Introduction

Islam in early modern Britain

The Moors, both Men, Women and Children, would flock to see me; and I was much admired by them for having Flaxen-Hair, and being of a ruddyComplexion. I heard some of them say, Behold! What a pretty Maid it is! Others said, I never saw a Nazarene (ie a Christian) before. I thought they had been (said some) like unto Hallewss, (or Swine) but I see now that they are Benn. Adam, (or Children of Men).

This passage was published in Exeter in 1704 and described the plight of Joseph Pitts, an English boy, who had been taken captive in 1678 by the pirates of Algiers. Similar passages in the writings of other English slaves recur, attesting to the Muslim sense of superiority at the first encounter with the fair-skinned northern peoples, the antipathy toward the infidel and finally the acceptance of the Christian as a fellow human. Joseph Pitts remained in captivity for nearly fifteen years, converted to Islam, lived and dressed like a Muslim, and became fully integrated into his masters’ world. Still, he yearned for freedom and for his native England, and in about 1693, he succeeded in escaping home with the help of the English consul at Istanbul.

While the English Christian was being examined and defined by the Muslims of the Mediterranean basin – animal or human, male or female – Britons were themselves defining the native Americans, as indeed continental Europeans had done since the end of the fifteenth century. Throughout the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, while Spanish, Dutch, French, British and Portuguese Christians were conquering indigenous populations across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, Islamic military power pushed the Ottomans and their North African satellites (the regencies of Tunisia, Tripoli [Libya] and Algeria) along with the “Empire” of Morocco beyond the Mediterranean and as far as the walls of Vienna and into the

1 Joseph Pitts, A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mahometans in which is a particular Relation of their Pilgrimage to Mecca (1704), p. 24. For a study of Pitt’s journey, see Zahra Freeth and H. V. F. Winstone, Explorers of Arabia: From the Renaissance to the End of the Victorian Era (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1998), chapter 2.
English Channel. Meanwhile, thousands of Britons and continental Christians were taken captive, and like Joseph Pitts, they were literally, to use Stephen Greenblatt’s term, “taken possession of.” As Columbus took possession of American natives for his monarch, so did Muslims take possession of European Christians for themselves and their rulers.2

Throughout the period roughly extending from the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558 until the death of Charles II in 1685, Britons and other Europeans met Muslims from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas. For the peoples of Spain, France, Italy and Germany, the physical proximity with Islam in continental Europe and the Mediterranean made encounters with the Muslims inevitable: as a result, their literature frequently alludes to Islam and Muslims.3 In the case of the British Isles, there was a vast distance between London or Edinburgh and Istanbul, but still, the likelihood of an Englishman’s or a Scotsman’s meeting a Muslim was higher than that of meeting a native American or a sub-Saharan African because Muslims were present throughout the Mediterranean basin – which at a time of turmoil in Europe, particularly during the Thirty Years War, provided a faster and safer means of transport for traders and travelers than the continental land route. Indeed, the Muslims who had the greatest impact on Britons in the early modern period belonged to the Mediterranean basin. Theirs was the Islam which included Istanbul (to which English writers nearly always referred as Constantinople), the center of the Ottoman Empire; Aleppo, a crucial link in the silk route that led to China; Beirut, “the Mart-towne whereunto all the ships comming from Europe doe arrive”;4 Jerusalem, a city of pilgrimage; Cairo, a center of trade in the period “before European hegemony,” to use Janet Abu-Lughod’s phrase, witnessing “the greatest concourse of Mankind in these times, and perhaps that ever was”;5 Algiers, “the whip of the Christian

4 Giovanni Botero, Relations of the Most Famous Kingdoms and Common-wealths throughout the World . . . And since the last Edition by R. I. Now once again enlarged according to moderate observation (1620, first published in English in 1601), p. 554.
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World, the wall of the Barbarian, terror of Europe, the bridle of both Hesperias (Italy and Spain), Scourge of the Ilands”; and Fez, “a world for a city” which “may rather second Grand Cairo than subjoin itself to Constantinople, being far superior in greatness with Aleppo.” Beyond this basin, Britons did not venture often: the Savafi Shah of Persia (the “Sophie”) was the enemy of England’s trading partner, the Turks, and notwithstanding the Shirley brothers’ attempts in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods to bring about an English–Persian alliance, there was not much interaction with the realm of the Sophie and with the language and civilization of Persia. The Mogul Empire in India was too far to reach except for indomitable diplomats-travelers such as Sir Thomas Roe, and the interior of the Arabian Peninsula attracted only a few traders because of intense local hostility to Europeans: still, Sir Henry Middleton, John Jourdain, Francis Rogers and some others left accounts of the Arabian hinterland.

