CHAPTER 1

Britons in Mediterranean and Atlantic
Captivity and Piracy

Sources

The archives of the North African region – at least the two archives of Tunisia and Morocco where I conducted research – do not include lists of British, or other European, captives – in the same manner that no information from Native American sources was to be found by Coleman. Neither does the archive in Gibraltar include records about British relations with North Africa before the middle of the eighteenth century. There are numerous chronicles, histories, hagiographies, and taqāyīd/short reports in the Arabic archives that include information about captivity, albeit not in a systematic manner, and not about Britain. There is little doubt that captors kept a record of the numbers and names of their British and other European captives in order to conduct ransom negotiations;¹ there also must have been ship logs and customs records. But such material does not seem to have survived (unless there are records in Algiers) – which makes the study of European captives as well as of North African piracy, diplomacy, and trade largely dependent on European sources. British consuls and traders in North Africa furnished a steady stream of information to London merchants, politicians, and writers – and to the merchantmen and the fleet in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Their information is extensive and increases in volume and detail in proportion to the expansion of trade and naval power.

Importantly, their information about the Libyans, Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans is not tainted by fantasy or Orientalistic attitudes (as for instance in Lady Montagu’s description of the baboon-like Tunisian women in letter 45): the consuls conveyed accurate facts. Although sometimes they lashed out in anger and denigration at the local population, in the vast corpus of their correspondence they were factual, and described North African domestic politics, rivalries and rebellions, Ottoman interventions, wheat harvests, ships

¹ See the reference in the draft of the 1622 peace agreement between Algiers and England where the Algerians are asked to make a list of all the English slaves in Algiers and Tunis in order to exchange them with the “Musslemen slaves taken by the English shipps,” TNA SP 103/1/148. See also the reference to the list of names prepared by the Moroccan ambassador to Malta in 1781, Ibn ‘Uthmān al-Miknāsī, Al-Badr al-sāfir li-hidayat al-musāfir ila fikāk al-asārā min yad al-‘aduww al-kāfir, ed. Malīka al-Zāhirī (Muḥammadiyya, Morocco, 2005), 69.
and their ladings, and Franco-British tensions. They listed the names of Algerian sea captains, the number of men, guns, and “renegades” on board Libyan ships, their ages and backgrounds – showing how much more advanced they were in intelligence-gathering than the North Africans. As chapter III will show, consuls and emissaries reported everything they could see and count about North African and European (chiefly French) diplomatic, commercial, and military activity. They collected their data in person and in situ and sent it back to London: after the British destruction of Algerian ships in 1671, the report that was sent included the number of enemy casualties, the ships that had been sunk, and the names of the enemy captains who had been killed.²

But British consuls and factors did not keep a consistent record of their nation’s captives. They mentioned captives, described interventions on their behalf, and sometimes listed names and expenses they incurred in ransoming and further assisting captives. But they did not keep records in the manner of the French and Spanish redemptionist priests from the Mercedarian and the Trinitarian orders, or of papal administrators, who went on missions to ransom their own. The Archivio Segreto Vaticano furnished detailed information about captives’ names, places of origin, locations of captivity, dates, and beneficia ries,³ while the Office of the Inquisition even listed the numbers and names of Christians who, after captivity, converted to Islam.⁴ In France, “the Marseilles Chamber of Commerce functioned as a kind of bank, advancing ransom money to the redemptive orders, transferring currency from the king to royal envoys, and reimbursing consuls for expenses.”⁵ Such extensive information has enabled historians to arrive at various reliable numbers of captives:⁶

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² See “An Exact List of the Algier shipps burnt in Burgia with their number of Gunns & Age” and names of captains: TNA SP 71/2/I, 3v–4r (8 May 1671). Interestingly, the names of the ships were given by the English, based on what they saw on the stern: thus, the Mary Gold had marigold on the stern; the Lyon had a “lyonn Redd,” the Moone had “Half moone in a Ring,” and others, TNA SP 71/2/ I, 71r (10 June 1674).

³ For an edition of the list in the Archivio, see Collenberg, Esclavage et rançons. See specifically the list of Euro-Christian families and their places of origin with one or more members in captivity, 470–479, and captives with first names only, 480–481.

