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Gravestone of Samuel Palache (c. 1550–1616), Portuguese cemetery Ouderkerk aan de Amstel. © L. Alvares Vega, *The Beth Haim van Ouderkerk*, Ouderkerk 2004, p. 27

Desperados at Sea

by Michael Studemund-Halévy

Abstract

Pirates are fortune-seeking fighters at sea. Their exploits fire the imaginations of their victims and admirers, drawing a veil over individuals who rarely bear a real name and pursue their adventurous occupations as buccaneers, filibusters, freebooters, privateers, pirates, or corsairs. Piracy, corsairing, and contraband trade were epidemic among the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Vikings, the Spaniards and the Ottomans, the Muslims, and the Christians. And the Jews.

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is history.
(Derek Walcott, *The Sea is History*, 1979)¹

1 What careers they were!

At the Jewish cemetery of Willemstadt in Curaçao, at least five gravestones bear depictions of ships, indicating that those buried there had a maritime profession of some kind.² Dramatically staged skulls and skeletons with black

¹ Carmen Birkle and Nicole Waller, eds., *'The Sea is History': Exploring the Atlantic* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006).

² Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, vol. 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1970), 230–233 [fig. 14]; Michael Studemund-Halévy, “The Persistence of Images: Reproductive Success in the History of Sephardi Sepulchral Art,” in *The Dutch Intersection*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), 123–147; Michael Studemund-Halévy, “More than Images: The Iconography of Sefardi Gravestones in the Jewish Cemetery, Bridgetown, Barbados,” in *A Sefardic Pepper-Pot in the Caribbean*, ed. Michael Studemund-Halévy (Barcelona: Tirocinio, 2016), 429–488; Natalie Zeldin, *Skulls, Shields, and Narratives: Using sepulchral imagery in Beth Chaim Cemetery to understand the degrees of acculturation in the Portuguese Sephardic community in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century* (unpublished manuscript).

eye sockets and grinning rows of teeth, with or without crossed bones, some accompanied by an hourglass adorn the gravestones of New Christians expelled from Spain and Portugal, who, having been forcibly baptized, found their way back to Judaism in the Old and New Worlds. Whether they were pirates, however, remains uncertain. Skulls, crossbones, and hourglasses are signs for eternity, allegorical *memento mori* symbols, but not hidden references to pirates, adventurers, outcasts, or social rebels, as pirate-loving experts keep trying to make us believe.³ They might have been captains or sailors, owners of a ship or shipping company, acting on their own account or on behalf of others. Artful epitaphs for rabbis, cantors, Torah scribes, community elders, and merchants tell of messianic hopes, of longing for redemption, and of the deceptions and the dis-deceptions of the vain world – of the desperados at sea, the pirates or buccaneers, and their daring adventures, they tell nothing. *Livros da Nação* (Minute books of the congregation) provide information on the ransom of Jews captured in the slave markets of Muslim barbarians in Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli;⁴ files of the Admiralty and notariats tell of routes and resources, captured cargo and slave ships,⁵ their Jewish owners, and the pinch.⁶ Literary accounts by Jewish authors of shipwreck, robbery at sea, and forcible conversion, however, are rare.⁷ Sefardic merchants in Curaçao give their merchant or privateer ships biblical or messianic names such as *Zion*,

³ Edward Kritzer, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean. How a Generation of Swashbuckling Jews Carved out an Empire in the New World in Their Quest for Treasures, Religious Freedom – and Revenge* (New York, NY: Anchor, 2008); cf. Studemund-Halévy, “The Persistence of Images,” 123–147; Studemund-Halévy, “More than Images,” 429–488.

⁴ In the 16th and 17th centuries, Jewish brotherhoods emerge for the rescue of captives who had fallen into the hands of freebooters, cf. Emmanuel and Emmanuel, vol. 1, 223–225; Eliezer Bashan, *Captivity and Ransom in Mediterranean Jewish Society, 1391–1830* (Ph.D. diss., Bar Ilan University, 1980; Hebrew); Daniel Hershenzon, *The Captive Sea: Slavery, Communication, and Commerce in Early Modern Spain and the Mediterranean* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 41–67; Stanley Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: A Testamentary History of a Diaspora in Transition* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2020), 52.

⁵ Seymour Drescher, “Jews, and New Christians in the Atlantic Slave Trade,” in *Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450–1800*, eds. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2001), 439–470.

