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BEYOND OTTOMAN HISTORY: THE CARAMOUSSALS AND THE EARLY MODERN MEDITERRANEAN

Abstract

The article is concerned with a class of early modern Ottoman vessels, known as caramoussals. It reveals an ignored aspect of their past by providing evidence for the fact that these ships were owned, traded and used outside the boundaries of the Ottoman world. While historians have so far used available sources to determine the part played by caramoussals in Ottoman economic and military affairs, this paper refers to several neglected sources revealing the acquisition and capture of these vessels by Western Christians in order to reuse them. This explains their presence on the sea routes linking Western Europe to the Ottoman Empire, as well as on the domestic routes of some of the Mediterranean maritime powers, such as Venice. The sources analyzed here emphasize the topic as being relevant not only to Ottoman maritime history, but also to the history of early modern Mediterranean. Thus, they serve as an incentive to a comprehensive study of caramoussals within the framework of Mediterranean maritime history..

Key words: *ships, trade, piracy, Ottoman Empire, Venice, Mediterranean Sea*

During the summer of 1574, the galleys of the Knights of the Order St Stephen from Pisa captured in the Eastern Mediterranean 15 Ottoman *caramoussal* vessels (Gemignani, 2001: 86). A similar raid undertaken in 1589 by the Knights Hospitaller from Malta made 19 victims of the same kind (Williams, 2007: 568).

Since Fernand Braudel, the historians of the Mediterranean have shaded more and more light on the parties involved, their motivations, as well as on the multiple consequences of such episodes of maritime

violence. They became an everyday reality after the battle of Lepanto (1571), as the Mediterranean entered a piracy era, which lasted until the beginning of the 19th century. The explanations of this turn of events are primarily linked to the withdrawal of the dominant maritime powers (Spain and the Ottoman Empire) and the reorientation of their military resources to other areas of strategic interest. The decline of Venice was added to this, as it lost its position of unique mediator of the trade between the East and the West and became a second-hand naval power, and victim of piracy (Braudel, 1996: 865–886).

The inability of the state authorities to do maritime police work explains the classical piracy, practiced by the outlaws. But the early modern piracy was a two-sided coin. The other side was generated by the blurred line between legal and illegal activities. Its distinctive elements were the use of the religious war propaganda in order to justify maritime violence of the involved parties (whether groups of individuals or even small states), respectively their toleration and even encouragement by the two empires. Both were interested in keeping such ambiguity, in order to feed a proxy war between the Christian and the Muslim halves of the Mediterranean. Thus, an unconventional war came to life, marked by yearly expeditions organized by the Barbary corsairs on the one hand, respectively by the Christian chivalric orders of St Stephen from Pisa and St John from Malta, on the other hand (Tenenti, 1967: *passim*; Bono, 1993: 9–41, 45–83; Fontenay, 2010: 240–243; Greene, 2010: 5–6, 29–42, 52–58, 78–80, 89–99; Abulafia, 2011: 452–469; Rozen, 2016: 16–27; Harlaftis, 2016: 14–16; White, 2018: 4–15).

However, there is scarce knowledge on the Ottoman vessels targeted by these attacks. The low interest of modern scholars generated only a few sketchy descriptions, in general dictionaries, naval lexicons and footnotes. Moreover, the few historians interested in them disagree when trying to reconstruct their building features (Çizakça, 1995: 213–228; Melis, 2003: 50–62; Özveren, Yldirim, 2004: 147–170; Zorlu, 2004: 297–353; Panzac, 2009: 80–85; Agius, 2008: *passim*; Turna, Pirim, 2015: 119–135). Consequently, it is not surprising that additional topics, such as tonnage, crews or armament have been completely ignored. All these deficiencies emphasize the lack of a monographic approach.

But before such an approach is initiated, an essential question naturally raises: how relevant is such an approach?

The following lines intend to demonstrate not only the relevance or usefulness of a systematic research of the topic, but even the need for such an approach. The conclusion will come by itself as soon as we review the sources of the 16th and 17th centuries that reveal these vessels in different contexts, outside the areas of power or influence of the Ottoman Empire.

In the academic literature, the *caramoussal* (Turk. *karamürsel*, cf. Urban, 2015: 316–320) is perceived as the main means of maritime transport of the early modern Ottoman world. Historians have underlined their current use for the transport of commodities and travelers, but also as auxiliaries of the navy, for moving troops, supplies and ammunition. Those sailing with these vessels or owning them came from all over the Empire. Among them were dignitaries of all ranks, ordinary Turkish subjects, Greeks, and even North African Arabs (Guarnieri, 1928: 162, 195, 197; Πλουμίδης, 2000: 35–37; Dursteler, 2006: 87, 167; Bostan, 2009: 333; Barbero, 2010: 42, 219–220, 253, 357, 366, 686, n. 23; Nemlioğlu Koca, 2016: 293).

