

## The Ottoman Age of Exploration

*Giancarlo Casale*

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This very interesting treatise describes in detail the expansion in the sixteenth century of the Ottomans south and east, from Yemen and Eritrea through the Indian Ocean and as far as Sumatra. Pivotal events were the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, which opened up for them the routes to Mecca, Medina, and points east—and their final expulsion from Yemen in

1636, depriving them of their key staging point in the area. The expansion took on various forms: the increase of military power (mainly naval), the development of economic interests, and the strengthening of ties with local Muslim populations. At times, the direction and initiative came directly from Constantinople—especially when the “Indian Ocean faction” was able to exert its influence—but more usually from Ottoman functionaries in Egypt and Yemen, or even ambitious pirates. The main rivals in the area were the Portuguese and their allies. However, developments elsewhere bore heavily on this contest, which, at times, took on global proportions. Ottoman interests in the Indian Ocean were strengthened by their role as guarantors of the Holy Cities and the pilgrimage routes to them, as well their defense of Muslim merchants throughout the area. For their part, the Portuguese viewed their affairs as part of a plan that would, they hoped, lead ultimately to the conquest of Egypt and the Holy Land. The Ottoman conquest of Iraq was at least in part an attempt to outflank the Portuguese and prevent a Portuguese-Safavid alliance. Ultimately, though, the protracted conflict with Persia launched by Murad III in 1577, apparently swayed by opponents of the Indian Ocean faction, seriously drained Ottoman resources, and was likely a factor in their ultimate failure to control the Indian Ocean. At various times the Ottomans considered joining forces with the French pirates or Dutch Protestants against the Portuguese. By the early seventeenth century, neither the Ottomans nor the Portuguese were contesting for dominance in the Indian Ocean; the key players there were the English, Dutch, Safavids, and Mughals.

Casale’s well-researched study makes good use of archival materials in both Turkish and Portuguese, and the rich bibliography and concise notes point the reader to many more resources. The chapters take their titles and themes from key players in the course of this expansion: Selim I, dubbed here “the Navigator,” whose conquest of Egypt opened up enormous trade opportunities in the East; Ibrahim Pasha, whose efforts in Egypt and Yemen during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent advanced Ottoman interests considerably; Hadim Suleiman, the official who carried the war against the Portuguese to the Horn of Africa, the Persian Gulf, India, and Malacca; Rustem Pasha, bitter rival of Hadim Suleiman, who worked against the Indian Ocean faction and sought to reorient Ottoman policy toward the West; Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, whose “soft empire” in the Indian Ocean was the apogee of Ottoman expansion there; and Mir Ali Beg, who, without help or encouragement from Constantinople, advanced

along the Swahili coast, hoping eventually to seize the main Portuguese base in Mozambique.

This study encourages a reassessment of some entrenched attitudes. The agenda of the Ottomans was not limited to land conquests. Instead, their policy was often guided by mercantile interests, and they made an effort to cultivate those interests through negotiation from a position of strength, not just the use of naval power. Casale's diggings in the manuscripts yields a wealth of commercial data, as well as revealing a whole world of espionage, court intrigue, and diplomacy. Indeed, the reports of Portuguese spies prove to be a useful tool. Casale rightly emphasizes the cultural and literary dimension of Ottoman interest in new and far-off lands—in particular, the production of maps and the development of Turkish travel literature. This book has already reaped well-deserved praise for itself opening up new worlds for the scholar. The clear, flowing prose makes the book accessible to the general reader also.

The work of Fernand Braudel and Henri Pirenne served to define the Mediterranean basin as a coherent space of academic attention. Over the past few years, Mediterranean studies have blossomed; societies, centers, and other organizations have sprouted throughout the West.<sup>1</sup> The Ottomans, of course, are included in those projects. Casale's book demonstrates that Mediterranean policy was just one worry of the sultans—indeed, the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean interests competed at the Sublime Porte. Moreover, Indian Ocean policy was a complex of economic, military, and religious interests. Ottoman experts may no longer ignore those interested in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, especially those interested in the spread and development of Islam in those areas. Experts ought to give Ottoman policies in these regions their due.

## Endnote

1. I may include the small study group on the Migration of Knowledge in the Eastern Mediterranean, which I lead, under the auspices of the Minerva Center for the Humanities at Tel Aviv University.

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