The Ethnic Composition of Ottoman Ship Crews and the “Rumi Challenge” to Portuguese Identity

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Abstract
Although the confrontation between the Ottoman and Portuguese navies in the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean is commonly described as a struggle between “indigenous Muslims” and “European intruders,” in reality the seafarers of both fleets were overwhelmingly Mediterranean in origin. Yet despite these shared origins, the crews of Ottoman and Portuguese ships nevertheless conceived of themselves in different ways: the Portuguese as part of a blood-based “nation,” and the Ottomans as part of a cosmopolitan “empire.” And ultimately, this difference profoundly influenced relations between the two powers. Since the Ottomans, unlike any of the indigenous peoples of the Indian Ocean, were so obviously racially and ethnically similar to the Portuguese, their self-confident cosmopolitanism posed a threat to the underpinnings of Portuguese ethnic solidarity, just as the strength of their navy posed a threat to Portuguese hegemony at sea.

Keywords
Ottomans, Indian Ocean, Portuguese, Ethnic Identity, maritime history

The confrontation between Ottomans and Portuguese in the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean is today most commonly described as a conflict between “indigenous Muslims” and “European intruders.” In many respects, however, the crews of Ottoman vessels were as distinct from the local populations of the Indian Ocean as those of Portuguese ships. In fact, most Ottoman seamen were drawn—to an extent rarely emphasized by modern scholarship—from stocks of seafarers who were ethnically mixed but overwhelmingly Mediterranean in origin. For this reason, interaction between the Ottoman Empire and the Portuguese Estado da Índia during the sixteenth century can be best understood not as a struggle between “natives” and “intruders,” but rather as the result of a simultaneous migration of peoples from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean by means of two
separate maritime routes: one around the Cape of Good Hope and the other through the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.

Yet despite these shared origins—and despite an awareness of these shared origins on both sides—the crews of Ottoman and Portuguese ships nevertheless conceived of themselves in very different ways. For the Portuguese, collective identity was already coalescing around a nascent protonationalist “commonality of blood” in the Western European mold, which over time was destined to become progressively more anxious about ethnic, racial, and religious intermixing.¹ The Ottomans, in contrast, projected an unabashedly pluralistic and multiethnic identity which was very much based around the project of accommodating diversity and incorporating it into the collective.² As we shall see below, such a difference was to have profound implications for the development of relations between the two powers, for in the end, it was precisely this marked divergence in the conceptualization of self which made the Ottomans seem so dangerous to their Lusitanian rivals. Since the Ottomans, unlike any of the indigenous peoples of the Indian Ocean, were so obviously racially and ethnically similar to the Portuguese, their self-confident cosmopolitanism posed a threat to the underpinnings of Portuguese ethnic solidarity, just as the strength of their navy posed a threat to Portuguese hegemony at sea.

In their more reflective moments, Portuguese authors of the sixteenth century sometimes expressed their fears about such a challenge quite explicitly. Unfortunately, their views have tended to be overlooked by later scholars working within a conceptual framework steeped in nationalist notions of ethnicity wholly inappropriate to the early modern Ottoman state. Alongside a discussion of the actual ethnic composition of Ottoman ship crews in the Indian Ocean, therefore, the present work will seek to address the problems associated with even asking questions about “ethnicity” in an Ottoman context.


² On the Ottoman Empire’s mechanisms for incorporating religious and ethnic diversity, especially for earlier periods of Ottoman history, see, in addition to the numerous works cited below, Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
The Semantics of Ottoman Ethnicity

The most basic obstacle to any discussion of ethnic identity in the Ottoman world is one of simple terminology. With relentless consistency, the vocabulary found in historical sources is not only problematic in itself but also seriously at odds with that employed in more recent scholarly works—even in cases where the very same word is being used. For example, European authors of the sixteenth century, in common with most historians today, habitually referred to the Ottomans as "Turks." If pressed, they might even have defined this term more specifically as "Turkish-speaking Muslims from Anatolia," which corresponds more or less to its modern definition both in Turkish and in Western languages. But in practice, "Turk" was employed by Europeans quite differently, as an indiscriminate blanket term for a Muslim of any ethnic origin. Even Western Europeans who converted to Islam could be referred to as "Turks"—as in the English phrase "to turn Turk," meaning "to convert to Islam"—though such converts were obviously neither natives of Anatolia nor native speakers of Turkish.

Meanwhile, in the Ottoman Empire itself, the situation was almost completely the reverse. "Turk" as an ethnonym was used extremely sparingly and usually only in reference to Turkish-speaking tribal nomads. As such, it had connotations of boorishness, lack of sophistication, or even "foreignness," and most city-dwelling Muslims of the empire (even Turkish-speaking ones) would have balked at using it to describe themselves. In later centuries of Ottoman history, such individuals might instead have referred to themselves as "Ottomans," thereby indicating an affiliation with the empire's ruling dynasty or an allegiance to the Ottoman state. But in the sixteenth century,

3 Despite the importance of this topic, it is one that has attracted very little systematic attention from historians. The following discussion is largely inspired by Salih Özbaran's recent historiographical work on the question of Ottoman identity, Bir Osmanlı Kimliği: 14.-17. Yüzyıllarda Rûm/Rûmi Aidiyet ve İmgerleri (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2004); and Cemal Kafadar's Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); see also Bernard Lewis, The Multiple Identities of the Middle East (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998).

4 For a collection of articles by different authors on the changing image and meaning of "Turk" in the West from the fourteenth century to the present, see Dînyada Türk Imgesi, ed. Özlem Kumrular (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2005).

5 For a somewhat critical reinterpretation of this commonly held view, see Hakan Erdem, "Osmanlı Kaynaklarından Yansıyan Türk İmaj(lar)ı," in Dînyada Türk Imgesi, 13-26.

