

## FRIENDS, FOES, ALLIES: OTTOMAN- BRITISH RELATIONS IN THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

*Turks and the British have been friends, foes and allies for a long time. The transformation in the nature of their relationships depended on the ongoing changes in power relationships. The eighteenth century was an era of transition during which England became an empire while The Ottoman empire declined. N.M.Cugler observes that before this period “England was not a powerful institutional force, but a small isolated island when compared to more powerful better-organized world Powers such as the Ottomans” (11). At the height of the Ottoman Empire(16th century), many Christians wanted to convert to Islam and thus become a citizen of a strong empire like the Ottomans. According to Nebil Mattar “conversion into Islam held a strong attraction for the English Christians - especially for the poor and the illiterate” (24).*

*After 1650, the British entered the Mediterranean where they established their dominance. Napoleon had invaded Egypt to open up a route to the East via the Red Sea. The British seized this opportunity to enter the Mediterranean and destroyed the French fleet. After the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the French lost their importance in the eyes of the Ottomans and the British became their closest ally.*

*Soon after, in 1827, the British formed an alliance with France and Russia to destroy the Turkish fleet and supported the Greeks in the war of independence (1830). In the Crimean War, they fought alongside Turkey and France against the Russians (1853-1856). However, in the first World War, the Ottomans sided with Germany, thinking that they would be on the winning side. The war proved to be disastrous for the Ottomans and ended with the break up of the Empire. Three other empires disappeared as a result of this war: the German, Austro- Hungarian and Russian. The British occupied several Southern and Eastern States of Turkey. Drawing on this historical context, this paper aims to examine the changing political relationship between the Ottomans and the British in the long Eighteenth Century.*

**KEYWORDS:** Friends, Foes, Allies, Relationships

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### INTRODUCTION

Turks and the British have been friends, foes and allies for a long time. The first formal relationship of the Ottoman Empire with the English dates back to 1396 to the battle of Niğbolu. In order to drive back the Ottomans from the Balkans, the English had contributed a thousand soldiers under Lord Huntington to the army formed by the Hungarian

king Sigismund. During the time of Soliman the Magnificent (1520-1566), European countries were trying to establish a new political system based on power relationships. Drawing on this historical context, this paper aims to examine the changing political relationship between the Ottomans and the British in the long Eighteenth Century.

In the 16th century, the Eastern Mediterranean ports became more important trade centers in the eyes of the European countries. In 1579, the famous grand Vizier Sokollu promised William Harborne aid in the form of steel, iron, and copper during the English-Iranian war so as to develop relations with the English. After this, it was decided by the Ottoman Sultan to give the English the commercial rights formerly given to the French and the Venetians. In addition, the English would send counsels to Egypt, Algiers, Tunisia, Tripoli, and Alexandria; all under Ottoman control. In 1581, the Levant company was formed and in 1583 the Levant company merged with the Venice company and became considerably powerful. The mission of the company was to regulate the trade between England and the Ottoman Empire. Later, Queen Elizabeth gave the members of the Levant company the political responsibility of drawing the two company closer and secure the support of the Ottoman Sultan against Spain- the common enemy.

As a result of the establishment of the Levant company, trade with far away lands came under the monopoly of the English, French and the Dutch companies. Trade with India moved to Atlas ocean where the English and Dutch were powerful and the trade route between Europe and the Middle East was controlled by Russia. An ottoman-English relationship in the 17th-century was rather peaceful. The start of the 18th century was also a time of peace and cultural prosperity. The years between 1718-1730 was called the Tulip period in Ottoman history and Sultan Ahmet III was the ruler at the time. After the signing of the Treaty of Passarowitz, the country enjoyed peace and prosperity. Long before Europe, the industrial revolution-though short term- was started in the Ottoman lands with the building of paper and carpet factories.( Etem Buğra Ekinci, Sabah,9,4,2015). The first printing press was introduced during this period which also witnessed the refinement of ottoman taste for decorations and furniture. The period was also marked by the appearance of major poets, historians, and composers.