However, the sources reveal them almost as frequently outside the Ottoman world. Most of them are related to the Ottoman-Venetian trade and suggest that the supply of grain for Venice and its islands in the 1560s–1600s was due to them to a certain extent (Σπανάκης, 1949: 523–524; Aymard, 1966: 20–22, 89, 95, 135–138, 165–166; Simon, 1984: 103–105; Πλουμίδης, 2000: 37; Luca, 2014a: 37–38). A list of ships that paid the anchorage fee in the port of Venice in the financial year 1598–1599 shows that out of the total of 196 registered vessels, 8 (4%) were *caramoussals*. Six of their owners were Ottoman Greeks from Mytilene (Lesbos) and Lyndos (Rhodos). The origins of the other two owners are not mentioned; however, judging by their names, they were probably Venetian subjects (Tenenti, 1959: 563–567). A report from October 13, 1581 by the Venetian governor of Cerigo (Kythira), Geronimo Capello, simultaneously identifies two such vessels, whose routes crossed in one of the island's havens: “*Andando in li giorni passati alla visita di quest’isola secondo il consueto, andassimo anco a San Nicolo di*

Aulemona, secondo l'ordinario, dove trovassimo una saitia francese con doi caramussali turcheschi, l'uno piccolo solito di portar formenti alla Canea et l'altro grande, che da Coron veniva carrico d'ogli per Costantinopoli" (Πλουμίδης, 2000: 37). Another report from February 19, 1603 by the Venetian governor of Zante (Zakynthos), Maffio Michele, reveals a resembling situation: "*What I feared has happened. The English have plundered the caramusale "Sicuro" in the port of Metala. I had sent her for grain. They took all the money intended for the purchase of the grain, and two pieces of artillery. No one knows what has become of nine men of the crew*" (Calendar, 1897: 535).

In reverse, the *caramoussals* were involved in a very profitable wine trade, which connected the Venetian Crete with the Kingdom of Poland through Constantinople, the Black Sea and Moldavia. Its last stage was taken on the road that crossed the Romanian principality from the South to the North (*via Moldavica*) and connected the Danube ports of Kilia (Chilia, Kili, Kiliya), Reni (Tomorova) and Galați (Galacz) to the Polish city of Lviv (Μαυροειδή, 1992: 146, 183–188, 233, 239–240; Luca, 2014b: 319–320; Dziubinski, 1997: 189-195). The research of the notarial registers of the Venetian Embassy in the Ottoman capital has revealed several such cases, concentrated in the last three decades of the 16th century. There are two entries preserved from 1590, for example, attesting malmsey transports from Constantinople to Reni. One of them refers to the ship of a Greek merchant in the Ottoman Kilia, named Manolis (Μαυροειδή, 1992: 240). The second is about the *caramoussal* of a Venetian subject, called Aribodesto Manulufos, who brought 70 *botti* (barrels) of wine to the same borough (Μαυροειδή, 1992: 186). Fortunately, the latter piece of information can be linked to another one, recorded in Lviv. We find out from it that the ship was a large one, adapted to the Black Sea sailing conditions, which is why the owners of small boats were calling on its services to take their wines safely to Danube's bank (Dziubinski, 1997: 47). Given the circumstances, we can assume that in 1590 Manulufos' ship was coming from Crete when it loaded the 70 barrels belonging to another merchant in Constantinople. Therefore, the vessel had a capacity superior to the 70 *botti* attested by the Venetian *bailo*'s Chancellery, which is why its owner used it for his

own commercial operations as well as to provide transport to merchants lacking their own appropriate means.

The *caramoussal* vessels were not confined to the international routes linking the two Mediterranean powers. Within Venetian waters, they were also involved in the transport of commodities and travelers on the domestic routes, connecting the metropolis to the main trading centers of the Venetian maritime empire: Heraklion (Crete), Zante / Zakynthos (Ionian Islands) or Zara (Dalmatia). The journal of the travel taken in 1609 by William Lithgow between Italy and Constantinople contains valuable information about both aspects mentioned. In the Adriatic Sea, for example, the Scottish witnessed a pirate attack on a *caramoussal* carrying Cretan wines to Venice: “*Departing from thence [Zara – a.n.] in a Carmoesalo bound to Ragusa, we sailed by the three iles, Brisca, Placa, Igezi; And when we entred in the Gulfe of Cataro, we fetched up the sight of the Ile Melida, called of old Meligna. Before we could attaine unto the Haven [Mljet / Melida island – a.n.], wherein our purpose was to stay all night, we were assailed on a sudden with a deadly storme: Insomuch, that every swallowing wave threatned our death, and bred in our breasts, an intermingled sorrowe of feare and hope. And yet hard by us, and within a mile to the ley-ward, a Barbarian man of war of Tunneis, carrying two tyre of Ordonance, and 200 men, seiz’d upon a Carmosale of Venice, at the first shot, she being loaden with Malvasie and Muscadine and come from Candy, and had us also in chase till night divided our contrary designes*” (Lithgow, 1906: 48-49). Further on, the route between the islands of Corfu and Kefalonia was covered by Lithgow, along with 48 other passengers, embarked on another *caramoussal*, belonging to a Greek subject of Venice: “*From thence [Corfu island – a.n.] after certaine daies abode, I embarked in a Greekish Carmoesalo, with a great number of passengers, Greekes, Slavonians, Italians, Armenians, and Jewes, that were all mindfull to Zante, and I also of the like intent; being in all fourty eight persons having roome windes, and a fresh gale, in 24. houres we discovered the ile Cephalonia the greater*” (Lithgow, 1906: 54).