6 On the development of "Ottoman" identity in the nineteenth century, see İlber Ortaylı, "Osmanlı Kimliği," Cogito, 19 (Summer 1999), 77-85.
“Ottomans” were specifically members of this ruling dynasty, not their subjects. Thus, the people we might today call “Ottomans” (unless, of course, we are speaking of Ottoman Christians or Jews) were more likely simply to call themselves “Muslims”—rather in the same way that modern citizens of the United States consider themselves “Americans” even though their country hardly encompasses all of North and South America. At the same time, myriad ethnic identities existed within this larger category of Muslim, and various terms to describe them often appear in Ottoman sources. But crucially, “Turk” in the modern sense of a general designator for Turkish-speaking Muslims had no exact equivalent. With specific reference to the Ottoman navy, the closest approximations would perhaps be “Rum yigitleri” or “Leventenler,” essentially Muslim (and usually Turkish-speaking) levies from core areas of the empire that were often used to man Ottoman ships. Even these terms, however, were loaded with ambiguities: “Rum” could also mean “Greek Orthodox,” as it does in modern Turkish, while “Leventen” has since come to signify a member of Istanbul’s small (and non-Muslim) community of Italian speakers. Adding to this confusion, it also bears emphasis that when an individual from a religious minority or from abroad converted to Islam, his or her original ethnicity tended to be subsumed into the larger category of Muslim. And even in cases when conversion was not an issue, an ethnic term (e.g., “Turk,” “Greek,” or “Jew”) could just as easily be used to indicate an individual’s religious affiliation as his or her ethnic or linguistic community.

How does this confusing terminology compare with the situation in the rest of the Muslim world, beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire? Here as well, “Turk” was rarely or never used in reference to the Ottomans, especially since the ruling dynasties and warrior elites of many neighboring states (including the Mamluks, Safavids, and Mughals) were themselves ethnically Turkish. As an alternative, the Ottomans were commonly (although not exclusively) known to other Muslims as “Rumis,” a usage which indicated their status as the successors of both the Eastern Roman

7 For an example of a contemporary document in which all of these usages (i.e., “Turk” as a nomad or foreigner, “Ottoman” as a member of the ruling dynasty, and “Muslim” for an Ottoman subject), see the anonymous Kitābu mesālihi l-muslimīn ve menāfi l-mūmīnīn, ed. Yaşar Yücel (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Yayınları, 1981), 56-72; as discussed by Baki Tezcan in “Searching for Osman: A Reassessment of the Deposition of the Ottoman Sultan Osman (1618-1622)” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2001), 101-2.
Empire and the medieval Seljuks of Anatolia, or “Rum.” Similarly, the Ottoman Empire as a whole was known as the “Sultanate of Rum,” and its sovereigns as the “sultans of Rum.” Under certain circumstances, the Ottomans too referred to themselves in this way, though (as the parallel usage of “Rum” to mean “Greek Orthodox” shows) they seem not to have done so in any consistent or systematic fashion.8

This brings us finally to the Portuguese, the most acute observers of Ottoman naval activity in the Indian Ocean, whose own terminology for the Ottomans presents something of a special case. Like other Europeans, Portuguese authors referred to the Ottomans not infrequently as “Turks,” though when doing so they were always careful to draw a distinction between “Turks” and the indigenous Muslims of the Indian Ocean, whom they instead designated as “Moors.” At the same time, however, Portuguese involvement in the internal affairs of Iran and the Indian Subcontinent brought them into contact with Uzbeks, Turkmen, and various other Turkic peoples from Central Asia. As a result, the Portuguese seem to have been unique among Europeans in developing an awareness of the ethnic connotations of the word “Turk” and of its inadequacy as a term for the multiethnic population of the Ottoman Empire. For this reason, they often turned to the local Muslim alternative, “Rumi,” to describe the Ottomans, while also using the same word in reference to mercenaries and other migrants from the Muslim Mediterranean who were “Ottoman” in origin but had no formal ties with the Ottoman state.9

The implications of this special Portuguese sensitivity to the nuances of Ottoman identity will be explored in greater detail below. For the moment, it is enough simply to note that any discussion of the ethnic composition of Ottoman ship crews is complicated by the terminology of contemporary sources, and to recognize that, for the Ottomans themselves, collective identity at the political level was hardly ever framed in ethnic terms. On the contrary, Ottoman authors of the early modern world were capable of discussing and even celebrating their lack of a clearly definable ethnic heritage in a manner that most Europeans of the time would probably have found impossible. Witness, for example, the following passage from

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8 Özbay, Bir Osmanlı Kimiliği, 89-108.
Mustafa Ali’s *Essence of History*, in which he glowingly describes the uniquely cosmopolitan pluralism of the Ottoman Empire of his day:

> Most of the inhabitants of Rum are of confused ethnic origins. Among its notables there are few whose lineage does not go back to a convert to Islam…. It is as if two different species of fruit-bearing tree mingled and mated, with the leaves and fruits; and the fruit of this union was large and filled with liquid, like a princely pear. The best qualities of the progenitors were then manifested and gave distinction, either in physical beauty, or spiritual wisdom.\(^\text{10}\)

**The Turkish Minority**

The above quotation, taken from the writings of one of the best-known Ottoman intellectuals of the sixteenth century, suggests that to analyze the ethnic composition of Ottoman ship crews we will be forced to employ terminology that the Ottomans themselves would never have used. But if—for our own purposes only—we define the term “Ottoman Turk” as indicating a “Turkish-speaking Muslim from Anatolia,” then the one fact that becomes immediately clear about the man power of the Ottomans’ Indian Ocean fleet is that this group never formed more than a small minority of the whole. To be sure, much the same could probably be said of ethnic Portuguese on many ships of the *Estado da India*. But in contrast to Portuguese vessels—where at least the commanders and highest-ranking officers were always blue-blooded *fidalgos* (Portuguese nobles of certifiable lineage)—no such rule applied for those of the Ottomans.\(^\text{11}\) In fact, of all the Ottoman admirals of the sixteenth-century Indian Ocean, only two belong unequivocally in the category of “Ottoman Turk”: the famous cartographer and navigator Piri Reis (or “Captain Piri”), who served as “admiral of the Indies” during the early 1550s and hailed originally from the port of Gallipoli,\(^\text{12}\) and Seydi Ali Reis, Piri’s immediate successor and a native of Sinop on the Black Sea.\(^\text{13}\) The careers of both of these individuals, however, were unusual in the sense that they had each served for most of their lives in the Mediterranean and were

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\(^{11}\) On the recruitment of Portuguese officers, see G. V. Scammell, “European Seafaring in Asia, c.1500-1750,” *South Asia*, 19 (1966), 27-8.


subsequently tapped to head the empire’s Indian Ocean fleet at an advanced age and without any previous experience in the region.

