Cultural Consequences

The Experiences English Merchants and Travelers in the Ottoman Empire during the Early Modern Period

April Donahue

History 521

Dr. Brown

During the early modern period, Europe endured widespread turmoil and social upheaval due to the numerous political conflicts, religious, and civil wars that covered the continent. It was also the age of mercantilism; new exploration and expansion was on the agenda for a the more powerful nations of Europe. The European's overwhelming desire for wealth provided the necessary motivation to the powers of Portugal, Spain, and France to explore the globe in an attempt to capture all available resources before their rivals were able to. England, unable to have funded serious exploration due to long-term internal challenges, had begun their global expansion tentatively by making overtures of diplomacy to the Ottoman Empire in a show of mutual anti-Habsburg, anti-Catholic friendship. From there, the two political entities move into a more traditional commercial relationship, based in the Levant region, from which they both profited.

In an effort to study England's initial attempts at pushing past the previous boundaries of trade, and the resulting cultural consequences they experienced, this paper begins with brief economic sketches of both England and the Ottoman Empire before focusing on external trade. Royal correspondence written by Elizabeth I to Safiye, mother of the sultan Murad III in addition to the sultan himself show the beginnings of England's attempt to consummate a trade relationship with the Ottomans. The writings of early English merchants afforded the opportunity to trade within the realm of the Ottomans provide a valuable perspective into the earliest beginnings of this new intercultural relationship. In addition, the private

letters of travelers fortunate enough to embark on foreign travel, and literate enough to write about their experiences offer a more personal look into early English perceptions of the Ottoman culture. From clothing, theater, and religion, once contact began, the culture of the Ottoman Empire began to affect many facets of early English life.

Agrarian in nature, England had a rural based economy leading into early modern times. This economy has been founded upon wool, which had been the chief export of England dating back earlier than the fourteenth century.[1] It is about the beginning of the sixteenth century that a shift from the rural economy to a more capitalist-like economy can be seen, with the advent of the putting-out system. Prior to the advent of the putting-out system, craft gilds carefully controlled the manufacturing of wool, among many other artisanal crafts. In this newer economy, the merchant was now in control. He bought the raw material, which was then distributed to the craftsmen who performed the various actions required to transform it into finished cloth, and then sold the cloth on the market for a profit.[2] The rise of this new merchant class can be seen throughout Europe during this period, providing the impetus for global expansion in the search for new sources of wealth.

England's attempts at global trade and imperialism came at a later date than its contemporaneous nations such as Spain, Portugal, Venice or France. This lateness

[1] E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1929), 391.
[2] William Gilbert, *Renaissance and Reformation*, http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/11.html

can be attributed to a sequence of internal events which had caused disorder. Reaching back as far as 1453 and the start of what is known as the War of the Roses a violent series of dynastic civil wars fought between the Houses of Lancaster and York for the English throne,[3]and affected England's stability for over one hundred years. By 1485, the throne had been won by Henry Tudor, of the House of Lancaster. This Tudor victory did little to provide England with the steadiness hoped for. Beginning with Henry VIII's break from Rome and the creation of the Church of England, to the religious succession wars of his heirs, it not until the long reign of Elizabeth I that England began to reach out and explore the possibility of foreign trade beyond previously established relations.

Similar to England, the Ottoman Empire was focused upon an agrarian economy. Through its above average labor productivity[4], the Ottomans farmers were able to provide adequately not only for themselves, but also for both the urban population and military. As a much larger political entity, and heterogeneous in nature, the Ottoman Empire differed from England in that there were numerous commodities traveling through the empire, but only a small percentage of those goods passed through the border. In the interest of stability, the Ottomans were more concerned with importation than exportation and as such were welcoming to

[3] Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "Wars of the Roses", accessed April 13, 2014, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/509963/Wars-of-the-Roses.
[4] Metin M. Coşgel, *Agricultural Productivity in the Early Ottoman Empire*, University of Connecticut Department of Economics Working Paper Series, http://www.econ.uconn.edu/working/2004-35r.pdf, (November 2005), 12. This entire paper, based on tax registers in the regions that were formerly under the Ottoman reign, focuses on the labor productivity of the Ottoman Empire, and its ability to produce as much grain output per worker on par with most European countries after the advent of the Industrial Revolution.