Around the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa where Islam fused its Arab, Byzantine and Turkish legacies, Britons encountered a powerful religious and military civilization which viewed them as an inferior people with a false religion. Whereas in the Americas the natives

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9 John Finein noted in Some Choice Observations of Sir John Finein Knight (1657) that the letters of the Persian Ambassador which were presented to King James were “un-understood for want of an Interpreter no where then to be found in England,” p. 193; in 1630, it was noted that “few in England understand Persian books because “Persian is very difficultly read,” Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, East India and Persia, 1650-1654, ed. W. Noel Sainsbury (London, 1982), p. 623. For the hoped-for alliance, see the discussion in D. W. Davies, Elizabethans Errant: The Strange Fortunes of Sir Thomas Sheriff and His Three Sons (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), chapter 8: “Sir Anthony as a Secret Agent.”

had been defeated by the European white man, in the dominions of Islam, Britons were humiliated as Muslims “would stand and stare upon us and spy upon us,” as the servant of Henry Cavendish wrote in 1589.11 Whereas the blond European had appeared as a god in the Americas – as legend had it among the Mayans and the Aztecs – for the Muslims, the redness of Pitts, as he stated himself, recalled the unclean pig. In the experience of the Americas, the European Christians held power over the native population in the same way that the Muslims held power over European Christians. In 1600, William Biddulph gave the following advice to Britons intent on traveling in the dominions of Islam:

Neither if a man receive a box on the ear at any of their hands, must he give one bad word, or looke frowningly upon him that smote him: for then hee will strike him againe, and say, What, Goure? Dost thou curse me, and wish that the Devil had me? but hee must kisse his beard, or the skirt of his Garment, and smile upon him, and then he will let him passe.12

That advice was heeded by George Manwaring, Sir Robert Shirley’s companion on the journey to Persia, who described how a Turk nearly pulled off his ear and dragged him around the streets of Aleppo, “with much company following me, some throwing stones at me, and some spitting on me.”13 No Muslim fell on his knees before a Briton: rather he humiliated the “Goure” (kafr, infidel) who could not but submit to the indignity. The Muslim not only did not fear the Englishman: he did not even recognize him. “The Turkes,” wrote a contemporary of Biddulph, “knowe not what you meane by the worde Englishman.”14 From whichever angle a Briton reflected on the Muslim perception of the Christian, he realized that Muslims saw themselves in power and certitude.15

This realization was not confined to travelers alone. It was felt inside England, Scotland and the rest of the British Isles because of the capture and enslavement of large numbers of English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh men, women and children. Although, after the battle of Lepanto in 1571,

11 Mr. Harris Cavendish His Journey to and From Constantinople 1589 by Foxe, his Servant, ed. A. C. Wood (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1940), p. 15. See also p. 14: “These proud Turkes persecuted us to be Crystians cam to us and stroke us wythe ther rydyng whipes.”
14 [H. Timberlake], A True and strange discourse of the travels of two English Pilgrimes; what admirable accidents befell them in their journey to Jerusalem, Caca, Grand Cazar, Alexandria, and other places (1600), p. 8. Timberlake’s advice to his countrymen was that they should introduce themselves as Frenchmen “because they are well knowne to the Turkes.”
15 For a survey of the Muslim medieval perception of Western Europeans, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, Al’Awr wal-Banahra [Arabs and Barbarians] (London: Riad El-Rayyes, 1991), chapters 3 and 4.
major hostilities were suspended in the Mediterranean between Christians and Muslims, piracy, the “secondary form of war,” continued.16 For in this period, the “Barbary states were in the same league as naval powers as England and France,”17 and their ships ranged from North Africa to Arabia and from the English Channel to the Spanish and Moroccan coasts; furthermore, their pirates captured single men and whole families, travelers and soldiers, traders and clergymen. This capture led to an experience which Ritchie Robertson has described as the “direct encounter” between the European — now denied his military strength and cultural certitude — and the non-European.18 Although Robertson (commenting on Urs Bitterli) and Greenblatt alluded only briefly to this “direct encounter” in their work, and although neither applied it to the domain of Islam, it was a category that widely informed the encounter of Britons with Muslims in this period — where the former found themselves in a position of powerlessness before, and enslavement by, the latter.

