

**ENGLAND, THE OTTOMANS AND THE BARBARY COAST
IN THE LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY**

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The English traveller Fynes Moryson recorded that when the Ottoman Sultan Murad III (1574–95) was shown the location of England on a map he peered at it in astonishment and wondered aloud why the King of Spain did not take a spade, dig it up and throw it into the sea. The Sultan then reflected on the great influence and achievements of the Queen of England from such a small base. With one exception, this anecdote acknowledges all the principal elements of Anglo-Ottoman relations during the reign of Elizabeth I: anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic diplomacy, maritime concerns, communication difficulties due to distance, and the fact that the English sovereign was a woman. The exception, which underlay all other elements, was commerce.

The formal beginning of Anglo-Ottoman relations dates from the correspondence between Elizabeth I and Murad III in 1579¹ which led in May 1580 to an Ottoman pledge of safeconduct (*ahidname*) for English merchants in Ottoman-controlled seas and ports in the eastern Mediterranean (the Levant) and along the Barbary coast of North Africa². This document is usually considered equivalent to a grant of trading privileges to the English. Although there is some evidence for occasional English trade in the Mediterranean from the late fifteenth century, for various reasons this seems largely to have ceased by the 1550s. The agreement of 1580 therefore represented a significant development in English mercantile interest in this region. A newly-formed joint-stock venture, the Turkey Company was established in September 1581, ostensibly with a monopoly on the approved trade. In 1592 it was amalgamated with the Venice Company (established in 1583) to form the Levant Company, a body which continued to regulate Anglo-Ottoman trade until the early nineteenth century.³ A separate Barbary Company, formed in 1585 with many of the same merchant investors, catered mainly for English trade along the Atlantic coast of Morocco.

By the mid 1580s an English commercial network had been established throughout the Muslim Mediterranean. In addition to the main trading factory at Constantinople, the Company had consuls appointed to Tripoli in Syria for Aleppo and the Levantine ports at the end of major overland caravan routes from the Persian Gulf and Iran; to Alexandria (briefly) for Cairo and the Red Sea trade; and to Algiers for the north African coast and trans-Sahara

routes. By 1603 small English merchant colonies had also appeared on the island of Chios (soon afterwards moved to Smyrna) and at Patras in the Morea. All existed in fierce competition with existing factories of Venetian and French merchants and, despite the provisions of the *ahidname*, trade was beset by difficulties with local Ottoman officials on land and with attack by pirates at sea.

Commercial activity nevertheless provided both the original pretext and the continuing framework for early English relations with the Muslim world. It enabled spices, silks, carpets, currants and other luxury items to be brought directly and more cheaply to England, without passing through entrepôts such as Venice or Antwerp. However, the political aspect was always prominent, and controversial from the start. This was due partly to the fact that the Turkey/Levant Company's commercial representative in Constantinople was also expected to serve as the Queen's ambassador, with all the disputes over finance, status and responsibilities which this entailed. William Harborne, the merchants' factor who negotiated the original safeconduct, was sent back to Constantinople in 1583 as Elizabeth I's ambassador, but with his salary paid by the Company. This dual role allowed rival French and Venetian representatives to question Harborne's credentials and to try to influence Ottoman officials against him: was he a real ambassador able to speak for the Queen, or just a merchant with pretensions but no authority? The second ambassador, Harborne's former secretary Edward Barton (in charge c. 1588–1597), found his position permanently undermined through lack of money, as the Queen and the Company each expected the other to bear the brunt of his expenses.⁴ Equally controversial was the fact that English exports to the Ottoman empire were mainly war-related materials such as tin, lead and strong cloth used for Janissary uniforms; items which were prohibited by the papacy from export to the infidel enemy. In the eyes of Catholic Europe and of her critics at home, Elizabeth I was guilty of active collusion with Christendom's greatest enemy.

The principal items in the State Papers Foreign⁵ for Turkey and the Barbary Coast in the later years of the reign of Elizabeth I provide an invaluable insight into the difficulties of establishing new diplomatic relations, in particular the practical aspects of long-distance communication and the implications these had for the ambassador's actions in Constantinople. There was the additional challenge of operating in an unfamiliar cultural environment. The ambassadors' regular letters to Walsingham (up to 1590), Heneage and Burghley in London form the most valuable and extensive part of the collection,

supplemented by a smaller number of royal letters and miscellaneous documents. Barton appears to have written roughly every two or three weeks, providing detailed accounts of Ottoman policies and personalities valuable both for his superiors and for later historians. Letters were often sent in several copies by different courier routes. Those via Poland or Venice were the most usual, though in neither direction was the post reliable and communications could often take around four months one way. In January 1584 Harborne was dismayed to discover that his first 11 letters as ambassador had been intercepted, probably by the Venetians, and had never arrived in London.⁶ In November 1592 Barton received eight London letters in one batch, the earliest dated 6 May.⁷ Correspondence by sea might have been quicker, but ran the risk of capture by Spanish ships near Gibraltar.