European merchants. To support this desired economic stability, the Ottoman government practiced selective interventionism, and would intervene in local and long-distance trade to regulate markets and ensure the availability of goods.[5]

Prior to the grant of trading privileges by Murad III in 1580, English merchants in the Levant often traded under the protection of France. When merchants did not sail with the French, they were forced to rely upon the Venetians for supplies of currants, sweet-oils, wines, spices, carpets, silks, drugs, and other luxury goods from the Orient. In return, the English supplied the region woolen cloth, lead, tin, and animal skins, all of which would then be exported again, to the advantage of the Venetians.[6] This indirect trade through the Venetians led to the establishment of English cloth in the Ottoman region, and was solidified by the usage of that cloth to garb the Janissaries, the elite soldier-slaves who made up the Sultan's personal troops. After the Portuguese had made the initial voyage beyond the Horn of Africa, however, the Venetian near monopoly on Mediterranean trading came to an end and by 1534, English trade in the region slowed considerably. Hakluyt writes in *The Principle Voyages and Navigations and Discoveries of the English Nation* that trade 'was utterly discontinued, and in manner quite forgotten, as if it had never bene, for the space of 20 years and more'[7] although there are a

[5] Şevket Pamuk, *Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire*, *1500-1800*, The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Autumn, 2004), 235.
[6] S.A. Skilliter, William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey 1578-1582, (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4.
[7] Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations*, *Voyages*, *Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, v. 62-3, 167-8 as cited in Skilliter.

small number of private merchants who are able to trade in the region prior to the capitulations that are eventually granted.

According to Skilliter, Hakluyt details the commercial exploits of English merchant-traveler Anthony Jenkinson, who had been able to procure grant of protection, known as a ferman, from the Sultan Suleiman while the sultan had been traveling in Aleppo in 1553. The ferman allowed Jenkinson entrance into Ottoman ports, trade throughout the empire, no extraneous taxation, and the same enjoyment of the liberties afforded the French and Venetian merchant communities. In addition, the sultan provided for Jenkinson's personal safety by having ordered Ottoman ship captains to protect Jenkinson against aggression toward and defense of his ship from hostile aggressors, and stated they must provide food as Jenkinson needed.[8]

It was not until the last quarter of the sixteenth century that direct trade without the added cost of traveling through Venice, or even Antwerp was established. The English government understood the advantages of a commercial relationship with the Ottomans would bring, however it was still left to the merchant community to bear the cost of the establishment of those relations. In 1578, William Harborne traveled to the Sublime Porte on behalf of his employer, English merchant Edward Osborne in an attempt to open trade negotiations with Murad III. Harborne's undertaking proved to be successful, and assisted by the diplomatic correspondence between Elizabeth, Murad, and Safiye, mother of the

[8] Skilliter, 7.

sultan. Of special interest, it can be seen in the letters between Elizabeth and Murad the attempt to construct a diplomatic relationship built upon mutual non-Catholic and anti-Habsburg sentiments. Allinson shows in *A Monarchy of Letters* how deftly Elizabeth establishes herself as more aligned with Murad in her Protestant contempt for the idolatry practiced by Catholics.[9] England received a charter of privilege in 1580 from the sultan.[10]

The following year, the Levant Company, a joint-stock company which included Harborne's employer Osborne, was established, and issued a charter for exclusive trading rights in the region for the next seven years.[11] This document became the foundation for English trade in the Levant, and established capitulations to the effect that English subjects would be free to trade within Ottoman dominions, Englishmen living in Turkey would not be liable to additional taxation such as the poll-tax known as *jizya*, English slaves would be set free, and English ships were not to be plundered. Additionally, this charter provided England the right to appoint consuls in any major commercial city.[12] Finally, England was able to gain a foothold in the international market without the reliance on other European powers.

William Harborne remained in Constantinople at Elizabeth's request to fulfill the role of ambassador to the Empire. Still unwilling to contribute fiscally to the position, the government of England expected the Levant Company to pay although

---

[9] Rayne Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 138
[10] Allinson, 134.
[11] T. S. Willan, *Some Aspects of English Trade with the Levant in the Sixteenth Century*, The English Historical Review, Vol. 70, No. 276 (Jul., 1955), 405. http://www.jstor.org/stable/559072 .
[12] Skilliter, *Doc. 14 Translation of Diploma incorporating the privileges for the English nation granted by Murad III to Elizabeth 1. 86-89.*

his salary. According to Woodhead, this conflation of the merchant-politician position caused the French and Venetian ambassadors to cast aspersions on his ambassadorial qualifications, questioning whether Harborne was truly able to speak for Elizabeth, or was he simply a cunning merchant out for personal wealth?[13] As the Levant Company continued to pay the salaries of subsequent ambassadors, this arrangement would continue to provide a source of tension; those men filling the double role of merchant politician would be subject to the same suspicions.

