

Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World

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1 Introduction

Sometime in the second century BC the citizens of the Athenian colony on Imbros in the Northern Aegean had the following decree inscribed in stone:

Decided by the people. Teleas, son of Aristokratos, of Cholargos proposed: since Lysanias is benevolent towards the people, and, there being a hostile attempt by some people against the island, he did not make light of it, nor shrink back from the danger to himself, but stood firm and brought news of the descent of the pirates. Therefore, so that the people may show their gratitude, it is proposed: With good fortune, it has been decided by the people that Lysanias, son of Aristokratos, of Deradiotai, is to be praised, and he is to be crowned with a crown of gold ...¹

It would seem that as soon as he was aware of the hostile strangers' approach, Lysanias knew exactly what word to use to rouse his compatriots: pirates! Their enthusiastic praise of his actions reflects a mortal fear of the sudden descent of pirates and the panic and suffering which might result. Murder, pillage and kidnap by seaborne raiders were familiar terrors for many of the inhabitants of the Mediterranean in Classical times. The surviving historical records contain many instances of piratical attacks on both land and sea. From the poems of Homer to the works of St Augustine pirates and piracy are a recurring theme in Classical literature. Why was piracy such a problem in the Graeco-Roman world? What efforts were made to suppress it, and how successful were they? These are some of the questions which this book will address through a detailed examination of the ancient sources.

Piracy is a term normally applied in a pejorative manner. Pirates can be defined as *armed robbers whose activities normally involve the use of ships*. They are men who have been designated as such by other people, regardless of whether or not they consider themselves to be pirates. In the

¹ *IG* XII.8.53, lines 1–13. The inscription continues with further honours for Lysanias. The date of some time before 166 BC, proposed by the editors (*IG* XII.8.4), is to be preferred to Ormerod's suggestion of the first century BC; Ormerod (1924): 139.

Graeco-Roman world the use of pirate as a term for undesirable ‘others’ is the usual way in which piracy is presented to the scholar. The pirates of Classical Antiquity are identified by their victims and their enemies, they do not claim the label of pirate for themselves.

It is important to establish at an early stage that *all* evidence of piracy in the Graeco-Roman world is textual. Piracy is not a phenomenon which can be documented from the material remains of Classical civilizations. Ancient pirates did not leave any distinct trace in the archaeological record, unlike soldiers, whose graves, equipment and habitations are fairly easy to identify.² A history of piracy can, therefore, be written only on the basis of texts which mention pirates or piracy in explicit terms, or which can be shown to refer implicitly to pirates or piracy, according to the normal usage of these terms in the culture which produced the texts.

There have been several histories of ancient piracy by modern scholars, notably Sestier, Ormerod and Ziebarth.³ All of these have tended to treat piracy as a relatively straightforward and unchanging phenomenon, assuming, implicitly or explicitly, that the terms pirate and piracy meant much the same in the Graeco-Roman world as they did up to the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ This book presents a new and radically different historical interpretation of the ancient Graeco-Roman texts relating to piracy, in which the emphasis is on understanding the use of the labels pirate and piracy in their historical and cultural contexts. I have deliberately taken a sceptical approach to mentions of pirates in ancient texts. In each case I have tried to determine why the individuals or groups described as pirates have been labelled in this way. My aim has been to produce not merely a narrative of piratical events, but an historical analysis of the development of the terms piracy and pirate in the Graeco-Roman world from *c.* 800 BC to AD 700.

Language

Since the basis of this study is an examination of Classical texts relating to piracy, it is necessary to explore briefly the Greek and Latin vocabulary

² For an optimistic attempt to assemble archaeological evidence which *may* relate to piracy see Gianfrotta (1981). There was no distinctive visual image of piracy in the Graeco-Roman world, but see Pls. 1–4 for a range of images.

³ Sestier (1880); Ormerod (1924); Ziebarth (1929).

⁴ Recent studies of particular importance include the excellent essay by Jackson (1973); the detailed analysis of Cretan piracy by Brulé (1978); the attempt at categorization of piracy by Garlan (1978), which reappeared in a revised form as Garlan (1989). Since the thesis on which this book is based was completed there have also been studies of the Romans’ attitude to piracy by Pohl (1993); Braund (1993); and a very good article on the Cilician pirates by Avidov (1997).

for piracy. Piracy and banditry were much more closely linked in the ancient world, in terms of both language and perception, than they are today. It is, therefore, also important to consider how far the ancient language of piracy and banditry overlap and to what extent it is possible to distinguish between the two in ancient writings.