The grand vizier İbrahim Pasha was a peace-loving man, kind and thoughtful and having seen the wretched living conditions of the soldiers had ordered barracks to be built in Scudery. However, his easygoing nature could not prevent his downfall. The government had devalued silver in order to raise the value of currency but unfortunately with no results and introduced taxes to the merchants to decrease the amount of imports. Patrona Halil, the Albanian gang leader, taking advantage of the unrest in the city organized a revolt and lynched the grand Vizier and his son-in-law, the commander of the navy. The rebels deposed of the Sultan and Sultan Mahmut Ist acceded to the throne. Many beautiful buildings in İstanbul were destroyed and “thus the Ottoman Empire lost its chance on its road to industrialization” (Ekrem Buğra Ekinci, 3).

The transformation in the nature of the relationships of Britain and the Ottoman empire was intimately linked with the ongoing changes in power relationships. At the height of the Ottoman Empire (16th century), many Christians wanted to convert to Islam and thus become a citizen of a strong empire like the Ottomans. According to Nebil Mattar “conversion into Islam held a strong attraction for the English Christians-especially for the poor and the illiterate” (*İslam in Britain*, 16). The eighteenth century was an era of transition during which England became an empire while The Ottoman empire declined. N.M. Kugler observes that before this period “England was not a powerful institutional force, but a small isolated island when compared to more powerful better-organized world powers such as the Ottomans” (11).

During the Elizabethan period and the seventeenth century, British ships sailed to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean coast to find new markets, goods and form good relations with the new allies. “Up to the seventeenth century, several places in the Far East, the New World, sub-Saharan Africa remained shadowy lands with which Britons had little contact. The Moors and the Turks of the North African region were better known. An important factor contributing to the relations of the English with the Ottomans was Britons who were travelers, soldiers, seamen, traders who were captured by the Barbary pirates and then sent to the slave market in Alexandria, to Salee from Tunis to Meknes. Some of the captured people never returned home, became Muslims and settled in these regions. Their memoirs provided Europeans with first-hand knowledge about the Ottoman Empire.”

During this period in European history, where many European cities were filled with the poor emigrants, Muslim lands offered new opportunity to start a new life. As Robert Burton observes: “A Christian who will turn Turk...shall be entrusted as a brother” (Matar, 2). There were several reasons for people wanting to convert to Islam: the under population of North Africa, the fact that the professions of Christian artisans were in high demand in these places and the Quran urged Muslims to convert people into Islam so the Muslims showed a serious effort to convert the Christians.

Although the captives were certainly not objective in their appraisal of Muslim lands, their accounts entailed important information about the lands, cities, crops, military conflicts. Reading their accounts, people gained information about the Mediterranean trade, cooperations, and piracy. The stories about these places reflect the social and religious challenge the non-Christians and non-Europeans presented to the Early modern Britons.

North Africa Tunisia (1574, Barbarossa), Algeria (1525) and Tripoli (1551-1911) was under the Ottoman rule but enjoyed a certain degree of political and commercial autonomy. Algiers was the capital of these regions. Thomas Baker, the English factor in Tripoli informed in 1691 that “the Turks controlled the region from the islands of Cape Verde near the coast of Guinea Eura as far as Norway, so that...our ships for Portugal, Spain, Madeira, Canaries, Westward Islands, New England, Virginia, all the East, West Indies are obliged to furnish themselves with such Papers (passes) to protect themselves against attack” (Matar, 8).

Between 1577-1704 there were twenty-two accounts written by English men living among the Muslims. Joseph Pitts and Thomas Pellow (1739) had converted to Islam and settled amongst the Muslims. Given the power they wielded for centuries, Ottomans were widely perceived as the chief “other” in English history. They interacted with the Muslims in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Many Turks as well as Moors visited and traded in English and Welsh ports. Queen Elizabeth cooperated commercially and diplomatically with Ottomans.