Other commanders, in the cases where their origins are known, seem to have had decidedly more diverse backgrounds. Selman Reis, the Ottomans’ first admiral of Suez, was a Greek convert to Islam from the Aegean island of Lesbos. His second in command, despite bearing the unmistakably Turkish name “Dimurdash,” was a Venetian wine merchant from Crete. Hadım Suleyman Pasha, who led a massive Ottoman naval expedition to India in 1538, was a palace eunuch originally from Albania. And Sefer Reis, whose long career as a corsair in the Arabian Sea culminated in his promotion to admiral in 1560, was possibly a convert from a family of Iberian Jews.

What about the rank and file of Ottoman ship crews? If anything, these crewmen appear to have been from even more diverse backgrounds than their officers. Here we are especially well informed about Hadım Suleyman Pasha’s armada of 1538, the largest Ottoman fleet ever to sail in the Indian Ocean. According to an anonymous Venetian who sailed with this fleet, the pasha used the excuse of an outbreak of war with the Serenissima in 1537 to arrest all Venetians in Alexandria; and “after this, those belonging to the sea, and the author of this voyage among the rest, were sent by fifty at a time to Cairo, whence Suleyman Pasha, having selected the gunners, rowers, carpenters and officers, sent them by companies to Suez to assist in fitting out the fleet in that port against his own arrival.” The total number of Venetians thus impressed is unknown, but the same source states that at least 2,000 tried to desert while still on their way to Suez, so their numbers must have been considerable. Furthermore, the experience of these Venetians was

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shared by several other groups similarly corralled into service for the 1538 campaign. While the fleet passed through Jiddah on its outgoing voyage, local Arab sailors were drafted to work the oars and pilot the ships, and some 146 Portuguese captured during the course of the expedition were likewise consigned to the galleys. At the conclusion of the campaign, as the Ottomans retreated from India and returned to the Red Sea, Portuguese defenders captured stragglers left behind by the pasha whom they identified as Greek, Albanian, and Sicilian. There is even an account of the campaign written in Hungarian by a participant on the Ottoman side.

What percentage of the fleet’s total man power did these groups represent? According to contemporary Portuguese observers, Hadim Suleyman’s armada was composed of a total of around forty war galleys and another twenty or twenty-five vessels of varying sizes, some of them smaller oared craft and some larger sailing ships for transport. Of the war galleys, each craft held about two hundred men, of whom twenty-five were elite Janissary harquebusiers, another twenty-five were Turkish bowmen, and the remainder were oarsmen (in addition to a handful of navigators, officers, and gunners). In all, if we include the crews of the transport ships and smaller vessels, at least seventy-five hundred men were employed as rowers, pilots, or deckhands, and virtually all of them seem to have been “foreigners” impressed into service through various means. They were accompanied by just three thousand regular Ottoman combat troops, and at least one thousand of these were members of the Janissary corps, composed of forced converts to Islam from Christian villages in the Balkans. The only component of the fleet’s man power likely to have been predominantly Turkish in ethnicity, therefore, was the contingent of two thousand archers—“rumes frecheiros,” as the Portuguese referred to them—though even among these a certain degree of ethnic diversity is probable. Thus, by even the most generous of estimates, ethnic Turks must have constituted somewhat less than a quarter of the fleet’s total man power.

24 These figures are taken from Ribeiro, “O Primeiro Cerco de Diu,” 259.
Admittedly, Hadim Suleyman Pasha’s armada was unusually large and may have been, especially in terms of the number of seamen impressed into service, a rather atypical example of Ottoman fleets in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, a high level of ethnic diversity seems to have been characteristic of fleets throughout the century, including consistently large numbers of Christian Europeans. As early as 1509, for example, when Francisco de Almeida defeated a fleet from Mamluk Egypt composed largely of “Ottoman” volunteers, the spoils of war recovered from captured ships included books in Latin and Italian and even a psalter in Portuguese.25 Later in the century, when the Ottoman fleet under Piri Reis attacked Hormuz in 1552, Portuguese defenders regularly called from the fortress walls to Christian renegades among the besieging forces, and subsequently learned details about the Ottomans’ itinerary from an Italian and a Russian who were left behind when the fleet departed.26 Numerous Christians were likewise freed from the galleys of Mir Ali Beg after the Portuguese defeated him at Mombasa in 1589.27 And in addition to these Europeans, a long list of other nationalities, including Circassians, Arabs, Maghrebis, Abyssinians, and Gujaratis, were all represented on Ottoman vessels.

An Ethnic Division of Labor?

