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Under Siege

Piracy, Borders, and Military Architecture

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The endless boundaries retained by international oceans have presented an unrelenting paradox for premodern and contemporary merchants, maritime sailors, and pirates. Pirates, transgressive in their behavior, travel freely across the domains of commerce, law, trade, and territory. Present-day acts of appropriation and terrorism at sea bring to mind these same historical issues that have long made the pirate a catalytic, disruptive figure. Piracy outlines spatial conditions that touch upon shifting physical and imaginary borders between modern nations. Borders no longer signify land-based inscriptions deemed by imperial powers but translate into open, boundless areas of indiscriminate negotiation. As part of a larger project, incidents of piracy during the age of empire serve as a framework to reflect upon built fortifications constructed to defend against common enemies. Heightened tensions towards militarization and accompanying psychic anxieties that existed in the eighteenth century are explored as historical antecedents to later contemporary examples.

Siege and terror are two significant concepts that attend to the traversal of borders between nations, which include the prohibited migrations of people, goods, and artifacts. Early fortifications were not only deployed as instruments of the state to control land and water but also incorporated defensive strategies to keep out unwanted parties. Piratical operations underscored the ambiguities inherent in laws and built infrastructure used to maintain these borders, and their actions provided opposition to the principles of siege craft. These tensions between the individual and the state remain present today in the margins between diverse countries such as Israel and Palestine, the United States and Mexico, China and North Korea. Such “walled states,” termed by Wendy Brown, have articulated a design vocabulary that consists



of barbed wire and networked surveillance. Fences, towers, and walls persist as strategies of defense in a post-national, post-border world. The architectural engagement with these intellectual discourses explores how these mobilized tactics endure as a critical means of addressing international sovereignty.

In a civilization without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.¹

1. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986), 27.

The endless boundaries retained by international oceans have presented an unrelenting paradox for premodern and contemporary merchants, maritime sailors, and pirates. Pirates, transgressive in their behavior, traverse freely across the domains of commerce, economics, law, and territory. Present-day acts of appropriation and terrorism at sea bring to mind these same historical issues that have long made the pirate a catalytic, disruptive figure. Piracy outlines spatial conditions that touch upon shifting physical and imaginary borders between modern nations. Borders no longer signify land-based inscriptions deemed by imperial powers but translate into open, boundless areas of indiscriminate negotiation. As part of an ongoing project, incidents of piracy during the age of empire serve as a broad framework to reflect upon built fortifications constructed to defend against common enemies. Intensified tensions towards militarization as well as accompanying psychic anxieties towards foreign invasions in the eighteenth century set the stage for present-day concerns with border crossings.

Piracy has been discussed as a general phenomenon to elucidate multi-faceted connections between architecture, literature, maritime history, and urban planning. Anthropologists, for example, have studied pirate cultures as counter cultures, or "organizations of social bandits in the Hobsbawinian sense," who take on the status of folk heroes when a political economy's inequalities are brought to a breaking point.² Peter Leeson casts pirates as preeminent rational choice theorists, whose motives are only for economic, selfish reasons to maximize their material returns and to minimize risk. Even in the context of intellectual property, pirates, according to Adrian Johns, steal licensed media in order to maintain strong convictions about freedom, rights, duties, and

2. Shannon Lee Dawdy and Joe Bonni, "Towards a General Theory of Piracy," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2012), 673.

obligations in the face of monopolistic incursions. “Architectural piracy,” or the copying of entire buildings, is now rampant in Chinese cities such as Beijing and Chongqing, which are both racing to construct versions of Zaha Hadid’s Guangzhou Opera House. Architectural critic Keller Easterling in *Enduring Innocence: Globalization and Its Political Masquerades* (2005) explores piracy as a metaphor to define a type of liminal architecture that reacts to the changing trends of globalism, but she does not outline the specifics of such a mode of practice.³ Furthermore, Mike Davis cites “pirate urbanization” occurring within third world slum communities plagued by squatters.⁴

3. Keller Easterling, “Seas” and “Piracy” in *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerades* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