⁶ *Prize Papers* – a research project of the University of Oldenburg promises new insights into life in the colonies, life on the ship as well as maritime trade and privateer wars.

⁷ Cf., for example, the study by Hispanist Harm den Boer, “¿Católico Zárate, judío Muley? Nuevo acercamiento a Las misas de San Vicente Ferrer,” in *Antonio Enríquez Gómez: Un poeta entre Santos y Judaizantes*, eds. J. Ignacio Díez and Carsten Wilke (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2015), 15–34.

Queen Esther, *Samuel the Prophet*, or *Shield of Abraham* (most of the early Jewish congregations used names such as *Nidhe Israel* [Scattered of Israel] or *Shearith Israel* [the Remnant of Israel]), even though this put them at risk of being attacked by the Spanish ‘Jewish’ ships.

Pirates and privateers, a kind of state-sponsored pirates and enemies of all mankind (*hostis humani generis*),⁸ have existed since the dawn of history, although their number is probably small and their names, with a few exceptions, are unknown.⁹ Piracy, corsairing and contraband trade were epidemic among all seafaring nations and occurred in every region, likewise among the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Vikings, the Spaniards and the Ottomans, the English and the French, the Muslims and the Christians. And the Jews.

Piracy (*πειρατέζ* in Greek) means an attempt to seek one’s fortune in a maritime enterprise, sea raiding, seaborne plunderers, or sea bandit, with (sometimes) religion as an excuse. Thus, pirates are fortune-seeking fighters at sea. Their exploits fire the imaginations of their victims and admirers, drawing a veil over individuals who rarely bear a real name and pursue their adventurous occupations as buccaneers, filibusters, freebooters, privateers, pirates, or corsairs. Pirates are shady minor historical figures whose biographies are difficult to document or reconstruct. Thus, a history of piracy can only be based on texts concerning pirates and piracy in explicit terms, and in terms used in the culture where the texts were written.¹⁰

⁸ Hugo Grotius, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*, 2013 [Paris 1625], relied on the Old and New Testament and on Aristotle and Cicero for a universal perspective.

⁹ A relatively small number of studies has been conducted on the maritime history of Jews; see Raphael Patai, *The Children of Noah. Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Samuel Tolkowsky, *They Took to the Sea* (New York, NY: Yoseloff, 1964); Ruthi Gertwagen and Avshalom Zemer, *Pirates: The Skull and Crossbones. Exhibition Catalogue* (Haifa: National Maritime Museum, 2002; Hebrew/English); Nadav Kashtan, ed., *Seafaring and the Jews* (London: Cass, 2001); Haim Finkel, *Jewish Pirates* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1984; Hebrew).

¹⁰ Merav Banai, “Piracy in the Ancient World,” in *Pirates: The Skull and Crossbones. Exhibition Catalogue*, eds. Ruthi Gertwagen and Avshalom Zemer (Haifa: National Maritime Museum, 2002; Hebrew/English); 250–240; Michael Studemund-Halévy, “Piraten,” in *Enzyklopädie Jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur. Im Auftrag der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig herausgegeben von Dan Diner* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2011–2017), vol. 4, 2013, 547–549; for ancient piracy, see Philip de Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

With the ever-present threat of piracy, the Mediterranean and the oceans became over the centuries an international space of injustice, a lawless space, or one over which claims of sovereignty proved difficult to enforce, counting, on the one hand, states, and, on the other, individuals operating on behalf of states and trading companies and on their own account.¹¹ Unlike the merchant profession, piracy that plagued shipping and sea transport is considered an accepted means of personal gain, and the profession of a pirate is questioned just as much as that of a hunter or fisherman.¹²

Piracy and privateering, for example, were considered by the *Ma'amad* (Sefardic Council of Elders) a dishonest dealing, a negative transition in the image of the Jewish congregations, placing the community at great loss and risk. Thus, the *Ma'amad* of the Portuguese Nation in Hamburg punished six members of the community with the *herem* (ban) for robbery of a plough, – on its way to Rouen, – to collect the amount of its insurance policy.¹³

That there were also important Jews among these minor historical figures is confirmed by historical testimonies, at least in the case of Sinan the Jew, Samuel Pal[l]ache, Benjamin Franks and El Pirata Moisés. There may well have been other Jewish fortune seekers at sea, but that falls (very often) into the realm of fantasy.