Ancient Greek has two common words which can be translated as pirate, ληστής (*leistes*) and πειρατής (*peirates*)⁵. The former is attested in Homer in various forms⁶ and it continues to be used by Greek writers throughout the period covered by this book. It derives from the same root as ληΐς (*leis*), meaning booty or plunder, i.e. the Indo-European root *laf* or *lau*, and its essential meaning is armed robber or plunderer, for which the common English terms are bandit or pirate.

The second word, πειρατής (*peirates*), is a later arrival in the vocabulary of the ancient Greek sources, not being found in Homer or any of the writers of the Classical period (c. 500–330 BC). *Peirates* and words derived from it continue to be used in the sources right up to the end of our period, and have meanings synonymous with *leistes* and its derivatives⁷. The derivation of *peirates* is probably from the word *peira*, meaning a trial or attempt, and it may be connected with *peirao*, meaning to make an attempt at something. An alternative derivation from the word *prasso*, meaning to pass through, achieve, is also possible, but unlikely.⁸

The earliest datable occurrence of the word *peirates* is in an Attic inscription of the mid third century BC from Rhamnous. It is a deme decree in honour of Epichares, who was elected as *strategos* with special responsibility for coastal defence during the archonship of Peithidemos,⁹ and undertook vigorous defensive measures during the Chremonidean war. The decree mentions a ransoming or exchange of prisoners arranged by Epichares and also indicates that the prisoners were taken by *peiratai*, who had been brought into the area by people described as ‘from the city’, i.e. Athens. Epichares held an enquiry and punished the guilty:

... ἐκόλασε δὲ καὶ τοὺ-
[ς κ]αθηγουμένους εἰς τ[ῆ]ν χώραν τοῖς **πειραταῖς**, λαβῶν καὶ ἐξετάσας αὐτούς, ὄν-
[τα]ς ἐκ τῆς πόλεως, [ἀξίω]ς ὧν ἔπραττον.

⁵ There is also another word for pirate, the much rarer καταποντιστής (*katapontistes*), which is found only occasionally in Greek literature; see below pp. 9–11.

⁶ Ebeling (1885): 985–7.

⁷ See LSJ s.v. πειρατής.

⁸ See LSJ s.vv.

⁹ The date of Peithidemos’ archonship is disputed, but must fall in or near to 267 BC, that is to say during the Chremonidean war, with the dating of which it is closely connected; see Will (1979): I 223–4 and Meritt (1977): 174, who suggests 265/4 for Peithidemos’ archonship.

... he also punished those who had introduced the pirates/bandits into the land, men from the city, arresting and interrogating them in a way that was fitting for what they did.¹⁰

The episode took place in a time of war, when Athens was supported by the Ptolemaic forces against those of the Macedonian king Antigonos Gonatas (c. 277–239 BC), but it was not itself a significant act of war. It may be that the *peirataí* were allied in some way to Antigonos, but their identity is not known, possibly because it was not clear to their victims. Speculation about them is pointless since the inscription is too badly damaged to yield any further information, and it is our only source for this event. The simplest and most logical interpretation of the use of *peirates* is that it is a pejorative term for a raider or plunderer, as it is found in later texts.¹¹

The word *peirates* also occurs in an inscription from Aigiale on the northern coast of the island of Amorgos, describing a raid on the town which took place at night:¹²

... ἐπειδὴ **πειρατῶν** εἰς
[τ]ῆν χώραν ἐμβαλόντων νυκτὸς ...

... since, when pirates made an incursion into the countryside at night ...

During the raid a variety of people from the city were captured and two of the citizens managed to negotiate their release:¹³

... συνέπεισαν τὸν ἐπὶ τῶν **πει-**
[ρ]ατῶν ἐπιπλέοντα Σωκλείδαν ἄπο-
λύσσαι τὰ τ' ἐλευθέραι ...

... he persuaded Sokleidas, the captain of the pirates, to release the free persons ...¹⁴

The editor of *Inscriptiones Graecae* vol. XII.7 dates the inscription to the third century BC, from the lettering. There is no reason to question the translation of *peiraton* as ‘pirates’, although any attempt to identify the perpetrators can only be speculation. Attempts to date the inscription more exactly on the basis of such speculation are futile. The fact that

¹⁰ *SEG* 24 (1968), no. 154, lines 21–3.