4. Mike Davis, *Slum Ecology* (New York: Verso, 2011), 37-38.

In lieu of these definitions, this paper views piracy as a framework that brought military tactics and political contraventions into contact with the edges of empire during the eighteenth century. Common enemies such as pirates and marauders were forced to confront equipped towns and bastions after coming ashore. The antecedents presented here will examine only a portion of what I call “mobile fortifications,” represented by castles, forts, colonial outposts, and other constructions along land and sea. These fortifications embodied instruments of monarchical and government control deployed to manage insurgent activities along the boundaries of an empire. Moats, towers, walls, and coastal outlooks generated defensible spaces through the use of design elements such as mines, parapets, and trenches. Siege and terror are two significant concepts that attend to the traversal of borders between nations, which controlled the migrations of people, goods, and artifacts. Early fortifications were not only deployed as instruments of the state to control land and water but also incorporated defensive strategies to keep out unwanted parties. Piratical operations underscored the ambiguities inherent in laws used to maintain these borders, and their actions provided opposition to the principles of siege craft. In other words, piracy sought to disintegrate the careful strategies put into place by architects and administrators who constructed fortifications along borders to defend the territory bounded within. Military thinking of the eighteenth century foreshadowed the “walled states” of the present day where defensive maneuvers have become far more complex.⁵ Such vocabularies of spatial tactics, particularly siege warfare, escalated militarization towards the height of the eighteenth century; yet, today in the face of disappearing boundaries between modern states, comparable built elements are still being employed to defend borders spread over close and remote distances.

5. Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).



Borders, in fact, possess more force when transferred to the edge conditions between earth and water, embodying non-sites where sovereign and individual agency may be asserted. Modern nations, in patrolling these zones, have been unable to manifest their authority, allowing itinerants, pirates, and migrants to cross over as they please. Pirates came into contact with the walls of fortifications as part of global networks involving eighteenth-century trade routes and political intrigue, and reciprocally, historical fortifications were customized for a number of encounters with common enemies, who would attack from the sea or from land.

Open Sea

In the context of eighteenth-century empire, maritime provinces around the world were sites of extraordinary inventiveness and creativity in political economy as recounted by Emma Rothschild. François Quesnay and A.R.J. Turgot respectively conceived of national economies as “vast systems of interdependent flows” and “interconnected transactions of millions of individual agents.”⁶ Multi-climate and multicultural prospects had already existed in this time period, hence allowing for different kinds of sovereignty to occur (hence different interpretations of law according to Montesquieu).⁷

Piracy and empire interact together as related discourses that tend to generate what historian Lauren Benton has called “imperfect geographies.”⁸ The term ‘imperfect’ refers to the fragmented nature of colonies, outposts, and other territories during the age of empire. The disjointed character of empire spread over oceans and continents require that it be controlled through the circulation of sea vessels and close land management. James Clifford has argued, “cultures of displacement and transplantation are inseparable from specific, often violent, histories of economic, political, and cultural interaction – histories that generate what we might be called *discrepant cosmopolitanism*.”⁹ These same discrepancies between cosmopolitan centres, like Benton’s geographies, rely on the displacement of peoples and knowledges to effect changes between regions. Benton mentions that ships played a unique dual order in the oceans: they were islands with their own regulations and judicial personnel, and at the same time, representatives of municipal legal authorities, or “vectors of crown law” in ocean

6. Emma Rothschild, “Global Commerce and the Question of Sovereignty in the Eighteenth-Century Provinces” *Modern Intellectual History* 1 (April 2004), 4.

7. Rothschild, “Global Commerce,” 11.

8. Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2-3.

9. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 33.

10. Benton, *A, Search for Sovereignty*, 704.

11. "Review of the State of the English Nation," July 1711.

space.¹⁰ Historian Janice Thomson avers that global efforts to control pirates and mercenaries opened an arena for true internationalism in the form of inter-state agreements to police the seas. Lands and seas alike were perceived to be the place of "infinite advantage" where nature remained inexhaustible with ample resources to be plundered.¹¹ Space as an apparatus of sovereignty was simultaneously scattered into discrete physical fragments (such as forts) and coalesced into concentrated areas (towns or regions) needed to defend parts of an empire.

Sovereign states did not rise to modern might without conceding that the uninhabitable character of the earth, specifically the seas and waters, presented its own difficulties. Early modern rulers considered these extraterritorial regions to be free, open to all those who wished to employ them for travel and transport of goods. Roman jurists defined the sea as a legal thing, like air, something that was common to all. In chapter on "Earth and Sea," Carl Schmitt claimed that land could be cultivated, privy to claims of detention and ownership; it provided *terra firma* for constructions of all kinds: fences, containments, boundary stones, walls, houses, and other buildings. In stark contrast with the liquid areas of the globe, seas could not be cultivated, no lines of demarcation could be seen, and by extension, they did not lend themselves to becoming foundations of stable architectural designs.

