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BOOK REVIEW

*Rieger, Andreas: Die Seeaktivitäten der muslimischen Beutefahrer als Bestandteil der staatlichen Flotte während der osmanischen Expansion im Mittelmeer im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*¹, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin 1994 (=Islamkundliche Untersuchungen Bd. 174), XI + 548 p., 3 maps, DM 83.

Over long centuries, its geographical location put the island of Malta right into the focus of naval activities in the Mediterranean. This was true for the commercial as well as for the belligerent ones—and often enough, both of them could hardly be separated from each other. A period of specially dense belligerent naval operations was the one between the 15th and the 17th centuries, when the expansion of the Ottoman Empire reached its high tide, whose waves also threatened to sweep over the Western Mediterranean basin.

An important instrument for the projection of Ottoman sea power were the later so-called “Barbary States” of the North-African coasts, the great opponents of the Hospitaller Knights of Malta and a scourge of the Maltese population of those centuries. The book to be discussed here offers a look at the other side of the hill², or better: sea, in this case. The author has drawn from a vast range of sources to portray those sea-warriors in the heyday of Ottoman naval power.

One of the main theses is that the military expeditions of these privateers were part of the Ottoman military efforts to control the Eastern, and later also the Western half of the Mediterranean Sea. The captains, thus, were by no means pirates in the sense of outlawed plunderers and robbers. Rieger proves that by giving the following arguments:

- During the Ottoman sea campaigns they put their fleets under the supreme command of the Ottoman admiral-in-chief. Moreover, a lot of the North African captains rose to high levels in the Ottoman military hierarchy and provided the sultan with some of his most capable military leaders, the most prominent of whom being certainly Khyareddin, in the west called Barbarossa.
- For a long period of time, the “Barbary States” were actually provinces of the Ottoman empire, ruled by beylerbeys (governors), who were sent from Istanbul and who governed their areas of responsibility under the regulations of the Ottoman provincial administration.
- If necessary, the Ottoman central administration occasionally punished privateers, who attacked ships of nations with whom the sultan had concluded a peace treaty.

1. Translations of the full title “The naval activities of the Muslim privateers as part of the state fleet during the Ottoman expansion in the 15th and 16th century Mediterranean”.

2. Paraphrasis of a book-title of Sir Basil Liddell Hart on the German military leaders in WWII.

- Privateering was part of their military duty. It occurred under the principles of the Islamic Law, that made the fight against the infidels a duty of any Muslim. Even looting for booty, the distribution of it and the attitude towards captives, who became enslaved followed the rules of the Sharia, the codex of Islamic law. Consequently, the Muslim freebooters never perceived the privateering courses of their Christian counterparts as illegal piracy.

This view was only taken by the Christian states around the Mediterranean, despite the fact that they did not behave any better than the Muslims themselves, but sometimes even worse. The Christians, however, lacked any religious and otherwise legitimised code of rules in the treatment of captives and slaves. Thus, as the book points out, denouncing the Muslim sea-warriors as outlawed pirates was none other than an instrument of propaganda. Moreover the two sides blended into what became one more chapter of the typical Mediterranean mixture of trade and privateering as a means of earning one's own living, something which was to be found for centuries in this region.

This situation was by no means a static one all through the two centuries under investigation, but subject to a historical development. The co-operation between the North African privateers and the Sublime Porte began in the times of Sultan Murad II. (1421–1444 and 1444–1451), when the Ottomans intensified their expansion into the Mediterranean in a long war against Venice, where the Aegean Sea was the main battlefield. Besides the war, an overall rise of trade on the sea-routes served as additional incentive for a rise in piracy. On the Venetian side, all religious feelings were thrown over board, when they and the Crusader knights more than once tried to enter into an alliance with the Turkmenian nomads under Uzun Hassan against the rising Ottoman power. That set the pace for a double-tongued, utilitarian policy of co-operation with the satanic infidels in case of necessity. This practice reached its peak when the French gave shelter to the Ottoman fleet against the Hapsburgs a century later.