Trade with the Ottomans was advantageous to England, who in 1570 had been isolated from continental Europe when Elizabeth had been excommunicated from the Catholic Church by Pope Pius V.[14] Now that England considered itself free to enjoy trade within the Ottoman Empire, English merchants capitalized on that trade by having provided large quantities of tin and lead, the raw materials necessary for armament. These exportations breached the prohibition against providing war materials from Christendom to the Infidels of Islam, and both Spanish French ambassadors were keen to inform their governments regarding such actions. As cited in Skilliter, Spanish ambassador Bernardino de Mendoza wrote to Philip II

[13] Christine Woodhead, 'England, the Ottomans and the Barbary Coast in the Late Sixteenth Century', State Papers Online, *1509–1714*, (Cengage Learning, Reading, 2009), 2.
[14] Pius V, *Regnans in Excelsis*, 1570, http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius05/p5regnans.htm

"*Two years ago they opened up the trade…they take great quantities of tin and lead, which the Turk buys of them almost its weight in gold, the tin being vitally necessary for the casting of guns and lead for the purposes of war…"*[15]

For the Ottoman Empire, who had been at war for much of the past century with numerous entities such as the Safavid Empire of Persia, or the Habsburgs in Europe,[16] the importation of the raw material necessary to make munitions was certainly considered a boon. The exportation of England's natural resources such as tin and lead in conjunction with the woolen cloth used by the Ottoman government to dress the Janissaries combined to make trade with the Ottomans lucrative enough to circumvent the Christian injunction against armament trade with practitioners of Islam.

After the initial success of the Levant Company, merchant consulates began to branch out to different cities. Three of these communities of English merchants, known as "factories" were based in Constantinople, Aleppo and Izmir. Although all three factories were based in thriving economic centers, Aleppo is considered by Goffman to be the least influential due to its remoteness from the recently established trade routes. Merchants in Aleppo exerted little of the political influence enjoyed by their counterparts in Constantinople and Izmir.[17] Since the Ottomans captured the city of Constantinople in 1453, it served as the hub for trade in the

[15] Bernardino de Mendoza as cited in Skilliter, 24.
[16] "Chronology of the Ottoman Empire (1259-1924A.D.)" http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/ottomanchron.html
[17] Daniel Goffman, Britons in the Ottoman Empire 1642-1660, (University of Washington Press: Seattle, 1998), 29.

eastern part of the Mediterranean region. Because of its status as the capital city of an empire, Constantinople imported enormous amounts of goods in order to support the government, military, and civilians. As an already international city with a diverse blend of inhabitants, it was not difficult for English merchants to create networks of trade once they arrived. Located on the coast, Izmir was mainly an agricultural town until the seventeenth century. Once merchants protected by capitulations began to arrive in search of wool, cotton and fruit the Port of Izmir become vital to international trade.[18]

International trade and foreign policy, as we have seen, facilitates travel by merchants, politicians, and in some cases their families. It is possible to create a skeletal perception of intercultural experience by analyzing diplomatic documents, but those documents, by nature, are politic in their wording. To craft a better understanding of the English perception of their new trade partners, it is helpful to look at the personal letters of those individuals who traveled from England to the Ottoman Empire to friends and family at home.

One of the earliest and most informative monographs written regarding the Ottoman Empire was written in 1665 by Paul Rycaut. Rycaut was employed as private secretary to Heneage Finch, 3rd Earl of Winchilsea, who was the ambassador to Constantinople at the time. Entitled "*The History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire*," Rycaut presented a fully anthropological assessment of the Ottoman Empire. Included in the book was the origin of the Islamic religion, a

[18] Goffman, 37.

history of the Ottomans, with biographical sketches of previous emperors, numerous government agencies, the palace and it's support system, folk festivals, the military, demographics of inhabitants, and included many drawings to underscore the topics.[19]

As discussed in MacLean's "*The Rise of Oriental Travel*," Thomas Dallum was a musician in London who was skilled in the manufacturing of organs, and crafted the organ Elizabeth sent as a gift to Safiye, mother of Murad IV. His letters provide the perception of perhaps the more "average" Englishman in that he had no previous classical or biblical education. Maclean considers Dallam's personal deliverance and playing of the organ for the sultan the first contact between an English commoner and Ottoman royalty. As such, Dallam's writing underscores the anxiety and trepidation he felt in proximity to the emperor.[20]