No definite number can be given of the men and women who were captured or captured-and-converted to Islam, but the extant records, biographies and autobiographies of England’s early modern history include repeated references to these Britons. Indeed, from their earliest forays into the Mediterranean in the early sixteenth century, Britons had had to contend with the captivity and/or conversion of their compatriots by the Muslims. Sometime between 1580 and 1582, Queen Elizabeth was urged by the East Levant Company representatives in Istanbul to preserve her subjects . . . from future captivity in his [the Ottoman Sultan’s] dominions, the redemption of which in these 20 years (no doubt) hath cost this realm four thousand pounds, and yet divers to this day remain there unrescued of which some (the more be pitied) have turned Turks.19

Evidently, and ever since the first recorded visit of a Briton into the Ottoman Empire, Anthony Jenkinson in 1553, there had been English traders and seamen in the Mediterranean, some of whom fell into Muslim hands and converted to Islam. Although neither the number nor the names of these captives have survived, the sum of “four thousand pounds” that was spent on ransomings the above “subjects” indicates a sizeable group.

17 Peter Earle, Corsairs of Malta and Barbary (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970), p. 46. Earle observes that Algiers possessed the largest fleet and Tripoli the smallest.
In January 1584, there was a money collection in London to redeem sixty English captives among the Muslims;\(^{20}\) on February 4, 1585, two Englishmen, William Moore and Robert Rawlin, were freed from the Algerian galleys, but others, they reported, remained in captivity;\(^{21}\) in June 1586, English ships were captured by the Barbary corsairs, and ten years later, arrangements were made in London to redeem Englishmen who had been enslaved in Algiers “lest they follow the example of others and turn Turk.”\(^{22}\) So numerous were the Englishmen in North African captivity that by 1598, the Spital Sermons, preached on the Monday and Tuesday after Easter from a special pulpit at St. Mary Spital outside of Bishopsgate, were becoming closely identified with church collections for ransoming “prisoners of the Turk or other heathens.”\(^{23}\)

During the Jacobean period, and partly as a result of an inadequate naval deterrent, British ships were relentlessly pursued, captured or sunk by the Muslims: between 1609 and 1616, it was reported that 466 English ships were attacked and their crews enslaved;\(^{24}\) in January 1618, a “Scotch ship” was “taken by Turkish pirates.”\(^{25}\) Between 1620 and 1621, wrote Sir Thomas Roe from Istanbul, more than 100 ships were taken by the North Africans, and in “Algier alone were found 1200 captives”;\(^{26}\) in 1621, six English ships were lost to the Turks, and in June 1624, a general collection was held throughout the kingdom for the relief of “1,500 English captives in Algiers, Tunis, Sally [on the Atlantic coast of Morocco], and Tituana” (on the Mediterranean coast of Morocco).\(^{27}\) In April 1625, a Turkish pirate ship captured a Dartmouth and three Cornish ships, and in the following month, an entry in the Calendar of State Papers stated that “The Turks are upon our coasts. They take ships only to take the men to make slaves of them.”\(^{28}\) In July of that same year, 600 English slaves were known to be at


\(^{21}\) Ibid., August 1584 – August 1585, vol. xix, p. 269.


\(^{24}\) Michael J. Brown, Itinerant Ambassador: The Life of Sir Thomas Roe (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), p. 158. See also “The council to Lord Zouch. The pirates of Algiers and Tunis have grown so strong that in a few years they have taken 900 ships, and imprisoned many hundred persons,” Calendar of State Papers Domestic, James I, 1613–1623, vol. x, p. 12 (abbreviated in subsequent notes as C.S.P. Domestic). The statement was written in February 1619.


\(^{26}\) The Negotiations of Sir Thomas Roe, in his Embassy in the Ottoman Porte, from the Year 1621 to 1628 Inclusive (London, 1740), pp. 575–573.

\(^{27}\) C.S.P. Domestic, James I, vol. x, p. 275; ibid., vol. xi, p. 287.

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Sali, and in August, it was feared that “within 2 years [the Turks] will not leave the King sailors to man his fleet.”

The accession of Charles I to the throne in 1625 did not change this situation: instead it aggravated it as Charles found himself embroiled in domestic political conflict. The capture of ships, men and women increased and confirmed the image of a forceful and powerful Islam. By May 1626, it was reported that there were 3,000 British captives in Algiers and 1,500 in Sali. Furthermore, Turkish attacks were no longer confined to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, but they extended into the port towns and villages of the British Isles: in August 1625, the “Turks took out of the Church of ‘Munnigesca’ in Mounts’ Bay [Cornwall], about 60 men, women and children, and carried them away captives”; and in 1631, the Turks took 140 persons from Baltimore, County Cork, and made them slaves. No wonder that for Sir John Eliot, vice-admiral of Devon, the sea surrounding the British Isles “seem’d theirs.” The Turks also attacked ships in British waters: in 1634, two barks from Minehead sailing with passengers and goods to Ireland were captured by the Turks, and on September 20, 1635, a ship off Scilly was taken by six Sali men-of-war; a few days later, Turkish pirates were near “those western parts,” and in March 1636, it was reported that thirty-six “English, Scottish and Irish ships have been taken, and there are now 400 captives of English, Scots, and Irish.”