Before the Ottoman expansion, the relations between the North African Muslim states and their Christian neighbours were relatively civilised, ruled by contracts and trade. The situation worsened when the Spanish eviction of the Muslims after the conquest of Granada (1492) swept into North Africa a layer of population, that had all reasons for hatred against their persecutors, and Spain began to fear for the security of its harbours along the Barbary coast. The moriscos pleaded for help at the Ottoman court, and in 1487 Sultan Bayezid II. (1481–1512) sent a mission to Spain to contact his Muslim brothers with a view to reconnoitre possible relief measures. Only some years before, Gedik Ahmed Pasha had led an expedition against Otranto in South Italy. Malta got a first warning of what was to happen in 1488, when Ottoman sea warriors attacked the island. Perceiving the importance of North Africa as a basis of operations, the Ottomans began to establish the first settlers there. The importance of the booty-raiders in this upcoming tension rose

and this made their armadas as important as the regular fleets. Ever more frequently, Sultan Bayezid II, summoned the raiders from North Africa and the coasts of Asia Minor to Istanbul in order to reinforce his imperial fleet, which at the same time was considerably built up.

This offered a lot of career opportunities for the experienced captains, who readily took the chance and often rose to the highest ranks in Ottoman military hierarchy. The book contains an ample amount of exemplary biographies of such people, who became lauded heroes of the sea in the sultan's service. They received regular salaries, carried official letters of privateering and were allowed to fly the Ottoman flag. The relations between the Sublime Porte and the somewhat unruly captains were however, not always free of conflicts. Some of them refused the sultan's call to arms and some did not respect peace treaties between the Porte and Christian nations. More than once, the sultan had to punish such captains harshly to restore his authority.

With the conquest of Egypt (1517) and Rhodes (1522) the Ottomans gained nearly undisputed control of the Eastern Mediterranean, and now intensified their support of North African naval actions against the Spanish Empire. After a series of naval encounters, sieges and countersieges along the African coast, the Ottoman expansion towards the Western Basin was checked during the Siege of Malta in 1565 and came effectively to an end with the heavy set-back at Lepanto six years later, where the Algerians under their able leader Uluc Ali, later Kapudan Pasha (Grand Admiral) got away with only minor losses.

That, however did not end the privateering activities in North Africa. The attrition, that the Spanish fleet suffered from the war against Great Britain, and that of the Ottoman imperial fleet, limited their ability to effectively counter the threat of the other side's corsairs. Consequently, the task of fighting the religious enemy fell more and more on the freebooters from Tunis and Algiers and on the Knights of Malta.

Also the domestic situation of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 16th to the 17th century added to the change of the situation in North Africa. The inner weakness of the Empire led everywhere to a rise of local autonomies. In the provinces of Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli, the council of the corsair captains always maintained a strong position against the pashas from Istanbul. Often in conflict with the local Janissary garrisons, these forces had to be checked and balanced constantly. When the central institutions became weaker and corrupt and the Janissaries, after long years of quarrels and struggle with the sea warriors, formed an alliance with them, the road was open to a more independent position of these remote provinces. The book, however, fails to make these complex processes and their impacts on the provinces sufficiently transparent.

At the end, the privateers more or less ceased to be part of the regular Ottoman fleet in the middle of the 17th century. They began to form virtually independent states with only a nominal suzerainty of the sultan. Closely connected with this

development was a change of attitude towards the religious impetus of Holy War against the infidels. More and more, privateering was seen as a capitalistic enterprise, a business of investment, gain and loss. As for the situation at sea, at first glance this had two contradictory impacts. The corsairs became more dangerous, since they no longer felt limited by the policy of the Porte. Simultaneously, when privateering became a free for all activity, corsairing itself became more regulated and predictable. The barbary states concluded contracts even with powers outside the Mediterranean like Great Britain and the The Netherlands, and the capture and the exchange of captives often followed fixed rules. From warriors of the faith, they took more and more features of the "capital oriented" piracy of the British, the Dutch and French pirates, these often sailing under the Hospitallers' flag. The northern freebooters now entered the Mediterranean with their technically advanced square sailed broad side ships and often co-operated with their Muslim colleagues, thus adding to the impetus of a more capitalistic oriented corsairing business.

In between the descriptive chapters on the historical beginning and end of the barbary corsairs as part of the Ottoman fleet, the reader finds a wealth of sometimes vivid accounts on nearly all aspects of this kind of naval warfare, only excluding the well-known big events like the Siege of Malta, Lepanto, etc. Moreover, one also finds many details about the constitution of those warrior communities, the social structure, the handling of their booty, biographies, etc. — a real chest-hold of information and detail.