While ethnic diversity was a constant on Ottoman ships, not all groups necessarily performed the same roles in the same numbers while on board. Rowers—always the most numerous group in any Ottoman fleet because of the predominance of oared vessels—were also the least likely to be ethnic Turks in the fleets of the Indian Ocean. In comparison to the Mediterranean, where the Admiralty made heavy use of local Turkish-speaking levies and even paid volunteers to man its galleys, the Ottoman-controlled areas of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf were extremely sparsely populated, such that the vast majority of rowers employed there were of necessity either convicts

26 Lisbon, A.N.T.T., Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 89, doc.9, fol. 6a.
or captives. Of these, the convicts were taken largely from Egypt and Iraq and probably had the same heterogeneous mix of Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, and the like as the larger populations of these two provinces. Meanwhile, captives—who according to Islamic law could only be non-Muslims from outside the borders of the empire—were often European Christians, but once again not in the same numbers as in the Ottoman fleets of the Mediterranean. This was due both to the relative scarcity of Westerners in the Indian Ocean region and (as we shall see below) to the special seafaring skills which such Westerners often possessed. As a result, black slaves from East Africa, and especially Christians from Ethiopia, were probably on the whole much more numerous than any contingent of “Frankish” rowers from Western Europe. Not surprisingly, non-Muslims from the subcontinent were also represented.

Pilots, on the other hand, were commonly Indian Ocean Muslims (as they were on Portuguese vessels) because of their privileged knowledge of local conditions. Portuguese captives were also highly prized by the Ottomans as pilots, provided they could be enticed or coerced into this role. Caulkers, carpenters, navigators, and other such skilled seamen seem most often to have been Italians and Greeks; some of them, slaves or impressed men; and others, renegades. Fighting men, for their part, were often ethnic Turks, but by no means universally so. Marine archers, for example, who in the Ottoman Mediterranean were usually Turkish speakers from the core areas of the empire, could just as easily be Circassians from Egypt on vessels in the Indian Ocean. And Janissary harquebusiers—who were by definition

28 On the Ottomans’ use of levies to man the banks of their Mediterranean galleys, see Colin Imber, “The Navy of Süleyman the Magnificent,” Archivum Ottomanicum, 6 (1980), 265-8.
29 The oarsmen of Sefer Reis’s fleet of 1565, for example, comprised “counterfeiters and other convicted criminals available in Egypt.” Istanbul, Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri, Mühimme Defterleri 6, no. 256, 122. For other examples from Egypt, Baghdad and the Yemen, see Imber, “The Navy of Süleyman the Magnificent,” 268-9.
30 Perhaps the earliest record of rowers being collected from East Africa, dating from about 1540, is in the anonymous Kânûnînâ ve Hzûtî-ı Hümayûn, Istanbul, Velîyüddin Efendi Kütiphanesi, no. 1970, fol. 42b.
32 For a description of Ottoman attempts to recruit Portuguese captives as pilots, see Lisbon, A.N.T.T., Corpo Cronológico, pt. 1, maço 59, doc. 104.
33 See below, nn. 43-6.
34 See Istanbul, Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri, Mühimme Defterleri 6, no. 256, 122.
European converts to Islam—seem to have been *de rigueur* on Indian Ocean warships far earlier than was the case elsewhere in the imperial fleet. There are also occasional references to Abyssinian Muslims serving as both archers and harquebusiers in Ottoman service. Finally, gunners appear to have been among the most diverse groups aboard Ottoman ships. Many of them were Western captives or renegades, or Greek or Balkan converts to Islam, though a good number of ethnic Turks could also be found in their ranks.

Because of their unique martial skills, seamen trained in the use of firearms (either as gunners or as harquebusiers) were in especially high demand throughout the Indian Ocean, where they were employed in large numbers not only on Ottoman warships, but also as mercenaries on private Muslim trading vessels. The Portuguese constantly fretted about the danger posed by these freelance “Rumi” harquebusiers and gunners and considered their presence on any ship with a trading pass from the *Estado da India* the gravest of offenses. Still, it is important to emphasize that any “Rumi” found defending a private merchant vessel was as likely to be a Western European as an ethnic Turk, as was the case on regular Ottoman warships. The only distinguishing characteristic of such mercenaries was that, as mercenaries, they were by definition serving voluntarily, so the Westerners among them would have been converts rather than captives.

**Recruitment and Impressment**

This notable presence of Western Christians on Ottoman vessels—even among their fighting contingents—leads us to question the extent to which the representatives of various ethnic groups in Ottoman service were...

35 In 1565 the governor of Egypt was ordered to supply “twenty-five harquebusiers and twenty-five Circassian archers” to each of the ten galleys being prepared in Suez for Sefer Reis. Istanbul, Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri, Mühimme Defterleri 6, no. 256, 122. This corresponds quite closely to Portuguese accounts of the distribution of archers and harquebusiers in Hadim Süleyman’s armada of 1538 cited above; in the Mediterranean, harquebusiers were regularly mandated only after the battle of Lepanto in 1571. See Imber, “The Navy of Süleyman the Magnificent,” 272.


employed by compulsion or by choice. An answer is easiest to find with respect to the rowers, among whom (as noted above) there was probably almost no one who was serving other than through compulsion as a captive or a convict. In other cases, however, the situation was made more complex by the uniquely Ottoman proclivity to use “slavery” not only as a means of compulsion, but also as an unusual but effective tool for recruitment and career advancement. In other words, in contrast to contemporary European fleets where captive labor was typically used only for menial and physically demanding tasks like rowing, Ottoman ships were populated by large numbers of experienced seamen who could technically be categorized as “slaves”—and who may even have begun their careers as captives—but whose conditions of service could hardly be called “slavery” in a European sense.

This ambiguous status most commonly typified the experience of European Christians in the Indian Ocean fleet, since Westerners often had valuable seafaring skills that their officers were eager to put to good use. As a result, European captives with the right credentials could find themselves in positions of responsibility surprisingly soon after capture, where they were expected to contribute to the operation and maintenance of their vessels and even to their defense in the case of an enemy attack. Ideally, such individuals would eventually be enticed to convert to Islam to gain their freedom, continuing thereafter to serve in the Ottoman fleet on a voluntary basis. But even if they did not, there was always a sliding scale of compulsion and remuneration along which they could move according to conditions, their willingness to cooperate, and the general perception of their trustworthiness.

