Ottoman Trade Routes from the Arabian Gulf to Central Europe in the 16-17th Centuries

János Hóvári
Given in English
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For more than half a millennium the Ottoman Empire had been a world power, determining the fate of many European, Asian and African regions. The western border of the Empire was, for quite a while, at the Danube in Eastern Central Europe and the Gulf Region was the Eastern frontier. Unfortunately, there are no studies comparing the common or different aspects of the frontiers. Of course, the experts on Ottoman history are familiar with the political and military complexity of the Ottoman world.

The Ottoman Empire was able to form an economic world, which was based not only on the laws and the directives of the Sultans, but on the shared interests of the different subjects. The importance of trade was beyond politics.

The countries of Eastern Central Europe were connected to the Mediterranean and Oriental world. This amalgamation lost a trade and economic competition with the emerging Atlantic world in the 16th-17th centuries. This shift made Eastern Central Europe a periphery market and the Atlantic coast the core, with its serious economic and social consequences.

Ottomans Trade International Connections in the Early 16th Century

Advisors of the Ottoman Sultans were aware of the importance of trade and the duties levied on various commodities. The Ottoman State took many measures to promote the commercial activity in all parts of the Empire. During the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566), the Ottoman Empire emerged as a great power, pursuing its interest even in the economic field.

After the various campaigns of Sultan Selim I (1512-20) against the Safavids and the Mamluks, between 1514-1517, Ottomans started to control most of the commercial links between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean (figure 1). Important continental trade routes crossed the whole empire from the East to the West and from the South to the North.

The Ottomans were very often at war with the Habsburgs' monarchy in central Europe and the Mediterranean and also with the Safavids in the Zagros Mountains. However, the periods of war were short (with some exceptions), and the periods of peace were long, based on various treaties and truces. When good relations prevailed, many merchants crossed the frontiers in order to take full advantage of the periods of peace. Analysts note that trade ruled over the hostility in most of the cases and that the business mind as a driving force of decision-making was stronger than the military-minded stances.

Traditionally, Eastern Central Europe, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Kingdom of Poland were connected commercially to the Black Sea region and Anatolia in order to get goods from India and the Far East. Trade in spices, textiles and various worthy eastern commodities was very successful for many merchants who could join the network on the long way from India to cities like Buda, Krakow, Transylvanian Saxon, and the south-eastern Polish towns (figure 2).

The above mentioned commodities were provided to the Austrians, Czechs and Moravians from Venice by its sophisticated networks. It was well known that the merchants of Venice had been playing the Oriental and Levant trade for many centuries. They were successful throughout Europe, but not in the eastern Balkans and in the Black Sea region. In this part of Europe, for various geographic and political reasons, an Oriental trade niche was given to Ottoman, Wallachian, Moldavian, Transylvanian and Polish tradesmen from the first half of the 15th century until the early 19th century. They had the opportunity to be involved in the commercial links between the Eastern Balkans and Western Anatolia, and the Black Sea region as well.

Anatolia is historically the hub of trading networks from Iran, Iraq and Syria towards the Mediterranean, Istanbul, the huge metropolis and strategic crossing point between Asia and Europe, used to lure merchants from all over the world. It was a gateway from East to West and from West to East. Anatolia absorbed the trade routes from Central Asia via Iran and from the Gulf and India via Iraq and Iran as well. The Balkans used to be considered the European hinterlands of Istanbul. Istanbul was also one of the most important ports of the Mediterranean Commonwealth, which could be fragmented politically but not economically.

The Arabian Gulf was connected commercially to India from ancient times (figure 3). Different products of India and the Far East were forwarded from the Gulf via Iraq to Syria and Anatolia, which caused various cities in the region to flourish. Muscat, Manama and Basra were traditionally towns that had outstanding roles in the functioning of this long-distance trade network (figure 4).

ABADIS shifted the centre of the Islamic world to Iraq, which meant that the state and economic life in the former peripheries started to be more organised and well structured. In the mid-13th century the Mongols partly damaged the trade network but not destroyed it. However, as the Thalghids came to power, they renewed and adjusted the injured networks. Later on the Ak Koyunlu (White Sheep
Roman times and formed the city of Makkah into the centre of the Arab economic and political life in the 6th - 7th centuries.