¹¹ Whether pirates or bandits should be used to translate the word *peirataís* here is not entirely clear. Rhamnous is a coastal town, but it is close to Boiotia and it could be penetrated quite easily by land. Later references to men called *peirataí* show that they can be bandits or pirates (see below) and insufficient context is provided by the inscription itself. Austin (1981): no. 50 translates ‘pirates’.

¹² *IG* XII.7.386, lines 4–5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, lines 15–17.

¹⁴ Translation from Austin (1981): no. 87.

there may have been similar raids by Aitolian pirates in this area in the middle of the third century BC does not mean that this incident can be attributed to them and dated to a particular period of Aitolian piratical activity.¹⁵ The inscription can, therefore, be dated to before 200 BC only on the basis of the lettering.

A word derived from *peirates* does occur in an Attic inscription which can, perhaps, be assigned to an earlier date, permitting the conclusion that this word was in use at the same time as it occurs in the noun form in the Epichares inscription discussed above. The relevant decree is in honour of Herakleitos of Athmonon, who protected Salamis from piratical attacks from the direction of Epilimnion:¹⁶

... καὶ πολέμου γενομένου τοῦ περὶ Ἄ-
λεξάνδρον καὶ **πειρατικῶν** ἐκπλεόντων ἐκ τοῦ Ἐπιλιμνίου ...

... and when the war of Alexander broke out, and pirates were sailing out from Epilimnion ...

Herakleitos was the Macedonian *strategos* of the Piraeus. The attacks occurred during the revolt of Alexander of Corinth, son of Krateros, which means that the honorific decree should be later than *c.* 250 BC, but not necessarily much more than a few years later, which would also be consistent with the lettering of the inscription.¹⁷

The Greek word *peirates* is, therefore, first attested in inscriptions from the middle of the third century BC, the earliest of which can be dated to 267 BC. There is nothing in these inscriptions which indicates a different meaning from that found in later literary and epigraphic sources. It is necessary, however, before continuing to discuss the early use and meaning of *peirates*, to consider two alternative explanations which have been advanced in recent scholarly works.¹⁸

In an appendix to an article on Athenian involvement in the war of Agis III,¹⁹ D. S. Potter put forward the view that it is possible to discover the earliest use of the word *peirates* in Book 20 of Diodorus' *Universal History*.²⁰ He is of the opinion that the text of Diodorus Books 18–20 is

¹⁵ Ziebarth (1929): ch. 4, does just this, associating the Aigiale raid with a decree of nearby Naxos relating to 'Aitolian piracy' (*IG* XII.5.36). See also Tarn (1913): 208–15, and Benecke (1934): 11–16.

¹⁶ *SIG* no. 454 = *IG* II².1225, line 13.

¹⁷ On the date of Alexander of Corinth's revolt see Walbank (1957–79): I 235–6 and Will (1979–82): I 316–18.

¹⁸ For similar conclusions to mine, and further, detailed discussion of literary and epigraphic sources see Pritchett (1991): 315–18.

¹⁹ The attempt of the Spartan king Agis III to throw off Macedonian control of the Peloponnese while Alexander was in Asia in 331 BC.

²⁰ Potter (1984).

based mainly on Hieronymos of Kardia, who was contemporary with the events described in Book 20. He argues that since *peirates* first appears in Diodorus' text in Book 20, with the alternative *leistēs* being used earlier, Diodorus is following the linguistic usage of Hieronymos. Since all the references to *peiratai* occur in connection with an Antigonid king's army, Potter takes them to refer to some kind of special mercenaries, engaged in a 'respectable entrepreneurial activity'.²¹ He also believes that the inscriptions from the third century discussed above refer to people who are "'naval mercenaries" operating under some legitimate authority ... synonymous with *polemios*'.²² Potter does not believe that the word has a pejorative sense at this time, but that it acquired one later. Thus for him it is a late fourth-century term for a naval mercenary, possibly coined and almost certainly first used by the historian Hieronymos.

