his actions; it was indeed a military/political move driven by a very *realpolitik*.

The diversity of the city’s inhabitants is also reflected in the complex configuration of European powers that vied for its command; the Portuguese, French, Dutch and British all had their hands in the lucrative city. Some fifty years earlier, in late November of 1612, another battle took place in Suvali, a coastal village near Surat, that in many ways foreshadowed the imminent shifts in colonial power relations. In this instance the British navy exacted a minor yet crucial victory over the dominant Portuguese. As Hannay rightly remarks, “the battle at Swally ... has as good a right as any other to be called one of the decisive battles of the world” (Hannay 1910, 85). Here was one of the first of many battles which marked the shift from Portuguese to British maritime ascendancy in the Indian Ocean. The pivotal battle also prompted the British East India Company to establish a small squadron of the Royal Navy, specifically tasked to safeguard English commercial interests along India’s coastline. Incidentally, this precise moment in history is remembered as the birth of the modern Indian navy.

Thus, the ostensibly minor battles at Suvali and Surat were in fact pregnant with several fateful seeds that would soon reach fruition. From this vantage it is clear that maritime commercial enterprises, with their connection to wealthy port cities, were essential to the shifting dynamics of colonial power relations. Battling Europeans and belligerent Marathas were taking a toll on Mughal authority and they needed to fight back, particularly in regard to their vulnerable coasts.

4 The Battle for Janjira

One strategy used by the Mughals to protect the empire’s western coast was to employ Siddi warriors and their naval expertise. Historically, this small but important community played a critical role in several power shifts in the

Deccan that had significant repercussions for the Mughal empire. Although many Siddis came to central India from east Africa as slaves or mercenaries, many, having proved their bravery and acumen in battle, quickly rose through the ranks of various Deccani administrations. Quite possibly the most famous was Malik Ambar, who commanded a sizable independent mercenary army and soon secured the highest position of chief regent for the Nizam Shahi kings of Ahmadnagar. So feared was Malik Ambar, with his debilitating guerrilla war tactics, that Jahangir developed a severe and often xenophobic attitude toward him. One famous Mughal painting depicts Jahangir's desire to have Ambar decapitated, but alas that wish remained unfulfilled.

By the mid to late seventeenth century, when Aurangzeb had finally come to power, the Mughals were in close alliance with the Siddis, particularly the semi-independent Siddis of Janjira on the west coast, some one hundred kilometers south of Bombay. Thus within half a century or so, the Siddis went from a hated nuisance to a trusted ally of the Mughals—yet another example of the fluid nature of Deccani power relations. The aqueous, amorphous and unpredictably changing nature of the sea accordingly serves as the perfect metaphor for the dynamic political life of the period: its ebbs and flows, its tides and currents. Around this time the Mughal administration even granted the official imperial title of Nawab to the Siddis of Janjira, and effectively installed them as the hereditary Grand Admirals of the Mughal navy. And so the Siddis of Janjira went from captains, to governors, to bona-fide rulers of a quasi-independent principality with an established royal line of hereditary succession.

Although holding imperial Mughal title and taking orders from the governor of Surat, the Siddis were “practically an independent power” (Edwardes and Garrett 1995, 183). Their base on the impressive island fortress of Janjira (from *jazeera*, meaning “island” in Arabic) has been called “the most magnificent surviving fort on the Maharashtra coast,” boasting 22 bastions, two gates, and over five hundred cannons (Sharma 2009, 49). It soon gained the notable distinction of being an impregnable structure, a notion that was often tested but never debunked. From this strategic vantage point, the Siddis of Janjira were, in a sense, the most powerful naval force on the west coast, often engaging with European fleets in a constantly changing game of allegiances. Their newfound fealty to the Mughals, however, now put them at odds with the Marathas. As a land-based power like the Mughals, the Marathas well understood the tactical importance of eliminating the Siddis and developing their own maritime presence. Maratha records characterized the vexing Siddis as a mouse in the house, or worse, a disease in the stomach (Ali 1995, 161). Shivaji and his men made at least four attempts to capture the strategic fort but all

of them failed. In 1676, for example, Shivaji dispatched one Moro Pant with 10,000 troops, none of whom could penetrate the high rampart walls (Nairne 1894, 71). Later Shivaji's son Sambhaji deployed a force of some 20,000 men, but even that substantial attempt met with failure. He is said to have tried to fill the causeway that separated the fort from the mainland to advance the attack, but legend has it he was also digging an underground tunnel to burrow underneath the fort's seemingly impenetrable walls (Ali 1995, 170). Such were the extreme (ultimately fruitless) tactics that the Marathas were forced to resort to.