In the centuries to come, the East-West trade remained important for the region. Mamluks, for example, in close co-operations with Venice, were able to strengthen the trade-structure from the Bab al-Mandab to the Mediterranean in the 13th century. The trade flourished and Venice was connected to India via Mamluk Egypt and the Sultanate’s commercial partners. It was obvious even to contemporary observers that Venice preferred her commercial interests over the goals of the Crusaders.

Ottoman-Portuguese Rivalry for the Indian Ocean

As Vasco da Gama reached the Malabar Coast of India in May 1498 and was able to return there again in 1501, a new Portuguese trade-system emerged linking East to West via the Indian and the Atlantic Oceans. The Mamluks and the Venetians were aware of all aspects of the unwanted competition. However, despite of the Venetian support, the Mamluk Sultans were not able to defeat the Portuguese fleet on the Indian Ocean.

As Sultan Selim I started to threaten the Mamluks, the leadership in Cairo had to turn to the defences of the Syrian provinces against the Turks. The Mamluks were defeated by the Ottomans, and Egypt became the province of the Sultans in 1517. Historians agree that the Ottoman conquest of Egypt provided the Portuguese enough time to strengthen their military and commercial structure in the Indian Ocean. The new Ottoman governors of Cairo knew all the details of the Portuguese penetration into the political and economic life of the Indian Ocean, the Arab Sea and the Arab Gulf as well.

A few months after Sultan Selim entered Cairo in 1517, the Portuguese fleet attacked Jeddah. Protecting the Muslim holy places, an Ottoman fleet was set up in Suez to expel the intruders from the Red Sea.

An outstanding school of cartographers connected to the developing Ottoman navy emerged in Istanbul at the turn of the 16th century. Piri Reis, the famous admiral and cartographer created the first version of his world map in 1513. He and his colleagues were aware of the fact that a huge struggle started on the Indian Ocean for Eastern trade. They tried to convince the Ottoman leadership that their navy should interfere. Their points were convinced Sultan Selim.

Change Of the Ottoman Foreign Policy

Sultan Selim (1512-1520) was at peace with his Eastern-Central European neighbours. According to most historians, it was only a tactical peace because he needed all of his troops to fight the Safavids and the Mamluks. His policy was successful and it made the Ottoman Empire a world power, giving it the chance to not only control huge regions but, being in pivotal position, to be a dominant power between the trade of India and Europe. The Ottomans were also able to defeat the Portuguese merchants and troops, which had started to build up their own network.

Sultan Süleyman I, the Magnificent (1520-1566) did not continue the foreign policy of his father (figure 6). He turned his army against Eastern-Central Europe, against the Kingdom of Hungary. As he took the throne, he led his army against the Hungarian strategic stronghold, Belgrade, and took it. After a long while, he stopped caring about the Eastern provinces and started to involve the Ottoman Empire in the French-Habsburg rivalry. This put the future of the Hungarian Kingdom in danger, because the King of Hungary stopped the traditional balancing policy between France and the Holy Roman Empire and joined the Habsburg’s side. As a new alliance emerged between France and the Ottoman Empire at the end of 1525, the Hungarian Kingdom became the most important enemy.

In 1526, the new sultan, Suleyman I, the Magnificent met with Piri Reis and tried to explain trade on the Indian Ocean and the problem with the Portuguese. Piri Reis tried to convince the Sultan to start a campaign in the Gulf, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean against the Portuguese, and highlighted the importance of Hormuz. Reis said: "Know that Hormuz is an island (i.e. island of Qeshm). Many merchants visit it... But now, our friends the Portuguese have come there and built a stronghold on its cape. They control the place and collect the customs – you see into what condition that province has sunk. The Portuguese have vanquished the natives, and their own merchants crowd the warehouses there. Whatever the season, trading cannot now happen without the Portuguese."

Sultan Süleyman I, the Magnificent did not rely on him and launched a campaign against Hungary in 1526 and was victorious over the Hungarian, Czech, and Polish troops. Yet it took his army 20 years to be able to rule the central part of Hungary (figure 6). The Sultan decided to drag the Ottoman Empire into a costly war with the European powers and lost the momentum to build up a huge empire in East, around the Indian Ocean.