The view has several weaknesses. In the first place, Hieronymos' influence on the text of Diodorus is not clear-cut. Potter's authority for Diodorus' preservation of Hieronymos' language, Jane Hornblower, suspects that Diodorus did not use Hieronymos' original work, but a later recension, probably by a Rhodian scholar of the second century BC, who reworked the text of Hieronymos, adding some material and changing some of the original. She concludes that: 'Direct comparison between Diodorus and his source for xviii–xx as yet eludes us ...'²³ Secondly, Potter's interpretation rests on the assumption that *peirates* first appears in Diodorus at 20.82.4, in a list of the forces of Demetrios Poliorketes at the siege of Rhodes in 305 BC. Yet Diodorus has just used the same word in the previous chapter, during his description of the high esteem of Rhodes in the eyes of the Greeks (Diod. 20.81.3):

ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον γὰρ προεληλύθει δυνάμεως ὥσθ' ὑπὲρ μὲν τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἰδίᾳ τὸν πρὸς τοὺς **πειρατὰς** πόλεμον ἐπαναιρεῖσθαι καὶ καθαρὰν παρέχεσθαι τῶν κακούργων τὴν θάλατταν.

Indeed, she attained such a position of power that she took up the war against the pirates by herself, and cleared the sea of their evil manifestation.

This passage may well reflect the language of a Rhodian version of Hieronymos' history, but could not possibly have been written by Hieronymos himself, because it refers to the exploits of the Rhodians in the third and early second centuries BC.²⁴ For Diodorus there was no doubt that *pei-*

²¹ Potter (1984): 235.

²² Potter (1984): 231.

²³ Hornblower (1981): 276–7. See also Sacks (1990) who argues strongly against the view that Diodorus was a slavish copier of his sources.

²⁴ See below pp. 49–53, 80–92.

rates was a pejorative term, as it was for his contemporary Strabo.²⁵ The passage cited above makes no sense if it is simply a term for some kind of ‘naval mercenary’ who is completely ‘respectable’ and whose activity is ‘legitimate’. As a general point about Diodorus’ vocabulary, it should be noted that Diodorus usually tries to bring his sources closer to his own clear, simple style. Hornblower cites the case of his use of Agatharchides in Book 3: ‘He prefers the more modern Hellenistic usage, . . . and in general replaces unusual with usual words.’²⁶ The fact that Diodorus is using the word in a military context repeatedly in Book 20 is indicative of the nature of Hellenistic warfare at this time, rather than the nature of the word itself.

It has also been suggested that *peirates* was a fourth-century creation to provide a distinctive word for seaborne plunderers (pirates) as a supplement to *leistes*.²⁷ The idea comes from entries in the tenth-century AD Byzantine lexicon *The Suda* (1454 and 474):

πειρατῶν: καταποντιστῶν, κατὰ θάλασσαν ληστῶν . . . ὅθεν καὶ πειραταὶ οἱ κατὰ θάλατταν κακοῦργοι.
λησταί: καὶ ληστής μὲν ὁ ἐν ἡπείρῳ πειρατῆς δὲ ὁ ἐν θάλασσῃ.

peiraton: *katapontistai*, plunderers on the seas . . . whence also *peiratai*, those who are evildoers by sea. *leistai:* *leistes* is on the land as *peirates* is on the sea.

While these entries make it clear what the Byzantine lexicographers thought were the appropriate meanings of *peirates* and *leistes*, they should not be taken as indicators of the fourth-century BC usage. In any case *peirates* is not attested in the surviving fourth-century sources. Nor can they be used to represent later Classical usage, since they are not borne out by examination of any other writers. Later authors continue to use both of the words *leistes* and *peirates* as synonyms. For example, Achilles Tatius, writing in the third century AD, uses both words together in the following passage, describing a malicious servant (Ach. Tat. 2.17.3): . . . ἦν γὰρ καὶ ἄλλως εὖρωστος τὸ σῶμα καὶ φύσει **πειρατικός** . . . (‘. . . he was exceptionally strong of body and by nature piratical’). The sentence continues: . . . ταχὺ μὲν ἐξεῦρε **ληστάς** ἀλιεῖς ἀπὸ τῆς κώμης ἐκείνης (‘. . . he quickly sought out some pirate sailors from that village’). The obvious translation of both words here is pirate, rather than bandit.²⁸

The earliest surviving author to make considerable use of the word *peirates* is Polybius, writing in the mid second century BC. He uses it to

²⁵ See below p. 8.

²⁶ Hornblower (1981): 274.

²⁷ McKechnie (1989): 117 & 131.