The presence of *caramoussal* vessels on the Venetian domestic routes was possible by buying and adapting it to the local legal requirements,

both by the Venetian merchants and by the Jewish and Greek subjects of the *Serenissima*. In 1574, for instance, the Venetian merchant Iseppo da Canal purchased from the Ottoman Empire two *caramoussals* of 150 *botti* and 250 *botti*, respectively. One of them kept the building features of the Ottoman vessels, the other was transformed into a *navetta*, but both were naturalized by the Venetian authorities (Nicolardi, 2014: 239–244). In 1586, the Cretan merchant Battista Vevelli did the same, buying for 20,000 Ottoman *aspers* half of the *caramoussal* vessel of the Ottoman subject Iannis Papano da Metelino (Mytilene, Lesbos) (Μαυροειδή, 1998: 83). Two years later, when the same Battista Vevelli obtained a 40,000 *aspers* loan from an Ottoman merchant, he guaranteed the repayment of the loan with the whole vessel (Πλουμίδης, 2000: 90–91). This means that in the meantime he had managed to secure as well the right of ownership over the other half of the boat. The practice of acquiring foreign vessels exemplified here through the case of the Ottoman *caramoussals* was part of the series of changes that ultimately led to the radical change in the structure of the Venetian economy and to its adaptation to the new global order, dominated by the “northern powers” (England and Holland) (Lane, 1933: 224–237; Stella, 1956: 17–69; Tenenti, 1967: 89–109; Sella, 1968: 88–106; Tucci, 1987: 277–296; Hocquet, 2006: 173–215; Lanaro, 2006: 19–69; Pezzolo, 2013: 256–282).

There is evidence that the other Mediterranean Christian powers have also benefited from the services of *caramoussal* vessels. Different types of sources reveal them sailing under the banner of Spain, Genoa and the Knights Hospitaller of Malta (Muscat, 2002: 252; Gerrard, Dauber, 2008: 242). What seems to differentiate these cases is how they were acquired. Unlike Venice, interested in keeping the peace with the Ottomans and the security of commercial routes, Spain, the Papacy and their vassals engaged in the logic of holy war. Consequently, when these sources reveal how the vessels came into their hands, they usually indicate spoils of war (Ligresti, 2013: 67; Mercieca, 2011: 47). Such a case is even reported by the official chronicle of the Hospitaller Knights of St John in Malta. This informs us that in 1566, after lifting the siege on the island, a Venetian ship recovered the projectiles fired

by the Ottoman artillery. At the request of the Hospitallers, the Venetian vessel was intercepted in Zaragoza by the Spanish authorities, and the projectiles were transported back to Malta with the help of a captured *caramoussal*: “[...] e ricuperate, le rimandò in Malta, col Caramusali della Religione, guidato dal Padron Vincenzo Fava; il quale fece molti belli, & utilissimi viaggi, in quella penuria di Navilij, che la Religione all’hora haveva” (Bosio, 1602: 728–729). Another case is provided by a Spanish official document from 1581. It is the statistics of the foreign ships that could be found in the Italian possessions of the Hapsburgs, which found among others: “*La nave nombrada Sancta María de Gracia, de que es capitán Stefano de Micolò, de ochocientas y veinte toneladas. Está fabricada sobre un caramuzali, y aunque tiene apariencia de poder ser para servir, no es muy á proposito para estas mares, ni para largo viaje*” (Colección, 1859: 82).

Conclusions. The sources presented here ultimately suggest that the *caramoussals* share a rich past which has by far surpassed the Ottoman maritime space. In fact, between 1550 and 1650, the entire Mediterranean world seemed to have come into contact with these vessels in one way or another. Obviously, the exploration of these interactions is conditioned by the in-depth understanding of their architecture and functionality, and in order to achieve such objectives, the effort of an extended investigation is necessary.

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