In response to the Siddis' domineering naval presence, Shivaji took to building his own coastal fortresses. Five such forts were built during Shivaji's reign, and Padmadurg, located just northeast of Janjira, was constructed with the express purpose of countering the Siddis' maritime prowess on the west coast. This new fort eventually fell to the Siddis of Janjira during the reign of Sambhaji. Now into the last two decades of the seventeenth century, the only force capable of defeating the Siddis were the English, who by this time had all but supplanted Portuguese naval power in the region. In fact, by the early eighteenth century, soon after the death of Aurangzeb, the Siddis of Janjira had allied themselves with the Honorable East India Company. And so like a swaying tide, Siddi allegiances turned in direct response to the rise and fall of geopolitical power shifts. We now turn briefly to two of the most famous pirate raids in history, both perpetrated by the English, the soon-to-be undisputed masters of India and her coasts.

5 The *Ganj-i-Sawai* and the *Quedagh Merchant*

Now in the closing years of the seventeenth century, English privateers, who were quickly branded as pirates by their own native countrymen, orchestrated two of the most notorious Indian Ocean pirate raids: the attack and capture of the *Ganj-i-Sawai* and the *Quedagh Merchant* by the now infamous pirate captains Henry Every and William Kidd respectively. Incidentally, both attacks resonated deeply with elements that underscored the seizure of the *Rahimi* little less than a century earlier. Although seapower dominance had now shifted from Portuguese to English hands, all the piratical raids inflicted by European powers exploited the vulnerability of Mughal shipping enterprises, many of which still passed through the Red Sea at regular intervals linked to the *haj* pilgrimage.

In September of 1695 a large convoy of 25 Mughal ships passed through the infamous Mandeb Strait, otherwise known as the Bab-el-Mandeb, or Gateway of Tears. Here many Mughal ships just like the *Rahimi* were captured, but the present attack was unique. It was committed not by just one ship, but by what

may be called a pirate confederation, a brotherhood, so to speak, that reeked of the fabled Pirate Code. Piracy, it seems, was organized now. The squadron, which included the Thomas Tew's *Amity*, Joseph Faro's *Portsmouth Adventure*, Richard Want's *Dolphin*, William Mayes's *Pearl*, and Thomas Wake's *Susanna*, was led by the most famous pirate captain of them all: Henry Every, known as the "King of Pirates," who commanded the *Fancy*. Of note is the fact that all these men were English privateers commissioned to patrol the American east coast. Dismayed by their prospects in the Atlantic, however, many of these privateers, who hailed from ports in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York, quickly turned pirate (Hanna 2015, 189). This new enterprise thus linked the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in a new but all too expected way, for the so-called Pirate Round followed the commonly used routes of the British East Indian Company, albeit with new pirate hideouts like the infamous Isle Sainte-Marie off the west coast of Madagascar and the ancient trading island of Socotra, not to mention the island of Perim right in the middle of the Mandeb Strait.

In pursuit of this Mughal convey, Every's ship the *Fancy* was successful in capturing two vessels: (1) the *Fateh Muhammed*, a six-gun merchant ship "carrying £50–£60,000 in gold and silver, and belonging to Abdul Ghafur, Surat's great shipping magnate"; and (2) the *Gang-i-sawai* ("Exceeding Treasure"/*Gunsway*), the largest and richest ship in the fleet, owned by none other than the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (Thomas 2014, 88). The loot from the *Gunsway* totaled somewhere between £200,000 and £600,000, including 500,000 gold and silver pieces, making it by far the greatest prize in pirate history. To add insult to injury, the ship was "taken to the island of Socotra where the vessel was looted, prisoners tortured and the many women aboard raped. While Avery's [an alternative spelling of Every's name] crimes thrilled the London populace, the East India Company was mortified when Aurangzeb retaliated. The Company's trade with Mogul India was embargoed, and its trading posts seized. Company officials were imprisoned, some of them dying in terribly squalid conditions, while the key station at Surat was cut off by imperial troops for nine months" (Thomas 2014, 88).

Clearly Every, who had once served in the Royal Navy, was now very much at odds with his native England. The putative first-ever international manhunt was underway, as the British government and the East India Company had put a hefty bounty on Every's head. Anglo-Mughal relations were already precarious, and such blatant acts of maritime aggression, which the Mughals viewed as state-sanctioned British predation, only made things worse. Although Every and his legendary booty were never found, just a few years later Captain Kidd would serve as an example of how the British viewed and treated this new breed of Red Sea pirates.