Gunniers present us with the best examples of this delicate intermediate position between slavery and freedom, for they had abilities which were at once especially useful and especially dangerous for the Ottoman fleet. Records show that large numbers of Westerners were regularly employed as gunniers on Ottoman ships (some voluntarily and some under compulsion), and it is therefore hardly surprising that we find numerous instances in which such men used their position to sabotage Ottoman combat operations at critical moments. In an encounter with the Portuguese in 1517, for example, the admiral Selman Reis saw his ship burst into flames when a Christian gunner set fire to the powder stores to incapacitate his own guns “and incite his coreligionists to attack.”

38 Political History of the Yemen at the Beginning of the 16th Century, According to Contemporary Arabic Sources, ed. and trans. L. O. Schumann (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1961), 32;
in the Indian port of Surat in 1555, Seydi Ali Reis was betrayed by an “infidel gunner” from his crew, who deserted to the ship of a Portuguese envoy and conspired with him to prevent the Ottoman fleet’s departure. Hadim Suleyman Pasha, because of the unusually large number of impressed men he employed during his campaign of 1538, was particularly plagued with this kind of problem. At one point during the siege of Diu, he ordered the decapitation of a Venetian gunner who had refused to obey his orders and had cried out defiantly, “the Signoria of Venice is not dead!” Subsequently, the pasha had all the remaining Christians put in irons, even while continuing to use them to operate the heavy guns.

Ironically, though, considering Hadim Suleyman’s well-deserved reputation for heavy-handedness, his campaign also offers some of the clearest examples of the temptation to use the carrot rather than the stick when dealing with captives who were at the same time potentially valuable crew members. Suspicious that his Christian gunners (some four hundred in all!) were intentionally missing their marks during the bombardment of Diu, the pasha at one point offered a thousand gold pieces and a promise of freedom to whoever shot down the great Portuguese standard flying over the castle—a prize promptly collected by one captive marksman after only the third shot. Later, once the Ottoman fleet had retreated from India and returned safely to Suez, the admiral magnanimously announced that all impressed Venetians were to be paid for their service at the same rate of pay as Ottoman regulars. Policies such as these were far from unusual and were designed to achieve much more than simply ensuring reliable performance during the heat of battle. Over the long term, they provided an incentive for skilled Western seamen to remain in Ottoman service on a permanent basis, where in time they could rise through the ranks to positions of substantial authority.

Italians, for whatever reason, appear to have been particularly receptive to the prospect of pursuing a career in the service of the Grand Turk. The


“Particular Relation of the Expedition of Soliman Pacha,” 271.

“Particular Relation of the Expedition of Solyman Pacha,” 272.

“Particular Relation of the Expedition of Solyma Pacha,” 286.
renowned Hoja Safar, for instance, originally from the southern Italian town of Otranto, was taken captive as a young man and began his life at sea as a slave of the admiral Selman Reis. Subsequently, he converted to Islam; rose to the command of his own galley; and eventually migrated to India, where he became governor of Surat and collaborated closely with Hadim Suleyman Pasha during the Ottoman siege of Diu.43 Similarly, his contemporary Giovanni Francesco Giustiniani, a Venetian convert to Islam who had previously spent time in Portugal, was one of Hadim Suleyman’s closest advisers and was appointed to the post of head navigator of the pasha’s fleet.44 Later in the century, the Veronese traveler Filippo Pigafetta remarked on the large number of Italians who continued to be employed at the Ottoman naval yard in Suez, including a certain Mastro Michele da Dieppe, a “slave” who ran the arsenal, and “a good number of Italian renegades stationed here with the sancak begi, himself from Pontremoli, who all work in service of the galleys.”45

Less prevalent than these Italians, but by no means absent, were a number of Portuguese seamen who could also be found serving the Ottoman fleet in a variety of different capacities. Most notoriously, the pilot Diego Martins, who was captured off the coast of Arabia by Ottoman auxiliaries in the mid-1530s, was convinced to embrace Islam and act as a personal adviser to Hadim Suleyman Pasha during the run-up to the 1538 campaign.46 Forty more Portuguese renegades, who had originally entered service with Sultan Badr of Shihr around the same time, also seem to have joined Hadim Suleyman’s fleet as combat troops.47 Some fifteen years later, yet another Portuguese renegade by the name of João de Barca accompanied Piri Reis on his expedition to Hormuz, where he was used by the admiral to negotiate with the defenders of the fortress during a break in the siege.48 Nor were these instances of “rebellion”—as the Portuguese sources refer to them—isolated examples, for according to some estimates there were as

43 “Particular Relation of the Expedition of Solyman Pacha,” 268.
47 Serjeant, The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast, 60, 85.
48 Couto, Da Ásia, vol. 6, bk. 10, chap. 2.
many as five thousand Portuguese renegades in Asia by the second half of the 
century. Precise figures are lacking, but a good number of these are 
certain to have chosen the Ottomans as paymasters.

Naturally, all of this consorting with the “Rumis” was viewed as a pro-
found threat by both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities of Portuguese 
Asia. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the Jesuit Frey Agostinho 
wrote a letter to the king from Hormuz in which he complained that Otto-
man merchants

carry back to Turkey along with their merchandise large numbers of Christians, some 
who are captives and others who are taken in by trickery, where they are all made into 
Turks. And this is because there is no bishop in Hormuz to look after their souls, 
which is the cause of great harm to Your Majesty’s affairs and a source of great danger 
to India, because these renegades know the ports [in these parts] and are the ones who 
advise [the Ottomans] about how fleets can be sent to India.50

The “trickery” of which Frey Agostinho spoke was of course a veiled reference 
to voluntary conversion, something Portuguese of the day were loath to 
speak about in regard to their own compatriots but which was as much a part 
of life in Portuguese Asia as it was in the Mediterranean.51 The Ottomans, 
certainly, were not the only Muslim polity guilty of luring Portuguese seamen 
away from the Catholic faith: there were probably many more in the service 
of Indian potentates, who generally offered better pay. Nevertheless, it was the 
Ottoman threat which the Portuguese seemed to view with the greatest 
sense of urgency—if for no other reason than the fact that they perceived 
the Ottomans as so racially and culturally similar to themselves.

