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Ottoman Empire and the Spice Routes in the 16th Century

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According to a document kept at the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo in Lisbon, the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent sent, in October of the year 1544, an Imperial letter to Dom Joao III, the King of the Portuguese seaborne empire, revealing that the two most powerful empires of the time tried to establish some form of agreement upon the flow of commerce in the Indian Ocean and the possibilities of commercial exchange¹.

Twenty years after this imperial letter, in 1564, the same Ottoman sultan sent another name-i hümayun to the Portuguese King. As preserved at the Turkish State Archives in Istanbul, this letter states the following: “Now it is needful that, when (this letter) reaches you, you shall, without delay, despatch to us your ambassador, who shall be sent for this laudable purpose and for the good ordering of affairs of state. And you shall act promptly, so that the conditions of (our) friendship may be decided on both sides, and so that the people and merchants in those lands may be relieved of anxiety and distress and live on good terms”².

World-famous historians like Fernand Braudel, Frederic C. Lane, Magalhaes Godino and Charles Boxer, and the Turkish ones like Halil Inalcik and Cengiz Orhonlu, have all agreed that the middle decades of the sixteenth century witnessed the revival of the spice trade through the Red Sea and the Gulf.

“No reputable historian nowadays maintains that the Portuguese 16th-century thalassocracy in the Indian Ocean was always and everywhere completely effective. In particular, it is widely accepted that there was a marked, if erratic, revival in the Red Sea spice-trade shortly after the first Turkish occupation of Aden in 1538, though much work

¹ Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Documentos Orientais, Maço 1, Document 24.

² Turkish State Archives (Istanbul), Ottoman section, Muhimme Defterleri, No. 5, p. 70 published in S. Özbaran, “The Ottoman Turks and the Portuguese in the Persian Gulf, 1534-1581”, in *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 6/1, Wiesbaden 1972, pp. 82-84.

remains to be done on the causes and effects of this development” said Charles Boxer when he wrote on the revival of the Red Sea spice trade.³

Niels Steensgaard, a historian from Denmark, worked some twenty years ago on the same subject and expressed this: “The dramatic shift of balance in the European-Asian trade in the decades following 1600 has fascinated me for several years. It appeared to me that the decline of the Portuguese Empire in Asia, the decline of the intercontinental caravan trade and the triumph of the Dutch and English East India Companies - the confrontation of the carrack, the caravans and the companies - was more than a tale of triumph and disaster, but also constituted a decisive moment in world history, pointing towards that distribution of wealth and power which characterized later centuries and the world in which we live”.⁴

Like many historians Steensgaard believed that "the destructive effects of the discovery of the sea route to Asia upon the traditional intercontinental trade routes were not felt until after the elapse of an entire century. After a set-back at the beginning of the 16th century the trade routes through the Middle East regained their importance..."⁵

When I began to write this paper there was a blockade by Western powers upon the Gulf in order to relieve Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion. Once more the Gulf was the center of an international and intercontinental dispute, and the casus belli was -- and is -- petroleum. But the factors which took the foreigners to the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century were different. “Vimos buscar cristãos e especiaria” (We have to seek Christians and spices) said Vasco da Gama when he was asked “what the devil has brought you here” in Calicut, India in 1498. There started “the advent of the imperialism of pepper” (o advent do imperialismo da pimenta) as expressed by Magalhaes Godinho.⁶

Indeed the Portuguese built up their eastern empire with an astonishing speed. They used their naval power to gain control over the Indian Ocean by occupying a number of strategic points and to divert the stream of merchandise - particularly spices - from Asia to Portugal via the Cape of Good Hope by blockading the entrance to the Red Sea and the Gulf,

³ C. R. Boxer, « A Note on the Portuguese Reaction to the Revival of the Red Sea Spice Trade and the Rise of Atjeh, 1540-1600 » in *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. X/3, December 1969, p. 415.

⁴ N. Steensgaard, *Carracks, Caravans and Companies: The Structural Crises in the European-Asian Trade in the Early 17th Century*, Odense 1972, p. 7.

⁵ N. Steensgaard, p. 9.

⁶ V. Magalhaes Godino, *Os Descobrimentos e a Economia Mundial*, vol. I, Lisboa 1965, p. 487; C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825*, London 1969, p. 37.

through which passed the merchandise of the Orient to the Eastern Mediterranean and European countries.

When the Mameluke State in Egypt and Syria was overcome by the Ottoman army, the trade activities through the Red Sea were already deteriorated. Leo Africanus who visited Egypt after the Ottoman occupation witnessed no commercial activities. Studying the Italian sources of the age, Magalhaes Godinho wrote that in the beginning of the year 1519 no commercial business took place in Eastern Mediterranean: "non è piu mercadonti ni al Cayroni in Alexandria".⁷

