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

Giancarlo Casale
University of Minnesota

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 nevertheles 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).