

Barbarian Piracy Between Preconceptions and Biases

"القرصنة البربرية" في الكتابات الغربية

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Abstract:

The maritime history of Mediterranean basin during the modern era is punctuated by a dynamic power historically recognized as The Regency of Algiers, which has portrayed in western writings as a barbarous state and a nest of pirates.

Examining these sources and even recent studies reveals a common use of the term Land or Coast of Barbary as a designation for the country and Piracy as an adjective for maritime activities.

This paper aims to analyze diverse perspectives by addressing the names and attributes those travelers, consuls and prisoners gave to Algeria and its sailors then devoted by recent studies, to justify their policies and colonial purposes.

Keywords: Regency of Algiers; Mediterranean; Western Writings; Barbary; Piracy; Corsairing.

الملخص:

تميز البحر الأبيض المتوسط خلال الفترة الحديثة بظهور قوة ديناميكية عرفت تاريخيا بإيالة الجزائر العثمانية، وقد برزت شخصيتها الدولية تبعا لقوتها البحرية، في حين صورتها الكتابات الغربية على أنها أرض البربر وعش القراصنة.

من خلال تحليل المصادر القديمة وحتى الدراسات الحديثة نجد أن أغلبها اشتركت في استخدام مصطلح أرض أو ساحل البربر كدلالة على البلاد، والقرصنة واللصوصية كتسمية للنشاط البحري.

يعالج هذا المقال مختلف وجهات النظر من خلال تحليل الصفات والتسميات التي أطلقها الاسرى، الرحالة والقناصل الأوروبيين والأمريكان على إيالة الجزائر وكرستها الدراسات الحديثة من أجل تبرير أغراضها الاستعمارية لاحقا.

Introduction:

Maritime history of Mediterranean basin during the modern era is punctuated by a dynamic and formidable power historically recognized as The Regency of Algiers, its international character due to its naval force emerged during the beginning of 16th century following to its accession to the Ottoman Empire and became front to repel Christian incursions.

In light of this tension, western writings about this danger lurking on the opposite bank of the sea varied between moderate and exaggerated ones, most of them have shared the use of the term land or coast of the Barbary as a designation for the country and piracy as an adjective for maritime activities.

This paper aims to analyze diverse perspectives of the so-called “Barbarian Piracy” by asking the following questions:

How did the European sources perceive Barbarian Piracy, and how were Algerian corsairs portrayed in western narratives and imagery of the time?

1- A Historical synopsis:

By reading the first Western writings about history of Algeria under The Ottomans, we notice that the most of them have reduced it to a barbarous state and a nest of pirates that lived parasitically on plunder and from the sale and ransom of Christian prisoners.

For westerners Europeans and Americans alike, Algeria was a source of troubles and a nuisance for the civilized Christian world.¹

One of the first writers who walked within this context the famous French priest Pierre Dan who started his account introduction by describing the Barbary corsairs as the plague of nature, the pest of humankind, the tyrants of common liberty, the executioners of universal innocence.²

The historian Robert Widali concluded that Barbary lands became a colony that brought together the worst men of the Ottoman Empire and that was colonial refuge for ruined men and those who came, were not the best of all Ottomans"

While the American consul William Shaller admitted that sea pirates and bandits like the Algerians, driven by the vanity of barbarism and ignorance, do not deserve the attention of history, for a strange fate would have incorporated this country into the system of Europe.³

Examining these sources and even recent studies reveals a common use of the term Barbary Land or Coast as a designation for the country and piracy as an adjective for maritime activity, and in order to respond to this it is necessary to refer to the concept and origin of each term.

2- Barbary Coast:

The term Barbary which Europeans consistently used to mark the Maghreb or North Africa, goes back to the Greek word Barbaria, which means all civilizations outside the field of The Greek one, another view is that it is from the Latin word Barbarus, which in turn derived from the Greek Barbaros, which means incomprehensible tongue and foreign language, "Probably a word initiative of un-intelligible speech; which means foreign in speech, barbarian, hence harsh-sounding".⁴

For Europeans the word meant the same thing as outsider or foreigner.

Then the name was given to the inhabitants of North Africa, and used by St. Augustine to denote the tribes that resisted the Roman, occupation while attaching some brutality and backwardness to them.⁵

However, the Arabic origins include the word "*Barbara* " or "بربر" meaning a person speaking beneath his teeth, or a sort of muttering or babbling, because the original inhabitants spoke a language that was un-understandable to them; so they called the inhabitants Berber, in the long the land came to be known as barbarity.⁶

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the concept completely changed from a name of an ethnic group inhabiting the Maghreb to a name that denotes a reactionary and savage people in need of civilization.

The Romans gave the name Barbarian on the inhabitants of the areas they occupied, and the Europeans retained the designation even though they did not deserve such a derogatory one, and contrary to the backwardness and brutality, which was deliberately attached to the word Barbar, the population here is more civilized, respectful and welcoming to strangers than some European countries.⁷

While Tassie responds and confirms that this view, which was common to Europeans, could be corrected by simply traveling to the region and noticing the extent of the civilization of the population and their culture, which surpasses some regions in Europe⁸.

3. Corsairing VS Piracy:

The second term is Piracy, although this phenomenon is as old as marine saline itself, and its beginning is associated with human access to the seas, specifically with the growth of trade between ancient Egypt, Phoenicia and the island of Crete.

