

## Aaron Beek

University of Minnesota (USA)

### Where Have All the Pirates Gone?

It is the nature of history that the victorious tell the tales. And this is particularly true with criminals, such as pirates, whose only record in the books come from their attacks and their eventual defeats. We know next to nothing about the pirates themselves, and we have only their enemies' word to show that they were pirates in the first place.

We do see famous orators, from Isocrates to Cicero, decrying the depredations of pirates. These pirates were enemies of everyone, and even if Rome's longstanding neglect of sea power encouraged piracy, Rome still repeatedly raised large forces to crush piracy 'once and for all'. Furthermore, the label 'pirate' or 'bandit' became a common slur to pin on political enemies, as Cicero does with Catiline and Antony.

Of particular note, however, is the fact that Roman leaders keep claiming that the pirate menace is now over. The most famous, of course, is Pompey, but Augustus claims this achievement as well. In the imperial period it becomes commonplace for governors and prefects to claim a similar distinction. Despite these claims, there is evidence for substantial pirate activity within years of each 'elimination'.

Yet, if the pirates are eliminated with such regularity by the state, we must explain their reappearance either by a substantial motivation for engaging in piracy, by concluding that they were never truly eliminated in the first place, or by suggesting that the label of 'pirates' was merely a convenient fiction to attack someone with public approval. My paper contends with all three possibilities and attempts to clarify just why ancient piracy is so resilient in the face of Roman opposition and tries to identify whence these pirates came.