

Viking Camps

Case Studies and Comparisons

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Chapter 14

**Pirate utopias? Viking camps
and aspirational polities**

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14 Pirate utopias?

Viking camps and aspirational polities

Neil Price

Introduction: the new archaeologies of the Great Army and its analogues

The discovery of the Repton winter camp (Biddle & Kjølbbye-Biddle 1992; 2001) brought a new, material dimension to the debates on Viking army and fleet sizes that had hitherto been largely confined to textual analyses. Prior to the excavations, discussions of these forces tended to focus on scale—did they number in the thousands, or mere hundreds?—and definition, often played out in competing interpretations of the seventh-century Laws of Ine (e.g. Sawyer 1957; 1962: ch.6; Brooks 1979). Into the twenty-first century, the picture was both sharpened and complicated by the excavations at Torksey (Hadley & Richards 2016; 2018), Aldwark (Williams 2020), and other sites, as Repton too was re-evaluated (Jarman et al. 2018) and seen in the possible context of an expanded landscape of occupation (at Heath Wood: Richards 2004; and Foremark: Jarman 2019). Beyond mainland Britain, work at the *longphuirt* sites such as Woodstown (Russell & Hurley 2014), and other Irish camps discussed in this volume, showed establishments of comparable size and complexity. Similar but locally distinctive material was also published from the Continent (e.g. Price 1991; Nicolardot 2002; and papers in this volume).

Alongside excavations in the winter camps and temporary fortifications, a broader research agenda addressed the regional socio-politics and demographics of the landscapes through which the armies moved, and in so doing began to consider what they actually were. Some scholars examined the internal structure of these mobile fighting forces, looking at ingroup identification (Raffield et al. 2015) and the conglomerate nature of the army composition, built up around *lið* ‘brotherhoods’ of varying size (Raffield 2016). Others built on decades of work on the Danelaw, Northumbria, and other areas of Scandinavian settlement, and new studies appeared utilising a varied set of data sources. Old excavation records were examined afresh, combined with the latest information from metal detector finds registered with the Portable Antiquities Scheme, technological investigations of ‘Anglo-Scandinavian’ dress accessories and portable material culture, and isotopic and genomic

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analyses of human remains from mass graves and cemeteries. The result was a suite of new interpretations of the successive phases of migration in landscape context (e.g. Kershaw 2013; McLeod 2014; Kershaw & Røyrvik 2016; Raffield 2020), sometimes with startling results.

Over time, what had once been a discussion of local logistics became a radical re-imagining of the ninth-century Viking armies that devastated the English kingdoms and the Frankish Empire (as summarised in two recent overviews, Price 2020: ch.12; Hadley & Richards 2021). Although debate continues on points of detail and matters of perspective, it is nonetheless possible to draw several key conclusions from this mass of research since the late 1970s:

- by the 870s, the armies clearly numbered in the thousands of individuals
- the population of the camps included not only men, as had long been assumed, but clearly also women, and presumably children
- the majority of the army's members were of pan-Scandinavian origin, from all over the North, but a minority had other ethnic backgrounds
- the camps were not purely military installations, but also provided clear evidence of manufacturing, craftwork, and trade, implying extensive and not exclusively violent interaction with the populations of their hinterlands (at least one—Torksey—and perhaps others, seem to have left a longer-term legacy of settlement in or near the same location)

The 'armies' thus emerged as modular and flexible entities, generally very large though their numbers would have shifted as members came and went. Although clearly Scandinavian in essence, they also attracted people from other regions—in other words, these were organisations that at least some thought worth joining. Although there is no doubt that armed force and peripatetic violence was their core motor, the armies' composite form also encompassed what seem to have been family units as part of the *lið*.

This new image of the armies fitted well with the adjusted view of the camps that they built, in that there was clearly no single model for their design and size. While sites such as Torksey and Aldwark seem to have housed an entire force, it is by no means clear whether fortifications such as the Repton D-shaped enclosure were intended for smaller groups or perhaps formed fortified 'citadels' around which a larger, dispersed occupation camped. The armies adapted their construction projects to local topography, political conditions, and also to their circumstantial needs at the time.

