

# A French Aristocrat Turned Pirate attacked Santiago de Cuba

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Many would be amazed on learning that an aristocrat, educated according to knightly canons, could become a fierce pirate capable of the greatest atrocities. Nevertheless examples abound in history. One of them was the case of Roberval, the first pirate of noble origin that France sent to the Caribbean.



## The beginnings

The American adventures of Jean Francois de la Rocque, Seigneur de Roberval, began as purely administrative and military, honest, you might say. He arrived in North America sent as lieutenant governor by Francois I, King of France, and accompanying Jacques Cartier, one of Canada's "discoverers", during his second expedition.

But the post was not enough to quench the French cavalier's thirst of adventures and riches. Roberval, prodded by the news that came from the Caribbean, managed to gather four ships and some dozens of adventurers. He set sail and soon left behind the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, setting course for the lands of eternal spring. It was the year 1543.

Before reaching his destination, the newly inaugurated pirate attacked a small Spanish flotilla bound for Mexico. Then, using the service of a Spanish sailor from one of the pirate ships, Roberval took the well-defended city of Cartagena de Indias. For several days his men sacked, raped, murdered and burned. They only left the city on receiving a large ransom.

Without losing time Roberval, whom the Spaniards had begun to call "Roberto Baal", set course towards the not far-off port of Santa Marta, also rich in merchandise.



## **Love santiago!**

It was precisely in Santa Marta where the former chevalier turned pirate learned of the poor defense in two of Cuba's main towns Santiago and Havana. He planned his attack against both. For attacking Santiago de Cuba Roberval sent a single tender manned by 20 adventurers, while he and his four ships sailed for the Isle of Pines, south of Cuba. The pirate tender reached the entrance to the bay at Santiago de Cuba on September 7. It wasn't necessary to go any further. Near the entrance a Spanish ship was anchored, its holds filled with merchandise, and a few minutes were all the French pirates needed to overcome the small crew. In a couple of hours they had transferred everything of value to the French tender. Some of the pirates went ashore, perhaps with the intention of surprising the city's inhabitants. But they were ready and waiting, and since they had two stone-throwing cannons skillfully manned the pirates were routed. Meanwhile Roberval's four ships, which for some time had been careened at the Isle of Pines, set sail for Havana for the attack. But that assault deserves another story.