6 Captain Kidd

Less than three years after the capture of the *Gunsway*, at the very close of the seventeenth century, when Anglo-Mughal relations were increasingly tense and tenuous, Captain William Kidd, the infamous Scottish privateer turned pirate, sailed into the Indian Ocean. His earlier life as privateer had taken him all along the eastern Atlantic seaboard and well into the Caribbean, mostly in pursuit of French merchant ships, sometimes Spanish galleons, and surely pirate ships laden with stolen treasure. In search of more promising booty, Kidd put together a fresh crew for his new ship the *Adventure Galley* and planned to sail around the Cape of Good Hope to the lucrative waters of the Indian Ocean. This new enterprise was no ragtag venture; in fact, Kidd was funded by some of the wealthiest nobles and businessmen of England: earls, dukes and barons pooled funds and secured a letter of marque that was personally signed by King William III. This letter, oddly homologous to the Portuguese *cartaz*, was a *carte blanche* for privateers to harass, capture and loot hostile enemy vessels (Thomas 2014, 89). In many ways this policy sanctioned the generally despised practice of piracy, wrapping the rapacious activity in the legitimizing robes of patriotism and entrepreneurship. To be sure, Kidd's backers viewed privateering in a similar light and expected their investments to yield rich returns, with a guaranteed 10 percent of all gains being promised to the Crown.

Kidd's new ship, the *Adventure Galley*, was a vessel to be reckoned with, "weighing over 284 tons burthen and equipped with 34 cannon, oars, and 150 men," many of whom were former pirates in search of new employment. During the long voyage to Madagascar, which took over four months, Kidd and his crew had minimal success in intercepting hostile ships, and so even less opportunity to capture valuable booty. Tired, frustrated and disenchanted, Kidd and his men set sail under French colors and headed for the Malabar Coast in search of French treasure. On January 30, 1698, Kidd captured a huge 400 ton vessel named the *Quedagh Merchant*, a mighty ship whose onboard diversity was matched only by its stunning cargo. The *Quedagh Merchant* was an Indian ship owned by one Coirgi based in Surat. A few years earlier it was commissioned by a group of Armenian merchants, who loaded it with "satins, muslins, gold, silver, an incredible variety of East Indian merchandise, as well as extremely valuable silks." The motley crew of this ship linked Indians, Armenians and Europeans into a single commercial enterprise, highlighting the kinds of transregional and multicultural exchanges that defined this period of inchoate globalism. It was becoming harder and harder to silo identities and isolate groups, almost as if personal identities were waves on the ocean, rising

and falling into a mysterious and undefinable space, a modality that allowed for interaction and dynamism to extend without boundaries.

Indeed the *Quedagh Merchant* seemed like the perfect prize for Kidd, until he realized that the ship was captained by an Englishman named John Wright, supported by two Dutch first mates and a French gunner. Quickly understanding his error, Kidd tried to convince his men to halt their attack, but the tide of plunder was unstoppable. The *Quedagh Merchant* with its valuable prize was taken back to the pirate hideout on the Isle Sainte-Marie, but in this short time, news had spread to England that Kidd and his unsavory lot had attacked a Mughal ship captained by an Englishman. The ECI “feared yet more retaliation on Aurangzeb’s part, knowing full well that he would be incandescent with rage. He certainly threatened to expel all Europeans from his realm. To save their skins and preserve their investment and trading interests, the Court of Directors launched a global manhunt for Kidd” (Thomas 2014, 89). Unlike Every, however, Kidd was soon captured in New York and brought to London for his trial in 1700. “Deserted by his backers, he was scapegoated, tried for piracy, condemned and executed” (Thomas 2014, 89). As Thomas rightly puts it, “Avery occasioned acute anger while Kidd was but a sacrificial lamb for slaughter to appease Aurangzeb, thereby ensuring that Company activities were not seriously impeded” (Thomas 2014, 96).

