

**TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED:
THE CORPORATION AND CAPTIVES IN BARBARY**

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In modern times the Corporation of London, as you well know, has many responsibilities and interests which lie outside its ordinary local government functions. That was even more true of earlier centuries. Some of those past interests were quite surprising, or at least seem surprising to us now, and one of the delights of the time when I was looking after the City's archives was to come across the unexpected.

My attention was first drawn to what has become the subject of this paper when I edited for publication some late sixteenth century accounts of the City Chamber and found the chamberlain was holding monies in trust for, I quote, 'the redeeming of captives in the dominium of Turkey' and paying out various sums for this purpose. I found out then just sufficient to enable me to write an explanatory footnote but determined that at some time in the future I would look into the subject more fully. When I finally came to do so, I found that not only the chamberlain's account but the records of the Court of Aldermen in the reign of Elizabeth I contained numerous references to the ransoming of captives held by what were then regarded as Turkish infidels on the Barbary coast of North Africa.

For this there were two reasons. First, monies raised in the city for this charitable purpose were paid into and administered by the chamber and the chamberlain not only included references to them in his own annual account but also from time to time laid accounts of receipts and expenditure of this money before the Court of Aldermen which throughout exercised a strong supervisory role. And, second, London merchants and seamen, trading with or sailing to the Mediterranean, were perhaps exceptionally well placed to be of practical assistance in effecting the ransom of the captives. In the twenty-five years between 1569 and 1593 the records reveal ransom efforts being considered on behalf of eighty-three named men as well as others unnamed. The great majority were held on the North African coast with a much smaller number in Spain or elsewhere.

But first for a little background. Elizabeth I's reign saw considerable changes in the pattern of English trade which was to move gradually from being export-led to import-led. The export of cloth, chiefly to the markets of Germany and the Low Countries, which had dominated English trade in the preceding two centuries, was beginning to stagnate if not decline. New long distances trades were being created to tap the lucrative markets for silks, spices and other products of the Mediterranean and the Near and Far East, a move which was stimulated by the intensifying political conflict between England and Spain through which country many such goods had previously come. The Muscovy, later Russia, Company, was founded in 1555, three years before Elizabeth I came to the throne and was soon to be followed by the Barbary, Morocco, Turkey and Levant Companies; the East India Company itself, which was dominated by the Levant Company merchants, was established in 1599.

Many of the entrepreneurs behind these companies were leading London merchants and not infrequently members of the Court of Aldermen. Edward Osborne, the lord mayor of 1583-84, was one of the principal instigators of both the Turkey Company and the Levant Company, and the twelve merchants who were the original patentees of the Turkey Company in 1581 included eight men who were either already aldermen or were to become aldermen within the next decade. These ventures often enjoyed considerable state backing, which won for them important commercial privileges, including from 1586 free access for English ships to the ports of Barbary for shelter and refreshment. Both the English and the Ottoman powers of this period regarded Spain as their chief enemy.

The City records are not very specific as to just where the captives were being held. Algiers is mentioned quite often, particularly after 1580, Morocco less frequently, but sometimes the description is 'a captive in Barbary', 'a captive in Barbary under the Turks' or 'a captive under the Turks'. Cloths were sent to Barbary for the ransoming of one Bryan Hall but after his return he was said to be 'lately redeemed out of Turkey' and it is likely that a few other references to captives 'in Turkey' or 'redeemed out of Turkey' also apply to men held on the Barbary coast. Harmon Ponde, in 1578, is the only captive specifically stated to have been held in Constantinople.

The term 'Barbary' was both geographically and politically a somewhat imprecise concept but was generally considered to have consisted of the states of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli together with the empire of Morocco. Morocco had a coastline extending both within and without the Straits of Gibraltar, bordering both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli were part of the Ottoman empire but since the powers in Constantinople in the second half of the sixteenth century were much occupied with events in the Near East and in the Levant or eastern half of the Mediterranean, these three regencies, among whom Algiers had pre-eminence, operated in the western half of the Mediterranean with a considerable degree of independence.