Given this revisionist understanding of the armies' logistics and composition, one must inevitably reconsider what such forces actually represented: where did they come from, how did they work, what were their agendas? An especially acute problem, or challenge, is that in mid-late ninth-century Scandinavia there seem to have been no political or ethnic groupings of sufficient size to launch expeditions on this scale. This in turn calls the identification of the armies into question—if they were not the 'Danes' or

‘Norwegians’, or the armed forces of a more regional power, then who were they?

Pirate paradigms and mobile communities

Since at least the late Middle Ages, one of the oldest and most consistent tropes associated with ‘Vikings’ in the specific sense is that of piracy—a connection that overlaps with the most widely accepted contemporary meaning of the Old Norse term *vikingr* itself (Brink 2008). With this in mind, in several publications over the past decade I have explored comparative studies of historical pirate communities, focusing on the Atlantic and Caribbean in the Early Modern period, but also looking further afield to similar phenomena in the Far East (Price 2014; 2016; 2020: ch.12).¹

Pirates, like Vikings, suffer from grotesque stereotyping in strikingly similar ways, and their respective clichés have a similar chronological trajectory across the past 200 years or so. In the words of Dawdy & Bonni (2012: 674), pirates have been seen in anglophone popular culture as ‘predators, parasites, criminals, outlaws, rebels, heroes, heroines, evildoers, buffoons, opportunists, armed robbers, raiders, plunderers, bandits, brigands, liberators, rogues, robin hoods, rascallions, and bloodthirsty killers’ (one gets the impression they enjoyed writing that list). Academic piracy research is also a lively field, taking varying approaches to the deconstruction of an activity that all agree was ultimately built upon maritime robbery with violence, though whether this was a means or an end is a matter of debate.

The detailed literature and comparisons have been referenced at length in my previous publications, but in broad terms one can discern three primary models for the interpretation of pirate communities, though each of course has internal variation:

- violent maritime predation, either planned or opportunistic, with a pure profit motive (a model with Antique origins—de Souza 2014, and analyses going back to Braudel; see also Anderson 2001)
- piracy as social banditry and an expression of mobile community, a socio-economic strategy of revolutionary potential, elevating the powerless in the face of state-based structures of oppression, with a focus on the freedom afforded by maritime movement (e.g. Rediker 1987, 2004; Cordingley 1995; Linebaugh & Rediker 2000, and analyses going back to Hobsbawm and Blok)
- piracy as business, focusing on (rational) self-interest, commerce, and plunder as a form of alternative taxation or even tribute (e.g. Starkey 2001; Lopez Nadal 2001; Leeson 2009)

In addition to these interpretive packages, there is also a general archaeology of piracy, which tends to concentrate on shipwrecks and sites associated with named, historical figures, but which is also now branching out into

issues of identity, signalling, and a material signature of pirate culture (e.g. Skowronek & Ewen 2006; Ewen & Skowronek 2016; Wilde-Ramsing & Carnes-McNaughton 2018).

These somewhat contradictory paradigms of piracy research have been usefully deconstructed in a major study by Dawdy & Bonni (2012). In picking apart the models on offer, they shrewdly observe that in the most basic terms this work explores the tensions between pirate communities seen as profit-sharing revolutionaries in a socialist mould, or as hyper-individualist greed-is-good consumers on a grand scale—thus contrasting the logic of production and the logic of consumption (ibid.: 675–676). Their engagement with Rediker’s work is compelling, including the suggestion that ‘if anything, the coherence and impact of this social movement [the pirate Brotherhood] has probably been understated’. They are especially critical of Leeson’s image of pirates as exemplary capitalists, entrepreneurs, and experimenters in consensual democracy, which they argue subverts Rediker’s model to the cause of neoliberal economics.

In particular, they devote most attention to the contemporary socio-economic circumstances in which specific kinds of interpretations arise.² Focusing on historical moments when ‘contradictions and inequalities built into a political economy peak to the breaking point’ (Dawdy & Bonni 2012: 673), a key argument is that piracy is not only defined by situation and perspective, but also by its place in the minds of both adherents and opponents. Of particular importance is their highlighting of the fact that *pirates cannot work alone*, both literally and in the sense of operating without social context. In this light, they offer their own, more flexible definition of piracy as ‘a form of morally ambiguous property seizure committed by an organised group’ (ibid.: 675). I agree, and when combined with a sense of dubious political legitimacy, I would argue that this is of crucial applicability to the Viking Age.