Marginal figures such as the pirate offer useful ways of thinking about "the utility of a history without borders." The pirate serves as a mediating device between the law and the borders of demarcated territories, outside the state and belonging to sovereign nations. Cited by Daniel Heller-Roazen and Carl Schmitt, the pirate has been generally contextualized as "the enemy of all," the nemesis of all human beings. They could be captured, sent to trial, even executed for their crimes on the high seas. They did not represent lawlessness itself, but tensions within exceptions to the law allowed them to circulate freely. Christian Wolff's *The Law of Nations Treated According to Scientific Method* (1749), for instance, argued that enemies are those who are at war with one another. A just war is not waged in hatred such as a private enemy with hatred and intent to take pleasure from the unhappiness of another. A public antagonist takes action on account of a pure sense of right, and a public adversary must be political, an enemy must be identifiable with a state. The character of the pirate shared a great deal with the rake and highwayman in terms



of authority, power, honor, virtue, and manners in relation to modern masculinity.¹² Interpreters of Daniel Defoe's novels have claimed that he has linked piracy to legitimate trade. In Defoe's *Captain Singleton*, first mate Quaker asks the captain, "Wouldst thou...rather than Money without Fighting, or Fighting without Money?"¹³ This quotation, in reality, is slightly misleading. When pirates were engaged in a commission, financial rewards were often far more paramount than other concerns; money drove pragmatic decisions about where to sail and whom to attack.

12. Erin Mackie, *Rakes, Highwaymen, and Pirates: The Making of the Modern Gentleman in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 129-30.

13. Daniel Defoe, *The Life, Adventure, and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton*, (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide, 2012).

Fiscal gain was often the paramount goal of a pirate as declared by Defoe's character Captain Singleton. Let us now take the trial of William Kidd as a paradigm of piracy that touched upon the edges of empire. On a trip down the Atlantic coast, Kidd, a Caribbean mariner who had ties to the East India trade, threatened to seize a Portuguese ship and refused the request of a British navy ship to provide it with healthy crew members. After making friends with pirates at Madagascar, he sailed to the Red Sea in search of ships returning from Mocha to Surat. He captured two ships, one of which was the *Quedah Merchant*, leased by a high official of the Mughal court. Arrested by Governor Bellomont of New York, ironically one of his sponsors, he was then transferred to London to stand trial for piracy and murder. Kidd's own defense (or lack of legal acumen) points out the pervasiveness of certain ideas among mariners about the law. He upheld the capture of the two merchant ships by citing his possession of French passes taken from the ships (which soon disappeared after he was arrested). He then pleaded coercion arguing that a mutinous crew forced him into the taking the prizes while in the Indian Ocean. He was tried in London at the Admiralty courts and found guilty, hanged on a special gibbet set up in the Thames at Wapping on the muddy foreshore, hanged in 1701 at Execution Dock. As custom, Kidd's body was left in the noose until three tides had passed over it, and until he was "dead, dead, dead."¹⁴ Kidd's tale, well rehearsed in literary and historical circles, provides us with an example of the transgressions between states and territories. His fraught incursion into the Indian Ocean required not only an alliance with the pirates of that region but *cartaz* or legal passes that allowed him to capture specific ships of given nationalities. Many pirates such as Kidd held several passes in hand in order to navigate the self-serving networks of nations, which required unlawful missions that were never fully identified nor acknowledged in court.

14. Simon Winchester, *Atlantic: A Vast Ocean of a Million Stories* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 225-26.

Defenses between Land and Sea

The darker realities of places inhabited by pirates on land or sea tend to be forgotten in the public mind, or more dangerously, they are romanticized to the point of inaccuracy. Barbary pirates or Ottoman corsairs, who flourished in the first half of the seventeenth century, offer another case in point. Their agile movements across the Mediterranean were a testament to their ability to negotiate demographics from many nations. More than 20,000 captives were said to be imprisoned in Algiers alone by the Barbary pirates. The citizens of the coasts of Sicily, Naples, and Spain suffered greatly from their activities. Letters of marque were employed to rationalize attacks on foreign ships, economic imperialism and piratical accumulation. Traders belonging to all nations, which did not pay blackmail to secure immunity, were liable to attacks at sea. Presents or even ransoms sometimes were not safeguards for security. Religious orders from the Redemptionists and Lazarites were engaged in working for the redemption of captives; large legacies were often left behind for that purpose. France encouraged piracy during her rivalry with Spain, and Britain publicly stated that Barbary piracy was a useful check against weaker Mediterranean nations. Operated mainly from North Africa, Barbary pirates often picked people off the shores in the eighteenth century—Christians from the coasts of Italy, France, and Spain as well as Muslims from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. King Francis I had permitted the Turks to visit Marseille and occupy Toulon in 1543, they repaid the favor by kidnapping the nuns of Antibes, among their other victims.¹⁵

15. David Abulafia, "Mediterranean History as Global History," *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (May 2011): 223.