The English people’s interest in the trade with the Mediterranean countries had a long history. Starting from the time of Francis I, Seigneur Foret had come to an agreement, with the Turkish government in Istanbul and started a company in France in 1511. There were so many advantages to that venture. The Venetians also started a similar company. The English trade with the Mediterranean had started back in the time of Henry VII and Captain Rodenham was the first Englishman who traveled as far as the Grecian Islands. Anthony Jenkins off had already gone off as far as the edge of the Mediterranean and visited Aleppo. He also found out that the Venetians and The French were interested in this region long before the others.

## TRADE IN THE 17TH CENTURY

The relations of the English with the Ottoman empire were a mainly through trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Levant company prospered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, reaching its peak in the 1670s. Membership reached the number of 400, however, by 1731, the number had dropped back to 80 or 90. France was gaining political influence. In 1693, the French fleets in the Bay of Logos destroyed a convoy of 400 vessels that belonged to the English and Dutch. Starting with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, The Levant company attracted a lot of criticism. It had been operating for 100 years, with the main business based in factories in Smyrna, İstanbul and Aleppo. The company's monopoly included all Turkish goods sold in England. East India Company accused the Levantine company of selling Turkish goods at high prices for profit. Further problems were raised in the Levant company with the increasing importance of the port of Livorno.

Later (in the 18th century), there was a decline in the trade with the Levant. There were several reasons behind the fall of the Levant trade. One of the main products of trade for the English was silk from Persia but because of the political difficulties in Persia starting from 1722, many areas of production were destroyed and thus cut off from export routes (Laidlaw, 25). Besides, demand for mohair, nuts and some drugs was falling in England and as a result, there was a serious drop in sales by 1730. Still, the major threat to the trade of the Levant Company was the French. The port of Marseille was gaining in importance. By the year, the company had 200 large ships and 400 hundred small ships working on the routes to Turkish ports. By that time the English had suffered another set back with the quarantine act of 1753. The act passed by the parliament forced ships coming from suspected areas to spend some time in quarantine in the Mediterranean port before they could enter English ports. Sometimes, the quarantine period lasted up to several months. However, other less important rivals, such as the Dutch, were only obliged to a quarantine of 40 days and in a Dutch port. This was another reason for the decline of trade of the English with the Ottomans.

In the Eighteenth Century, the relations of the British with the Ottomans were more through trade, captive narratives, records of travelers and references to Turkish stories by various eighteenth-century authors. A vast majority of the plays and novels written in the seventeenth century depicted the fierce image of the Ottoman empire. Aphra Behn's *Oronoko*, Shakespeare's "Othello" draw on the frightful image of the Turks engraved in the minds of the European audience. Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *Castle of Otranto* is another work that reflects the powerful memory of Turks in relation to the Ottoman siege conducted by Gedik Ahmed Pasha in the year 1480 during the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror.

Jean Antoine Gallan translated the Arabian Tales that appeared under the title *Les Mille et un Nuit* in French in twelve volumes between the years 1704-1717. These volumes were quickly translated into English and ran through at least thirty editions (1712-1713). The story of Scheherezade who made up many stories in order to prevent her husband from killing her quickly became very popular. According to Conant, "the Arabian Tales was the fairy godmother of the English novel" (243). One can safely say that these tales influenced the structural arrangement of several works published in the eighteenth century including Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Addison's *The Papers of Sir Roger Coverly* (1711-12), Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1760) Johnson's *Rasellas* (1759) and Beckford's *Vathek* (1786).

The famous writer Daniel Defoe was one of the authors who mentioned Turks quite frequently in his works. He even wrote a work entitled *Defoe's Continuation of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* (1718). Defoe was quite critical of Turks, Moors of Tunis, Tripoli, Algiers, and Salee: "The peoples were attacking English ships and breaking the possibility of

Defoe's dream of development of English trade. For Defoe, the World has divided into two nations. "nations who traded and nations who did not" (Matar170). He observed: "These Mohametans, as I have said of the Turks, have very little inclination to trade: they have no Gust to it, no Taste of it" (Matar,171). Defoe further shows how British ideology against American Indians was superimposed on the Moslems (Matar,172) and suggests that the British did not want to be near the "Turks" even if they were converts to Christianity."(Matar,173)( Defoe, "A plan of the English commerce, being a complete Prospect of the trade of this nation, as well as the home trade as the foreign" XIII, XIV;234,238,239,241 241-245.)

