CHAPTER 2

Captives and Captors: 1563–1760

This chapter will present a survey of British captivity and ransom, from 1563–1760. It will also furnish the historical context for captivity in the early modern Mediterranean and Atlantic, with special focus on political and naval developments, the various categories of captives, ranging from clergymen to soldiers, and the reasons for ransoming or not ransoming them.

The chapter is divided according to monarchs, and although there was overlap, it is important not to lose sight of differences in specific periods of time. The approach is historical and geographical, not thematic, because a British captive taken in 1600, when England had no fleet and no naval clout, could not but see his plight in quite a different manner from a captive in 1700, when the British fleet largely dominated the western Mediterranean waters; and the commercial and military power of Britain at the beginning of the eighteenth century greatly superseded that of North Africa, by far more than a century earlier. Furthermore, different locations produced different dynamics of trade, piracy, and diplomacy: what was effective in negotiations or exchange in Meknes in the Moroccan hinterland was not necessarily effective in Algiers on the Mediterranean coast or in Salé on the Atlantic.

The Elizabethan Period, 1558–1603

Even before the arrival of the Tudors to the English throne, some sailors and crewmen had been taken captive in the Mediterranean.1 From the mid-sixteenth century, small fishing ships fell victim to pirates, both North African as well as Continental (especially from Dunkirk). Little is known about these captives except a few names from the early 1560s (and documented in a captivity account recounted in 1577 and published by Hakluyt in 1599–1600), but in 1567, Geoffrey Fenton declaimed against his compatriots in England for not helping captives. Although the Muscovy Company was using slaves in its

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1 As early as 1480, indulgences had been “issued to raise money to fight the Turks or to ransom captives,” although some captives could have been held by Europeans, Anon., Indulgences (Westminster, 1480).
Russian factory, he was angered at the enslavement of Englishmen, and in his translation of Matteo Bandello’s *Tragical Tales*, he lamented the “perversity of our age [which] is come to that point that where our fathers and grandfathers delighted in works of charity, with care to supply the necessity of such as did want, our helluos and guls of riches do not only close their ears against lamentable cries of the needy, but also make no conscience to despoil them.” Whether any English soldiers or youths were released from Turkish captivity after the battle of Lepanto in 1571, as George Gascoigne alleged in his “A Devise of a Maske for the Right Honorable Viscount Montacute” (1573), is not clear, but in 1572, Edward Webbe and seven other Englishmen were taken captive into the world of Islam and beyond, both real and imaginary, and were ransomed along with thirteen others in 1588 through the intervention of Queen Elizabeth. In 1577, John Foxe stated that out of 266 Christians captured by the Turks to Alexandria, only three were English. In this first account that appeared in print about captivity in the Islamic Mediterranean (in Hakluyt, 1589), Foxe described his captivity and escape and subsequent service to the Spanish king, thereby beginning the “genre” of narrating capture, endurance, and then escape or ransom.

Although there were collections for captives in Easter 1579 which continued throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth, it was with the establishment of the chartered companies – the Turkey Company in 1581 (later renamed East Levant), and the Barbary Company in 1585 – and the investments in commercial shipping that the issue of captivity came to national and royal attention. Capitalists with friends in Greenwich Palace, Parliament, and the Privy Council complained about the loss of their ships, cargoes, and sailors, and demanded of the monarchy political or naval intervention. Throughout her reign, Queen

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2 In 1567: see the reference in John Michael Archer, *Old Worlds: Egypt, Southwest Asia, India, and Russia in Early Modern English Writing* (Stanford, 2001), 122.