There is no doubt that the picture often painted of the Barbary coast as a hotbed of pirates preying on Christian shipping is overstated. Algiers, far from being a den of pirates, was a recognised port of call for English shipping. Contemporary diplomats often wrote well of the ordered conduct and judicial systems obtaining in the Turkish regencies while seamen and merchants thrown into Spanish gaols were often more harshly treated than by the Turks. It is true that in this period the line between commerce and piracy, between merchants and corsairs, was often blurred but this was true of Christians as well as of Mohammedans. English shipping in the Mediterranean probably suffered more by attacks of other Christian powers than by those of the Barbary States; there were galley slaves in both Christian and Turkish ships; and the bagnios or state prisons and the slave market of Algiers could be paralleled by those of Leghorn or of Valletta, home of the Knights of St John. And the masters of a few English ships courted disaster for themselves and their crews by disregard or abuse of privileges granted to English shipping.

That being said, the plight of Englishmen held in infidel hands nevertheless elicited much sympathy at home. The fear of the Muslim after all was longstanding. At the time of the great Crusades, the Saracens were the enemy which had captured the Holy sites. In the fourteenth and fifteenth century the Ottoman Turks had subjugated much of the Balkans and in 1453 had captured Constantinople, capital of the once great Byzantine Empire. In the sixteenth century they continued to harass and terrify Europe. Vienna was besieged in 1529, although it did not fall, and Hungary was later to become an Ottoman province. The

great Ottoman sultan, Suleyman the Magnificent, died in 1566 while besieging a Hungarian fortress on the Danube.

A large part of the money to be used for the ransoming of the captives came from charitable alms given at the sermons preached to great crowds at Easter time at the open air pulpits of St Paul's Cross and St Mary Spital which were attended by the lord mayor, aldermen and sheriffs in state. The preachers were encouraged to exhort the people to give generously and collectors of the alms, usually members of the twelve Great livery companies were appointed.

The sums so raised, which ranged from £70 to £100 each year, the equivalent of many thousands of pounds today, were then paid over to the Chamberlain. Collections were also made from time to time at other Sunday sermons at Paul's Cross or in parish churches and it was not unusual for a returned captive to be 'openly shewed in the sermon time at Paul's Cross', presumably to reassure the citizens that their donations had been put to proper use and to encourage further almsgiving.

Other contributions came from friends or relatives towards the ransoming of specific prisoners. Friends of James Ogle gave £10 towards his ransom; Edward Warner, draper, £20 towards the release of his brother Robert; William Laude, citizen and joiner, £100 and a pledge of a further £12:10s:0d for his son John. Such gifts undoubtedly helped to move the captives higher up the queue of those on whose behalf ransom efforts would be made. Sometimes such contributions might be repaid. The £10 given by Clemence Collyns, widow, was returned to her after her son John succeeded in escaping before a ransom was effected. John Dryver was given back the £20 he had paid towards the redeeming of his son Robert; no reason is given but later entries suggest that it may have been because Robert had adopted the Mohammedan faith. This was by no means unknown. In 1582, fifteen men held prison in Algiers wrote to the Bishop of London, stressing that if they were not ransomed then their miseries and torments might cause them to 'turn Turks' which would be to the perdition of their souls.

The London merchant most actively concerned in efforts to ransom captives in the earlier part of the period under discussion was Francis Bowyer, citizen and grocer. A Merchant Adventurer, a major trader with Spain, and one of the pioneers behind the foundation of the Muscovy and Morocco Companies, he was to serve as master of the Grocers Company 1575-76 and as alderman of Castle Baynard Ward from 1576 until his death in 1581. Both before and after his election as alderman he was often a member of small committees appointed to consider the best means of effecting the ransoms. Other frequent members of such committees were Alderman Edward Osborne, already mentioned, and Alderman George Barne, son of a former lord mayor of the same name, brother-in-law of Sir Francis Walsingham, a founder of both the Spanish and Turkey Companies and a governor of the Muscovy Company.

