IDENTITY AS COMMODITY: TOURNAMENTS OF VALUE IN THE TATAR RANSOM BUSINESS

As several recent books attest, historians are finally putting the ransom business at the center of their analyses of encounters between Muslims and Christians in the pre-modern period. Wherever captivity was a constant, from Ottoman Central Europe to West European coastlines threatened by corsairs, cross-cultural ransom practices emerged to facilitate ways out of bondage for captives and financial gains for ransom brokers. Recent studies have uncovered sophisticated forms of negotiation, professional mediation, and joint rituals of diplomacy and exchange.  

While Eastern Europe's "involuntary involvement in the international slave trade" is well known, there are still no detailed comprehensive studies of Tatar ransom practices. 2 This article is a preliminary analysis of ransom as a cross-cultural economic activity with its own strategies and negotiating techniques. In view of the fact that Professor Richard Hellie recognized the importance of ransom in his fundamental study of the Russian economy and has spent much of his distinguished career investigating issues of slavery, exchange, and economic value, I am delighted to offer in his honor a study that ties some of these themes together. While confirming the historical reliability of the description of ransom strategies by the Polish diplomat Marcin Broniewski, this study will also draw upon theoretical perspectives to analyze the cross-cultural negotiation of value in ransom transactions over two centuries.

This is not the proper forum to trace the fascinating history of the Crimean Khanate. It is sufficient to note that the Girey dynasty, which traced its lineage back to Chingiz Khan and became vassals of the Ottoman Empire in

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2. The quote is from Richard Hellie, _Slavery in Russia 1450-1725_ (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 23.