Harborne, Barton and the third ambassador, Henry Lello (1597–1607), were generally more isolated than their peers elsewhere in Europe, undertook more on their own initiative and consequently had more regularly to defend their actions. In 1581 Harborne wrote a long, grovelling letter of explanation to Burghley exonerating himself from the charge of having used the newly acquired treaty of privileges to aid an English ship, the *Bark Roe*, in its piracy against Ottoman subjects. In 1596 Barton agreed to accompany the army of Mehmed III (1595–1603) on its campaign against Habsburg forces in Hungary, accepting for himself, four other English gentlemen and their 12 servants, a three-man Janissary guard, a coach, 21 horses, full provisions and 36 camels as pack animals – all at the Sultan's expense. This over-friendly participation greatly embarrassed Elizabeth I in the eyes of fellow Christians, despite Barton's argument that his purpose in attending the campaign had been to be on hand to offer his services as peace negotiator if required.⁸

While the Ottomans gave generous allowances to resident ambassadors – whether on campaign or not – the corollary was that regular gifts were essential in return in order to win and to keep the friendship of Ottoman officials at almost any level.⁹ Here alien cultural norms had to be appreciated, and the gifts given by the French and Venetian ambassadors had to be outshone, on both everyday and special occasions. A particular English advantage was the ability of the Queen to correspond as a woman with the influential Safiye Sultan, favourite of Murad III and mother of Mehmed III, and thus to open an additional channel of communication with the Ottoman palace. The clockwork organ which eventually arrived in 1599 as Elizabeth I's congratulatory gift for the accession of Mehmed III in 1595, was accompanied by a coach for his mother. These presents sealed English prestige in

Constantinople due not only to their novelty value but also to the very favourable impression created by the ship which transported them. The Sultan was rowed out especially to view the *Hector*, a well-armed merchantman of 300 tons and 27 guns, a clear example of English maritime strength.

The success of English diplomacy in Constantinople depended primarily upon mutual Anglo-Ottoman enmity towards Philip II of Spain. England's geographical location and obvious naval potential would have made her an attractive ally for joint expeditions. Barton's reports show that in the winter of 1590–1591 the Ottomans were actively building up their galley fleet,¹⁰ though tantalizingly it was never quite clear how or where they intended to use it. However, the death of the pro-English chief admiral Hasan Pasha in July 1591¹¹ and the Ottomans' increasingly bellicose attitude to the Habsburgs in Hungary effectively put an end to any English hopes of joint fleet action against Spain.

There were nevertheless other ways of pursuing anti-Spanish solidarity. Early in his tenure, and with the prestige of the Armada victory behind him, Barton had some influence on the Ottoman decision not to admit a new Spanish envoy and to have the latter turned back at Ragusa.¹² In early 1590 Barton made common cause with the envoy sent by the new Protestant King of France, Henry IV, and was ultimately successful in having the previous Catholic French ambassador discredited and, in summer 1592, imprisoned.¹³ Even after Henry IV's adoption of Catholicism in 1593, Barton and his French counterpart remained in general agreement on an anti-Spanish stance. The Queen's Protestant faith – non-idolatrous and in Ottoman eyes closer to Islam theologically, as well as anti-Catholic politically – gave the English ambassador a useful advantage and a distinctive, if not quite accurate, label as 'the Lutheran envoy'.

Further anti-Spanish agitation concerned the plight of Don Antonio, pretender to the throne of Portugal, and his son Don Christobal. Although three-cornered negotiations between Elizabeth I, the Ottoman Sultan and the Sultan of Morocco, Ahmad al-Mansur (1578–1603), aiming to expel the usurper Philip II from Portugal figure prominently in Barton's reports, nothing ever came of his efforts to further 'the enterprise of Portugal'. The unfortunate Don Christobal languished in Fez as a royal hostage for his father's good intentions, while the Ottoman Sultan looked on and the Sultan of Morocco and the Queen argued over the costs of a proposed expedition to Lisbon and over the imprisonment of English merchants in

Morocco.¹⁴ Later, however, in 1601, Lello scored a significant anti-Spanish point when the Dutch, new to Ottoman trade and only recently independent from Spanish rule, chose to place themselves under the protection of the English flag (rather than the French) when sailing in the Mediterranean.