At that time, the seas were not subject to an agreed legal system, so if countries saw that their political and commercial interest required their control over part of the sea, they did so and prevented others from entering it, including what the Roman Empire did, which considered the Mediterranean its property and called it our sea "*Mar Nostrum*".⁹

Indeed, the British King Edward III claimed to be the king of the seas, and demanded that ships offer him the duties of obedience... Denmark and Sweden followed England's lead and declared control of the Baltic Sea, and Pope Alexander VI divided the Atlantic Ocean between the kings of Spain and Portugal in 1493.¹⁰

With the passage of time, the power of European pirates increased and kings began to use them in their wars, as France did in its war against Britain, and Netherlands commissioned them to attack Spanish ships, and this is confirmed by many historian, It is with the Europeans that piracy appears clearly for the first time in history"¹¹

At the time when Maghreb maritime activity appeared in general, its concept and rules had already been developed by the Europeans themselves, and this leads us to talk about the historical circumstances that prompted Muslims to adopt piracy and the establishment of a naval force as a form of popular defense at times, especially after the fall of Andalusia, and a manifestation of official rejection of Iberians attacks at other times, in the same context, Moulay Belhamissi confirms that it was launched with the motivation of protecting Islamic lands and liberating the occupied coastal cities.¹²

The accession to The Sublime Port formed an important link, the newborn Regency benefited from the broader Ottoman naval power and political alliance, the ships brought by Barbarossa brothers were the nucleus of the fleet, and with the passage of time the boats turned into larger and more powerful ships.

At this point began the European use of so-call pirates, sea robbers and bandits as a sign of Muslim sailors, but the Algerians had the largest share, and we will discuss the reasons later.

To understand the difference between these labels and approach the correct one, we need to explain each term and return to its origin:

- **Piracy** meaning sea banditry and Pirates are a diaspora of different countries have engaged in sea banditry even against the ships of their own countries¹³, while Brodel describes them as men of no political affiliation and creed, roaming the seas and attacking ships for their own benefit.¹⁴

Therefore, the pirate was a free boater, recognizing no rule above his own will, he attacked indiscriminately the ships of any nation.¹⁵

• **Corsairing** came from the Italian word *Corsa* and its origin goes back to the Latin word *Cursarius* meaning race¹⁶, used for the first time in the fourteenth century in the sense of racing to attack the ships and coasts of foreign countries, then entered the word into the French language in the early sixteenth century, and was intended to rob the ships of enemy countries.¹⁷

"Racing, on the other hand, was a form of war decided by the government; the Corsair is a regular fighter, He attacks only enemy ships."¹⁸

Therefore, corsairs are sailors who attack ships belonging to countries in hostility with their king; practicing their activity according to international law that was recognized at the time, and force represented the basis for it, whoever has power can extend his control, and effectively all elements of power met in the hands of the Regency of Algiers.

Probably there is another term, in English, which is "**Privateering**", the closest to the activity of Algerian sailors, "A privateer is a private owner of a vessel who legally engaged in chasing enemy shipping."¹⁹

It is the name used by John Baptize Wolf to indicate Taifa of Rias and explained: "The Corsair Rais were privateers, they made war only on the enemies of their prince.. They carried a commission that legitimized their activities both justified as a holy war".²⁰

The definition refers to an important element which was the motive behind this activity, the fundamental cause that revolves around it is the old conflict that took the Mediterranean basin a center, between Islam and Christianity as examples of jihad on the one hand and the Crusades on the other. So on corsairing is an inevitable extension of it, which is also confirmed by Banzac; they considered the pirates to be the vanguard of Islam, fighting bravely against the infidel forces from Europe, they commonly referred to as Mudjahides.²¹

Contrary to the common belief of the concept of "The Barbary Pirates ", North African sailors in general are "privateers" rather than "Pirates", they are part of a legitimate international system, and they work under their own order.²²

4. Preconceptions and Biases:

Returning to the question we subtracted earlier, why Algeria specifically?

Although Mediterranean corsairing involved both Muslims and Christians, western writings definitely attribute the role of "The bad guys" to the Algerians whom they describe as "The most dangerous pirates the world has ever seen."²³

Back to the ancient writers De Grammy replies Algeria is the whip of Christendom, it is the horror of Europe and the bridle of Italy and Spain; he added that the Algerian navy cannot be matched by the navy of any other country, and that there are no sailors stronger than the Algerians²⁴,

The same sailors whom Haido describes "sailing winter and spring without fear, roaming the Mediterranean from east to west without paying any attention to European boats, mocking their sailors so that they think that they are going out to hunt rabbits."

That what made them "scourge of Christendom" like the Englishman Playfair L. Robert titled his famous book about Algeria and its sailors.²⁵

Perhaps the reasons for this superiority are due to the location of Algeria and the nature of its open coasts, as well as the use of appropriate methods of warfare such as surprise raids, advanced and fast ships, psychological preparedness and belief in the right to defend the land and the sanctity of religion.²⁶

In addition to the favorable international conditions represented in the European conflicts and religious wars, as Charles-André Julien explained; the 17th century was the golden age of corsairs, the independence of the Regency vis-à-vis the Sublime Porte,

the weakening of European navies and the rivalry of Christian nations allowed them all the audes".²⁷

By addressing the names and attributes that Westerners in general gave to the Regency of its sailors It is possible to understand the prevailing view of Algeria and its society during the Ottoman era, which laid the basis of the writings of travelers, consuls and prisoners, and then devoted by modern historical studies, especially French ones, which are considered tendentious studies that ignored the historical existence of the Algerian people and considered the country a civilized vacuum.

In this context, Wolf mentions the factors that consolidate this view: "We should remember that our informants were men frustrated by their experiences with a government that often appeared to be an anarchy... Or men who had been slaves or travelers who brought their Christian prejudices... and unfortunately Moslem writers who might have corrected our impression did not find it necessary to do so..."²⁸

Conclusion:

This study is an attempt to reveal misconceptions about the History of modern Algeria, that is often deliberately disseminated by trying to abolish sovereignty and focusing on the impression the Regency of Algeria was nothing more than long reign of chaos and banditry.

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