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Barbary Captivity Narratives: Imperial Experiences Lived Through Ordeals

Privateering was an important economic, military and diplomatic factor on the early modern transatlantic stage, its influence extended from the early Mediterranean basin to the post-revolutionary America. Pirates under different flags used to “legally” plunder ships and coastal regions of enemy countries. And the human cargo made a crucial part of the pray for corsairs of the Ottoman Empire and privateers from Europe. Some of those who were taken as captives by pirates wrote down their ordeals and a number of the texts have survived throughout history. The Barbary Captivity Narratives were written by European individuals who experienced captivity at then called “Barbary States” in North Africa. This genre dating back to the 16th century kept being published and read in western society as privateering went on unceasingly until the end of the 20th century.

My argument on Barbary Captivity Narratives is that this genre represents significant but neglected part of the imperial experience of early modern Europe. On the one hand, collective cultural memories of the Other was shaped by individual storytelling. The captives offered some of the first impressions for western society about the Maghreb and its Muslim culture. By mixing with the local population at a very intimate level, these men and women with diverse backgrounds provided multidimensioned views to the public about the customs, people and daily life in North Africa. While a sense of imperial Self and the oriental Other is always evident in their writings, the Self is often questioned, challenged or event converted when physically and mentally traumatized during captivity. Barbary captivity narratives offer a microscope of how different identities meet, clash and mediate and most importantly – how individual narratives can break away from typical colonial discourse, thus provide pluralistic views of the imperial experience.