²⁸ Achilles Tatius also treats *leistes* and *peirates* as synonyms meaning pirate in other places, e.g. Ach. Tat. 5.7.6 and 7.

describe a variety of individuals and groups ranging from the bandit Dorimachos and his gang to a flotilla of pirate ships chased by the Romans in 190 BC during the war with Antiochos. A brief look at some examples of his usage and that of Strabo, writing in the first century AD, will suffice, along with the passages of Achilles Tatius cited above, to illustrate the usual practice among Greek authors. In his account of the Aitolian Dorimachos' raiding in the Peloponnese in 222 BC Polybius writes as follows (Polyb. 4.3.8):

συνδραμόντων δὲ **πειρατῶν** καὶ παραγενομένων πρὸς αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν Φιγάλειαν, οὐκ ἔχων τοῦτοις ἀπὸ τοῦ δικαίου συμπαροσκευάζειν ὠφελείας . . .

When a newly formed gang of bandits came to him [Dorimachos] at Phigaleia, not having a justifiable project to provide them with plunder . . .

Polybius cannot possibly be referring to pirates in this context, so the translation of *peiratai* must be bandits.²⁹ In a later book, however, when he is describing the naval battle of Myonnesos, he uses *peirates* with the meaning of pirate (Polyb. 21.12): . . . οἱ δὲ **πειραταὶ** θεασάμενοι τὸν ἐπίπλουον τῶν Ῥωμαϊκῶν πλοίων . . . ('. . . the pirates, seeing the Roman fleet bearing down upon them . . .'). Again the obvious translation of *peiratai* is pirates, and this can be confirmed by referring to the text of Livy 37.27.4, which goes into greater detail than the fragment of Polybius.³⁰ In Book 4 Polybius uses *leisteia* to describe the plundering activities of the Cretans (4.8.11) and the Aitolians (4.9.10). He refers in these instances to plundering both by land and by sea. Strabo is even freer in his use of *leistes*, *peirates* and their cognates. He also treats them as synonyms and even employs them both in the same sentence, when contrasting the Lycians with their neighbours the Pamphylians and the Cilicians (Str. 14.3.2):

ἀλλ' ἐκένοι μὲν ὀρητηρίοις ἐχρήσαντο τοῖς τόποις πρὸς τὰ **ληστήρια** αὐτοὶ **πειρατεύοντες** ἢ τοῖς **πειραταῖς** λαφυροπώλια καὶ ναύσταθμα παρέχοντες.

But the former used their places as bases for piracy, when they practised it themselves, or made them available to other pirates as markets for their plunder.³¹

From the texts cited above it can be seen that *peirates* is a synonym for *leistes*. They both mean pirate or bandit, and can both be translated by either English word, or by the neutral term plunderer.

²⁹ It is significant that Polybius' language throughout this section on the Aitolians in the late 220s BC (Polyb. 4.3–6) is generally polemical and pejorative. Hence his choice of *peiratai* to describe Dorimachos' band, because it is not a technical, military term, but a pejorative, damnatory one. See further below pp. 73–6 on Polybius and the Aitolians.

³⁰ See Walbank (1957–79): III 105. Livy's text reads *apparuit deinde piraticos veloces et lembos esse* ('Then it became clear that they were fast pirate lembi'). On the *lembos* see Casson (1971): 125–7.

³¹ *Leisteria* is a noun derived from *leistes* meaning the practice of piracy or banditry.

The word *peirates* is, therefore, first attested in the third century BC and is apparently a common word in the Greek world by the end of the century. In literary sources either or both may be used. Suggested specific meanings for *peirates* are not borne out by its usage, and the precise circumstances of its appearance in the ancient Greek language are not ascertainable. It is possible that, since Greek was a spoken language with a strong oral tradition, the ‘newer’ word may have been in use for some considerable time before its earliest occurrence in any written context. The habits of Greek epigraphy were generally conservative, with innovations being incorporated only very slowly.

