ANCIENT PIRATES AND FISHERMEN

This study has, thus far, focused upon the Graeco-Roman sailors aboard round-hulled, square-sailed merchant vessels, or the seamen and rowers who manned the narrow-hulled, fine-lined war-galleys. Over the course of this chapter, however, the emphasis will shift to the pirates and fishermen of the ancient world—two of the most important seafaring communities that regularly operated on the waters of the Mediterranean whose activities have important implications for our understanding of the ancient seafaring season. Ancient writers occasionally make passing references that help shed some light on the seasonality of pirate activity on the Mediterranean. Analysis of the vessels and tactics commonly employed by piratical groups offer additional insights into the capacity for these seaborne marauders to operate on the seas of winter. The following pages will also address how the migratory patterns of important fish stocks into and through the Mediterranean may have kept many fishermen on the seas well into the wintertime as they attempted to secure large catches, while the harvesting of purple-bearing shellfish may also have necessitated frequent trips on to the water throughout the winter months.

Directly related to the great variation in the abilities of galleys and merchantmen to cope with high winds and large waves is the effect of such adverse conditions upon the seasonal operations of pirates. It has already been seen that the hazards of nature—in the form of strong and variable winds, rough seas, overcast skies, mist and fog, together with a lack of daylight—presented a formidable threat to maritime activities on the wintertime Mediterranean. These dangers should not be underestimated and, whenever possible, they would surely have been avoided by ancient mariners. Nonetheless, the threat posed to shipping from human hazards—in the form of pirates, privateers, buccaneers, and other commerce raiders—would, for long periods of Graeco-Roman history, have provided a strong incentive for ship-owners and merchants to risk their vessels and cargoes on winter seas in an effort to avoid the dangers presented by these seaborne predators.¹

¹ While those engaged in acts of maritime violence are often separated into various
Mention of pirates mounting wintertime operations is certainly extremely rare in the ancient literature. Henry Ormerod, in his classic study, *Piracy in the Ancient World*, had little doubt that the reason behind the apparent cessation of pirate activities during the winter months was a direct result of the closure of the sea-lanes during this period of the year: with the seas closed to commercial shipping, ‘the pirate’s business was suspended and the opportunity taken to refit.’ If Ormerod is correct in this conclusion, then the seasonal nature of pirate activities was a simple matter of cause and effect; piracy was not a viable occupation throughout the winter months because the merchant vessels that were the targets of these seaborne marauders were themselves not usually at sea during the winter. However, it has already been seen that commercial shipping on the ancient Mediterranean appears often to have ignored the maritime calendars laid down by writers such as Hesiod and Vegetius, or legislated for by the emperor Gratian. As such, although the evidence is meagre, there are nonetheless strong indications in the ancient literature that voyages were regularly being made by merchant vessels throughout the winter months. Furthermore, if the general lack of pirate activity in the wintertime was simply the result of an absence of seaborne prey, then pirates could still have carried out raids against coastal settlements at this time of year, for ‘pirates lived by raiding the land more than by raiding ships at sea.’ Rather than the lack of opportunities for seizing booty during the wintertime, the absence of piracy from late autumn through until early spring is probably as much a reflection of the inability of the vessels and tactics employed by pirates operating on the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean to come to terms with the weather and sea conditions of winter. While round-hulled merchant vessels, reliant upon the brailed square sail for propulsion, were able to contend

categories such as privateers, corsairs or buccaneers, there was often a great deal of similarity in the types of vessels used and the tactics employed when intercepting and capturing seaborne prey. As such, for the purpose of examining the seasonality of their operations, unless otherwise stated, all will therefore be referred to under the general label of ‘pirates’. Indeed, the ancient literature also tends to lack any precision when describing acts of maritime violence (Gabbert 1986: 156; Ormerod 1924: 61), while for the sailors, merchants and passengers who were the victims of these various seaborne marauders, their fate, like that of the ship on which they were travelling and the cargo they were transporting, would often have been the same regardless of the exact definition applied to those who had captured their vessel. As such, piracy will be defined in its broadest sense as ‘the act of taking a ship on the high seas from the possession or control of those lawfully entitled to it’ (Kemp 1976: 650).

1 1924: 18. See also Pryor 1988: 87.