In my previous work, I have drawn heavily on Rediker and Linebaugh’s models of piracy as a kind of deliberately constructed social world, that has interesting points of correspondence with the implications of current research on Viking armies. In my view, within the mobile fleets and land forces of the ninth century we can see a similar loyalty to community above any concept of ‘state’; to a degree, a levelling of hierarchy in the form of *lið*-based authority; and a similar reorganisation of social relations in the ‘government of the ship’, the latter becoming almost a political space (Price 2014; 2016). A special sense of identity is also detectible, a signalling of allegiance and choice through distinctive material culture, rituals, and other forms of expression. For the Viking armies, this may have included the manufacture of group-specific weapon elements, such as shield bosses, as well as colour symbolism on clothing, and even a kind of creole language used within their communities (Downham 2009; 2011; Price 2014: 59–63; 2016: 167–169).

These groups also show a similarly chronic instability to the Early Modern pirate fleets, and an inability to sustain prolonged internal conflict—Viking forces are frequently described as dividing and recombining in new

constellations. In particular, I have adopted the eighteenth-century concept of *hydrarchy* as a useful model for the armies' conglomerate organisation and operations, in which the Great Army and its Continental cousins emerge as migratory, predatory pirate polities whose existence was an end in itself (Linebaugh & Rediker 2000; Price 2014; 2016; 2020: ch.12). Continuously evolving and changing as members of the armies came and went, they were independent of the fledgling states of Scandinavia, but nonetheless almost always implicated in events that unfolded around them. This idea of life in a 'Viking' army as a conscious socio-political alternative is at the heart of the model I have put forward, and in recent years the concept of hydrarchs in particular has been taken up by others (e.g. Coolijmans 2020).

Taken together, these various perspectives on re-evaluating the Viking armies of the ninth century have generated a radical, multi-vocal re-imagining of what they were, how they were organised, and how these in turn informed the nature of their activities. However, and specifically in the context of the present volume, another question also arises: in the light of the groups that built and used them, how should we interpret the 'winter camps' that have so far formed the armies' primary archaeological trace? Here again we may turn to analogies with pirate polities from later centuries, and the concept of utopian communities.

Utopia: between what ought to be and what is

The first explicit formulation of the utopian concept under that name was Thomas More's famous book, published in 1516. The term is taken from the Greek, meaning 'No Place', but with a shift from a generalising sense of a non-existent community to one with norms superior to those of other, contemporary societies. More's work had several Antique inspirations, most obviously Plato's *Republic* (2012 [c.375 BCE]) but also others that located their ideal communities specifically on islands (examples that have survived only in fragments include the rational paradise of Panchaea in Euhemerus' *Sacred History* from c.300 BCE, and Iambulus' *Islands of the Sun* from c. 165–50 BCE; Winston 1976). Closer to More's time, though perhaps farther from his world-view, was Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1999 [1405]), now upheld as one of the earliest works of women's literature and depicting an allegorical utopian community built of noble female histories.

Philosophical meditations on utopian communities formed a genre that was particularly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³ Often insular on the Antique pattern, they were frequently conceived as Republics or Commonwealths, but there were other formats too (see Claeys & Sargent 1999; Claeys 2020 for the following examples). Around 1602, the Italian utopian Tommaso Campanella published his *Civitas Solis* ('The City of the Sun') in his own language, with several other editions following in subsequent decades. Instead of an island, here the utopian vision is a city with seven circuits



Figure 14.1 Woodcut map of Utopia from the first edition of Thomas More's book, printed by Dirk Martens in 1516.