Differentiation between pirates and bandits in Greek sources

As has been stated above, the modern English words pirate and bandit are both possible translations of the Greek words *leistēs* and *peirates*. The clear semantic difference which is found in modern English, that pirates operate mainly at sea and use ships, and that bandits always operate on land, is not inherent in the ancient Greek words as they are used in the surviving sources. This does not mean, however, that ancient writers could not distinguish between the two. On the contrary they often did so, when they had reason to, by using either a qualifying description, or by use of another (less common) word which means pirate. An example of the former method of differentiation is found in Strabo’s description of the Bosphoran peoples near Colchis (11.2.12): ζῶσι δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν κατὰ θάλατταν **λησστηρίων** (‘They live by plundering at sea’ – i.e. piracy). There is only one word in Greek which means a pirate, not a bandit: *katapontistes*,³² which translates literally as ‘one who throws into the sea’. It is used almost exclusively to mean pirate.³³ It is not a commonly used word in Greek literature, possibly because, although useful for specifying pirates as opposed to bandits or plunderers in general, it is a long and rather inelegant one. There can be no doubt that even those authors who did employ it were reluctant to make continuous use of it, for whatever reason. Isokrates uses it only once in the *Panegyrikos* and twice elsewhere (Isoc. *Paneg.* 115; *Panath.* 12 and 226). He also uses *leistēs* (e.g. *Panath.* 226). Demosthenes uses both *katapontistes* and *leistēs*. At one point he

³² It is translated by LSJ under the verb from which it derives, καταποντίζω, which means ‘throw into the sea, plunge or drown therein’: LSJ s.v.

³³ Pausanias (8.52.3) uses this word metaphorically, saying of all who fought against Athens in the Peloponnesian war: ... φαίη τις ἂν ἀτόχειρας καὶ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα καταποντιστάς εἶναι τῆς Ἑλλάδος (‘... they may fitly be described as the assassins and almost the “wreckers” of Greece’. Trans. Frazer). Pausanias prefers to use *leistēs* for pirate, e.g. 1.7.3.

employs both as a pair of pejorative terms to describe conditions on the island of Alopekonnos (Demos. 23.166).

The only author who makes regular use of *katapontistes* is the historian Cassius Dio, writing in the third century AD. He prefers *leistes* to *peirates*, which he never uses. He employs *katapontistes* as a specific term for a pirate when he wishes to make an explicit distinction between maritime and land-based activities. His use of it is concentrated round his discussion of Pompey's early career and the *lex Gabinia* of 67 BC (Dio 36.20–37). The distinction between pirates and bandits is clearly made in the opening part of this section (Dio 36.20.1): οἱ καταποντισταὶ ἐλύπουν πλέοντας, ὥσπερ καὶ τοὺς ἐν τῇ γῆ οἰκοῦντας οἱ τὰς ληστείας ποιοῦμενοι ('The pirates had always attacked shipping, just as the bandits did those who live on the land'). Having differentiated between the two types of plunderers, Dio explains why, with the continual wars providing cause and opportunity for many to turn to armed robbery or plundering (*leisteia*), it was piracy which had caused the greatest concern at Rome at this time (Dio 36.20.3–4):

While the bandits' (*leistika*) plunderings on the land, being under the very eyes of the locals, who could discover the injury nearby and apprehend them without much difficulty, were easily stopped, the plundering by sea [i.e. piracy] had increased dramatically. For while the Romans were occupied against their enemies, they [the pirates] were flourishing, sailing all over the place and all joining together as groups, so that some of them came to each other's aid like regular allies.

The point which Dio stresses here is the pirates' ability to operate everywhere (36.22.4). It is the range and comparative strength of piracy which makes it so different from banditry and allows it to become a serious menace. Dio, however, does not use only the specific term *katapontistes* to refer to pirates in this section. He initially employs it to make a clear distinction between pirates and bandits. Then, when he has established that it is the pirates who will be the subject of his narrative, he alternates it with *leistes* (Dio 36.24.1; 36.36.4). Thus it can be seen that Dio could use a specific term for pirate rather than bandit, but did not always feel it necessary to do so, allowing the context to make it clear which was meant (as at 36.20.1). At other times he might leave it up to the reader to decide the significance of *leistes*. In a later book Dio explains that Aulus Gabinius (*cos.* 58 BC) had been a rather disastrous proconsul for the people of his province of Syria. In 55 BC, when he toyed with intervention in Parthia and then turned instead to an invasion of Egypt, he left behind him a province bereft of soldiers. Dio says of him: 'Gabinius did much to ruin Syria, so much that he caused more harm to the people than did the pirates (*leistikon*), who were flourishing still ...' He repeats the point at