Piri Reis, the main figure behind the policy that was implemented, had to wait for approximately 20 years to realise his plan on the Indian Ocean. The Ottomans captured Basra in 1546, and the seizure of Aden and Hormuz became one of its goals. Piri Reis became the admiral of the Ottoman fleet on the Red Sea, and seized Aden in 1548. In 1552, he tried to take Hormuz but failed. He paid with his life,
as the great cartographer was sentenced to death for his failure.

His successor was Seydi Ali, who tried to capture Hormuz in 1553 but also failed. He lost his ships and returned on foot, visiting various countries. His memoir, Mirror of Countries, was completed in 1557.

After these failures, the Ottomans gave up their ambitions on the Indian Ocean. Instead they concentrated only on controlling Bab al-Mandab and ruling Aden and different strategic parts of Yemen.

The formation of the new Atlantic-Indian trade routes in the early 16th century was not favourable for the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf region, and the Ottomans. The emerging Atlantic trade was a disaster for Venice and various Mediterranean cities and also for the Eastern-Central European merchants far beyond the Ottoman Empire. As a consequence of the shift in trade-routes, the decline of Levantine trade started. The cities on the Mediterranean coast, the Black Sea Region, the Balkans and Eastern-Central Europe lost their previous commercial importance and became marginalised in the emerging new economic world order.

The Decline Of Venice and Its Regional Impact

Until the famous book of Professor Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean world, La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II – The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, was published, most historians thought that trade between the Mediterranean and India collapsed suddenly in the early 16th century, causing the fall of the Venetian-Mediterranean economic-system. The famous French scholar demonstrated that it was not a simple process. Many researchers overestimated the Portuguese, and later the Dutch, capabilities of monopolising Eastern trade. Historians did not take into account that there was a strong Muslim need to keep their traditional economic positions on the sea. Furthermore, the Muslim merchants were able to promote the continental caravan-trade to avoid the Portuguese and later the Dutch control points and to provide better quality goods. Owing to these endeavours, the Mediterranean remained the market of Indian goods even in the 17th century. Therefore, French and English ships were able to visit the Eastern Mediterranean Ottoman ports in order to get Indian and Far Eastern goods. However, the quantity of the purchased items was significantly less than a century before.

The decline of Venice generated by the shift of the trade route from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic is part of history classes all around the world. Since the end of the 1970s, most students learned that the Ottomans took Constantinople and the different Eastern Mediterranean ports and cut the trade between East and West. Consequently, the Venetians could not pursue their trade and it led to the decline of Venice.

According to these views, Islam and the Ottomans caused the end of the Venetian heyday and Mediterranean dominance. Moreover, according to various books, the main reason for the major geographical discoveries at the end of the 15th century was that the Islamic states, namely the Ottomans and the Mamluks, severed Europe from the East. Fortunately, many excellent historians in the last hundred years pointed out that these assumptions are baseless according to historic sources. On the contrary, the Eastern world was extremely interested in pursuing trade with Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean ports. Ottomans tried to continue the Levantine trade in order to gain immense state revenues from the levied duties. Many Christians could come to the Ottoman Empire during its whole history, pursuing trade and profiting.

The Ottomans and the Muslims of the Middle East and the Gulf region lost the struggle to preserve their commercial system to the Atlantic world. The defeat of Muslim merchants in the Indian Ocean in the 16th century triggered a longstanding domino effect. The dominos extended to Eastern-Central Europe and westward. The changes of the Indian Ocean in the commercial system reached that region around the 17th century and caused the decline of various flourishing cities in the Balkans and in the eastern parts of the Hungarian and Polish kingdoms.

**Figure 1:** Portuguese map of the Indian Ocean by Jorge Reinel from 1519

**Figure 2:** Old Buca

**Figure 3:** Arab trade routes

**Figure 4:** Basra

**Figure 5:** Seljuks II, the Magnificent (1063-1072)

**Figure 6:** Ottoman control

**Figure 7:** Thanks to Ambassador Hovari for the images

Dialectics of Arab Thinking: Drama and Arab intellect

Osama Abu Taleb

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Criticism directed towards Arab Islamic intellect has carried on since its encounter with European culture. The conflict began between the Occident and the Orient, with the latter’s assimilation of Greek lore and its transformation into European heritage. Arab Islamic heritage came into focus as Arabs transmitted to Europe the sciences of philosophy, logic, medicine, chemistry, astronomy and sociology. Controversy began to take place between the two intellects, paralleling the conflict of wealth and of the control of navigation routes and strategic sites. This took place openly in colonial and religious forms as dictated by the interest of European countries acting individually or collectively to distribute war spoils either through occupation or mandatory regime.