While the raiding campaigns in the Aegean seemed more spontaneous and uncoordinated, those in the West bore the character of well targeted operations of power projection and conquest. Contrary to most actions in Greek archipelagos, they operated in larger squadrons and fleets, attacking and besieging large and fortified places and taking strongly armed state galleys. In their appearance, however, they did not differ very much from one another nor were they much different from those of their western colleagues. Especially in the East, many of the privateers were traders, fishermen or peasants, whose sheer poverty drove them at sea to waylay some uncautious merchantmen or to launch a night attack against a sleeping farm or coastal village. The obvious context of this constant strain against the chances of survival by piracy and the reaction of the population, who saw their only means of surviving in raiding themselves too, did not come to the author. Despite the fact that this vicious circle, that possibly extends such kind of constant low level warfare to eternity and finally devastates whole grand regions until it collapses because of lack of booty and people to be robbed and turned into robbers, is well-known in military history,³ it did not receive more than superficial attention⁴ here. The Greek islands in particular, with their shallow

3. The most prominent and best known of its kind certainly being the Thirty-Year War; in our times Somalia or Yugoslavia are sad examples.

4. Only once mentioned at p. 218f.

waters and rugged coasts, favoured these raiders with their small and fast boats, since the big galleys usually could not follow them to their fox-holes. They did not make much difference between Christians and Muslims, and sold their booty to the respective other side. The typical, protective and camouflaged architecture of many island villages still prevails in this region. The author gives many examples of the shrewd tactics, counter-tactics and stratagems, by which corsairs and population outwitted each other.

At sea, the use of false colours up to the disguise of the sailors and hands on deck was very common and often led to a surprise attack, that led to the surrender of the ship without any resistance to the Muslim corsairs. Since the ship was often the most valuable part of the booty, its destruction was avoided as far as possible. As in their land campaigns, they used elements of "psychological warfare" like their wild looking appearance, the noise of the drums etc. to discourage the Christians, sometimes beyond offering any resistance at all.⁵ Afterwards, all valuables were collected and the captives were taxed for their value either as slaves or sources of ransom money. According to Islamic Law, women were nearly always treated with the most possible decency and respect. This could not only occur somewhere between Gibraltar and Gallipoli, but also in the English Channel, which also belonged to the Algerian corsairs' theatre of operations. One centrepiece of the rare Ottoman sources on raiding warfare is an Ottoman novel⁶ about the typical career of a corsair captain and his changing fate, which is extensively used by Rieger.

For their operations, the corsairs used two different kinds of bases: First, jump-off points, second, places where they could sell their booty, resupply, repair their ships, get rest and recreation during the winter season etc. The areas of operation were along the routes used by the merchantmen and supply ships. Since they usually passed along the coasts, these and the islands were also subjected to raids. The author gives a detailed overview of all these locations. The Muslim corsairs of the Western Mediterranean (and Christian e.g. the Hospitallers as well) also maintained bases in the Eastern basin, where the most profitable fishing grounds were located. Often, these were only temporarily used, hidden and protected anchor sites, where ships were overhauled. Some of them, however, developed into efficient private shipyards of the booty raiders, which in times of need received construction orders from the state owned yards. Quick, efficient work was crucial, since there was always the chance of being hunted down in the fox-hole or at least of missing an attractive prize. The harbours in the African home provinces had ample capacity of well organised yards.

If the ships were not summoned to join the imperial fleet, they weighed anchor up to four times or more for a corso, that could last about a month or more. To sell their loot, especially slaves, they retreated to their own harbours or sailed to

5. These elements could have identified that as a very common feature of Ottoman warfare from many contemporary western sources about the Ottoman land army, especially the Janissaries.

6. Available also in a German translation by Andreas Tietze, in: Acta Orientalia, vol. XIX, part I, 1941.

well-known market places, e.g. in the Aegean Sea. Some of the islands, like Naxos, were used by both sides, who sold their booty at the same time in the same place, the Maltese raiders being no exception. Sometimes the Ottoman governors acted as mediators. If people from close by regions were captured, they could arrange for their ransom on the spot, thus returning home, while some hostages stayed behind. The Algerians did their business mostly in Tetuan, El-Arish, Sale, Tunis and Tripoli. After coming under Ottoman overlordship, the Republic of Ragusa—today Dubrovnik—also served as a market place. If the captives were lucky, they were freed by Christian men-of-war while still at sea, or they even freed themselves by revolting against the Muslim crew.