39.56.5. The irony of the situation is apparent only if the translation is ‘pirates’, for it was Gabinius who, as tribune in 67 BC, proposed the law which gave Pompey the Great his famous command against the pirates. Dio’s subtle humour is well served by his choice of words.³⁴

It was possible, therefore, to differentiate between pirates and bandits in ancient Greek. From at least the beginning of the fourth century BC there was a word available which meant only pirate (i.e. *katapontistes*), but it was rarely used. It was always possible for ancient authors to add a qualifying adjective or participle or phrase to the words *leistes* and *peirates* and their cognates in order to make the meaning clear. Alternatively it could be obvious from the context of a particular passage which of the two was meant. There remained, however, an inherent ambiguity of meaning in the two main Greek words for armed robbers or plunderers which reflected a close association of the two in the minds of the Greek-speaking peoples of the ancient world. This close association derived particularly from the disapproval which both types of armed robbery often merited in the eyes of many in the Graeco-Roman world.

If bandits and land-based plunderers in the Graeco-Roman world can be described in the same language as pirates, what is there about the pirates that is significantly different? The answer, which has already been provided, but is worth emphasizing, is that piracy involves the use of *ships*, which require a greater initial commitment of resources and offer a greater range and freedom of opportunity to the would-be plunderers than can be obtained from wholly land-based activities.³⁵ Ships also need harbours or anchorages, so that the pirates’ *bases* become an important factor in their success, and the suppression of piracy requires the control of such bases.

It is appropriate at this stage to consider what might mark piracy out as different from any other forms of violence among the Greeks, especially warfare. Linguistically this is done by referring to acts of war and warriors with distinct words. A good example, from the fifth century BC, is the inscription recording a treaty between Athens and Halieis in 424/3 BC:³⁶

... πα]ρέχεν χαλι-
 ας Ἀθηναί[οις ναύσταθμον καὶ προθύμος ὄφελέ]ν Ἀθεν-
 αίοις καὶ λ[ε]ιστὰς με̅ ὑποδέχεσθαι μεδ’ α]ὐτὸς [λ]ε]ί[ζ]ε[σ]-
 θαι μεδὲ χσ[υστρατεύεσθαι μετὰ τὸν πο]λεμίων ἐπ’
 [Ἀθε]ναίος ...

³⁴ See below Chapter 5 for Pompey’s campaign against the pirates.

³⁵ See, for example, the passage quoted above from Dio’s *Roman History* 36.20.

³⁶ *IG* I (3rd edn) 75, lines 6–10. See Meritt (1935).

The people of Halieis are to make available to the Athenians their harbour and to help them readily. They are not to admit pirates, nor to practise piracy, nor are they to join in a campaign with the enemy against the Athenians . . .

The inscription clearly differentiates between pirates and enemies. This does not mean, of course that enemies do not plunder, but the Athenians' opponents in warfare (who, in the context of this treaty, would be the Spartans and their allies) are described by a different word (*polemioi*) to the one used for pirates (*leistai*), who might also plunder the Athenians, as, indeed, might the people of Halieis themselves.³⁷ A distinction between war and piracy was regularly made in the Graeco-Roman world, but the ancient sources do not always make one, nor do they all make it in the same way and for the same reasons. Most of the ancient Greek historians and other authors whose works are used in this book were highly sophisticated writers, capable of exploiting the associations of commonly used terms to present their own interpretations of people and events. For example, two words which are derived from *leistes* – *leisteia* and *leizomai* – are regularly used by the Greek historians Thucydides and Polybius to refer to acts of banditry or piracy (e.g. Thuc. 1.5; 3.85; 4.41; 5.115; Polyb. 3.24.4; 4.8.11; 5.101.1; 13.8.1). The language of these two authors can be taken as reasonably representative of the vocabulary and ideology of the Classical and Hellenistic periods. They use these words typically to refer to acts of maritime armed robbery which meet with their disapproval, for one reason or another, but the variety of contexts in which they employ them, ranging from the aristocratic raiding of Homeric times to seaborne plundering on behalf of Hellenistic kings, are a strong warning against simply placing all such references under the heading of 'piracy', and assuming that they had an unchanging, negative image in the eyes of contemporaries.³⁸ Hence it is important to approach piracy through a detailed analysis of the sources, establishing, as far as is possible, what they are saying and why they are saying it. The gradual development of a negative image of piracy in the Graeco-Roman world is one of the main themes of this book.