As England was so distant from Constantinople, and there were no common borders or areas of major contention, most aspects of Anglo-Ottoman relations tended to coincide rather than to conflict. Equally, in the highly competitive atmosphere of late sixteenth-century Constantinople, Ottoman statesmen were happy to use the English ambassador and his Queen for their own ends. Hence Harborne and his successors appear to have been perhaps disproportionately prominent in the city's diplomatic community. Barton's leading role in brokering peace between the Ottomans and Poland in 1590 is an instance of this. Cossack raids into Ottoman territory had reached unacceptable levels, but it suited the Ottomans not to become embroiled in a new war just as they were concluding a 12-year conflict with Iran. In three separate letters to Elizabeth I from the Sultan, the grand Vezir and the governor of Rumeli (the Ottoman Balkans) the Ottoman-Polish treaty was presented as a friendly favour to her, because she had requested it in order to prevent damage to her own trade (also principally in war-related supplies) with Poland.¹⁵ However, similar attempts by Barton, on Elizabeth's instructions, to arrange a peace between the Ottomans and the Austrian Habsburgs in 1592–1593 did not coincide with Ottoman interests and consequently failed.

Beyond Constantinople, English dealings with the Muslim world remained essentially commercial, although in the corsair capital of Algiers, the main transaction was often the ransoming of English sailors taken at sea. As early as 1583 Harborne reported that there were around 60 Englishmen held captive in Algiers and asked for the Queen's help in organizing a ransom collection in England.¹⁶ Despite these dangers, however, Algiers quickly became a favourite English port of call for legitimate trade, re-provisioning and the taking on of passengers, often Muslims on their way further east. The other side of the coin was the infectious lawlessness in the Mediterranean and by 1600 the English had themselves established a well-founded reputation for conspicuous piracy on Muslim shipping (as well as Spanish). This became a cause of considerable diplomatic tension. While the respectable Levant Company sought to maintain legitimate trade, the 'outlopers of our nation' – many of whom carried letters of reprisal issued by the Lord Admiral in London – were a major complicating factor. In the Atlantic, the Barbary Company suffered equally from the

opportunism of English privateers and the consequent detention of its merchants in Moroccan ports. However, Ahmed al-Mansur, also aware of the value of an anti-Spanish ally, remained generally friendly, and sent at least two envoys to England during Elizabeth's reign. One Moroccan official accompanied the returning English envoy Henry Roberts in 1589;¹⁷ the second visited with a retinue of around 30 in 1595. However, as with the Ottomans, no naval expedition resulted from these contacts, despite much posturing on both sides.

Elizabeth I's doubts and hesitations over these Muslim connections are well attested in the State Papers but the desire to undermine Spanish influence and to profit commercially overcame any religious qualms. Although James I sought initially to clamp down on both privateering and the Ottoman alliance, the firm base of operations established by 1603 had encouraged an increasing number of traders and travellers to the Muslim world, the natural extension of interest even further east through the East India Company of 1601, the frequent representation of Turks on the London stage, and the first major work of English scholarship on the Ottomans, Richard Knolles' *General historie of the Turkes* (1603 and several seventeenth-century editions).

Citation:

Christine Woodhead, 'England, the Ottomans and the Barbary Coast in the Late Sixteenth Century', *State Papers Online, 1509–1714*, Cengage Learning, Reading, 2009.

Further reading

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Notes

¹ See SP 97/1, 1-4.

² Copies of the contemporary Latin translation from Ottoman Turkish in SP 103/72, 3 and SP 97/1, 5-8

³ See SP 97/2, 159-160.

⁴ See SP 97/2, 25, 46, 190.

⁵ The State Papers Foreign series for the Tudor period is included in *State Papers Online*, Part II.

⁶ See SP 97/1, 14.

⁷ See SP 97/2, 179.

⁸ See SP 97/3, 147-59 and SP 102/4, 11.

⁹ See SP 97/2, 72, 179.

¹⁰ See SP 97/2, 147, 163.

¹¹ See SP 97/2, 143.

¹² See SP 97/1, 188.

¹³ See SP 97/2, 167.

¹⁴ For example SP 102/4, 9(2).

¹⁵ See SP 102/61, 17-23.

¹⁶ See SP 97/1, 16.

¹⁷ See SP 102/4, 54.