It is not the subject of my paper to demonstrate the motives which attracted the Ottoman central government to southern expansion. No doubt economic as much as religious effects played their roles in this enlargement. When we read, however, the report of Turkish seaman Selman Reis, who served in both Mameluke and Ottoman fleets, we are inclined to believe that the Ottoman administrators did not appreciate, fully, the importance of the oriental trade routes during the age of discoveries. The report was written in 1525 and presented to "the Gate of Felicity; presumably to Ibrahim Pasha, then the governor of Egypt. The author of the report sees the potential Portuguese danger to the Ottoman possessions in the Red Sea and points out the extent to which the Portuguese were capturing the trade in spices and other goods in the trading centers of the Indian Ocean. "One cannot escape from painful feelings" says Selman "when one sees these (Ottoman) ships and arms idly at Jidda, while one hears about the joyous activities of the accursed Portuguese in those lands of India".⁸

The anxiety expressed by Selman was not without reason. Despite the Ottoman galleys and fighting men, the Portuguese blockade of the Red Sea was still effective. According to what Magalhaes Godinho transfers from Italian sources of the sixteenth century, namely M. Sanudo and Priuli, the spice prices in the Eastern Mediterranean towns were very high compared with the prices in Lisbon⁹. The Portuguese sailors were not allowing merchandise to go to the Levant through the Red Sea. Merchant ships functioning between the Red Sea and Malabar in India were damaged by the Portuguese. Here are the two examples of this kind: In March 1529 a Portuguese fleet seized a big ship (nã) full of spices and also 8 other ships, put

⁷ S. Özbaran, « The Ottomans in Confrontation with the Portuguese in the Red Sea », in *Studies on Turkish-Arab Relations*, Istanbul 1986, pp. 207 ff.

⁸ S. Özbaran, « The Ottomans in Confrontation with the Portuguese in the Red Sea », in *Studies on Turkish-Arab Relations*, Istanbul 1986, pp. 207 ff.

⁹ Magalhaes Godino, II, pp. 115-116

on fire 4 small vessels near the western coast of India.¹⁰ Portuguese historians of the 16th century mention that 8 big ships (naos grossas) and 14 larger vessels (terrades) of Muslims sailing between India and the Red Sea were captured by the Lusitanians¹¹. They also seized an Ottoman galleon (galeão grande de rumes).¹²

The Ottomans or Rumîs/Rumes as called by Arab and Portuguese writers also had reputation, among the Muslim states around the Indian Ocean, for their military forces, particularly the use of fire- arms. They were often in need against the Portuguese. The Estado da India, Portuguese Eastern Empire, was no doubt threatening the existence of various states in the Indian Ocean from the coast of Africa to the Malay-Indonesian area. The Shah of Hormuz Sharafaddin sends a letter to Sultan Süleyman for help to expel the Portuguese from this strategic place. The ruler of Gujarat in India also sought the Ottoman military help¹³. In 1531 there were no spices in Beirut and Alexandria if we believe in what Pero Caroldo wrote from Venice to his Portuguese King: “as galeças grossas destes Venezianos, que agora se esparão de Barute e de Alexandria nom trazem especias de nenhua sorte”.¹⁴

Many factors, including economic, induced the Ottomans to go to the wider world. Preparations at the arsenal of Suez with newly built galleys, and even the attempt of opening a canal between the River Nile and the Red Sea did not immediately take them into the Indian Ocean. The matters in the Mediterranean Sea and the affairs on the Turco-Safavid frontier seemed to them more important. The inevitable campaign, however, came in 1538. The bevlerbeyi of Egypt Süleyman Pasha went against the Portuguese Diu in India with 74 ships carrying about 3,000 men and big guns. This expedition proved, however, to be unsuccessful. But the existence of an Ottoman naval force at Suez was a continuous threat to the Portuguese Estado da India. In 1541 a strong Portuguese fleet tried to destroy the Ottoman galleys at Suez; they were equally unsuccessful.

It was about this time in which the two empires tried to establish some form of agreement by sending official letters to each other. The Ottoman Palace needed pepper whereas the Portuguese were short of wheat. Although the correspondence between the Sultan

¹⁰ Fernão L. de Castanheda, *História do Descobrimento e Conquista da India pelos Portugueses*, Lisboa 1833, Livro IV, Capitulo XXXII and XXXVI; Magalhaes Godino, II, p. 146.

¹¹ Gaspar Correia, *Lendas da India*, Lisboa 1858-1861, II, p. 272.

¹² Castanheda, Livro VII, Capitulo LXVII-LXIX

¹³ S. Özbaran, « Osmanli ve Hindistan Youlu », in *Tarih Dergisi*, No. XXXI, Istanbul 1978, pp. 92 ff.

¹⁴ Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, Gaveta 20, Maço 7, Documento 15 ; S. Özbaran, “Osmanli Imparatorluğu...”, p. 97

and the King continued in the middle decades of the sixteenth century¹⁵, the Turkish threat to the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean seems to have grown on both sides of Arabia. The Ottomans took Basra in 1546 and made an amicable approach to the Portuguese governor of Hormuz; obviously they wanted the entrance to the Gulf open. Katif was then besieged by the Portuguese naval forces; their proceeding to Basra ended, however, with no success.