Because most people were unfamiliar with the Islamic Civilization, "laymen and politicians realized the need for information about the sociological and anthropological conditions of North African slavery" (Matar,176). In his account of his captivity published in 1796, John Foss observes: " the dress of the Turks makes them appear more like monsters than human beings" (178), adding that "There were no humans amongst the Moslems, either they were monster- like Turks or an Indian-like Moors"(178).

The strength of the Ottoman army and the fright of Turks was depicted by the major authors and travel writers of the eighteenth century. Samuel Richardson edited the diplomatic negotiations of Sir Thomas Ro and used this knowledge in telling about the escape of Clarissa in his novel. In his *Works*, Henry Fielding also reflects in a witty manner the fear of Turks. Worthy and Pot are talking:" "Bring me an example from the Turks. good Mr. Worthy, I find no such affinity in our interests –Worthy; but Sir.—

Pol: "But for me no butts.-but what can be the reason for all this warlike preperationwhichall our newspapers have informed us of. Yes, and the same newspapers a hundred times in the same words.. Is the design against Persia? Is the design against Germany? Is the design against Italy? Suppose we should see Turkish gallies in the channel? We may see them, yes, we may see them in the midst of our security. Troy was taken in its sleep, and so may we" (Henry Fielding, *Justice Caught in his own Trap*, 28)

Besides these works of fiction, slavery accounts were also of major importance in the long eighteenth century. Joseph Pitts published *A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohammetans, with an account of the author's BeingTaken Captive* in 1704. The aim of this work was to give first-hand knowledge about the customs, religion, and culture of the Mohammetans. Pitts is one of the authors of the captivity narratives who had turned Turk, that is converted to Islam and his writing this narrative can be perceived as a way to redeem himself from the charges of his countrymen. He mentions that the zeal of the Mohammetans for their religion is very strict. In his words: " If they are so strict in their false worship, it must need be a reprimand to Christians who are so remiss in the true" (223). He tells of how his ship was captured by the pirates and taken to Algiers. He also describes the custom of Turks of throwing to the sea a sheep cut into peace from the head and tail of the ship to protect them from bad weather, storm and accidents. Regarding the manners of Turks' eating and drinking, he says that they do not know how to drink in moderation and thus get drunk most of the time.

Of their way of marrying, he tells that although the Mohammedans are allowed to have as many wives as they wish he has never known of a man having more than two wives and he adds: "there is not one in a thousand hath more than one wife"(243). He also mentions that although they value literacy a lot, they are mostly illiterate and their women are never taught how to read and write. Joseph Pitts also gives a detailed account of the Mohammetan religion; thecustoms, beliefs, and religious practices.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* was one of the most influential works of the 18th century. In 1716, the Montagu family departed for Turkey on a diplomatic mission. In particular, they aimed to ameliorate the relations with Turks and if possible to prevent a war between the Ottoman empire and Austria. Lady Mary arrived in Turkey with the intention of admiring everything she saw there. Everything was new to her and because of the novelty, all captured her interest. However, many of her observations are far-fetched: For example, she said in every courtyard there were fountains constructed to produce a soothing effect on the nerves whereas the reality was that they also served the important function of drowning the noise made by the ladies; gossip and talk. She also states that Turkish women are the most free women on earth, which of course wasn't true. She observes: "Turkish ladies don't commit one sin-less for not being Christians... This very easy to see they have more liberty than we have, no woman, of what rank soever being permitted to go in the streets without two muslins"(71), one that covers her head and one that covers the whole face and another that disguises the shape. "You may guess then how effectually this disguises them, that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her and slave and t'is impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her no man either touch or follow a woman in the street This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery"(71).

Lady Montagu also notes that "Turks have found an injection against smallpox which was considered fatal in England." She observes: "the small pox so fatal and so general among us is here entirely harmless by the invention of engrafting" (which is the term they give it). Montagu also tries to correct some false notions prevalent in the West about the East, noting for instance that "The Turkish ladies have at least as much wit and civility, nay, liberty as ladies amongst us"(135).

