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Pirates of the Caribbean

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Exquemelin Marks the Spot: The Ambiguities of Piracy

The term "pirate" brings to mind a number of images— swashbuckling rogues sporting parrots on their shoulders, dusty treasure maps, chests filled with gold. We think of the infamous Blackbeard, the courageous Anne Bonny, and the notorious Captain Morgan, but rarely do we reflect on where these preconceived notions, both true and false, originate. One of the most influential sources we have on Pirates of the Golden Age is *The Buccaneers of America*, written by Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin. The facts, uncertainties, and misconceptions surrounding Exquemelin's life and work serve as a unique lens for analyzing the ambiguities surrounding the study of piracy.

Little is known about Exquemelin's early life. In fact, debates regarding his identity have been only recently resolved— many early pirate scholars believed that "Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin" (later Anglicized as John Esquemeling, further adding to the confusion) was a pen name for the Dutch novelist Hendrik Smeeks (Carse 1965:252), but in 1934, "new research put this ill-founded theory to bed" (Leeson 2009:208). According to the original French edition of *The Buccaneers of America*, Exquemelin was born in 1645 (Haring 1910:277), but there is still considerable uncertainty regarding his birthplace; scholars including Robert Carse claim that Exquemelin was Flemish, while others assert that he was Dutch (Haring 1910:70), and still others believe that he hailed from Harfleur (Gibson 2014:72). However, it is generally agreed upon that Exquemelin arrived in Tortuga in 1666 as an *engagé*, or an indentured servant. After

several years working under a cruel master, he lived with the buccaneers as a barber-surgeon from 1668 to 1674 and took part in several major raids, including Henry Morgan's 1671 sack of Portobello (Haring 1910:277). He reportedly died after 1707 (Haring 1910:277).

This ambiguity regarding Exquemelin's background is hardly uncommon among buccaneers, privateers, and pirates. Even Blackbeard, widely regarded as piracy's most famous icon, has remarkably mysterious origins— his name has appeared as Edward Teach, Edward Thatch, and Edward Drummond, and he was most likely born before 1690 ("Blackbeard: Pirate Terror at Sea"). Similarly, Henry Avery is known by multiple names, including John Avery and Long Ben (Cordingly 2013:21). That Exquemelin's past is still so unclear despite his status as a published author demonstrates the difficulty in obtaining information on notable pirates, and it is one manner of revealing the difficulties associated with pirate scholarship.

However, Exquemelin did provide the public with a wealth of information in *The Buccaneers of America*, written in 1674 upon his return to Europe. The book was translated into a plethora of languages, and the English version was so popular upon its release that a second edition was published within three months (Haring 1910:279). It contains a combination of first-person accounts of life among the buccaneers and narratives of the exploits of well-known pirates, including Henry Morgan and l'Olonnais.

Exquemelin's personal reflections on his time on Tortuga have proved remarkably reliable, providing us with much of what we now know about the buccaneers (Latimer 2009:71). The descriptions provided by Exquemelin fit with those of DuTetre and Labat, French priests who also spent time among the buccaneers (Little 2007:40), and this correlation serves to verify Exquemelin's anecdotes; as C. H. Haring notes, his accounts are "closely corroborated by official narratives" (Haring 1910:278). From his testimony, we have learned intimate details of

life among the buccaneers— their eating habits, their debauchery, and their social structure. We have seen glimpses of the autonomy on which Eric Hobsbawm's "social bandits" theory, written centuries later, is based, and in terms of pure testimony, Exquemelin has become viewed as a valuable and "perfectly honest witness" (Haring 1910:278).

Yet in analyzing Exquemelin's impact on the study of piracy, the inaccuracies of *The Buccaneers of America* are equally important. These controversies extend to several aspects of the book, from its publication history to its second-hand accounts, and must be analyzed in order to truthfully assess the transformations that have since taken place in pirate scholarship.

First and foremost, the translation history of *The Buccaneers of America* has greatly impacted international perceptions of the book and resulted in striking alterations to the content itself. Exquemelin's work, originally written in Dutch, was translated (often multiple times) into English, German, Spanish, and French, all within mere years of its original publication. But as Robert Carse notes, "Each edition was different, even at the beginning. National chauvinism colored the pages, and the hack writers and the bad translators were careless with the values of veracity" (Carse 1965:253). For instance, a 1684 French translation "greatly altered and enlarged" the original text, exaggerating already-dramatic claims and twisting the essence of the book (Haring 1910:281). And as many later influential pirate scholars were not native Dutch speakers (including Charles Johnson, the 18th-century author of *A General History of the Pyrates*), this disparity would become greatly important in evaluating the extent to which Exquemelin's accounts are tainted by fiction.