A surprising number of English women traveled to the Ottoman Empire after the relationship between both entities become more secure. Bernadette Andrea discusses one of those women, Mary Fisher, in her book "Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature." Fisher, a Quaker, had taken it upon herself to seek an audience with the sultan, Mehmet IV in Edirne. After engaging in a conversation touching upon their respective religions, Fisher is said to have recalled her

[19] Paul Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, https://archive.org/stream/presentstateott00habegoog#page/n0/mode/2up
[20] Gerald MacLean, *The Rise of Oriental Travel*, (Palgrave MacMillan: Hampshire, 2004), 42.

experience as one that recognized the "humanity and graciousness" of the sultan and his people.[21]

A more recognized figure in the field of travelogues is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife to Edward Wortley Montagu, who had been appointed to ambassador to Constantinople in 1716. Lady Montagu is known to have written an estimated nine hundred letter to friends and family in England and Europe. Although as the wife of an ambassador Lady Montagu acquainted herself with strictly the more elite inhabitants of the region, her letters provide insight into the lives of the women who live in the palace and received unprecedented access to areas where women are typically sequestered from men, such as the baths, or the sultan's harem. The letters discuss in an in-depth manner the sumptuous surroundings that foreign dignitaries lived in, with luxurious fabrics and precious gems. Likewise, Lady Montagu provides a greatly detailed letter describing the traditional form of dress of the women in the region called the *ṣalvar*, which featured the novelty of trouser like legs. Additionally, Lady Montagu makes a point to mention the great civility and politeness afforded to her by the women of the Ottoman Empire, saying that

"*I know no European court where the ladies would have behaved themselves in so polite a manner*."[22]

An unexpected by-product of the intercultural relations between England and the Ottoman Empire was the effect of contact on clothing styles. According to

[21] Bernadette Andrea, *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007), 60.
[22] Robert Halsband, *The Selected Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, (Penguin: Middlesex, 1970), 90.

Skilliter, when making his discrete entrance into the region, William Harborne is reported to have donned the traditional dress of the Ottomans in order to prevent rival state merchants from sabotaging his efforts on behalf of England.[23] Like Harborne, Lady Montagu also dressed like Ottoman women to travel incognito by passing as an Ottoman woman, and even had her portrait painted in the traditional Ottoman garb.[24] As Onur Inal shows in "Women's Fashions in Transition: Ottoman Borderlands and the Anglo-Ottoman Exchange of Costumes," during the eighteenth century, women's magazines in England were filled with new Turkish dress terms such as kaftan and dolman had entered the vocabulary of the well-dressed.[25]

Due to the Ottoman government's reluctance to import items other than cloth for military usage, and armament, the traditional dress of the empire experienced little change in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially considering the sumptuary laws in place at the time. Religious laws in place at the time supported the government's reluctance to modernize in any way. English merchants typically kept to the commercial factories in which they made their money, thus few inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire actually came into contact with newer fashions. It wasn't until toward the end of the seventeenth century that European fashion had any effect on Ottoman dress. When it did, it was held to a

[23] Skilliter referencing Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*, 39.
[24] Halsband, 95.
[25] Onar Inal, *Women's Fashions in Transition: Ottoman Borderlands and the Anglo-Ottoman Exchange of Costumes*, Journal of World History, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2011

different aesthetic, in which the contours of the body were draped and covered in more fabric than the typical European.[26]

Some effects of intercultural relations with the Ottomans had on the English were, in hindsight, to be expected. As mentioned, fashion provides an excellent example. By nature ephemeral, fashion trends farther back than the period analyzed can be seen to change regularly. Through the portrayal of Ottomans in the innumerable plays which had been written and performed during the seventeenth century, the English elite had been inundated with the luxurious articles of clothing worn by the characters in the plays. It should come as no small surprise that they would wish to emulate such luxury themselves. Likewise, due to the restricted travels of the English merchants in the Ottoman Empire combined with the lack of political sway held by the ambassadors, there is again no surprise that Ottoman dress remains unchanged until the empire is in decline, and Europe is on the rise.

As previously mentioned, another aspect of English life affected by interactions with the Ottoman Empire was theater. As the Ottomans made their way through Europe, and Christians became more familiar again with their Islamic religion, there had been concerns over the apostolic act of converting to Islam, or in the vernacular of the time, "turning Turk." After establishing the Levant Company, the English were amazed to discover the heterogeneous blend of Islamic converts in

[26] Charlotte Jirousek, "*Transition to Mass Fashion System,"* Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire 1550-1922, ed. Donald Quartaert, (State University of New York Press: New York, 2000), 219

the region.[27] These fears can be seen readily in the numerous theatrical works that appear in the seventeenth century. Many of the plays that had been written at the time portrayed the Turkish characters in a negative light.