Source: Image: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in the public domain.

of walls, situated in an ideal climate. All professions and occupations are held to be of equal value, in the eyes of a supposedly benevolent theocratic monarchy, and servitude of any kind is banned. However, power is completely androcentric, and women and children are regarded as goods to be held in common. Joseph Hall's *Mundus alter et idem* ('An Old World and a New') from c. 1605 presented a satire of Utopia as four new-found lands in the South Seas, each populated by a different variety of reprobate. Hall was a bishop and an almost professional controversialist, and his book was written for private circulation, though by 1643 it had been reprinted with other utopian works and its authorship was widely known. After More's work, probably the best-known utopian book was Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, which appeared posthumously in 1626 (More et al. 1999: 149–186). Again focusing on an island, Bensalem, vaguely located in the Pacific west of Peru, this presents an ideal Christian community living in enlightened harmony, with an emphasis on education (there is a state-run university) and analytical science as a path to the future. Chastity and piety are key virtues, and Bensalem's officials work without salary.

It is interesting that the single most important quality of More's *Utopia* is the abolition of private property, and the institution of the commons—an

implicit critique of the economic motor underlying all Western societies. A century after his time, these ideas were the currency of radical thought in the English revolution of the mid-seventeenth century (e.g. Hill 1975). At stake were not only conflicting understandings of democracy and equity, but also the social frameworks of sexual and religious freedom, a debate expressed in an effusion of complexly dissenting ideas and, ultimately, manifested in civil war. The latest and one of the most influential utopian works of this time was a topical bestseller, Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668; More et al. 1999: 187–212). An arcadian, polyamorous fantasy that descends into a kind of dystopia, the book can be read as an attempted exoneration of European racism and colonial brutality. This was one of several such works that were clearly inspired by European intellectuals' vision of the American colonies, and what they saw as their blank-slate potential for the institution of ideal communities. The utter disregard for indigenous peoples (and, indeed, the European disenfranchised such as women) is obvious. However, these same texts also hold a potential for a different reading from below, as unintended inspiration for resistance.

An overriding concern for the nature of a balanced society can be seen in almost all these works, though played out in very different ways, especially relating to social hierarchy and the equitable division of labour. There is a sense in which many of the literary utopias of the seventeenth century in particular interrogated the unspoken anxieties of European colonial ambitions, and it is not hard to see a connection here with the pirates of the so-called Golden Age in their interpretive incarnation as social bandits (a link made directly by Rediker in 1997). But to what degree was this a matter of metaphor and retrospective historical analysis, or alternatively, a connection really made at the time? In considering these questions, we can not only illuminate the nature of postulated 'pirate utopias' of the Golden Age, but also consider whether these concepts can be perceived more than half a millennium earlier in the mobile polities of the Viking Age.

Pirate utopias and 'impossible brevity'

The notion of pirate utopias as a genuine entity derives from the writings of the 'ontological anarchist' Peter Lamborn Wilson (1995), also publishing as Hakim Bey (1991). Inspired by the 'impossible brevity' of 1960s counter-culture communes, he began to explore what he saw as the idealised communities of historical pirates as conferring a kind of retrospective legitimacy to the notion of mobile, anti-Establishment tribes in the present. In particular, Wilson coined the concept of the 'Temporary Autonomous Zone', or TAZ, conceptualised as a temporary space (such as a pirate base) that eludes formal structures of control, created as an intentional socio-political tactic, based on non-hierarchical social relations. The TAZ exists 'between the cracks' of existing state processes, and impermanence is inherent in its design.