2 Antiquity – *S'fnot piratim*

The history of maritime trade has been accompanied since its beginnings by reports, mythical tales, legends, and unheard-of incidents, above all myths about desperados at sea. In the Greek mythology, Nauplius (Ναύπλιος, i.e. 'seafarer', in Greek), the son of Poseidon, was the first sailor and navigator and was also engaged in piracy and slave trading (in the Hellenistic period the main difference between piracy and warfare was the scale of activity). Many pirates were engaged in legalized sea robbery, like the Cilicians, Illyrians, and Athenians, who in their heyday rendered the Mediterranean, a hotbed of

¹¹ Evangelos P. Samios, *Die Piraterie als völkerrechtliches Delikt*, Ph.D. diss. (Greifswald: J. Abel, 1899).

¹² David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 88.

¹³ State Archive of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, Jüdische Gemeinden 993, *Livro da Nação*, vol. I, 380.

piracy, with more than a thousand ships plundering the shores as they passed and taking slaves wherever they could find them.

Early references to seaborne raiders with Jewish roots can be found already in antiquity. Much feared on the high sea as well as along the Mediterranean coast were the *s'finot piratim* (ספינות הפיראטים), the pirate ships. Graffiti of a single-row pirate galley with attackers at the bow carrying arrow, bow, and spear in pursuit of two merchant ships decorate the Greek-Roman style ceremonial tomb of Jason, erected in the time of the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaios (1st century BC.) in the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem. Numerous inscriptions assignable to this period record campaigns and sudden attacks by unidentified pirates carried out in various areas of the coastal cities on the Aegean and Ionian islands. The historians Flavius Josephus and Strabo also refer to early Jewish piracy and a stronghold of Jewish-Hasmonean pirates in Joppa (Jaffa).¹⁴

3 In the Mediterranean – Sinan, the Jew, and Samuel Pal[1]ache, servant to several masters

“Sinan, whose last name is Cœfut, a Jew from the city of Smyrna, a sea pirate possessed of an excellent mind and skill, especially in shipping” – this is how the French engraver and author Jean-Jacques Boissard describes the legendary pirate Sinan in his book *Leben und Contrafeiten der Türkischen und Persischen Sultanen*, published in 1596.¹⁵ In countless, mostly fanciful accounts, the renegade makes a career for himself as Sinan the Jew, Sinān Ra’is [Arabic for ‘sea

¹⁴ Patai, *The Children of Noah*, 43; Kashtan, *Seafaring and the Jews*; Tolkowsky, *They Took to the Sea*; Orit Rotgaizer and Sa’ar Nudel, “Piracy, and the Jews (2nd century BCE – 19th century CE),” in *Pirates: The Skull and Crossbones. Exhibition Catalogue*, eds. Ruthi Gertwagen and Avshalom Zemer (Haifa: National Maritime Museum, 2002; Hebrew/English), 216–222; Robert Stieglitz, “Hebrew Seafaring in then Biblical Period,” in *Seafaring and the Jews*, ed. Nadav Kashtan (London: Cass, 2001), 5–28; Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*; Studemund-Halévy, “Piraten”; Michael Studemund-Halévy, “Auf der Suche nach koscheren Piraten,” in *Rache. Geschichte und Phantasie*, eds. Max Czollek, Erik Riedel and Mirjam Wenzel (Munich: Hanser, 2022), 94–99.

¹⁵ Lives and portraits of Turkish and Persian sultans from / Ottoman times / to the current Sultan Mahomet II. Also containing historical descriptions / and true outlines of many other noteworthy heroes and heroines, all artfully reproduced using ancient metals, and initially offered to the Holy Roman Emperor Mt. Ferdinand from Constantinople: Originally written in Latin by the scholar H. I. I. Boissardo V. / and adorned with short poems / but now translated into German. Delicately engraved in copper and republished, cf. Diterich von Bry Leodien (Frankfurt: Kollitz, 1596), 267–273 [my translation].

captain’], *Sinão o Judeu*, *Çifut Sinan*, *Sinan Coëfv*t, etc.).¹⁶ The significance of his name ‘the Jew’, however, is obscure.