49 Cruz, “Exiles and renegades in early sixteenth-century Portuguese Asia,” 246; more 
generally, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political 

50 “[J]untamente com a mercadaria levão muitos christãos comprados e outros engenados 
pera Turquia onde os fazem ser Turcos, e isto por não aver em Ormus hum bispo que com 
cuidado vigie sobre as almas donde vem muito dano a fazenda de Vossa Magestade e perigo a 
India porque estes renegados sabem os portos e são os que dão os avisos de como podem vir 
as armadas a India.” Documentação Ultramarina Portuguesa, 8 vols. (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos 

51 For a roughly contemporary literary example of corsairs and conversion from the Med-
iterranean, see Kafadar, Between Two Worlds, 83; more generally, see Peter L. Wilson, Pirate 
Racial and Cultural Affinities between “Rumis” and Portuguese

Portuguese awareness of the uncomfortable resemblances between themselves and the Ottomans could take a variety of different forms. Most obviously, “Rumis” were consistently described—unlike most indigenous Muslims of the Indian Ocean—as fellow “white men” (“gemte branca”) in Portuguese texts. And while hailing from diverse backgrounds, a good number of Rumis (especially the Italians) were also native speakers of Latin languages with whom the Portuguese could communicate relatively easily. Such individuals served as natural interlocutors, figuring prominently in Portuguese accounts of their interactions with the Rumis. Ultimately, their presence created a sense of cultural closeness which would have important implications for the ways in which the Portuguese perceived the Ottomans generally.

At the rarified level of interstate relations, of course, the two powers remained inveterately hostile throughout the sixteenth century. But on a personal level, the cultural affinities shared by Ottomans and Portuguese could on occasion open the door to more benign types of interaction, ranging from good-natured ribbing to even quite touching instances of kindness or charity. Jihangir Khan, for example, a “Rumi” of Italian origin who served first under Admiral Selman Reis and later under the sultans of Gujarat, was fond of subjecting the hapless Portuguese placed in his custody to lengthy recitations of Petrarch and Ariosto. In similar fashion, certain Portuguese used to bring letters once a year to Hoja Safar in his stronghold in Surat which they claimed were from his Italian mother and which were addressed in Italian “to Hoja Safar, my son, at the gates of hell.” Kara Hasan, another Rumi immigrant to the subcontinent who had participated in Hadim Suleyman’s siege of Diu, was described by the Portuguese chronicler Diogo do Couto as a genuine friend and as his primary informant on matters related to the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. It is in part thanks to this personal friendship that we know today as much as we do about the Rumi community of sixteenth-century western India.

Even the Jesuits, religious stalwarts though they were, could sometimes treat their Rumi adversaries with kindness. At one point late in the sixteenth century, the fathers at the Mughal court in Agra pleaded for the release of

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52 Couto, *Da Ásia*, vol. 5, bk. 1, chap. 9.
53 Couto, *Da Ásia*, vol. 6, bk. 2, chap. 4.
54 Couto, *Da Ásia*, vol. 4, bk. 1, chap. 6.
a number of Portuguese prisoners there and managed in the process to secure the freedom of five Ottoman captives. Their justification for this charity is revealing, for according to the account of one friar these captives were “Turks of Europe; for two kinds of Turkish soldiers are found in India, those of Asia, to whom the name Turk is given, and those of Europe, who are mostly from Constantinople, which had been called the New Rome, on which account they are called Rumis both by Indians and Portuguese.”

As this anecdote illustrates, even the shared experience of captivity could serve as a venue for finding common ground. By the mid-sixteenth century, after several decades of ongoing hostilities, there were many high-ranking Rumis and Portuguese who had spent extended periods as each other’s captives, gaining thereby an intimate familiarity with the manners and customs of their opponents. On the Ottoman side, Kurtoğlu Hizir Reis, who commanded a large fleet of galleys in the 1560s, and Piri Reis, the renowned admiral and cartographer, were among the most prominent seamen to have served time as prisoners. Many Portuguese fell captive to the Ottomans as well, including a large number who were placed collectively under the care of Hasan Pasha, the governor of the Yemen. There they were reportedly treated “most humanely” by the pasha, since he was “very well disposed to the Portuguese because his parents were Christian.”

An even more dramatic example of this type of interaction is provided by the capture at Mombasa in 1589 of the famed Ottoman corsair Mir Ali Beg. On this occasion, an expected military encounter between the Ottoman and Portuguese fleets was cut short by the surprise intervention of several thousand Mazimba cannibals from the interior of Africa, who had overrun the Ottomans’ fortified positions on the coast and left them with no choice but to surrender to the Portuguese. Once safely aboard the enemy flagship, the Ottomans appeared almost relieved by their captivity, as their commander Mir Ali gracefully announced to his new masters: “I

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56 On Kurtoğlu Hizir’s captivity, see “La Foudre du Yémen, ou conquête du Yémen par les Othomans,” ed. and trans. Silvestre de Sacy, *Notes et Extraits des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 4 (1788), 472; on Piri Reis, who was a captive of the Knights of Rhodes, see Özbaran, *The Ottoman Response to European Expansion: Studies on Ottoman-Portuguese Relations in the Indian Ocean and Ottoman Administration in the Arab Lands during the Sixteenth Century* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1994), 177.
57 Couto, *Da Ásia*, vol. 10, bk. 7, chap. 8.
do not lament my adverse fortune, for such is the nature of war, and I would much rather be a captive of the Christians, as I was once before in Spain, than food for the barbarous and inhuman Mazimba." Then, at least according to the Portuguese chronicler Dos Santos, MirAli obligingly converted to Christianity "and with this act restored for his soul all of the losses and injuries sustained by his body."

