

# Chapter 4.1

## *The Buccaneers, part II*

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A Hispaniola buccaneer as seen by a French artist

**B**UCCANEERS STARTED THEIR DAILY hunts before dawn, with their dogs leading the way. When they sighted their first animal, the band's chief would have the right of the first kill and would bring down the beast with his *fusil boucanier*. Should the animal somehow survive, he would chase after it and sever the tendons of its hind legs, bringing it to the ground. Thereupon, the chief would singlehandedly cut the throat and skin the carcass. Next, he would cut out the big marrow bones and share them among the group who would breakfast on *toute chaude*, raw marrow, which they would suck from the bones.

No one could eat until an animal had been killed. Once the fallen animal had been flayed, the best meat would be sent back to the base camp to be roasted for their midday meal, and the remainder of that first kill would belong to the dogs. And so, the hunt continued until every man had killed an animal and had loaded himself with its skin and the portion of its meat most suitable to making bukan (also spelled, boucan). Thus loaded, they returned to the base camp to eat and later to work on the process of curing their meat.

When the hunt was over, the buccaneers returned to their homes on the coast. So tasty was their bukan that its fame spread, and soon passing ships were sending boats ashore to obtain it. The buccaneers exchanged their hides, tallow and the tasty meat they did not use for themselves to these ships in return for coin and tobacco, muskets, powder,

shot and clothing. A hundred pounds of bucan sold for three pieces of eight (one pieces of eight was worth five English shillings).

During their hunting expeditions, buccaneer life was laborious and their diet sparse. However, once at home and after they had sold the products of their labour, the buccaneers indulged in every sort of extravagance and debauchery until they ran out of money and were again compelled to return to the severe, unforgiving life of the hunt.

The buccaneers lived by a few simple laws that corresponded well with the state of their primitive society. If two men quarrelled, each man pleaded his side to the wisest of their comrades, and if they could not agree on a settlement, they decided their dispute by duel.

They fought their duels with knives, cutlasses, pistols, or the same long-barreled weapons with which they hunted. When a duel was fought with pistols, the combatants stood back-to-back ten or twelve paces apart and, turning round, fired at the command of an observer. If both shots missed, the argument was decided with cutlasses, and the man who drew first blood was declared the winner.

The contest was observed closely, and if it were found that an adversary had taken an unfair advantage, he was immediately tied to a tree and shot through the head. If a

man were proved to be a coward, he was either shot or mutilated and expelled from their company.

Over the decades following Columbus's colonization of Hispaniola, the island's population had become concentrated in and around Santo Domingo, leaving vast areas unpopulated except for herds of the aforementioned feral cattle and hogs. Considering the buccaneers and the French *habitants* to be dangerous intruders, the Spaniards started slaughtering the cattle and hogs, depriving the hunters of their livelihood.

Eventually, the Spanish drove hunters and *habitants* completely off the island, with many finding refuge on Tortuga, a tiny offshore island. But, to the Spaniards, even Tortuga was too close, so they ousted the unwelcome intruders from there also. Try as they might, however, the Spaniards failed to prevent some of the buccaneers from returning to the Haitian portion of Hispaniola.<sup>[1]</sup> And by then, the buccaneers had developed an enduring hatred of Spain.

<sup>[1]</sup>French colonization of Hispaniola was officially recognized by King Louis XIV in 1665. The new French colony was named, *Saint-Domingue*, and Spain formally ceded Tortuga Island and the western third of the island to France in the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick.

Shortly thereafter, about 300 Tortugans returned to their island colony. And, in 1641, the French governor-general

at St. Christopher, responding to Tortugans' plea for official protection, sent a Huguenot named Levasseur and 50 other Protestants to set up headquarters on Tortuga.



FIGURE 1 - BOARDING A SHIP | GEORGE ALFRED WILLIAMS

The tiny colony prospered and grew. But, by 1653, Levasseur had become power-mad and was murdered. His replacement was hardly in place when the Spaniards struck and again tried to oust the colonists. Early in 1655, though, the Spaniards were forced to return to Santo Domingo to defend against the impending English attempt on that city.

By 1655, with no safe haven and with much of the feral cattle and wild boar slaughtered, Tortugans looked for other ways to earn a living and, at every opportunity, to rob and kill Spaniards. Some became sea-raiders and began calling themselves *Brethren of the Coast*.

Operating from small, shallow-drafted canoes known as *piraguas*, they preyed on Spain's coastal settlements and shipping—Spain's were the only merchantmen sailing in nearby waters at that time.

*Piraguas* were dugout canoes made from silk cotton or cedar trees of up to 40 feet in length and six in breadth. They had a single mast and no decking. The indigenous people who had developed the canoes used paddles to propel them, but Europeans altered the design to allow the use of oars.

Although buccaneers were scrupulously honest when dealing with communal property, many were ruthless, fearless, lawless rogues capable of chilling cruelty. They expected no quarter and gave none. They sailed under a stern code of discipline documented in articles, the principal one of which was, "No purchase, no pay." Plunder was pooled and shared according to their articles. Extra compensation was given to those who performed acts of conspicuous courage or became disabled during an engagement.

Life in an open boat is far from pleasant for most, but these were a special breed of men used to a tough life and harsh environments. Some were strong, sturdy men who had cut logwood at Campeche and were known to carry three or four hundredweight. Others had been indentured workers on farms and plantations where they'd toil for hours under the scorching tropical sun. They would sit upon their benches, rowing with long, slow strokes for hours without complaint or sign of fatigue. Nearly all were above average in strength and had been in the tropics long enough to have become acclimatized.

Sometimes a raiding party would row—with the help of a small sail—their piraguas all the way to the Main. There, in boats crammed with heavily armed men, the buccaneers lurked among coastal islands and inlets until a merchantman came by from one of the many Spanish ports along the coast. If she seemed a reasonable prey—Spanish-owned without too many guns and not too high-built for them to climb her sides—they put their backs to the oars to dash out and engage the hapless vessel.

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