Amongst their ships there were nearly all the kinds and sizes, that ever sailed the Mediterranean Sea. The private corsairs usually could only afford smaller ships, while only the state backed and well organised corsair communities like the North Africans or the Hospitallers could afford the expensive galleys. Having a choice between heavy armament and velocity, they chose the latter and relied on their resourcefulness in stratagems. At the beginning of the 17th century, renegades from the Netherlands taught the Algerians how to build the superior square-rigged ships of the northern seas which, however, never fully replaced the galleys.

The conditions on board these ships did not differ very much on both sides—they were miserable for their crew, especially for the oarsmen. They tried to ease their lot by knitting gloves and socks, which they sold in the harbours. These slaves were the most important economic factor of the raiding business. Not only the Muslims, whose religious law permitted slavery under strict regulations, but also the Christian nations around the Mediterranean had slaves. Several popes, however, justified enslavement of infidels, despite the fact that Christendom officially did not allow slavery. In consequence, these slaves were not protected by laws as under Muslim rule. Trading with slaves or obtaining ransom was an extraordinarily lucrative business, and Christian raiders did not hesitate to trade with Christian slaves, whom they kidnapped on the Balkan coast. The author illustrates the sometimes astonishing manners of this kind of business, with a lot of vivid examples. The fate of the captives varied considerably. Raising ransom, mediating and organising the whole exchange became a specialised profession on both sides, in which religious orders and professional licensed “redemptionists” were employed. Ransom chests for this purpose were kept even in the Hanse towns of the Baltic. Sometimes, even the captive received a commission fee from his master, when he managed to get ransomed. Those who were not ransomed by their relatives or states ended as slaves. According to the Sharia, they could ransom themselves by excess money for labour or were set free after some years. Lots of them, especially skilled craftsmen in crafts related to ship-building, could rise to considerable fortunes even as slaves. Many of them later converted to Islam. They were then set free, and from this moment became full-scale Muslims, with all

rights. Some even returned, after they were ransomed, to continue living in North Africa. Others were less lucky and suffered as oarsmen and slaves of the state in heavy public works.

A considerable number of renegades—up to two thirds of the captives—became corsairs themselves and eventually rose to the highest ranks of the Ottoman military hierarchy. The role these renegades and socially advanced slaves played in the factory of Islamic buccaneering, can rather be overestimated. Without their contributions to technology transfer, ship construction in the North African yards, sailing and navigation or the employment of the artillery, especially later that of the advanced square-rigged roundships, would not have been possible. Amongst the renegade corsairs representatives of all nations were also to be found Mexicans and Brazilians. Since conversion to Islam was made easy, and the new Muslim was immediately considered a full member of the Islamic community according to the sharia, the Ottomans in all their history made extensive use of these kinds of apostates, who became “professional Ottomans”. They acquired the status of clients of their former masters, often being installed in important functions in their household as a starting off point for their later career. Amongst them were not just former captives. Many came voluntarily, and often whole ships changed sides. Fleeing from punishment or revenge in the numerous blood feuds was one motive, religious persecution, e.g. for French and Italian Protestants, was another one.

In the economic network, the corsair captains held the central position. Many others, from craftsmen to traders, money changers to workers of all kinds, directly or indirectly earned their own living in their environment. Very often the ship did not belong to the captain or the state, but to another private person or an investors’ syndicate, who invested in a corso as in any other enterprise. Sometimes, such shareholders rented a slave, to serve on their behalf on board of the corsair. If a ship was lost, it had to be replaced at once according to a strongly enforced law. In case the corso was successful in terms of loot, prizes and slaves, the investors got a return according to their shares. The distribution of the profits was conducted by regulations in a highly disciplined manner. Brawls amongst the crews, a common occurrence on Christian ships, are not recorded, since the Koranic law of war gives a set of detailed rules for dealing with spoils of war. The author once more gives detailed accounts on how the system worked. Their most hated opponents, the Hospitaller knights, were organised along rather similar lines. They were financed by French and Maltese magnates, and with the acquisition of a *patente di corso*, the captain simultaneously signed a contract, that he had to represent the interests of a group of investors.⁷ This capitalistic approach towards privateering has to be seen in close relation to the changes of the domestic construction of the Ottomans, especially that of the provincial administration, as related in the historic chapters of the book.