This gentlemanly exchange, coming in the aftermath of a mutually shocking encounter with a force of tribal cannibals, perhaps represents something of an extreme case in which Ottomans and Portuguese were at their most willing to find common ground as "civilized" men. But other encounters between Rumis and Portuguese involving a similar recognition of cultural sameness could provoke bloody outbursts of cruelty as easily as moments of compassion. At one point in the late 1530s, for instance, a Portuguese patrol near the mouth of the Red Sea overcame an Ottoman merchant ship and discovered that its captain was "a Christian from Mallorca, converted four years earlier for the love of a Greek Moslem girl whom he married." His captors immediately set about trying to persuade him to return to the faith of his forefathers, first through gentle arguments and then with their fists. But when the man refused, "carrying on like a lunatic and blindly resisting any attempt to make him see the holy Catholic truth," the Portuguese captain had him bound, gagged, and thrown overboard to the sharks rather than accept the sincerity of his conversion.

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59 “Alegrai-vos e esperai em Deus, que já eu fui cativo de pior senhor do que vós sois, que foi o Malabar, e agora estou neste estado que vedeis; assim vos pode suceder a vós.” Dos Santos, Etiópia Oriental, 1: 242.

60 “Mirale Beque foi mandado para Portugal, onde se converteu e se fez cristão, no que restaurou para a sua alma todas as perdas e quebras que tinha recebido no corpo.” Dos Santos, Etiópia Oriental, 1: 242.


62 Pinto, Travels, 5.
the man could have saved himself even with a well-timed return to Christi-
anity. Mir Ali Beg, who was so gallantly treated by his captors and apparently
shared none of this unfortunate Mallorcan’s stubborn attachment to Islam,
still seems, despite his ingratiating conversion, to have spent the remaining
decades of his life chained in the darkness of a Portuguese prison.63

Without question, analogous instances of gratuitous Ottoman cruelty
toward Portuguese captives also occurred. But even so, there was at least
one critically important way in which the Ottomans’ attitude toward their
adversaries differed dramatically from that of their Portuguese counterparts:
namely, after surviving the ordeal of combat itself, any Portuguese sailor or
man-at-arms taken into Ottoman custody was treated not only as a prisoner
but also as a potential recruit. As is indicated by the contrasting fates of Mir
Ali Beg (who was held for decades in a Portuguese prison despite his conver-
sion to Christianity) and European renegades like Francesco Giustiniani
and Hoja Safar (whose conversions to Islam opened to the door to brilliant
careers in Ottoman service), there was something about the Ottomans’
ability to accommodate diversity and embrace it fully as their own which the
Portuguese were simply incapable of reproducing.64 Faced with this undeni-
able reality, Portuguese observers could only respond with a combination of
fear, fascination, and grudging respect.

**Portuguese Ethnic Identity and the “Rumi Challenge”**

As already mentioned above, Portuguese awareness of the multiethnic yet
distinctively Mediterranean flavor of Ottoman collective identity was
unique among contemporary Europeans. One would be hard pressed, for
instance, to find an author from another early modern Western nation able
to describe the Ottoman concept of self in quite the same terms as the
Portuguese chronicler Diogo do Couto. At one point in his famous Décam-
das, Couto explains in some detail that “Rumis” are actually Greeks, not Turks
from “Turkistan”, and that they are equally so be they Jews, Christians, or
Muslims. He even maintains that it is for this reason that the Ottoman sultan

63 Boletim da Filhoteca Ultramarina Portuguesa, 16 (1960), 692; quoted in Fernand

64 On the limited prospects for integration among *conversos* in Portuguese Asia, see
requires members of different faiths to wear different-colored hats, for otherwise it would be impossible to tell them apart. He then concludes:

It is because these Rumis are descended from Greeks that they hold themselves to be more honored than the Turks. And in truth they do have an advantage over them in terms of their customs, purity and valor, and wherever they go [they] proudly declare themselves to be Rumis with [heads] held high. The greatest insult that one can lay upon them is to call one of their number Turk, for these they consider the most base and desplicable of men. Such is the reason for the name Rumi.65

This nuanced and empathetic assessment—so strikingly reminiscent of the passage from Mustafa Ali’s *Essence of History* discussed above—would have been nearly unthinkable in the rest of early modern Europe, where the Ottomans were known simply and derisively as “Turks.” Indeed, in its general contours Couto’s description is remarkably analogous to a new definition of “Ottoman-ness” with which scholars today, as they emerge from the nationalist historiography of past generations, have only recently begun to come to grips.66 By the standards of the sixteenth century, then, the Portuguese perspective was truly unique. And at least at some level, the special sensitivity to Ottoman identity which Portuguese authors displayed must have resulted from the wrenching and deeply contested reidentification of self going on at the very same time within Portuguese Asia.67

On one hand, the Portuguese of the *Estado da India* were few, operated on the margins of vast and cosmopolitan Asian societies, and out of necessity adopted a strategy of alliance building and cultural mixing with native populations that earned them a notorious reputation among contemporaries in Europe.68 On the other hand, it was precisely this kind of easy intercourse

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65 “Estes Rumes como procedem dos Gregos, tem se por mais honrados que os Turcos, e na verdade lhe são aventejados em costumes, limpeza e valor; e onde quer que chegão logo se nomeão por Rumes a boca chea. E a mor afronta que se lhe pode fazer he chamar a hum destes Turco, por averem a todos por baixos, torpes e desprimorosos: esta he a razão deste nome de Rume.” Couto, *Da Ásia*, vol. 4, bk. 8, chap. 9.
66 See above, nn. 1-7.
68 On the huge number of “natives” employed on ships of the *Estado da India*, see, for example, the articles by G. V. Scammell, “Seafaring in the *Estado da India*, c.1500-1750,” *Mare Liberum*, 9 (1995), 441-52; and “Indigenous Assistance in the Establishment of Portuguese Power in Asia in the Sixteenth Century,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 14, no. 1 (1980), 1-11. Interestingly, this “indigenous assistance” even included ethnic Anatolian Turks. At one point during the siege of Diu, “Rumis” who managed to breach walls of the fortress were betrayed by an
with natives that raised alarm bells among the more orthodox elements of Portuguese society, who feared that cultural syncretism and racial mixing would lead inevitably to the twin horrors of heresy and loss of national solidarity. Proponents of such a view, whose voices became progressively louder as the sixteenth century progressed, urged their countrymen to maintain the purity of their blood in order to preserve the cultural and religious cohesion upon which they believed the continued survival of the Estado da Índia ultimately depended.