It has also been established that Exquemelin was far from an unbiased author. In fact, controversy surfaced even during his own lifetime— Henry Morgan, a key figure in *The Buccaneers of America*, successfully sued Exquemelin for libel (Gambrill 2007:7). Morgan

objected to factual errors that threatened his reputation (including the claim that Morgan had been an indentured servant) as well as Exquemelin's insistence on painting him as a ruthless, bloodthirsty pirate— after all, the author was "no fan of the Welshman," (Latimer 2009:170) believing that Morgan had cheated him during his participation in the attack on Panama (Maxwell 2003). Similarly, the definition of a "buccaneer" provided in the book makes "little etymological sense," and Benerson Little posits that Exquemelin was simply making a joke (Little 2007:41). Clearly, Exquemelin had several motives in writing *The Buccaneers of America*, and these factors threaten the credibility of his work.

Furthermore, many of the historical and biographical details found in the book are either "exaggerated or blatantly false" (Gambrill 2007:7). In chronicling the events of other buccaneers, Exquemelin's accounts differ from those of fellow authors, including David Van der Sterre (Little 2007:191) and Spanish contemporaries (Little 2007:179), and this makes them impossible to verify concretely. Factual errors also taint the manuscript— at one point, for example, Exquemelin claims that the buccaneers destroyed the castle of Santiago in Portobello, Panama, although in actuality, the castle stands to this day (Latimer 2009:177). And despite Exquemelin's insistence that all of his information came from firsthand eyewitness, much of his biographical writing is largely based on hearsay, as with the case of Jean-David Nau, a French buccaneer more commonly known as l'Olonnais (Latimer 2009:159).

Most of what we know of l'Olonnais comes from *The Buccaneers of America*, although the book's description of him provides "few verifiable facts" (Marley 2010:285), and several anecdotes supplied are so colorful as to be "surely exaggerated" (Latimer 2009:161). The most well known of these comes from a passage in which l'Olonnais deals with several Spanish captives:

> …l'Olonnais, being possessed of a devil's fury, ripped open one of the prisoners with his cutlass, tore the living heart out of his body, gnawed at it, and then hurled it in the face of one of the others (Exquemelin 2012:107).

Considering Exquemelin's penchant for dramatics, his numerous factual errors, and his lack of verifiable sources, there is a strong possibility that stories like these are either greatly altered or never occurred in the first place.

Although the effects of *The Buccaneers of America* are clear, the question still remains of whether or not it will ever be possible to definitively verify or refute the details of Exquemelin's unconfirmed anecdotes. Pirate scholarship teems with unresolved disputes, and shoddy paper documentation (pirates were not known for their record-keeping) is rarely enough to resolve any theory entirely. Thus scholars have turned to archaeology, but this often leaves us with more questions than answers.

Few archaeological sites on piracy have ever been tied to specific individuals— theories must be substantiated with historical records, or artifacts providing definitive identification must be recovered (and apart from the discovery of the *Wydah*'s bell, this has almost never occurred at a piracy-related site). Unfortunately, this does not bode well for the information presented by Exquemelin, as the most controversial details all relate to specific individuals. It is highly unlikely that archaeologists will ever uncover artifacts establishing the details of l'Olonnais and the prisoner's heart or other alleged instances of pirate brutality. This is one instance in which it seems we will have to content ourselves with the information at hand.

The legacy left behind by Exquemelin and *The Buccaneers of America* has been substantial, and it remains "the standard work on the subject" of buccaneers— meaning that both fact and fiction have endured (Cordingly 2013:40). Despite claims that our notion of the

romanticized pirate began primarily with Defoe's *Treasure Island* and Barrie's *Peter Pan* a survey of Exquemelin's impact suggests that these distortions originated even earlier (Skowronek 2006). The popular perception of pirate violence, for instance, has become greatly exaggerated over time; in general, pirates sought to avoid violence, as it was costly on both sides, but sources such as Exquemelin's book have captivated the public's imagination. Scholars frequently cite l'Olonnais to demonstrate the cruelty of the buccaneers, yet when one looks at the sources used, all inevitably trace back to *The Buccaneers of America*, in which the chapters on l'Olonnais are merely based on hearsay (Latimer 2009:159). Captain Morgan, too, has come to represent the epitome of pirate ruthlessness, yet Morgan himself actively disliked this image and made a deliberate effort to act within the boundaries of the law. The "romantic mythology surrounding buccaneers" has captivated our culture, and this is largely due to the impact of Exquemelin's work (Gambrill 2007:7).

Of course, this is not to say that there were no violent pirates— there certainly were, and the lurid stories that grab readers' attentions are not founded completely on imagination. But few historical subjects have presented such a disparity between popular assumptions and historical reality, and Exquemelin serves as one of the earliest contributors to this phenomenon. In studying history, it is often just as important to examine the author's bias as it is to analyze the content itself, and *The Buccaneers of America* provides a precipitous balance between fact and fiction, historical accounts and slanderous descriptions. Just as pirates were complicated— Social bandits or cunning criminals? Ruthless law-breakers or social idealists? — so are the elements impacting their study, and Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin superbly highlights these factors.

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