In the year 1552 there came, after the Diu campaign, the second big expedition of the Ottomans. The veteran sailor, geographer, the author of *Kitab-i Bahriye*, Piri Reis set sail from Suez with 25 galleys and 4 galleons to capture Hormuz, and secure the entrance of the Gulf. However, this campaign and the efforts of another well-known Ottoman geographer and seaman, Seydi Ali did not bring victory to the Ottoman Palace.¹⁶

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the grand-scale campaigns in the Indian Ocean seem to have been abandoned. The immense area, stretching from the Red Sea to the China Seas, was too large for a small country like Portugal with its limited population. Meanwhile, the Asian traders increased their commercial activities beyond the reach of the Portuguese. "Corruption, arbitrariness, nepotism in the granting of offices, private trading by officials and soldiers, and extortion of the natives grew steadily worse"¹⁷. It was equally difficult for the Ottoman government to have victories over such a large area, the Indian Ocean, with the Mediterranean practice of maritime. They became a land empire rather than a seaborne one. In confrontation with an economically expanding Europe they also witnessed the decline of the timar system, under which all the revenue sources were delegated to the provincial officials and military functionaries along with the authority to collect the taxes in kind.

In 1555 the Ottoman administrators proclaimed their two new provinces (beylerbeylik) along the coast of the Indian Ocean: Lahsa in the Gulf, Habesh in the Red Sea. The budgets of Ottoman Yemen and the fiscal registers of Basra indicate that among the revenues of these provinces stood certain amount of income obtained from the incoming merchandise - revenues of these provinces were collected by means of tax-farming system. The port revenues did not seem to occupy a high percentage. For example, in 1562 4,273,806 para (one para equaled 2 akçe) came from the taxes put on the incoming merchandise, i.e., 14% of

¹⁵ S. Özbaran, "An Imperial Letter from Süleyman the Magnificent to Dom João III concerning Proposals for an Ottoman-Portuguese Armistice", in *Portuguese Studies*, vol. 6, London 1990.

¹⁶ S. Özbaran, « The Ottoman Turks and the Portuguese... », pp. 58-66.

¹⁷ Meilink-Roelofs, p. 126.

the total revenue of the province of Yemen¹⁸. In the end of the century, however, 29% of the total income came from the landing places (iskeleha)¹⁹.

Between the dates of the two imperial letters, which I mentioned earlier, i.e., 1564, the conditions for trading activities were changing. The Red Sea ports were to receive more traders from the East. “Atjehnese participation in the Red Sea spice-trade was undeniably in full swing by the mid-sixteenth century” says C. R. Boxer²⁰. Portuguese expeditions to intercept ships from Atjeh and Gujarat failed to fulfill their purposes. Books and articles written about the pepper trade in the Levant are full of references to support the argument that the commercial business, particularly in spices, had been revived. “As for spices, of which pepper was by the far most important” writes Braudel, “there was annual flow of 20, 000 to 40, 000 light quintals between 1554 and 1564”²¹. F. Lane estimated²² the following figures for the Venetian pepper exports from Alexandria:

Yearly average before Portuguese interference was felt about 1, 150, 000 lb. Eng.

Yearly average, 1560-64 inclusive 1, 310, 454 lb. Eng.

A dispatch from two Portuguese spies at Venice – as evidence among many – informed in 1564 the King of Portugal that in June of that year there arrived in Cairo 1, 800 quintals of other spices. These spices had been landed at Jeddah, some of them reaching from Atjeh and Malabar Coast in India²³.

The frequency of traders from the East and the Atjehnese appeal to the Ottoman sultan for military help indicate that commercial activities in the Indian Ocean had been restored in 1560's²⁴. Until the end of the 16th Century, when the decisive blow was struck by the establishment of the North-West European trading companies²⁵, the Ottomans had profited

¹⁸ Topkapi Palace Archives, Istanbul, D. 314.

¹⁹ H. Sahillioğlu, « Yemen'in 1599-1600 Yılı Bütçesi », in Yusuf Hikmat Bayur'a Armağan, Ankara 1985, p. 302.

²⁰ C. R. Boxer, « A Note on Portuguese Reactions... », p. 417.

²¹ F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (trans. S. Reynolds), vol. II, London 1972, p. 550

²² F. C. Lane, « The Mediterranean Spice Trade: Further Evidence of its arrival in the Sixteenth Century », in Crisis and Change in the Venetian Economy in the 16th and 17th Centuries (ed. B. Pullan), London 1968, p. 47.

²³ Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Corpo Chronologico, Maço 107, Doc. 9; C. R. Boxer, “A Note on Portuguese Reactions...”, p. 420.

²⁴ There exist some studies on the Ottoman-Atjehnese relations in the 16th Century. A. Reid's “Sixteenth Century Turkish Influence in Western Indonesia”, in *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. X/3, 1969, pp. 395-414 and D. Lombard's “L'Empire Ottoman vu d'Insulinde”, in *Turco-Tatar Past Soviet Present: Studies presented to Alexandr Bennigsen*, Paris 1986, pp. 157-164.

²⁵ Steensgaard, p. 9.

from the trading business in the Indian Ocean and the Levant. However, this had not occupied a big percentage in their budgets. With the revenues they had collected in the frontier provinces, they had to pay their military expenses. The new comers from the North-western Europe marked the end of the Ottoman ill-formed trading policy.