Interestingly, those most alarmed by the ongoing process of miscegenation in Portuguese India were also the voices most likely to draw direct parallels between the Portuguese and the Ottomans. One Jesuit friar in Goa, for example, wrote disparagingly in 1556 that “these Portuguese are as mixed with infidels, be they Moors or Gentiles, as the Greeks of Constantinople are with the Turks, and the lives of the Portuguese here are dedicated to nothing but dealing and trading in various merchandise with every sort of infidel, who are enemies of the cross, the law, and all Christian virtues.”

The articulation of such views, which coincided with the introduction of the office of the Holy Inquisition into the territories of the Estado da Índia, marked the start of a new era in which colonial authorities strove with unprecedented resolve to consolidate the national and religious integrity of their Portuguese subjects. Ironically, however, such efforts often served to exacerbate the problem of “cultural drift” they were designed to prevent, by alienating more marginal elements of society and pushing them toward an affiliation with local groups or, worse, the Ottomans.

Such was notably the case for the numerous Jews and “New Christians” of Portuguese Asia, many of whom had important family or business contacts in Ottoman lands. Early in the sixteenth century, these individuals had remained valuable members of the Portuguese community, serving as negotiators and interpreters and using their contacts to supply the authorities with information about Ottoman naval movements or military preparations. After 1550, however, and especially following the arrival in Goa of the

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Anatolian Turkish woman married to one of the Portuguese whom they assumed would instead act as their accomplice. See Couto, Da Ásia, vol. 6, bk. 1, chap. 6.

firebrand Jesuit Dom Gonçalo da Silveira in 1559, numerous Jews and New Christians from the *Estado da India* began instead to identify themselves openly with the Ottoman cause, some to the point of serving as double agents for the sultan or actively lobbying for Ottoman naval intervention in the Indian Ocean.  

Similarly, the mixed-blood progeny of Portuguese men and local women, who by the mid-sixteenth century had become so numerous as probably to outnumber the Portuguese themselves in Africa and Asia, now began to be seen as especially easy targets for “Ottomanization.” According to Diogo do Couto, by 1560 there were some twelve hundred “filhos de Portuguezes” in Ethiopia alone; and Couto remarks that all would have surely become “Janissaries of the Turk” had it not been for a terrible plague which forced the army of Özdemir Pasha to retreat to Suakin 1559. Obviously, the question of whether such fears were realistic or a mere flight of fancy must be left to the realm of speculation. But the fact that an author such as Couto expressed them at all is indicative of just how seriously the Portuguese could perceive the threat of assimilation by the Ottomans.

The Ottoman Navy as an Instrument of Cultural Imperialism  

As more than one modern scholar has noted, the Portuguese of the sixteenth century appear to have been consistently preoccupied with a “Rumi threat” far out of proportion with the actual (rather limited) scale of Ottoman naval operations in the Indian Ocean. But perhaps Portuguese fears make more sense if we think of them as a reaction not solely to the physical menace of armed Ottoman military intervention, but rather to the more intangible, but at the same time more intimate, danger of Ottoman cultural assimilation.

Unlike the indigenous populations of maritime Asia, who were obviously distinct from the Portuguese both racially and culturally, the “Rumis” were recognizably and disturbingly similar to the Portuguese. At the same time, the cohesiveness of their identity depended neither on linguistic nor ethnic

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71 Couto, *Da Ásia*, vol. 7, bk. 7, chap. 5.
72 See, for example, Subrahmanyam, “The Trading World of the Western Indian Ocean, 1546-1565: A Political Interpretation,” in *A Carreira da Índia e as Rotas dos Estreitos*, 225.
homogeneity, being instead self-consciously—one might even say aggressively—multiethnic and cosmopolitan. A “Rumi” could be Turkish, Greek, Italian, Albanian, Arab, Mallorcan, or even Portuguese. Many were also Muslims, some through conversion and others by birth; but it is clear that Ottoman ships were manned in equal measure by non-Muslim slaves and even paid volunteers who kept the faith of their fathers while choosing to serve the sultan. Not even formal affiliation with the Ottoman state was necessary for classification as a “Rumi,” since the Portuguese also used the term in reference to mercenaries employed on private merchant ships and pirate vessels and in the armies of independent potentates throughout the Indian Ocean.

Indeed, the only absolute prerequisite for “Rumi-ness” seems to have been a very loosely defined cultural affiliation with the world of the Mediterranean, which for the Portuguese translated into an uncomfortable similarity to themselves. Both in theory and in practice, it was therefore a very simple thing for any Portuguese of the Estado da Índia to himself become a Rumi. And this, in turn, exposed the basis of Portuguese national solidarity to be essentially a matter of personal choice, rather than an inescapable birthright or an expression of divine will.

As a result, the visceral terror with which the Portuguese looked upon the Rumis may have been as much based in a fear of self as it was in a fear of the other. Potentially, Rumis could be both racially and culturally indistinguishable from Portuguese, yet somehow stripped of an intangible essence which determined their identity. For the soldiers and seamen of an “empire” which theoretically encompassed all of maritime Asia, yet whose total Portuguese population probably numbered fewer than ten thousand souls, what could be more frightening than that?