

Misson and Libertalia

The most famous pirate utopia is that of Captain Misson and his pirate crew, who founded their intentional community, their lawless utopia of Libertalia in northern Mada-gascar in the Eighteenth century.(42)

Misson was French, born in Provence, and it was while in Rome on leave from the French warship Victoire that he lost his faith, disgusted by the decadence of the Papal Court. In Rome he ran into Caraccioli - a "lewd Priest" who over the course of long voyages with little to do but talk, gradually converted Misson and a sizeable portion of the rest of the crew to his brand of atheistic communism:

"...he fell upon Government, and shew'd, that every Man was born free, and had as much Right to what would support him, as to the Air he respired... that the vast Difference betwixt Man and Man, the one wallowing in Luxury, and the other in the most pinching Necessity, was owing only to Avarice and Ambition on the one Hand, and a pusilanimous Subjection on the other."

Embarking on a career of piracy, the 200 strong crew of the Victoire called upon Misson to be their captain. They collectivised the wealth of the ship, deciding "all should be in common." All decisions were to be put to "the Vote of the whole Company." Thus they set out on their new "Life of Liberty." Off the west coast of Africa they captured a Dutch slave ship. The slaves were freed and brought aboard the Victoire, Misson declaring that "the Trading for those of our own Species, cou'd never be agreeable to the Eyes of divine Justice: That no Man had Power of Liberty of another" and that "he had not exempted his Neck from the galling Yoak of Slavery, and asserted his own Liberty, to enslave others." At every engagement they added to their numbers with new French, English and Dutch recruits and freed African slaves.

While cruising round the coast of Madagascar, Misson found a perfect bay in an area with fertile soil, fresh water and friendly natives. Here the pirates built Libertalia, renouncing their titles of English, French, Dutch or African and calling themselves Liberi. They created their own language, a polyglot mixture of African languages, combined with French, English, Dutch, Portuguese and native Madagascan. Shortly after the beginning of building work on the colony of Libertalia, the Victoire ran into the pirate Thomas Tew, who decided to accompany them back to Libertalia. Such a colony was no new idea to Tew; he had lost his quartermaster and 23 of his crew when they had left to form a settlement further up the Madagascan coast. The Liberi - "Enemies to Slavery," aimed to boost their numbers by capturing another slave ship. Off the coast of Angola, Tew's crew took an English slave ship with 240 men, women and children below decks. The African members of the pirate crew discovered many friends and relatives among the enslaved and struck off their fetters and handcuffs, regaling them with the glories of their new life of freedom.

The pirates settled down to become farmers, holding the land in common - "no Hedge bounded any particular Man's Property." Prizes and money taken at sea were "carry'd into the common Treasury, Money being of no Use where every Thing was in common."