7 Conclusion

What do these events, ranging over almost a century from 1613 to 1700, tell us about the dynamism of the Indian Ocean world? Are there thematics we can trace or trajectories to follow? Indeed, the “long seventeenth century” witnessed profound shifts in power dynamics, commercial trading practices and sociopolitical alliances. These transitions were often effected at sea, the structureless zone of contact and interaction that spawned new and often unexpected allegiances as well as hostilities. And although the events described here began on or near the Indian Ocean, the wakes of these maritime activities were quick to resonate inland. From our reading, this volatile century witnessed the decline of Portuguese maritime supremacy and the ascendancy of British naval power, the transformation of the Siddis from foe to friend of the Mughals, the rise of Maratha power by way of increased coastal fortifications, and the transition of English seamen from state-sponsored privateers to reviled pirates. It was a lively time indeed, when maritime actors from all parts of the world swashed about in the rolling waves of the Indian Ocean, trying

to make their fortunes in this new, uncharted and uncontrolled seascape. This was also a time when the commercial interests of state agencies like the East Indian Company were increasingly interlinked with political machinations and colonial agendas. As Margariti notes, this complexity “highlights the need for sharper definitions of pirates and piracy in the pre-modern Indian Ocean. It also calls attention to the motivations and goals of a wide range of maritime actors ... [and] the connection between the use of maritime violence and the bid of maritime polities to ‘territorialize’ the realm of the ocean, in order to extend their territory out to sea” (Margariti 2008, 546).

In fact, it seems that this goal of territorializing the unwieldiness of the ocean, to bring order to an otherwise undifferentiated realm, was the underlying ideology that precipitated the period’s high-strung volatility. In many ways it was a time of disparate worldviews, or rather oceanviews, coming into contact with each other. European powers like the Portuguese, British, Dutch and French, with their long naval histories and traditions of seafaring, viewed the oceans just as they saw the land, as a space to be parsed, regulated and ultimately dominated. The Mughals, on the other hand, were almost flippant toward the great ocean that surrounded them. By nature, convenience or arrogant lethargy, the Mughal emperors never invested in building their maritime power or even securing their long coastlines. And as Pearson has argued, the Battle of Surat, along with Shivaji’s related attack on Shaista Khan, marked the beginnings of Mughal decline (Pearson 1976, 221–235). To take this thesis forward and generalize it in the context of our present discussion, it seems that Mughal naval weakness was the root cause of the empire’s downfall, and in turn, the rise of European colonial dominance. In this light, there appears to be an arc, a curve that bends from imperialism to colonialism. In that sense, is the ocean perhaps the defining difference between these two modalities? In other words, does colonialism as a practice and as a principle arise from controlling the sea? This is a much larger question to tackle, but the evidence presented here from the seventeenth-century Indian Ocean seems to support such a hypothesis. This desire to control the sea, however, was not easy, for “even in its most paradigmatic cases, empire’s spaces were interrupted, politically differentiated, and encased in irregular and sometimes undefined borders” (Benton, 2005, 700). Thus the creation and negotiation of these watery lines of demarcation became the animating force of this dramatic period in premodern history.

As an afterthought directed at potential future research, we might ask how things would look if we extended our arc of transition into the following century. By this time, both the Portuguese and the French colonial presence in

South Asia was greatly diminished, and the British were rising as the undisputed masters of the Indian Ocean; meanwhile Mughal power waned under the increasingly detrimental threat of Maratha insurgencies. What changed in maritime traffic and trade during this period, and how were various players effecting these transitions? One important character from this time was Kanhoji Angre, considered the first bona-fide admiral of the Maratha Navy. Under his leadership, natives of India, for the first time in the history of this period, could claim to have a legitimate naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Angre and his fleet successfully fended off several colonialist incursions from the Dutch, the Portuguese, and particularly the British. He even levied taxes on European merchant vessels, a bold inversion of the taxing practices perpetuated by Europeans in the preceding century. Indeed, Angre was celebrated as a hero in India, but European powers quickly branded him a “pirate”—that slippery designation that can so dramatically shift depending on context and perspective. The subtle ways in which these relationships played out is well evidenced in a carefully worded letter dated May 24, 1724, from William Phipps, Governor of Bombay, to Angre that warned, “any state bordering upon a neighbour that lives on plunder and robs under colour of friendship must necessarily be careful for their defence” (Elliott 2009). Clearly British maritime ventures were being severely thwarted by Angre and his men. The irony is that Angre’s fleet was manned by not just Indians, but rather a motley crew that included refugees and rejects from Europe, many of who were likely already branded as pirates by European authorities. Angre is said to have “used many Europeans to man his formidable squadrons. Such expatriates were mostly deserters from the service of those western maritime powers established in the East and hence, initially, the large numbers from Portugal” (Scammell 1992, 641–642). In a very interesting turn of allegiances, it was now rather likely that a former Portuguese seaman was sailing under an Indian flag against British trading ships. The active circulation of personnel in this oceanic environment is just one of the many ways in which we can further understand the dynamic shifts in South Asian power relations of the seventeenth century, a time when pirates, princes and profiteers all sought their fortunes on the waves of the Indian Ocean.

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