In June 1636, three fishing boats with fifty men in them were captured by the Turks “near Black Head, between Falmouth and the Lizard”, in that same month, it was reported that the coast was “now full” of Turks and that “200 Christians” had been “brought into Sallee in April last in one day”; in August 1638, “Turkish men-of-war of Algiers” took “some of his Majesty’s subjects” in the English Channel. By October 1640, families of 3,000 Englishmen held in captivity in Algiers were petitioning the King for help, and two years later the author of Libertas stated that the number of Englishmen “in chains” had risen to 5,000.

29 Ibid., p. 54. 30 Ibid., p. 81. 31 Ibid., p. 545.
32 Ibid., p. 95; ibid., vol. vi, p. 535. The attack on Baltimore took place in June 1631 and resulted in the capture of eighty-nine women and children and twenty men; see the extensive study of this episode by Henry Barlow, “The Sack of Baltimore,” Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, 74 (1956): 101–120.
39 Ibid., p. 72. 40 Ibid., vol. xii, p. 607.
The “Turks and Moors” of North Africa and the rest of the Ottoman dominions were spreading alarm in England, Wales and elsewhere in the British Isles, especially among fishermen, sailors, traders and the Levant Company’s representatives in Parliament. From Minehead to Dartmouth, from Bristol to Portsmouth, and from the Thames where a Turkish ship was captured in 1617 to the Severn into which the Turks penetrated in September 1624 and to the Isle of Lundy, their impact was felt. The news about the Turks’ incursions, wrote Sir Nicholas Slanning to Sir Francis Vane in September 1623, “terrifies the country.” There was so much concern about the Turkish attacks and about the fate of English captives that in December 1640, a Committee for Algiers was appointed by Parliament whose main task was to oversee the ransoming of English captives. Members of the Committee included a cross-section of English military, ecclesiastical and parliamentary authority: there was the Lord Admiral of the Fleet, the Bishops of London, Winchester and Rochester, and Members of Parliament chiefly (but not exclusively) from coastal areas both in the west as well as the east of the realm. In 1641, “An Act for the relief of the Captives taken by Turkish Moorish and other Pirates” was passed (16 Car I. c. 24), and in the next few years, further measures were taken by Parliament: “Ordinance for Collection to be made for relief of Captives in Algiers” (April 25, 1643); “Ordinance for Redemption of the Captives in Algiers” (October 24, 1644); “An Ordinance for the raising of Moneys for the Redemption of distressed Captives” (January 28, 1645); and on November 12, 1646, “An Ordinance for the Continuing of the Argier Duty, for the Releasing of distressed Captives, taken by Turkish, Moorish, and other Pirates, was this Day read the First and Second time.” Throughout the 1640s, the House of Commons had to address the problem of captives and their ransoms. Even foreign refugees were given permission to collect money in England for the redemption of their kin from Muslim

slavery.\textsuperscript{46} To many Britons, the Muslims posed a danger to all of Christendom, from Greece to England, and from “Muscovy” to Ireland.

During the Commonwealth and the Restoration periods, the English navy became powerful enough to force peace treaties on the Barbary Corsairs. Still, captives continued to be taken by the Muslims: in February 1662, 300 slaves in Algiers petitioned the King for help,\textsuperscript{47} and three years later, the wives and families of eighty captives there petitioned him;\textsuperscript{48} in 1668, a patent authorized a “collection to be made in all churches and chapels for two years, for the redemption of English subjects, captives in miserable slavery in Algiers, Sally, and other parts of the Turkish dominions,”\textsuperscript{49} and in June 1670, a petition was presented to the King on behalf of “140 men from Stepney” who had been captured from “Twenty-two merchant ships” by the Algerians.\textsuperscript{50} In that same year, a list of Britons captive in Algiers was published “for the Benefit of those that have Relations there”: it consisted of the names of 380 men and women who were still enslaved, only two of whom were not from the British Isles.\textsuperscript{51} Although the English fleet could now bombard the harbor towns of the Barbary Coast and burn a few ships, the corsairs were always able to return to action.