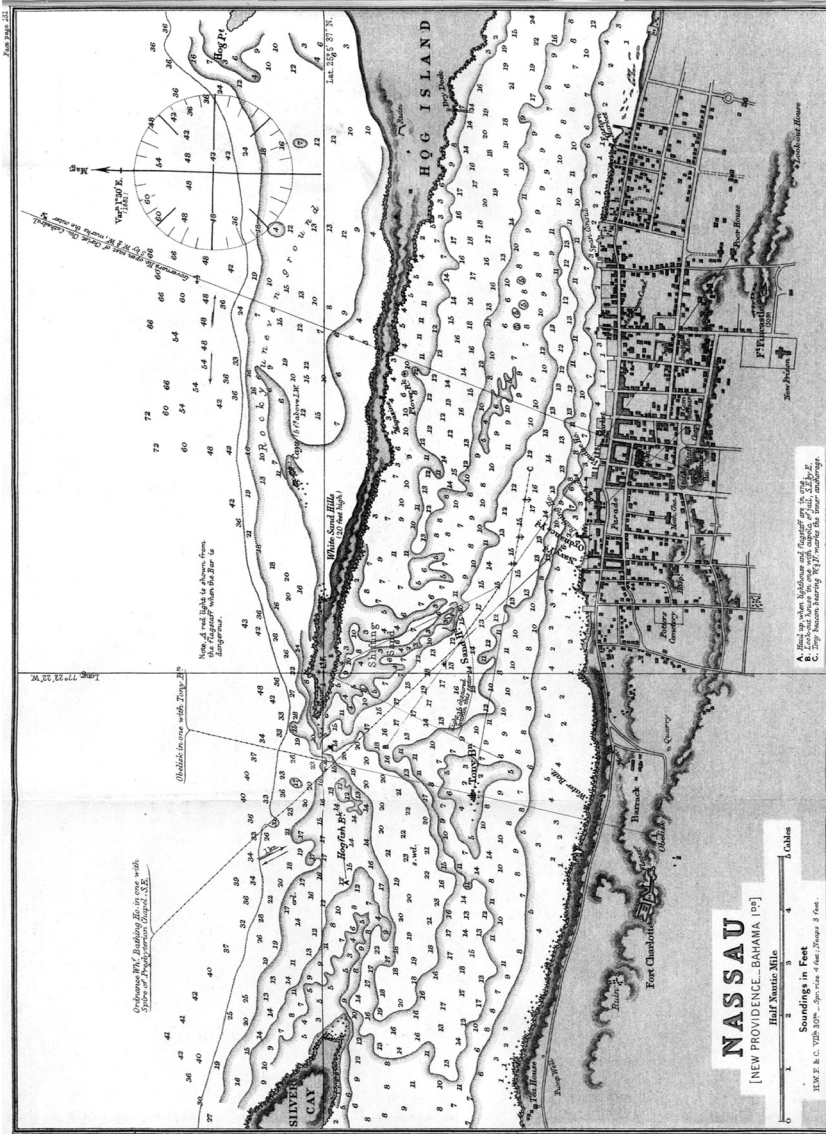
Around much of this thinking one can perceive a distinct 'folkloric aura of bandit fantasies' (Dawdy & Bonni 2012: 694), rooted firmly in the culture of

anarchist collectives from which it emerged.⁴ Mainstream historians received Wilson's ideas with nervous caution, or simply ignored them, but several serious scholars of radical social movements were more welcoming. Both Rediker and Linebaugh, who had introduced the new study of hydrarchies, and likewise Christopher Hill, the celebrated Marxist historian of English radicalism, found much of interest in the concept of pirate utopias. A key factor was the character of historically attested pirate strongholds.

Wilson based much of his argument on what even he admitted was the rather dubious foundation of Libertatia or Libertalia. Mentioned only in the second, expanded edition of Johnson's *History of the Pyrates* from 1726 and claimed to be located around Madagascar, it is now generally agreed to be fictitious, or at least a creative amalgamation of several separate pirate enclaves on the island. What sets it apart is that Johnson's text included a uniquely explicit rationale for such a place, in line with utopian thinking. However, beyond the imaginative fog of Libertatia, there were other, genuinely attested safe havens that could be seen in a similar light.

We can briefly mention in this context the bases established by the Brethren of the Coast at Tortuga and Port Royal in the 1640s–1670s (e.g. Hamilton 2006), and also comparable examples from the Far East, including the strongholds of the *wako* of the China Seas, the Orang Laut of Melaka, and the maritime samurai of Japan's Inland Sea (for references, see Price 2016: 156). All of these were conscious attempts to create secure platforms for pirate settlement, with multi-faceted economic foundations that included maritime robbery with violence, but also extensive (albeit uneasy) interactions with the broader world. However, the degree to which radical socio-political experiments were combined with profit-driven self-interest is debatable at best. In terms of literary utopian inspiration, some pirate captains were clearly 'gentlemen' of a sort, with considerable education and used to material refinement (e.g. Preston & Preston 2004; Killock & Meddens 2008). However, while the social value of science and education may have been obvious to some of them, this was probably rather less the case for their crews.

