

Shiver Me Pages! A Book Review of

X Marks the Spot – *The Archaeology of Piracy*

Edited by Russel K. Skowronek
and Charles R. Ewen

University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL. 368 pp., illus., maps,
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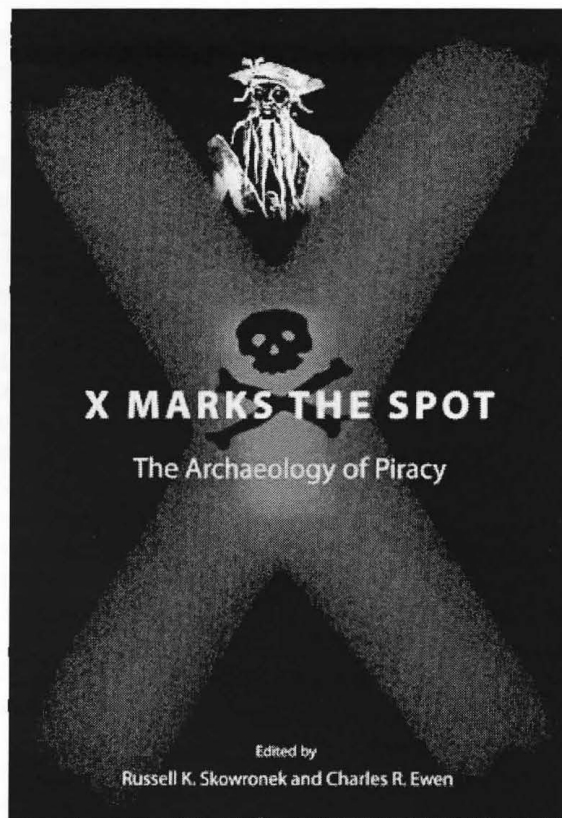
It's night-time. Picture a fetid and smoky dock-front tavern, two filthy scallywags sit at a table sodden with spilled grog. The men are filthy, rugged, dishevelled—which is not too far from the truth given that they had just returned from a day of archaeological fieldwork on the wind-whipped B.C. coast. One of the men, William Angelbeck, leans in, casts a furtive glance about the establishment and whispers hoarsely to the other. He inquires of this gentleman, me, your author, an “exchange for services” deal, a read, an interpretation of sorts. It seems that William has come across a document and needs someone, someone with my particular expertise, to review it, interpret it, and return to him my take on the subject matter. In exchange I will be allowed to keep this document and do with it what I might—for good or evil—the choice will be mine and mine alone. “So, that’s what’s in it for me?” I retorted, leaning back in my chair, casually casting my gaze about the room, filled with drunken louts and yokels.

I took his offer, such as it was—it had promise and intrigued me. Further, to be frank, my pockets were not spilling over with booty and I just may use this opportunity to my advantage. In true pirate form, I told him I would do it, but the review would be late, of poor quality, and likely plagiarized. I refuse to be held responsible for any inaccuracies, outright lies, spelling or this in mind, read-on, if you dare.

The *X Marks the Spot* is well put together and nicely mixes “serious” archaeology while considering the media sensationalized subject matter and keeping portions light, campy, and amusing. Going so far as to describe the editor’s idea for the book whilst dining at a pirate-themed restaurant in Savannah, Georgia—they even include a photo of the really cool skull coffee mugs. The book is a good mix of historical background and archaeological research, mainly contributed by U.S.-based academic professionals working around the globe. The mood is nicely set with an introduction by Charles R. Ewan. He quotes a certain well known, world-famous archaeologist (and adventurer):

Archaeology is the search for fact. Not truth. If it’s truth you’re interested in, Dr. Tyree’s philosophy class is right down the hall. So forget any ideas you’ve got about lost cities, exotic travel, and digging up the world. We do not follow maps to buried treasure and “X” never, ever marks the spot! – Indiana Jones

Reply the editors: “Sometimes it does” . . .



The introduction surmises the book as it delves into the role and image of piracy and pirates in pop culture moving from Peter Pan and Jack Sparrow to Captain Kidd and Christopher Condent, and finally provides a very cursory history into the archaeology of piracy. Setting down how the book and its contributing authors quell their wide-eyed childhood fascination and research (credibly and seriously).

One aspect of the book that I really enjoyed was that each chapter had a hidden gem or two, a little fact or statement telling me something that I had not known or putting forth an amusing little anecdote from pirate history. For instance, did you know that “buccaneer” came from the French “boucan”? This term refers to an outdoor grill that local squatters cooked and sold (stolen) meat to passing ships and occasionally turned to piracy as well. (“Would you like fries with that?” “No?” “Well maybe I’ll just run ya through with my cutlass and steal yer ship then!”)

The first part of the book is focussed upon “Pirate Lairs,” with four contributing articles on Port Royal, Jean Lafitte (who was really more of a fence than a felon and bore little resemblance to Yul Bryner), and two articles on Honduras and the logwood industry, including noted Pirate William Dampier. Having worked closely with many loggers in my time, it comes as little surprise to me that many individuals seasonally divided their time between harvesting logwood and plundering hapless mariners, soldiers, and settlers. The Port Royal article was predictably interesting written by noted Aggie, Donny Hamilton, who gave the key-note

presentation at last year's annual Underwater Archaeological Society conference. Port Royal and the archaeology there are fascinating and tell us much about the Pirate life and economy of the era. This site mirrors a shipwreck in that a significant portion of this thriving (and thieving) community was wiped out by natural disaster and now lies, well preserved, beneath the sea—a normal day in a pirate seaport frozen in time.