The pirate or corsair Sinan, born in Smyrna as a descendant of Spanish exiles (Sinan’s Jewish history is somewhat obscure), is one of a few Jewish and Christian renegades given the opportunity by the Ottoman rulers to ascend the political, social, and military ladder by serving as advisors, doctors, or finance ministers, or by pursuing a military career. Sinan made it to the rank of captain and commander of the Ottoman fleet, conducting extensive maritime operations against the Spaniards. In the naval battle of Preveza in 1538, the Ottoman admiral Khayr al-Din Barbarus and his principal lieutenant Sinan defeated the united imperial armada (Holy League) commanded by the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria and supported by Pope Paul III and the Republic of Venice. In 1550 Sinan became governor (*sanjak-bey*) of Algiers and grand admiral (*kapudan pasha*) of the Ottoman fleet. In May 1553, he plundered the coasts of Italy and Sicily and expelled the Genoese from the Corsican port cities of Bastia and Bonifacio. In a letter dated August 16, 1533, the English ambassador to Rome calls him a fearless Jew (*Judeum illum famosum pyratum*),¹⁷ while Protestant theologian Johann Jacob Schudt describes him in his 1734 book *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten* as a Jewish renegade “who has attained great honors among the Turks, just as apostate Christians are otherwise promoted to high dignities and honorary offices”.¹⁸ In 1556, Sinan is said to have fallen ill and to have died just days before a planned departure for a raiding mission to the coast of India.¹⁹ At the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, there was a corsair named Solomon Sakit (d. 1724), a Jew from Livorno who also supplied as double agent supplied information and misinformation to Turkey and Algiers about the Christian kingdoms. He is apparently the one referred to in a book published in 1750 about the Barbary

¹⁶ The Turks expressed their contempt towards the renegades through insulting epithets, such as *çifut*, for Jew.

¹⁷ *Sinan the Jew* is often confused with *Sinanüddin Yusuf Pasha*, an Ottoman admiral of the 16th century who died in Constantinople in 1553 and was buried in Üsküdar, or with *Sinanüddin Fakih Yusuf Pasha*, an Ottoman grand vizier of the 14th century. For more information on Sinan the Jew, cf. Tolkowsky, *They Took to the Sea*, 172–183.

¹⁸ Johann Jacob Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt and Leipzig: 1734), chapter 6, 55–56 [my translation].

¹⁹ Rotgaizer and Nudel, “Piracy and the Jews,” 220–221; Haim Zeev Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, vol. 2, 2nd revised edition (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 2.

pirates as having a monopoly over the ransoming of Christian captives in Algiers²⁰ – Jews captured by pirates could count on rescue by fellow Jews, the ransom was undertaken by the so-called slave banks. There are numerous cases in which the Jewish community boards in the Caribbean, as well as the Jewish communities of Bayonne, Amsterdam, and Hamburg, reported the redemption of Jewish captives of pirates in fulfillment of their halakhic obligation of *pidyon shevuyim* (redeeming captives or prisoners), a communal rather than an individual duty.²¹

In 1608, after the visit of a Dutch delegation to Morocco, Sultan Muley Zidan (Zaydan) appointed the wealthy, learned, polyglot and diplomatically experienced merchant Samuel Palache (Palacci, Palaggi, Pliaji, Falaji, Palazzo, de Palacios) as his envoy and commercial agent in The Hague and Amsterdam, with the express purpose of forging an alliance against Spain and the privateers in the Barbary States.²² Samuel Palache, son of a rabbi named Isaac, whose ancestors were said to come from Cordoba and are mentioned as rabbis since the 10th century, was charged with assembling a fleet of pirate ships in the United Provinces. He was a *judío de permiso* – that is, a privileged Jew – who acted as a commercial agent or diplomat on behalf of the sultan Muley Zidan, issued with a privateers' license to drive the Spanish off the Moroccan coast.²³ A talented linguist and wandering diplomat, Palache took orders from the Moroccan side, but did not want to get on the wrong side of the Spanish, either. He indicates his willingness to convert to Christianity if the Spanish

²⁰ Rotgaizer and Nudel, "Piracy and the Jews," 219.

²¹ In the 16th and 17th centuries, guilds or brotherhoods arose for "prisoner rescue" (mitzva of captives) who had fallen into the hands of privateers. Spain did not have such *cofradía* (religious brotherhoods) as in Italy (Livorno and Venice) or later in Amsterdam or Hamburg, see Emmanuel and Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, vol. 1, 223–225; Rotgaizer and Nudel, "Piracy and the Jews," 219; Bashan, *Captivity and Ransom*, 49, 66, and fn. 89.