The Britons who were captured in these attacks came from all over the British Isles: from Liverpool to Dover, from Dundee to Hull and from Edinburgh to Barnstaple, although the highest number came from London. Communities in large cities and hamlets, in harbor towns and agricultural villages contributed to the number of captives, and families throughout the British Isles shared in the anxiety over their kin. They also endured poverty as a result of the abduction of their wage-earning relatives and of the losses incurred by the traders who paid the salaries of those relatives. One report stated in April 1627 that the losses from the Turks amounted to £26,000 “besides the relief of the wives and children” of the captives.\textsuperscript{52} In September 1635, sixty seamen were abducted near Lizard Point as they

\textsuperscript{46} See the references to a Russian and a Greek in \textit{C.S.P. Domestic, James I, 1609–1625}, vol. x, p. 475 and \textit{C.S.P. Domestic, Charles I, 1625–1626}, vol. i, p. 557 respectively. Such petitions continued into the Restoration period, see \textit{C.S.P. Domestic, Charles II, 1660–1665}, vol. iv, pp. 142–143. See also \textit{Ibid.}, vol. x, p. 606, where reference is made to a patent granted to collect money for “certain poor captives redeemed from Turkish slavery.”


\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, vol. v, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}, vol. viii, p. 161. The petitions continued well into the latter years of Charles’s reign: \textit{Ibid.}, vol. xiii, p. 578.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{C.S.P. Domestic, Charles I, 1670}, vol. x, p. 294. See also \textit{A True Relation of the Victory and Happy Success of a Squadron of His Majesties Fleet in the Mediterranean, against the Pyrates of Algiers} (Savoy, 1670).

\textsuperscript{51} Henry Printall, \textit{A List of the English Captives taken by the Pyrates of Algier, made Publick for the Benefit of those that have Relations there} (1670). See the reference to this figure in \textit{C.S.P. Domestic, Charles II, 1670}, vol. x, p. 166.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{C.S.P. Domestic, Charles I, 1627–1660}, vol. ii, p. 146.
were returning to Dartmouth: their “wives and children are becoming an intolerable burthen,” wrote the mayor of Dartmouth to the Privy Council.\textsuperscript{33} In that same year, wives of captured sailors and soldiers organized themselves into a group, and over a thousand of them petitioned Parliament for assistance in redeeming their captive kinmen;\textsuperscript{34} three years later, in May 1638, another petition was presented by “divers poor women, in behalf of their husbands in captivity in Algiers, to the King.”\textsuperscript{35} Vast multitudes of what must have resembled the twentieth-century “women-for-the-kidnapped” assembled in London near the Houses of Parliament and Whitehall seeking help. For captives left behind them not only needy families but communities concerned about the increasing expenses of maintaining unprovided-for wives and children: ever since the Poor Relief Act of 1598 (and then 1601), the relief of the poor had become the responsibility of the parish community.\textsuperscript{56}

Parallel to these strains on parishes was the strain on trade which witnessed a major crisis from 1616 on as a result of England’s failure to reorganize its cloth export and to compete effectively with the Dutch.\textsuperscript{57} By their attacks, Muslims were destabilizing England’s commercial activity and the production and manufacture of its exportable goods. Mariners and seaports were affected by the Turks, as were numerous industries which depended on foreign markets. By 1605, the Levant Company claimed to be employing more than 40,000 people – and those were making fustian only.\textsuperscript{58} Trade with Islamic countries was essential, especially because it produced “a healthy balancing of imports and exports” for England.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, of all the countries of Europe, Britain enjoyed the most extensive trade with the Muslim Empire in the seventeenth century: it exported dyed broadcloth, kersies, tin and lead, and imported currants, cotton, wool and yarn, spices, oils, chemicals, silk and other

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\bibitem{Epstein1981} Epstein, \textit{The Levant Company}, p. 55. See the letter by Richard Stapers to the Earl of Salisbury dated 19 October, 1607, in which the former warned against losing the trade with Turkey to the Venetians since that loss would lead to the “utter undoing of a great number of poor people at home, set on work by the same trade in making fustians. For whereas in times past the trade of Spain did vest yearly 20,000 coloured cloths and kerseys, now none at all; therefore there is the more necessity to maintain this trade of Turkey”: \textit{Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Honourable the Marquess of Salisbury}, eds. M. S. Giuseppi and D. McN. Lockie (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1963), part XIX, p. 287.
\textsuperscript{56} Robinson, \textit{Libertas}, p. 6.
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