The articles about the Honduran logwood industry are also quite interesting and amusing. It was shocking to learn that these pirate and logging communities drank quite a bit; there were some very amusing quotes that came out of the historical literature involving rum-punch drunken “frolicsome” Pirates and “vile miscreants to whom it is sport to do mischief.” I must admit that I did find one of the two logwood articles overly analytical, heavy on the theory and psychological/political/anthropological interpretation. For example, the author feels that pirate society was very egalitarian, and their rebellious tendencies were an overt display of disdain towards the capitalist bourgeoisie (or something to that effect). Okay, so regular crew used fine china for any-old-meal—maybe they just needed a plate? Finally, the article on Jean Lafitte follows his travels through Texas and provides insight into the man who was then, and continues to be, both a hero and villain, depending on your source of information.

The second part is eight chapters on “Pirate Ships and their Prey,” and it was certainly the weightiest section and I found it extremely interesting. It gave the historical background on a variety of vessels, captains and crews and their exploits and cultural remains from many global locations, whether they be pirates or privateers. The authors described the significant pirate influence near Madagascar and the Indian Ocean, especially the infamous vessel the *Speaker*. I gained a tremendous respect for John Bowen, Christopher Cyer (aaarh there be yer gold!), and Captain Kidd. The chapter has some of those amusing little nuggets, including a short bit on Bowen's ship-wrecked crew and their run-in with local Madagascan settlers. The pirates wanted peace and fair-trade; the settlers wanted reward money. The settlers' lack of military training proved unfortunate in that they knew where to point the guns—just not how to load them. All-in-all, things turned out best for all and little blood-shed ensued.

Christopher Hamilton's chapter on the *Whydah* pointed out the inequities of the “Golden Age's” 16th to 18th century tax system by simply showing that “crime pays.” Honest merchants who safely returned to their homeland with their cargo complete and intact were taxed much more than a privateer returning to their crown a vessel or cargo of ill-gotten gain. It was never insinuated or suggested, but lucrative (and fair) for merchant vessels from opposing countries to simply meet at sea and switch ships! Moreover Hamilton did great work on the *Whydah* site and did some excellent interpretation of site formation processes.

Of course, no pirate studies would be complete without a chapter (in this case two) written on Blackbeard's vessel *Queen Anne's Revenge*. (Why, oh, why can't we name our ferries like this?!) Both authors worked on the site and give compelling arguments and a plethora of evidence garnered under exceedingly difficult excavation conditions. One author, Mark Wilde-Ramsing, insists the site is Blackbeard's ship; the other, Wayne R. Lusardi, is certain that is not the case and calls the vessel the *Beaufort Inlet Wreck*. Both articles are so well argued and the science so

well done—yet one of them must be wrong. I wonder if either of these guys have suggested a wager?

I found that I became very squeamish reading the article by Lusardi. He shows one of the recovered artifacts: a surgeon's pewter urethral syringe, used to inject mercury in the treatment of venereal disease. Eeeesh, the diameter of the needle-bore looked huge, I squirm uncomfortably as I write this. Last, within the “Ships and Prey” part, is a good article on piracy along the Mississippi River and a study of the wreck sites, hide-outs, and trails used by notorious outlaws who existed beyond Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. Following that is an article on the effect that Piracy and (essentially warfare) had on the Caribbean landscape, considering the numerous forts and castillos built to protect ports and settlements from raids by foreign navies and privateers. The article also wrestles with the difficulty (elaborated much more in the concluding Part 3) of identifying Pirate sites and cultural materials from any other maritime site.

The final part is entitled “Pirates in Fact and Fiction.” The authors present a terrific summary to the chapters presented. They point out the aforementioned difficulty in interpreting pirate sites from other site types of the era. I guess all pirates don't carry a “Cursed Aztec Gold” coin in their pocket or purse. This nicely segues into another point within the introduction and conclusion in that much of our interpretation of the past comes from our view of the present, whether it be political, economical, technological, or simply looking at pirate fashions. Our interpretations of our ancestors have changed and will continue to change.

I really enjoyed the book. It was put together well, with a depth of supporting data and analysis, yet the inherent adolescent thrill that inevitably arises when discussing pirates is acknowledged and embraced. You can get some real information out of this collection and still have a good time. I figure I'll give *X Marks the Spot* another read—right after I hoist the Jolly Roger up the main and set a course for plunder!

Rob Field is a consulting archaeologist and has been working with Arcas for about fifteen years. He has been involved in archaeology below the waves for twenty (or so) years with numerous projects under his weight belt, including digging inundated middens at Montague Harbour, looking under the Arctic ice for Sir John Franklin's *Erebus* and *Terror*, and diving the deep, dark, and dangerous *Empress of Ireland* with Pro-Com divers. He is a long-time member of the ASBC and UASBC ... but has realised that both membership dues are waaaay past due and has no excuse beyond simple procrastination. He enjoys books, movies, and dressing up as a pirate—and has been known to drink rum and commit the occasional act of piracy himself.