The fluid identity of slavery held strong associations between liberation and state building, cementing imperialism's roots in abolition. Pirates were known agents who helped to propagate the slave trade, in particular, male and female African slaves, which only fueled migrations of people into bastions onto the European coastlines. Historian Gillian Weiss links captive redemption to state formation still vital ideology of liberatory conquest. She relates that Louis XIV dreaded the loss of valuable mariners and merchants, sharing an anxiety about exposure to North African contagions, notably plague, sodomy, and Islam. They often sailed in round-bottomed vessels like *xebecs* and *pinks*, loitering in the Gulf of Gascony to pluck French "sardines and flying fish" straight from the sea. Complaints were made to the king about "the pirates of Tunis and Algiers who devastate all the merchants of your said city and other maritime places of your kingdom and devour the blood of your poor subjects."¹⁶

16. Gillian Weiss, *Captives and Corsairs: France and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011), 17.



The Greek root *peirates*, meaning “an attempt” or “an attack,” is indicative of the strategies and skepticism towards the promulgation of terrestrial laws and order.¹⁷ The inherent logic embedded in acts of piracy provided the opposing response to those devoted to defending borders through the construction of fortifications. Piracy and siege defenses were, in essence, opposites sides of the same coin. To repel pirates and other marauders, siege craft remained a critical element of military architecture. François Blondel (1618-1686), who trained as a naval officer and military engineer, was initially chosen by Colbert in 1666 to map the “islands of America.” The construction of walls and plan layout of towns by Blondel in the New World laid the fundamental groundwork for the ideas that military engineer Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban would later shape into key strategic defenses back in France.

Vauban’s ambitions desired to render the French kingdom into a *pré-carré* (dueling field) whose boundaries would be secured by a *ceinture de fer* (iron belt) composed of newly fortified places. The frontier, for Vauban, was a spatial ensemble, not a line, shaped by local traditions and topography.¹⁸ Vauban’s *New Method on Fortification* (1722) offers intriguing connections between engineering, the demarcations of territory, and what he called military architecture, a term later taken up by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. A general rule studied by military engineers was summarized as “whatever defends ought to be defended.” For example, Vauban cited certain advantages when placing a fortress encompassed by water—it could not be undermined; there was no occasion to create great works; the enemy could not always discharge their cannon with any certainty because water abated much of their force; the besieged may easily set fire to the enemies’ shipping; the naval army remained too exposed to the view of the artillery.¹⁹

However, Vauban’s role as a taker of fortresses has been severely downplayed. His development of siege parallels and the ricochet shot were quite effective. Original zig-zag trenches minimized the degree to which defenders of a fortress could shoot along the length of the trench. Defenders could attack the head of a trench where troops were limited by its cramped dimensions. Vauban revised the zig-zag trenches to become communications areas with a series of trenches parallel to each other and concentric to the fortress. The trenches could then be filled with soldiers to fire upon the fortress in the final assault. Batteries of artillery could be placed in a wider arc, multiplying points of attack.²⁰ He devised

17. For further information on pre-eighteenth century piracy, see Molly Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

18. Michael Wolfe, *Walled Towns and the Shaping of France: From the Medieval to the Early Modern Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 151. In 1668, Louvois ordered Vauban to oversee the creation of 144 *plan-reliefs*, or models of places that illustrated the details of

captured towns.

19. Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *The New Method of Fortification* (London: Printed for A. Bettesworth and J. Batley, 1722), book II, 91-92.

20. Janis Langins, *Conserving the Enlightenment: French Military Engineering from Vauban to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 108-109. See Vauban’s first work on siegecraft *Mémoire pour servir d’instruction dans la conduite des sièges et dans la défense des places*.

other mechanisms as part of an array of spatial tactics to deter the enemy. A *boyau* was a “moat border’d with a Parapet, which is drawn from one Trench to another for better Communication.” Not only did buildings possess parapets, but even moats defined a thin line across the top of their construction that aligned one trench to another on the ground. A bomb chest was defined as a “kind of Wooden Chest wherein are put from three or six Bombs, which is placed under Ground, to blow it up into the Air, in case it be taken.”

Artillery, particularly the use of the cannon, transformed the moral conditions of defense as much as the material conditions that shaped it. Greater breadth of arranged strongholds were necessary to counteract the growing firepower behind attack strategies. Destroying ramparts used to require underpinning their shores to which were set fire; rather than employing this method, in contrast, pockets were dug and filled with gunpowder. Considerable portions of the earthworks and revetments were consequently blown up.