These plays provide the foundation upon which the future pejorative concept of orientalism will be built upon. Most famous is Shakespeare's "Othello," in which the audience is provided numerous accounts of the barbarity and cruelty of the Ottomans. Another notable example is playwright Delarivier Manley's "New Atlantis," in which repeated scenes of polygamy can be seen as a product of England's budding orientalism.[28] Unlike Lady Montague, Manley did not have personal experience with the women of the Ottoman Empire, and was guided by contemporary cultural attitudes when writing the Turkish characters in her play.

The relationship early modern England held with the Ottoman Empire is one that calls for more analysis in comparison to the imperialistic relationships Britain imposed on its colonies in later years. The stereotype of the imperialist Briton is one who is domineering, ethnocentric, and exploitative of the indigenous peoples which had been conquered. These traits are not exhibited by the seventeenth century English merchants who populate the factories of the Ottoman Empire. Conscious of their tenuous position, and determined to make money, these men were more accommodating and deferential to the powerful government of the distant land they in which they resided. Perhaps due to England being a small influence in the world

[27] Mustafa Şahiner, *"The Problematic of "Turning Turk" in Philip Massinger's The Renegado,"* Journal of British Literature and Culture (2007), No. 14, 101.
[28] Andrea, 117.

at the time, and because they were unable to begin exploration and exploitation as early as the Spanish did, their attitude toward "others" had not had an opportunity to be marred by a sudden influx of wealth and power.

Trade relations with the Ottoman Empire proved to be a training ground for the English, who were seeking to improve their status as a powerhouse in the eyes of the rest of the world. Commercial trade with the Ottoman Empire allowed the English an opportunity to interact successfully with non-Christians in a unique environment that was mutually advantageous. While global reaction had been negative due to the trade of prohibitive items, it is clear that England posed a threat not only to international merchants, but the Holy Roman Empire itself. It is because of the trade relationship with the Ottoman Empire that England is able to become more financially solvent, and better prepared for exploration. At the same time Elizabeth had agents in Constantinople, there was exploration beginning in the New World, and she granted the charter of the Roanoke Colony in Virginia in 1585. Although the risk of that exploration is still held by joint-stock companies, it is this confident exploration for resources by the new merchant class that begins England's rise as one of the most powerful nations of the world.

Bibliography

Allinson, Rayne, "*A Monarchy of Letters,"* (Palgrave-MacMillan: New York, 2012).

Andrea, Bernadette, *"Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature*," (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007),

Coşgel, Metin M., "*Agricultural Productivity in the Early Ottoman Empire"*, University of Connecticut Department of Economics Working Paper Series, (November 2005), http://www.econ.uconn.edu/working/2004-35r.pdf,

Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s. v. "Wars of the Roses.

Gilbert, William, "*Renaissance and Reformation,"* http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/11.html

Goffman, Daniel, "*Britons in the Ottoman Empire 1642-1660*," (University of Washington Press: Seattle, 1998).

Halsband, Robert, "*The Selected Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu,"* (Penguin: Middlesex).

Inal, Onar, "*Women's Fashions in Transition: Ottoman Borderlands and the Anglo-Ottoman Exchange of Costumes,"* Journal of World History, Vol. 22, No. 2,(2011).

Jirousek, Charlotte, "The Transition to Mass Fashion System Dress," in *"Consumption Studiesand the History of the Ottoman Empire 1150-1922.* Ed. Donald Quataert.

Lipson, Edward, *"The Economic History of England,"* (A&C Black: London, 1929).

MacLean, Gerald, *"The Rise of Oriental Travel,"* (Palgrave-MacMillan: Hampshire, 2004).

Pamuk, Şevket, "*Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800*," The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Autumn, 2004)

Skilliter, S.A., *"William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey 1578-1582. A documentary study of the first Anglo-Ottoman relations."* (Oxford University Press: London, 1977)

Şahiner, Mustafa, *"The Problematic of "Turning Turk" in Philip Massinger's The Renegado,"* Journal of British Literature and Culture, No. 14, 101. (2007)

Willan, T. S., "*Some Aspects of English Trade with the Levant in the Sixteenth Century,"* The English Historical Review, Vol. 70, No. 276 (Jul., 1955), http://www.jstor.org/stable/559072.