Latin language

The Latin vocabulary for piracy is similar in some respects to the Greek. There are two main words for pirate: *praedo*, derived from *praeda* (booty/plunder), which is the one most commonly found in Latin literature, and

³⁷ On the historical context of this inscription see below pp. 31–3.

³⁸ For more detailed analysis of these and other passages in Thucydides and Polybius see de Souza (1992): 41–50.

pirata, which clearly derives from the Greek word *peirates*. *Praedo* is similar to *leistes* and *peirates* in that it can mean ‘bandit’ or ‘pirate’. In addition, the Latin word *latro* is sometimes used to mean pirate. In its earliest usage, in Plautus, it seems to have meant ‘mercenary’, but it quickly became a synonym for *praedo*.³⁹

Pirates could be differentiated from bandits with the use of an adjective or qualifying phrase, as in this extract from Nepos’ *Life of Themistokles* 2.3: *qua celeriter effecta primum Corcyraeos fregit, deinde maritimos praedones consecando mare tutum reddidit* (‘This being quickly achieved, he first humbled the Corcyraeans, then, by pursuing the pirates, he made the sea safe’). Piracy, or banditry, is usually signified in Latin by the word *latrocinium*.⁴⁰ There are no significant controversies or academic debates over the meaning of these Latin words. As with the Greek authors, however, the Latin writers whose works are analysed in this book were fully capable of exploiting the wide range of meanings and associations inherent in these words to achieve a suitable literary or rhetorical effect.

Structure of the book

The arrangement of the main chapters of this book is broadly chronological. I trace the origins and early use of the terms pirate and piracy in the Archaic period of Greek history (c. 800–500 BC) in Chapter 2, focusing on the world of the Homeric poems and the rise of the Greek *poleis* in the Eastern and Western Mediterranean. Much of the source material which is discussed in the rest of the second chapter is provided by the famous Athenian historians and orators of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, especially Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Demosthenes. Their evidence is supplemented by other literary sources, not all of them contemporary with the Classical period (c. 500–323 BC), and by inscriptions, which furnish important documentary evidence of piracy from the middle of the fifth century BC onwards.

Chapter 3 begins the analysis of ancient piracy in what has often been considered its heyday, the Hellenistic period (c. 323–31 BC). I have not attempted to adhere so closely to a chronological structure in this chapter, mainly because of the lack of reliable narrative sources for much of the third century BC, until the 220s, when the *Histories* of Polybius throw a fascinating, but complex, light upon the period of rise of Rome and the

³⁹ On *latro* meaning mercenary see *OLD* s.v. *latro* (1). Both *latro* and *pirata* are used to mean pirate in August. *De civ. De.* 4.4.

⁴⁰ E.g. Livy 37.13.11–12; Cic. *II Verr.* 1.89. See below pp. 149–50 for further examples and discussion of the vocabulary of piracy in Cicero’s works.

decline of the Hellenistic kingdoms in the Eastern Mediterranean. The activities of the Aitolians, Illyrians and Cretans, who acquired considerable notoriety as pirates in the third century BC, are discussed in this chapter. Numerous inscriptions are considered in both this and the following chapter, 4, which examines piracy in the second and first centuries BC, paying particular attention to the Cilicians and the history of Roman suppression of piracy in the Late Republican period (133–31 BC). This topic reaches a climax in Chapter 5, which presents a new interpretation of the famous campaign against the pirates of Pompey the Great in 67 BC. Analysis of Cicero's treatment of the theme of piracy in several of his works is fundamental to this chapter.

Chapter 6 assesses the extent of Pompey's success and explores the nature of piracy in the Roman Principate (31 BC – AD 284). The geographical scope of the book widens somewhat in this chapter, going beyond the Mediterranean region to the edges of the Roman Empire. I consider that the era of the Roman Imperial Peace (*pax Romana*) had a profound effect on perceptions of piracy in many of the ancient sources written during or after this period, especially the *Geography* of Strabo, which is discussed in some detail in this chapter, along with several other literary sources. The main section of the book ends with Chapter 7, in which I examine piracy in the Graeco-Roman world in Late Antiquity (AD 284 – c. 700), ending with the arrival of the Muslims in the Mediterranean in the seventh century BC. Chapter 8 briefly draws some general conclusions from the analyses and interpretations of the preceding chapters.