One case study, though, is different—the most advanced, complex, and well-documented example of such a base: the Republic of Pirates that intermittently flourished at New Providence (Nassau) in the Bahamas from 1706–1718. In recent years, not least in popular culture, the utopian qualities of this 'created pirate space' have been exaggerated in media such as streaming dramas and games (Jones 2018; Dirksen 2019: 36–44). These plays on piracy as a marginalised identity are different to the contemporary Jack Sparrow archetypes of Hollywood, but are a nostalgic distortion nonetheless, a different version of the outlaw romantic (cf. Mackie 2005, highlighting the subtle tensions between pirates seen as subculture or counterculture). This aside, there was a reality to the Nassau enclave, in the adoption of an actual pirate code of basic democracy⁵ with almost tragically optimistic aspirations to an effective republic of liberty (Woodard 2007).



The Nassau pirates seem to have put a form of utopian concepts into actual practice, or tried to, but with the addition of violence as the means to those ends. Most particularly, this pirate utopia (and its approximate comparanda elsewhere) had targets, and came into being through predation upon the states whose ideals they subverted. Part of eighteenth-century piracy's political irritation for the European maritime powers lay precisely in its appropriation of ideas held by a supposedly better class of person, but activated in a way that they would never actually condone, and in fact actively feared (unless undertaken on their behalf, by proxy).

The short-lived nature of all these enclaves (and of pirate operations—see Price 2016: 153–155) can be an obstacle to their understanding. Utopian thinking, and Wilson's TAZ concept, tend to be largely dismissed either as a component of the Marxist reading of pirates as would-be revolutionaries, or as another component of anarchist dreams. However, this is to confuse the obvious longer-term failure of any such aspirations in the past, and the illusory vision of their success in the present, with a denial that they were ever there at all. In this light, we can turn finally to the Viking camps themselves.

Viking camps and aspirational polities

Given the archaeological revelations as to the scale and composition of ninth-century Viking forces, and the new details of the camps, it is not hard to see the latter in a similar light to the later pirate bases, as environments suited to the political aspirations of their creators and inhabitants. However, a number of conceptual and chronological comparative challenges clearly present themselves. First, it is suggested that the paradigms of social movement and resistance developed for understanding the pirate communities of the seventeenth century and after can be retrospectively applied some 800 years and more back into the past; this is unlikely to be a smooth or easy process. For Wilson's pirate utopias, a concept that is (dependent on one's viewpoint) little more than a late twentieth-century anarchist fantasy—or is at best applicable to only a handful of Golden Age maritime bases—is repurposed as something that actually could have been attempted some 1,100 years previous. In all of this, there is no question of any point-for-point transference or checklist of comparisons, but rather a matter of tools to think with, and frameworks to employ. The 'Vikings' of the 'armies' were not pirates of the Golden Age or members of a sixties commune, but active agents in an utterly different world, one that they knew themselves to share with a myriad of gods and other beings besides which the wildest of acid trips would pale. They were also political operators of experience and repute, in control of a dispersed but focused war machine that could topple kingdoms.

It is clear that the camps in themselves neither support nor refute ideas about planned migration, and they also set up an intriguing dichotomy between the notion of shipborne forces and land-based armies. As Olsson (2022) has suggested, it may be worth a deeper application of Actor-Network

theory to the nodes of fleets and their bases. A key aspect of the camps, currently being pursued by several contributors to this volume, is the likelihood that they were much more than simply places for a large body of individuals to spend the cold season in semi-hostile territory. A degree of interaction with their ‘hinterlands’ has already been motioned above, and from the work at Torksey in particular, there is already a sense in which the army ‘camps’ almost resemble peripatetic proto-towns (e.g. Williams 2013, 2020: 99–102; Harrison 2013). So much so, in fact, that the excavators of Torksey have suggested that residence in these enclosures ‘may have given many of the members of the Viking armies their first experience of urban living’ (Hadley & Richards 2021: 113). In addition, as several participants at the Santiago seminar behind this volume pointed out, occupied towns themselves could also serve as ‘camps’ of a sort, and none of these temporary settlements were confined to the winter months.