Against that background began Western attempts to get acquainted with the Orient represented in the Arab Islamic World and to evaluate its civilization and achievements. This was not purely objective, as it included a great deal of misunderstanding, baseless opinions and intentional distortion. This attitude covered different fields of life and intellectual activity: from the study of history, anthropology, ethnography, politics and economics to literary creativity in poetry. This also covered studies of performing and vocal arts, music, formative arts and architecture, and research on Sufism and Sufi masters.

In 1948, a Lebanese merchant named I. Nagash, returned from a trip to Italy and France. Impressed by their theatre, at the time quite unfamiliar at home, he introduced Molieire’s L’Avar (The Miser) at the garden of his home, launching a new theatrical movement in Alexandria, simultaneously parallel to the work of the Syrian playwright Sheikh Abu Khalil Gubbani in Damascus. Only then, did the interest in drama begin in the Arab world.

This took place after a long period of the absence of any information on the art of the theatre (approximately seven centuries) due to a mistake by Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126-1198) in his translation of Aristotle’s De Poetica. Ibn Rushd’s error was in the translation of the word ‘tragedy’ as equivalent to praise, and ‘comedy’ as parallel to satire. He relied on Aristotle’s idea that ‘tragedy’ imitates the actions of great persons, whereas ‘comedy’ imitates the acts of mean people.

What is the relation between dialectics, as a method of thinking that belongs to philosophy and drama, as an art (treated mainly by literary criticism)? What is the role played by dialectics in the formation of the intellect of a specific nation, and to what extent does it affect its dramatic creativity? It was suggested by some biased Orientalists that Arab thinking lacks this asset, since the art of
About the journal

Hadith al-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadith al-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 16 got underway in October 2010 and, as with previous years, is presenting scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

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Contents

02  2 November 2009
The Modernity of Jahiz
and his Kitab al-Hayawan
Valentina Colombo

10  15 February 2010
On the Rise and Meaning
of Islamic Calligraphy
Alain George

14  22 February 2010
Ottoman Trade Routes from the
Arabian Gulf to Central Europe
in the 16th and 17th Centuries
János Hóvári

19  22 March 2010
Dialectics of Arab Thinking:
Drama and the Arab Intellectual
Osama Abu Taleb

23  29 March 2010
War into Art: Tapestries Depicting
the Campaign Against Tunisia
by Emperor Charles V
Agnes Stillfried

28  5 April 2010
Islamic Archaeology in the Gulf
Derek Kennet

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LNS 320 HS
Dish
carved from nephrite jade
(light greyish green with white blemishes)
Height 20 mm; diameter 178mm
India, probably Deccan
2nd - 3rd quarter 17th century AD

Hadith al-Dar
Volume 33
المحتويات

6 نوفمبر 2020
كتاب الحوار المجتمعي وعلاقته بالحداثة - يافة فانتنيا كودومور

16 فبراير 2020
نشأة NX5 الخط العربي ودارته - علاء جوج

22 فبراير 2020
طريق التجارة العالمية من الخليج إلى وسط أوروبا - في القرن 17

16 مارس 2020
دفانتو EUR 26: إفراح العقل العربي - د. ياقوو موغري

23 مارس 2020
جذب العقل العربي - دراما العقل العربي

29 مارس 2020
الحرب في عيون القين: ميزات مزدادة برسوم تصوير حملة الإمبراطور تشارلز الخامس على نسائل انتنس ستريكرود

30 أبريل 2020
الاتراك الإسلامية في الخليج

40 أيار 2020
الاتراك الإسلامية في الخليج

11 مايو 2020
الاتراك الإسلامية في الخليج

18 مايو 2020
الاتراك الإسلامية في الخليج

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