Among the English poets also there were those that produced works that reflected Eastern influence such as Pope's "The Dunciad", "The Rape of the Lock" Thomson's "Castle of Indolence" and William Collins' "Persian Eclogues". The dramatists of the eighteenth century aimed at producing plays with Eastern plots or characters and settings. The reason for this was the demand and interest the public had shown for Eastern tales. Published in 1696, one of the plays with Eastern themes is *İbrahim, the Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks* by Mrs. Pix who made the mistake of making İbrahim the thirteenth instead of the twelfth Turkish sultan (Oueijan, 45). Eliza Haywood, wrote *The Fair Captive, A Tragedy* in 1721. Here, the Turkish wives are described as "dull, passive, submissive to their husbands" (Oueijan, 45). Later tragedies like Edward Young's *The Revenge* and David Mallet's *Mustapha: A tragedy* reflect more authentic Turkish images probably due to authors' having been acquainted with some good translations of works about the Ottomans.

However, it is William Beckworth's *Vathek* and Samuel Johnson's *Rasellas* that provide more authentic representations of the East. One could perhaps go as far as to argue that "Johnson is the first major literary figure to challenge the prejudiced view of his predecessors" (Oueijan, 52). Johnson was especially interested in Eastern laws of hospitality which he mentions several times in *Rasellas*. William Beckforth, on the other hand, became interested in the East after reading the *Arabian Nights*. Later, he visited Switzerland (1770) and Venice (1780) and had published his novel *Vathek* in 1786. It was considered a very realistic depiction of the East based on concrete facts. The fact that he had learned Arabic and had read several Arabic manuscripts contributed to his realistic depiction of the East.

The presents exchanged between The Ottomans and the English also helped enhance the diplomatic relationships. Starting with the organ with a clock sent to Sultan Mehmet III, from Elizabeth I through Henry Lello, her representative in 1599, many valuable presents were exchanged between the English and Ottoman dynasties. In 1867, Sultan Abdulaziz became

the first Ottoman sultan to pay an official visit to England.

The Ottomans who wanted to continue their good relations with the English supplied the English navy with various supplies in their fight with the Spanish during dynasty wars (1702-1714). Despite the fact that Ahmet the 3rd who replaced Mustafa II was a very peace-loving Sultan, the increasing power of Russians that was manifest in their military victory against Sweden and invasion of Ottoman borders (1768), led the Ottomans to declare war against Russians. Following Turkish victory at the battle of Prut, the Ottomans also declared war against Venetians who were later supported by Austrians.

In rivalry with France at the time, the English supported the Russians in order to end the hegemony of the French in the Mediterranean. During the Russian –Ottoman war between the years 1768-1774, the English continued to support the Russians. They also played a major role in the destruction of the Ottoman navy in 1770. After 1650, the British entered the Mediterranean where they established their dominance. Napoleon had invaded Egypt to open up a route to the East via the Red Sea. The British seized this opportunity to enter the Mediterranean and destroyed the French fleet. After the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the French lost their importance in the eyes of the Ottomans and the British became their closest ally.

Soon after, in 1827, the British formed an alliance with France and Russia to destroy the Turkish fleet and supported the Greeks in the war of independence (1830). In the Crimean War, they fought alongside Turkey and France against the Russians (1853-1856). However, in the first World War, the Ottomans sided with Germany, thinking that they would be on the winning side. The war proved to be disastrous for the Ottomans and ended with the break up of the Empire. Three other empires disappeared as a result of this war: the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian. The British occupied several Southern and Eastern States of Turkey. In addition, they formally annexed Cyprus as a British colony.

To conclude, one can say that the Turks and the English have been foes, friends, allies for a long time and currently maintain good relationships. The United Kingdom is the second biggest importer of goods from Turkey after Germany and has been a strong supporter of Turkey's bid to enter the European Union. Last but not the least, Turkey and Britain constitute the second and seventh largest European economies.

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