Shipwrecks have long played a significant role in the lives and imaginations of mariners and English and Welsh coastal communities. This has inspired an extensive literature, both popular and scholarly, exploring shipwrecks and a significantly smaller subsection detailing the history of Wreccum Maris, or the law of the wreck of the sea. David Cressy’s *Shipwrecks and the Bounty of the Sea* adds to this growing literature by exploring shipwrecks and Wreccum Maris during the Elizabethan and Stuart periods and challenges the notion of the barbaric salvager. As Cressy notes, many of the topics explored in the work, from Elizabethan explanations of shipwreck causes to the recovery of sunken materials, are not novel in themselves, but this work fits in the growing literature covering Wreccum Maris in the medieval period as well as from the later Georgian period onward.

In addition to the introduction, the work comprises twelve chapters and an appendix of 850 shipwrecks along the English and Welsh shores. Cressy clearly organizes each chapter and moves between many larger themes like interpretations of how and why vessels wrecked (chapters 1 and 2), the total number of vessels sunk (chapter 1), deep water recoveries (chapter 11), and Wreccum Maris (chapter 3). As one might expect, several chapters provide ample case studies of different wrecks, including the 1641 wreck of Dutch merchant “fluyt” *Golden Grape* (chapter 8), drawn from the author’s work with primary sources in newspapers, customs records, High Court of Admiralty papers, and estate papers, among many others. With these case studies, Cressy effectively illustrates the rich history of the complex interactions between landowners, “wreckers” or salvagers, the state (Crown), and shipowners.

In the fourth chapter, Cressy posits that there is little evidence to suggest that salvagers and coastal communities behaved “barbarically” during the Elizabethan and Stuart periods and argues that the interpretations of Wreccum Maris and the
relationship between salvagers and shipwrecks often depended on local conditions. This argument challenges much of the literature around salvaging, which he states was inspired by scholars using E. P. Thompson’s model of the eighteenth-century moral economy and subsequently portrayed coastal communities as “barbarous,” “savage,” and eager to destroy any floundering vessel or harm its inhabitants for gain (p. 72). Contemporaries, for example, knew the challenges and risks when calling something a “wreck,” which meant it was salvagable. Many merchants claimed their vessel perished or that it fell on rocks and broke into pieces to avoid calling it a “wreck” (p. 57). Claims of the “barbaric” actions of salvagers were exaggerated by merchants attempting to recoup losses or by manorial proprietors (landowners) against the Crown and vice versa. For Cressy, who brings to this project an extensive knowledge of early modern English social history, the Crown and the customs officials behaved more barbaric than any other group.

In terms of the moral economy, salvagers were far from “savage” and were an integral part of the community. Salvaging was highly organized, and many community members knew their responsibilities when a salvaging opportunity occurred. Local connections provided markets for these goods, and people of various social classes interacted with one another in the salvaging process and regularly worked together for each other’s benefit even if the lion’s share of profit went to the landowner. Although no one became rich from any one wreck, even a smaller salvaging expedition provided a modest windfall for many coastal communities and replenished the supplies of landowners. In one case, the salvaging of **Golden Grape** on the Dorset coast provided ample raisins and oils to a strapped rural community. This wreck furnished added nutrients to the local diet and provided many households who sold salvaged goods with six to eight times their weekly income just before the holidays (pp. 170-71). Although Cressy posits that salvagers remained largely nonviolent during the eighteenth century as well, he presents evidence that suggests that more violent interactions between salvagers and customs officials occurred then, though still not to the extent that previous scholars have suggested.

Cressy could have helped readers by developing more salvaging and wreck narratives in chapter 4. Several later chapters, for instance, explore various shipwrecks in more detail and provide abundant examples of the lack of evidence for a “barbarous” coastal community of salvagers. While Cressy often directs the reader to chapter 4 when exploring other themes in those chapters, developing more of those case studies, like that of Albemarle in chapter 4, would have further supported the lack of evidence of “barbarous” salvagers despite the claims by merchants and avoided some of the whiplash for the reader in later chapters.

In sum, *Shipwrecks and the Bounty of the Sea* is a welcome addition to a growing field within maritime studies. For those interested in the subject, this is a very enjoyable read. While Cressy covers a wide range of topics, the target audience is more for specialists in maritime history or studies, especially those of the Elizabethan and Stuart periods. Those with an interest in Wreckum Maris, or the intersections between culture and the sea in the early modern period, will find this work of great interest.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


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