These mercantile and manufacturing functions, perhaps trade-with-a-sword, also provide a connection between the Temporary Autonomous Zone and a different kind of enclave, what Sven Kalmring (2016) has called the Special Economic Zone. The term was initially coined with particular reference to Hedeby, deconstructing the tired urbanism debate in early medieval studies to focus on places differentiated from their surroundings through a varied repertoire of special measures. While Kalmring writes primarily of actual towns, his criteria of basic defence, formal jurisdiction and a rules-based economy functions just as well for the camps—not least in relation to their role as manifestations of particular constructs of power. If we briefly return to our later parallels, one thinks of Hong Kong, Singapore, and other imperial free-trade ports of the east as comparable examples. Like them, the winter camps maintained precise material and economic links with the furthest-flung of trade routes, far beyond their location in western Europe.

It is important to see the camps, and the armies, as manifestations of choice, personal as well as economic. They presented sets of social options in a changing world, and perhaps stepping stones to a different future. Life within them could have longer-term consequences too, for example on the upbringing of children in the camps. Several scholars have considered young lives in the context of migratory communities, and also the militaristic ethos that permeated the armies (e.g. Hadley 2016; Raffield 2019). Similarly, the presence of women in the army camps has prompted questions as to whether any of them were combatants.⁶

There seems little doubt that the camps were unusual places, built for purpose by mobile, flexible, and modular polities with complex motives. As deliberately impermanent foundations, they demanded quite specific systems of control, while simultaneously precluding others. They were contingent settlements, occupying transitional and expedient spaces—though they were not necessarily lawless for that. A TAZ can be a repeatable experiment, and there is no reason this could not take a peripatetic (and perhaps dispersed) form.

Were the camps then ‘pirate utopias’? The term relies on too many assumptions and over-stretched analogies to be entirely satisfactory, but there does seem to have been a sense in which they were expressions of optimistic exceptionalism (in their own ambitions at least), with a degree of utopian thinking in their design. At the same time, the armies and their camps were pragmatic entities, acting and feeding a versatile set of approaches to plunder, land-taking, and eventual settlement.

Ultimately, perhaps the best way to see the combination of the armies and their enclaves is as *aspirational polities in landscapes of movement and predation*. They were temporary occupations of enormous size and impact, made by people on a violent socio-political journey—though whether they arrived at their intended destination is another matter.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Curiously, just as I and others have used the so-called ‘Golden Age’ pirates as analogies for Viking predatory forces, the latter have in turn been employed as comparisons for their counterparts in the Roman era (Pearson 2006) and even the Bronze Age (Kristiansen 2016).
- 2 Much of Dawdy and Bonni’s paper in fact focuses on the ideological links that they see between historical piracy and the analogies used today by copyright opponents and the self-proclaimed heroes of the free internet (see also Dawdy 2011); I disagree, in that I do not see self-image alone warranting comparison with, say, the lethal maritime carnage of the eighteenth century. This aspect of their work is not considered further here.
- 3 Utopian novels continued to be published well into the nineteenth century, sometimes with connections to actual communities established within the tradition of utopian socialism (see Kozakevich 2017), but these will not be considered here as they did not influence the pirates of the Golden Age.

- 4 More recently, the term has entered general currency as a medium for speculative fiction, such as Bruce Sterling's re-imagining of a Futurist enclave on the Adriatic in the wake of the First World War (Sterling 2016).
- 5 The most extensive example of such a document is the *Articles* of Bartholomew Roberts, 'Black Bart' (1682–1722), who operated in the Caribbean just after the fall of the Pirate Republic; his code is reproduced in Captain Johnson's *History* (1998: 180–181) and makes for illuminating reading.
- 6 In 2016–2018 there was a distracting, predominantly online and largely spurious 'debate' about the alleged activities of female warriors in the armies, based initially on a misreading of Shane McLeod's 2011 paper in which he definitely did *not* claim that these forces were packed with military women. This expanded with the studies of the 'female warrior' burial Bj.581 from Birka (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Price et al. 2019), whose authors similarly never suggested that such individuals were particularly numerous. I suggest that we must move on from a discussion that was never warranted in the first place (making a distinction here between specific discussions of female warriors in the Viking armies and raiding groups; the rather different and necessary debate on the reading of sex, gender, and identity from funerary remains; and the varying definitions of warriorhood). Do I believe that female warriors existed in the Viking Age? Yes. Do I believe they were present in large numbers, or that they played a major role in the armies? No—and others agree (e.g. Friðriksdóttir 2020: 64).

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