Raft of the Medusa

[En]very moment an officer who was in the governor's boat cried out aloud, "Shall I let go?"
Mr Clanet opposed it, answering with firmness, "No, no!" Some persons joined him, but could obtain nothing, the towrope was let go . . . a cry of "we forsake them" was heard . . .

THEODORE GIRICAULT (1791-1824) READ THE TRAGIC TALE Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal in 1816, an account of the extraordinary suffering experienced by J. B. Henry Savigny and Alexandre Corréard and other shipwrecked survivors after abandonment on a raft following the shipwreck of the frigate Medusa. He met with the authors in November 1817 to discuss their ordeal. Corréard's and Savigny's account drew universal outrage. Only 15 of 150 of those abandoned on the raft had survived 13 days on the open sea off the coast of Africa until their rescue by the crew of the brig Argus; 5 more died shortly after being rescued. Intrigued by their story, Géricault visited other survivors who had been transferred to hospitals in Paris, France. Corréard, the chief engineer and geographer, and Savigny, the second surgeon, had expected recognition and reward from their government. When it was not forthcoming, they published their story of abandonment by an incompetent captain, a royalist political appointee, Hugues Duroys de Chaumereys (1763-1841), who had little previous navigational experience. Their book described the drastic means they had taken to survive on the raft to a confused public, who was coping with the restoration of the monarchy after Napoleon's final defeat. Following the publication of their book, funds were raised through a subscription on behalf of the survivors that attracted Mr. Clanet opposed it, answering with firmness, "No, no!" Some persons joined him, but could obtain nothing, the towrope was let go . . . a cry of "we forsake them" was heard . . .

The lifeboats accommodated about 250 of the 400 passengers. The soldiers were suspicious of being abandoned, and a raft was constructed from masts and crossbeams. It was crudely constructed, roughly 65 feet by 23 feet. It had a sail but no means of navigation, no oars, and no anchor; it was to be towed to shore by the lifeboats. When the men (and 1 married woman) were loaded onto it, some 150 of them, they sank in the sea to their waists at the ends of the raft. It was hopelessly overcrowded; each man only had 3 square feet to stand. When the towrope was cut, those on the raft were left with a primitive sail but no means to navigate. Seventeen men remained behind on the Medusa.

The only food available was a small supply of biscuits (soon contaminated with sea water) and barrels of wine. On the first night, although the occupants tied themselves together with rope, 20 went overboard and 12 died, trapped between the planks. The second night saw heavier seas; drunken soldiers attacked the officers and wounded 60 dying in the fighting or drowned. The wine was rationed, but those on the raft were left with a primitive sail but no means to navigate. Seventeen men remained behind on the Medusa.

The authors appeal to the reader who shudders at their actions to consider the responsibility of those who abandoned them and placed them in this situation. And they ask for forbearance for their means but kept the sick on half allowance would have been killing them by inches. So after a debate, at which the most dreadful despair prevailed, it was resolved to throw them into the sea. . . . Three sailors and a soldier took upon themselves the cruel execution: we turned our faces aside, and wept tears of blood. . . .

But an extreme resource was necessary to preserve our wretched existence. We tremble in horror at being obliged to mention what we made use of! We feel the pen drop from our hands, a death-like chill pervades all our limbs, our hair stands erect on our heads! Reader we beseech you, do not feel indignation toward men who are already too unfortunate; but have compassion on them.

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Many men, especially the officers, initially held back from cannibalism, but eventually all partook. When the raft was found, Parnajon, the captain of the Argus, commented on the dried strips of human flesh spread out on the raft.2

Wine was the main source of sustenance. Exhaustion, starvation, extreme thirst, injury, tropical heat, and sleep deprivation all contributed to the mental state of those aboard. Delirium, hallucinations, and delusional beliefs were common. One victim on the raft spoke of going to that wine merchant over there, expecting he was entering the merchant’s house as he threw himself into the sea. Savigny suggested that those on board the raft suffered from phrenitis calenture, a form of delirium thought at the time to be brought on by the excessive tropical heat. Some saw the ocean waves as green hills. This vision was attributed to individual delirium rather than being a mirage (an optical illusion due to variations in the refractive index of the atmosphere—first defined by Gaspar Monge [1746-1818], a physicist who accompanied Napoleon in Egypt, to explain the illusion of seeing water in the desert). One occupant joked that “if a brig is sent to look for us, let us pray to God that she may have the eyes of Argus (a mythological giant with 100 eyes).”1(p66) Several days later, a captain of infantry announced that he saw a ship, a brig, at great distance—it was the Argus:

[W]e gave a thousand thanks to God; yet, fears mingled with our hopes; we stra[l]ighted some hoops of casks, to the end of which we tied handkerchiefs of different colors. A man, assisted by us all together, mounted to the top of the mast and waved these little flags . . . some thought that they saw the ship become larger, and others affirmed its course carried it from us.... 1(p68)

The brig disappeared and their joy dissipated into despair as they now awaited death with resignation. They made a tent from the sail and lay under it on the raft; they determined to inscribe their experiences on a board and enter each of their names so if the raft were found messages might reach their families. When a master gunner ventured from the tent he returned jubilant, “Saved! See the brig close upon us.”1(p66) The Argus had been sent to provide supplies to those who had reached shore in the Sahara desert by lifeboat and inadvertently found them.

Géricault studied the disaster, as a friend wrote, with the persistence a judge would apply in his docket.2 Psychologically, he had been under considerable family pressure after impregnating his uncle’s young wife, who was 6 years his senior.3,4 Now, putting aside his shame, he was single-minded in his approach to this painting. To recreate the atmosphere on the raft, he went to a Paris morgue to draw bodies and did portraits of dying patients at the Hôtel Beaujon in Paris. He placed body parts and a severed head in his studio to recreate the atmosphere of human decay on the raft and painted still-lifes of dissected limbs and the severed head in his studio to recreate the atmosphere of human decay on the raft. During that time, only his most intrepid friends visited the malodorous studio, some fearing infection.2 In preparation, Géricault also reviewed scenes of battle, suffering, and death in the works of Michelangelo, Rubens, Caravaggio, Gros,5,6 and others. He sought to depict the sublime and terrible as Fuseli had done in his painting The Nightmare.7

Géricault sketched 5 alternative episodes of the disaster on the raft: Mutiny, Cannibalism, Sighting of the Argus, Hailing the Approaching Rowing-Boat, and Rescue. He composed each episode in detail. In Mutiny and Cannibalism, he depicted the action from a distance. For the Hailing, the raft was brought into the foreground to transport the viewer onto the raft to participate with the survivors’ suffering rather than remain a detached observer.4

The Sighting of the Argus, the final choice for the painting, retained the closeness to the raft in the foreground but steadily distanced the rescue ship from the raft.4 There are 4 dramatically distinct groups in the painting: (1) dead, dying, or despondent men in the foreground, including 2 figures taken to be a father grieving the death of his son; (2) 4 men, alert and watchful, standing on the other side of the mast: among them Corréard, who points with an outstretched arm with Savigny standing behind him; (3) 5 men who struggle to rise to their feet; and (4) 3 men who mount barrels and signal to the Argus. Light fills a diagonal axis that stretches from bodies at the lower left up to a powerful black man at the apex, raised on the shoulders of his comrades, who holds a piece of cloth that unfurls in the wind as he waves it beneath a luminous sky over a wind-ploughed sea.6

Géricault won a gold medal at the Paris Salon in August 1819. By the time of the exhibition, the sensationalism of the raft story had begun to subside. His painting was exhibited with the title Scene From a Ship Wreck; its association with the Medusa was left to the viewer. When the king, Louis XVIII, visited the Salon, he made a long stop and carefully observed the painting. His comment to Géricault about the painting as a scene from a ship-wreck at once judged the work and encouraged the artist.3 Overall, the reviews were mixed: negative about the subdued coloring and absence of religious or heroic elements, but positive about the dynamism of the composition. Géricault left Paris for the countryside with a friend, tired, depressed, and suspicious. Although he sought to depict suffering rather than make a political statement, the French had looked for a broad political statement in the painting. Later, Géricault’s spirits were lifted by the British, who were more objective and more positive in their assessment when the painting was exhibited in London. Some British reviewers saw a veiled reference to cannibalism in the father/son image in the foreground, recalling Joshua Reynolds’s portrayal of Ugolino and his sons from Dante’s Inferno, who was said to have devoured his sons, at their request, after their deaths.

Recent analysis of the painting has drawn greater attention to Géricault’s positive attitudes regarding the abolition of slavery.8 Placing a black man at the apex of the Raft of the Medusa and a graphic drawing of the slave trade that Géricault completed are proposed as evidence for this.

Géricault died prematurely at age 33 years. The Louvre purchased his painting the year after his death. The Raft of the Medusa now resides in the Louvre alongside masterpieces by Eugène Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, Jacques-Louis David, and Jean-Antoine Gros, providing Géricault posthumously with the recognition he richly deserves.

James C. Harris, MD

REFERENCES


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