²² Abraham I. Laredo, *Les noms des Juifs du Maroc* (Madrid: Hebraica Ediciones, 2008); Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, vol. 2, 212–218; Rotgaizer and Nudel, "Piracy and the Jews," 219; E. M. Koen, "Notarial records Relating to the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam up to 1639," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 11, no. 1 (1977): 81–96, here 95.

²³ A *judío de permiso* is a practicing Jew who, following the expulsion of 1492, is granted permission to reside in Spain on the condition that he or she wears a sign on the external clothing identifying its owner as a Jew.

were willing to accept him into their secret service. From then on, he maintained close ties with the Spanish court, providing it with secret information about Dutch Moroccan relations. At the same time, he passed information on the Spanish to the Dutch and the Moroccans. As a triple agent he worked both for and against three countries – Morocco, Holland, and Spain – and spent his entire life navigating between four religious worlds: the Jewish, the Muslim, the Catholic, and the Protestant. Raised amid Jewish traditions, Palache, as an ambassador and occasional pirate, attaches great importance to eating kosher food and regularly attending synagogue.²⁴ It thus comes as no surprise that when he arrived in Amsterdam, his luggage contained ritual objects such as a Torah scroll and religious books. They were initially taken to his townhouse, where the first services were held. Some years later they would be used in the second synagogue in Amsterdam, Neve Salom.

On December 24, 1610, the steward or *stadtholder* Maurice of Orange, the State's General, and Samuel Palache agree on an alliance aimed at providing mutual support and weakening Spain both politically and economically. In this treaty, the sultan and Maurice of Orange also grant their agent Samuel Palache the authority to go on privateer voyages and sell the looted goods along the Moroccan coast. The granting of these far-reaching privileges is the first alliance and trade agreement between a European and a non-Christian state.

Samuel Palache was successful not only as a diplomat for foreign masters but also as a privateer in his own cause. In 1614, on a return voyage from Asfi to Rotterdam, he seizes a Portuguese caravel and a Spanish ship off the Azores, leaves the crews behind on the Azorean island of Santa Maria and takes over the cargo. Not long after, he appropriates the cargo of the English sailing ship *Penelope*. Towards the end of 1614, when a heavy storm forces him to seek refuge in Plymouth, he is captured and jailed at the behest of Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, who served as the Spanish ambassador to England from 1613 to 1622 and again a few years afterwards. He claimed that Palache was a pirate who converted to Judaism. After paying a large ransom and with the help of bribes from English officials, Palache was able to return

²⁴ Mercedes García Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 85.

to Amsterdam.²⁵ The prize was then divided between him, the captain, and the crew. Shortly after the trial, Palache fell ill and died two years later, on February 4, 1616, in The Hague.²⁶

Samuel Palache, who succeeded in obtaining the right of settlement for the Jews in Amsterdam eight years earlier (though not for himself), found his final resting place in the Portuguese cemetery *Beth Haim* in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel near Amsterdam, where he was buried in the presence of Maurice of Orange and the assembly of the estates. The inscription on his gravestone reads:

This is the monument on the final resting place of the learned, pious, and prominent man who carried out his duties to God and his fellow men, of the honorable Haham Samuel Palache, of blessed memory who was called to the heavenly abode on Friday 17 Shevat of the year [5]376.²⁷

4 Were there Jewish pirates of the Caribbean? – El Pirata Moisés

Jewish desperados at sea can be located not only in antiquity and in the Mediterranean but since the 16th century especially in the Atlantic, which becomes an Iberian Catholic Atlantic for the colonial powers Spain and Portugal, a Protestant Atlantic for Holland and England, and an enterprising and itinerant Atlantic for the Portuguese Jews (*conversos*, *Neuchristen*, *ex-Marranos*) from Recife, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Livorno, and London, who became there in a significant minority. They used the lawless expanses of the seas for their dangerous but profitable business from the 16th to the 18th century. Sefardic Jews and *conversos* played a central role in the 16th and 17th centuries as pioneers, traders, and settlers in the progressive colonization of the Caribbean region, which was accompanied by the expansion of long-distance trade

²⁵ David Corcos-Abulafia, "Samuel Palache and his Trial in London," *Zion* 25, no. 2 (1960): 122–133 [Hebrew]; Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa*, vol. 2, 217; David Bensoussan, *Il Était Une Fois Le Maroc: Témoignages Du Passé Judéo-Marocain* (Paris: L'Universe, 2012), 101.