From time to time Francis Bowyer laid accounts of his transactions before the Court of Aldermen. In 1570, for example, the chamberlain transferred £110 to Bowyer. Bowyer's account shows that he used most of this money to purchase twenty cloths which were packed in five trusses distinguished by a mark - and this mark is reproduced in the margin of the repertory of the Court of Aldermen, then shipped overseas in the Richard of Arundel and delivered to two of Bowyer's factors or agents in Barbary, to be used for the ransom of two English mariners. One of these factors, Nicholas Stile, was himself to become a

prominent merchant and an alderman of Aldersgate Ward. There was undoubtedly a well established traffic in ransoms with ships carrying goods or money for this purpose.

In 1576 Bowyer was instrumental in securing the release of seven unnamed Englishmen, possibly not Londoners, whose ransoms totalled £521. Bowyer's factors also secured the release of William Ivett, grocer, certainly a Londoner, and of Richard Burke of Plymouth, mariner, his wife and four children. Ivett and Burke and family all came home in the Mary Martin, one of the Levant Company's ships. After Bowyer's death in 1581 no other London merchant was to play such a prominent role in ransoming of captives. Most were involved in the rescue of only one or two men, and usually had to produce the former captive before the Court of Aldermen or one of its committees before being reimbursed their expenditure.

The ship, the Mary Martin, was itself sunk in 1582. Seven members of the crew, including the master, returned home in November 1585, having paid part of their ransoms in Algiers and pledged to pay the remainder on return to London. They were given varying sums out of the charitable collections. But other members of the crew were still captive. Their wives raised over £100 which, together with further sums contributed by the chamberlain, were used to purchase eight fine cloths. These were despatched aboard the George Bonaventure. In October 1585 consideration was given to redeeming the crew of the Nicholas Bonaventure taken captive in Algiers. The records name fifteen crew members from William Phoenix the mate to William the boy. Two of them at least were back in London by March 1588.

A few of the captives ransomed were held elsewhere than in Barbary. In 1576 £10 apiece was given towards the ransoming of two unnamed Englishmen held captive by the Duke of Florence, one of them in the Duke's galleys. In March 1581 the wife of Robert Massey, a prisoner 'for religion' in Seville in Spain, was granted £6:13s:4d towards his redemption, and in January 1584 £15 was given towards ransoming Thomas Brycklebanck, for long a captive under the King of Spain. In 1591, at the behest of the Privy Council and one senses rather reluctantly, the City gave £3:6s:8d to two Devon merchants towards the charges of redeeming twenty-five poor Englishmen lately taken prisoner in Spain.

It is interesting that in 1582 the lord mayor, writing to the Privy Council, states that collections for English captives were made only in London although the benefit, as indeed we have seen, had been more widely extended, and he renews a previous plea that such collections may be made also in other cities and towns.

Many of the captives recorded in the City archives as being helped were Londoners. Certainly all were Englishmen. Mention is made on four or five occasions of Hungarians seeking aid. As was said earlier Hungary had been invaded by the Ottoman Turks. These men were seeking assistance in the ransoming of fellow countrymen or were themselves ex-prisoners who had been released on payment of part of the ransom and still had to pay the pledged remainder. They seem to have been regarded with some sympathy. A ward collection was authorised on one occasion or small sums of money granted on others. But these were always paid out of the City's own cash and not out of charitable collections. The Court of Aldermen was adamant about this. In 1575 it turned down a request on behalf of some Irish born captives in Barbary and ordered that all money collected as charitable alms should be used only for Englishmen and no others. In 1582 the Privy Council asked that some money out of the Easter collections might be given to one Lucas

Argenten, a Greek, whose wife and children were alleged to be prisoners in Turkey. The lord mayor, who in any case seems to have regarded Argenten's credentials with a considerable amount of scepticism, replied that for many years the Easter collections had been devoted to the relief of the queen's natural subjects. If contributors should learn that their money was given to a stranger they would contribute less in future; money diverted to strangers would be taken 'out of the bellies and souls of our natural English brethren'; and an unwelcome precedent be set for other strangers to come forward. But, as I hope I have shown, for English captives the City did its best.

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