For Viollet-le-Duc, an engineer’s solution for the problem of warfare could be encapsulated as “to see the besieging force without being seen, while obtaining a cross and defile fire.”²¹ An ideal solution would render any fortification “perfect and impregnable” but was not yet possible.

21. E.E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Military Architecture*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1990 [1860]), 261.

He applied his knowledge of military engineering to his novel writing. In *Histoire d’une forteresse*, he brought his experience of the defense of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of the 1870s to bear upon the fictional story of a fortress La Roche-Pont that withstands multiple sieges over the course of many centuries. The novel acts as Viollet le Duc’s version of a “siege journal,” complete with day-by-day description of attack, length of resistance for the fort, detailed maps and drawings with each stage of progress.²² Situated at the extremity of a promontory, the fortress presented a narrow front to its attackers. Viollet le Duc’s imagined protagonist Vauban (based upon the aforementioned architect) planned works for the northern face of the fortress—“he made a demi-lune, with a tenaille behind, and next the bastioned work B which swept the whole plateau. As to the rest of the town, making use of the old bastions, he strongly flanked them and disposed the stronghold as shown by plan D.”²³ Vauban’s design in the novel had its own drawbacks. A fan-shaped plateau spread outside the fortress would easily fall prey to converging fires set by besiegers. For instance, fig.67 in Vauban’s treatise illustrates the sectional

22. See Langins’ reference to Fourcroy de Ramecourt on 119.

23. Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Annals of a Fortress: Twenty-Two Centuries of Siege Warfare* (New York: Dover, 1876), 306, 313.



qualities of his planned works; he fortified each place according to the nature of the position of each bastion. Roads were widened and improved, with houses detached from the ramparts. Eventually, all of the escarpments were encased in heavy masonry with counter-forts.

Walls and Terror

In closing, eighteenth-century fortresses became easier to capture in faster time along with the improved performance of artillery. Speed and the potential mobility of an attack were emphasized by Marc-René de Montalembert among others over the importance of stationary defense. Montalembert shifted the emphasis from the defense of a location to outlying detached fortresses and the intensity of firepower, not relying upon the thickness of walls to provide security. Road networks eventually improved along frontiers.²⁴ Many regional French towns increasingly asked permission to tear down their walls, citing enlightened notions of the public good. Ditches and gates remained in place as testimony to human pressures encroaching upon the militarized edge.²⁵ Armies grew larger with more soldiers in the field increasing with populous states and ran with “operational efficiency.” A highly trained officer corps allowed for the coordination of multiple operations, freedom of movement, and most importantly, the ability to bypass fortresses altogether.²⁶ These strategies were quickly embraced by Napoleon I at the end of the century while urban vitality became redefined by aspects of circulation, openness, and exchange as town walls were demolished.

24. Wolfe, *Walled Towns*, 166.

25. Wolfe, *Walled Towns*, 162.

26. Langins, *Conserving the Enlightenment*,

132-33.

27. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*,

Eighteenth-century strategies of siegecraft are echoed in the present day discourses of walling that produce entities at stake as “simultaneously vulnerable, victimized, righteous, and powerful” claimed by political theorist Wendy Brown.²⁷ Conceptions of siege have existed as an economic phenomenon since the Middle Ages. Blending military and economic elements in a siege facilitates an appreciation of how defenses against migrating peoples today acquire a security aspect in contemporary walling discourses. Sieges functioned by penetrating defenses, swarming an enclosed area, and plundering resources. Terror can be framed as a siege, rather than as welfare – it aims at plunder, not at sovereign conquest. By coupling siege craft and terror together, early modern and contemporary fortifications invoke similar rhetorical devices that call upon the state to provide protection against

unknown enemies. Architectural tactics of defense are complicit in these charged encounters and must engage these histories of piracy and siege craft in order to understand the complex legacy that undergird fences, walls, and towers.

In a post-national, post-border world, space as an apparatus of sovereignty endures as a relevant means by which to gauge international politics and its possible design consequences. Its so-called disappearance from the borders between states seems highly unlikely, and in truth, spatial tactics that underline the ever-present nature of borders endure as historical and contemporary tropes of defense. Recently, Congressional representatives in the United States waged war on terror using the old language of the Barbary pirates. Akin to the time of Thomas Jefferson, the battle against Al-Qaeda was couched in the familiar terms of militarism and foreign conflict. Afloat and ashore, pirates still thrive amidst cautious politicians, who must find better ways to manage their siege against terror and international coercions against the state with open borders.