²⁶ For the gravestone of Samuel Palache (c. 1550–1616) at the Portuguese cemetery Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, cf. L. Alvares Vega, *Het Beth Haim van Ouderkerk* (Ouderkerk aan de Amstel: Pirola, 2005), 27.

²⁷ D. Henriques de Castro Mz., *Keur van grafsteenen op de Portugees-Israelitische begraafplaats te Ouderkerk aan de Amstel* (Ouderkerk aan de Amstel: Stichting tot Instandhouding en Onderhoud van Historische Joodse Begraafplaatsen in Nederland, 1999), 91–94; García-Arenal and Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds*, 100.

worldwide. After the rejections and persecutions in Europe, the New World at the same time enabled them to create a Jewish Atlantic and a Jewish World (*Mundo Judío*) with Jewish spaces and places.

However, Jewish and New Christian pirates first began to appear in large numbers at the start of colonial expansion in the 16th century, as sea trade was extended from the European inland seas along Spanish and Portuguese trade routes across the oceans. As the sea trade flourished, four regional centers of piracy emerged that would continue on into the 19th century: the Caribbean, the coast of West Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean. The pirates with letters of marque²⁸ included, particularly in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, numerous Jews and New Christians with anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic motives, whose ancestors, or who themselves, had left the Iberian Peninsula because of social discrimination and persecution by the Inquisition or forced baptism. They almost always did business under the protection of or under contract with Ottoman rulers, the English, the Dutch, or trade companies. Sefardic and Ashkenazi Jews had shared financial interests with privateers (smuggling) but were more victims of pirates than perpetrators in piracy, since Jewish merchants from Barbados, Jamaica, and Curaçao had to fear that pirates would attack their ships, take the crew to Spanish territories, or bring them before an Inquisition court – extemporaneous pirate-Inquisitions were a pervasive threat for Caribbean Jewish seafarers that prompted the carrying of affidavits regarding their birth as Jews, which they could then produce in case of capture by Spanish pirates. After all, the Spanish were targeting conversos, not Jews.²⁹ However, estimating the proportion of New Christians (*conversos*, *cristãos novos*) and old Christians (*cristãos velhos*) among the privateers is difficult, since only the narrow criteria of the Inquisition determined who was considered a new Christian and who was not. In addition to the many who died in privateering, on the gallows, or in shipwrecks, some of them died highly respected, were buried in Jewish cemeteries and with gravestones that portrayed the deceased as pious men.

²⁸ A 'letter of marque' was the official commission issued by a sovereign government authorizing attacks on merchant vessels with which that government was at war.

²⁹ Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, 50; Emmanuel and Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, vol. 1, 225–225.

Commissioned by Sefardic or New Christian merchants from Curaçao and St. Eustatius, but also in the service of England, France, and the Netherlands, the pirates and privateers fought on the “silver route”, the Spanish Main, to intercept silver destined for Spain from Mexico, Central as well as South America. The Sefardic merchants in Curaçao gave their merchant or privateer ships biblical names such as *Zion*, *Queen Esther*, *Samuel the Prophet*, or *Shield of Abraham*, even though this put them at risk of being attacked by the Spanish as ‘Jewish’ ships. On September 8, 1628, off the coast of Cuba, Dutch Vice Admiral Piet Pieterszoon Hein (1577–1629) of the Dutch West India Company (*Geoctroyeerde West-Indische Compagnie*) captured, with 25 ships, nine of the 12 ships of the legendary Spanish Silver Fleet (*flota de Indias*). His booty was worth twelve million guilders. Hein received support from the legendary *El Pirata Moisés*, veteran of Dutch campaigns in Brazil and an active, anti-Iberian privateer. Like many of his contemporary pirates, his life is shrouded in mystery. *El Pirata Moisés* was born as Antônio Vaz Henriquez/Vaes de Leon in 1602 to a New Christian family in Antequera or Amsterdam (his father was Abraham Cohen Henriques, alias Francisco Vaz/Vaez, born c. 1572 in Leon, who died in 1638 in Amsterdam and was buried in the *Beth Haim* at Ouderkerk).³⁰ In 1626, Moses Cohen Henriques retreated with his Jewish crew and his brother Abraham Cohen to Recife, where he is said to have officially returned to Judaism as Moisés Cohen Henriques and acquired the pirate island named after him, Antônio Vaz. On this island the colonial governor, Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, built the town of Mauritsstaad/Mauricia. Subsequently, he laid the groundwork for the Dutch invasion of Brazil. He traveled to Amsterdam and returned to Brazil in 1634 as commander of his ship *As três torres* and 17 additional ships, accompanied by many Jewish sailors, among them Josua Cohen (Antônio Mendes Peixoto) and Jacob Serra (Francisco Serra). In 1637 the Dutch conquered the entire northwestern region of Brazil within two weeks. In 1648 in Recife Cohen Henriques became a member of the Amsterdam-affiliated synagogal community *Kahal Zur Israel* and later of the *Kahal Kadosh Magen Abraham* community led by Rabbi Moses Rafael d’Aguilar on