7. Rieger is borrowing heavily from Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary*, London 1970. Since there is no account that could illustrate the business of life of Muslim raiders, he uses examples from the Christian side.

As the author himself points out, the sources about the phenomena concerning the Ottoman privateers are scarce. His book, accepted as a doctoral thesis at the University of Hamburg, is nevertheless an impressive attempt to collect these sources and draw all available information out of them. Thus, the length of the single chapters often does not reflect the importance of the topic, but is dictated by the availability of materials. What makes the work even more valuable is the fact, that its creator is obviously able to read all the important languages of the Mediterranean from Ottoman to Greek to Italian, so that his book could, for a long time, be the definite account on his aspect of Mediterranean history and Christian-Muslim relations.

It deserves much praise for the extensive use of primary sources, despite certain faults in the employment of secondary sources. Its strength in the depiction of details at the same time turns out to be its major weakness. By concentrating on the subject, the author sometimes isolates it too rigidly. The book is thus a bit lacking in the employment of secondary sources. Some more reading could have lead to a deeper penetration of the whole picture and in turn perhaps to more brilliance and analysis as far as the broader historical and socio-economic framework of the topic is concerned. To give only a few examples:

- It should have been made clearer that the conflicts between local bodies, the Janissary garrisons and the imperial governors certainly had their local implications, but they were also part of a deep change in the fabric of the Ottoman Empire, that affected it as a whole, and not only the North African provinces.
- By concentrating heavily on slave trading and the aspects of Ottoman power-projection in terms of gaining naval supremacy, he overlooks other much more important impacts. When the Hospitallers, still operating from Rhodes, captured eighteen Turkish grain transport ships, in Istanbul, the grain price rose by fifty per cent⁸ and, as in Rome, feeding the population of one's capital city was a very crucial issue for stability. Thus, raiding was not only a disturbance and molestation or a side-show of regular naval warfare, but could heavily affect the centres of power itself. Controlling it thus had far greater importance for the major powers.
- The revisionist approach of the author concerning the unbalanced view of western historiography on the Muslims as criminal pirates, and their western opponents as bright knights of justice, undoubtedly has its merits. It could however, instead of being repeated at each and every opportunity, have been better concentrated in one chapter. There he could have shown by some easy comparative analysis, that raiding and trading had an age old cultural and economic tradition in the Mediterranean, since the Argonauts first set sail. The story of the barbary raiders was just one chapter of this story, that came to an end when the first steam frigates entered the Mediterranean in the 19th century, giving the organised state navies a bias against the raiders, that still remains.

8. Setton, Kenneth M. *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571)*, 4 vols, Philadelphia 1978–1985, vol. 3, 122—another most important secondary source omitted by the author.

When it comes to the technicalities of ships, armament, their use and tactical and strategical impacts, there are serious omissions and flaws. The same is true for sorting the detailed accounts into the overall historical environment. Here the use of a more analytical work on Ottoman history like that of Josef Matuz⁹ or on maritime warfare like those of Pryor¹⁰ and Guilmartin¹¹ could have added considerably to the structure of those passages. Also, Dauber's epic work on the Hospitaller fleet¹² could have given much more substance to the chapter about the ships of the privateers. They are not even mentioned in the list of sources. Last but not least, the readability of the text suffers from a lot of repetitions. This defect could easily be erased by a critical re-reading and possible re-arranging of several chapters; the amount of more than five hundred pages is due to the use of rather large print characters and spacing between lines. To sum it up, this is a solid and valuable piece of historical craftsmanship, as a doctoral thesis should be and a recommended reading for all scholars of early modern Mediterranean history.

9. Matuz, Josef, *Das Osmanische Reich*, Darmstadt 1985; possibly the best single-volume account so far.

10. Pryor, John H., *Geography, technology and war*, Cambridge 1988.

11. Guilmartin, John Francis Jr., *Gunpowder and Galleys*, Cambridge etc. 1974 (Reprint 1980).

12. Dauber, Robert L., *Die Marine des Johanniter-Malteser-Ordens*, Graz 1989.