³⁰ Isaac S. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao* (New York: Bloch, 1957), 272–278; children: Judith, Aron (d. 1653), David [d. 1679], Mozes, Jacob. Epitaph: Sepultura/de varao Abraham Cohen Henriques/que deu sua alma a seu criador/22 Elul 5398 [1. September 1638].

the island Antônio Vaz.³¹ Cohen Henriques was later accused in Madrid by the Portuguese Estevão de Aires da Fonseca of being responsible, along with Jews from Amsterdam, for the capture of Pernambuco, where he ended up living with the Dutch for a year with the Dutch for a year in that latter city.³²

After the reconquest of Recife by the Portuguese in 1654, many Jews and New Christians left the city and sailed for the Caribbean on the Dutch frigate *Valk* but fell into the hands of Spanish pirates, who took them to Jamaica. While the baptized Jews were immediately handed over to the court of the Inquisition in Cartagena despite diplomatic intervention by Holland, 23 practicing Jews were able to continue their journey. They all eventually arrived – or so the legend goes – in Nieuw Amsterdam (today's New York), where they were accepted only after the intervention of the Amsterdam rabbi Menasse ben Israel. There they founded the first (permanent) Jewish kahal community in North America.

Moses Cohen Henriques was not among the new settlers staying instead in the Caribbean. He became an advisor to the legendary English pirate Sir Henry Morgan (1635–1688) and a member of the Brothers of the Coast, a group of privateers guided by utopian ideas of liberty and equality that had a permanent and protected settlement on the small Caribbean island of Tortuga at the turn of the 16th to 17th century.³³ He is believed to have died in Barbados in 1663 or 1664.³⁴

5 Atlantic – Benjamin Franks, the reluctant pirate

Over the course of his turbulent life, the Danish jewel merchant Benjamin de Aaron Franks, born in Altona (1649?), a town near Hamburg that was held at that time by the Danes,³⁵ repeatedly encountered pirates and privateers.

³¹ Moisés Orfali, *Isaac Aboab da Fonseca. Jewish Leadership in the New World* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2021), 23–24, 92, 97, 181.

³² Consejo de la Inquisición, lib. 49, fol. 45; Orfali, 23–24.

³³ Ross Kenneth Urken, "The Forgotten Jewish Pirates of Jamaica," in *Smithonian Magazine*, July 7, 2016.

³⁴ Emmanuel, *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao*, 274. The place of his burial, however, has not been found to this day.

³⁵ For his biography, see Samuel Oppenheim, "Benjamin Franks, Merchant, and Captain Kidd, Pirate," *PAJHS* 31 (1928): 229–234; Fritz Heymann, "Der Mann, der mit Kapitän Kidd segelte," in *Der Chevalier von Geldern*, ed. Fritz Heymann (Amsterdam: Querido, 1937), 182–208; Matt Goldish, "The Strange Adventures of Benjamin Franks, an Ashkenazi Pioneer in the Ameri-

He traveled to the English colony of Jamaica and ran a lucrative diamond trade in the notorious pirates' nest of Port Royal. After losing his considerable fortune in the devastating Port Royal earthquake of June 1692, he spends a few years living in Barbados and St. Thomas before moving on to New York. He may have been the first Franks in America. Since his business was going badly, Franks decides to travel to Surat, India, then a well-known hub of the gemstone industry, to seek his fortune as a gem merchant once again. On September 6, 1696, he enlisted on the *Adventure Galley* as a starboard watchman.³⁶ As a passenger he had no right to demand a share of prize money but had nevertheless to wield a grappling hook and rifle in case of an attack. This three-master, launched only shortly before in Deptford, England, was under the command of the tyrannical captain William Kidd, the most famous pirate in American history, described by King William III as his "loyal and beloved friend."³⁷ Provided with official *letters of marque* and with the approval of the East Indian Company, Kidd was allowed to capture and plunder the ships and the cargoes of the Spanish and French buccaneers and to attack pirate ships on the trade routes of the Indian Ocean. However, the voyage was ill-starred. Members of the crew fell victim to cholera along the way, and on failing to locate any pirate ships to capture in the Red Sea in the hope of good bounty, the sailors staged a mutiny. After several incidents with English and Portuguese ships as well as with a ship belonging to the Muslim pilgrim fleet, Captain Kidd anchored in the Arabian Sea and in Karwar, near Goa, to take on water and food. Here he was discovered by agents of the East India Company, which held the shipping monopoly in the Indian Ocean and now considered Kidd a pirate to be hunted down rather than the pirate hunter he himself claimed to be. Benjamin Franks escaped from the ship by stealth and made his way to Bombay (today Mumbai). From there, on October 20, 1697, he reported to

cas,⁷ in *The Jews in the Caribbean*, ed. Jane Gerber (Oxford: Littman Library, 2014), 311–318; Mirvis, *The Jews of Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*, 50–51. No members of the Jewish Franks family are buried in the Jewish cemeteries in Hamburg, Altona, or Denmark, see Julius Margolinsky, *Jødiske dødsfald i Danmark, 1693–1976* (Copenhagen: Dansk Historik Håndbogsforlag, 1978); Michael Studemund-Halévy, *Biographisches Lexikon der Hamburger Sefarden* (Hamburg: Christians, 2000).

³⁶ Lincoln P. Paine, *Warships of the World to 1900* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 1.

³⁷ Robert C. Ritchie, *Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Richard Zacks, *The Pirate Hunter: The True Story of Captain Kidd* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2002).

London about his arduous and adventurous journey. In an affidavit, he described himself as a privateer and, being Jewish, swore on the Hebrew Bible that he had never participated in acts of piracy as a member of Kidd's crew ("this I do swear by the Old Testament to the best of my knowledge and what I have heard of the Seamen that all the above written is true").³⁸ It is this affidavit that later resulted in Kidd being sent to the gallows in an unfair trial held in London on May 23, 1701.³⁹

Even though Benjamin Franks, who traveled to England before the trial, was acquitted of the charge of piracy, he had at least one more involuntary encounter with pirates. When he set out from Bristol for Philadelphia after the trial in London, his ship, the *Pennsylvania Merchant*, was captured by the French pirate ship *La Paix* during the crossing, and Franks was taken prisoner. On April 29, 1700, the *La Paix*, under the command of the notorious French pirate Louis Guittar, was in turn attacked off the Virginian coast by the English battleship *Shoreham*. Franks was finally free and went on to New York, where he died sometime after 1716.

6 Epilogue

Pirates, romanticized or demonized in popular culture, lend themselves as a projection surface because they left no written sources, only captivity narratives; several of these reports went through many print runs or were translated into several major European languages. The mythologization of being a pirate is based primarily in the lack of first-person documents (the identity of a pirate is always in question) and the fact that most European narratives are derived from the seventeenth-century Dutch buccaneer Alexander Olivier Exquemelin's pirate book of 1678. Nevertheless, pirates – at least those who are assumed to be of Jewish origin – belonged to or were on the payroll of the ruling elite. They achieved fame and were admired by the people and ennobled by the crown like the pirate captain Henry Morgan, who set flame to the city of Panama in 1670.

³⁸ Deposition of Benjamin Franks October 20, 1697, in *Privateering and Piracy in the Colonial Period: Illustrative Documents*, ed. John Franklin Jameson (New York, 1970), 190–195; Heymann, "Der Mann, der mit Kapitän Kidd segelte," 191–197. Mark P. Donnelly and Daniel Diehl, *Pirates of Virginia: Plunder and High Adventure on the Old Dominion Coastline* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2014), 74–80.

³⁹ Ritchie, *Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates*; Zacks, *The Pirate Hunter*.

However, the longing for a kosher version of pirate captains, who made the oceans unsafe with a messianic sense of mission, living Jewish values, observing mitzvot and dietary laws, and who refrained from engaging in fighting during the Sabbath and the High Holidays, springs from a naive fantasy and serves solely to satisfy a need for sensational headlines and the longing for myths of a Jewish hero, factual and fictional. In some circumstances, so does a Hollywood-inspired Jewish pirate.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See, for example, the unspeakable, gimmicky book by Edward Kritzer, cf. Kritzer, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean*.