



IOWC WORKING PAPER SERIES

General Editors: Philip Gooding & Julie Babin

Working Paper No. 12

February 2022 ISSN 2371 5111

Galley Labour in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

This paper examines the system of labour provision for the Ottoman navy from the fifteenth to the late seventeenth century. Comparing the experiences of statute labourers, convicts, and prisoners of war who rowed on galleys and worked in the imperial arsenal, it argues that the organisation and classification of labour were key mechanisms in establishing state control over subjects during the early modern period. For the field of Ottoman history more specifically, the conclusion suggests that differences in socioeconomic status and human capital had greater influence on the way the state viewed and interacted with its subjects than is commonly acknowledged.

Keywords: Captivity, galleys, Ottoman Empire, penal labour, statute labour

If there is a hell in this world, it is in the galleys where rest is unknown.

—16th century saying¹

This paper will investigate galley labour in the early modern Ottoman Empire, from the creation of a full-scale Ottoman navy in the second half of the 15th century until the obsolescence of oar-powered vessels in the late 17th century. Like the other major powers around the Mediterranean basin during this time, the Ottoman Empire dedicated extensive material and human resources to maintaining a navy capable of guarding its strategic interests not only in the Mediterranean but also in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Running this vast enterprise required the cooperation of individuals at all levels of Ottoman government and society, from grand viziers and provincial governors to urban ferrymen. However, the crucial task of powering the ships, as well as of repairing and sometimes operating them, fell to a group of people who were not formally members of state institutions but forced to contribute their labour under different conditions of coercion. At the same time, the organisation of labour on galleys and in the Imperial Arsenal was in many ways a microcosm of the broader Ottoman system of governance and rule, as it depended on the differentiated exploitation of categories of human capital classified according to their utility to the imperial project and informed by considerations of social control. The experiences of the statute labourers, convicts, and prisoners of war who rowed on Ottoman galleys for more than two hundred years, as well as the system which supplied this labour, can therefore reveal the multifarious ways early modern states used their control over labour to maintain authority over subject populations. With this goal in mind, I will examine these experiences and compare them among the different classes of labourers in the Ottoman navy, as well as the navies of contemporary states where appropriate. Rather than working from a pre-given definition of bondedness, I hope that the

¹ Phillip Williams, *Empire and Holy War in the Mediterranean: The Galley and Maritime Conflict between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 75.

comparison itself will reveal what bondedness and freedom meant in the specific context under study.

The Ottoman Navy and the Organisation of Labour

Although the Ottomans had made use of transport fleets as early as the first half of the 14th century, it was during the reign of Bayezid II (1481-1512), the son and successor of Mehmed II who conquered Constantinople, that they undertook to create a navy on par with other major powers in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.² This can be interpreted as a recognition on the part of the Ottomans that they could no longer afford to ignore the strategic importance of the seas, particularly given the post-medieval revitalisation of commerce in the Mediterranean before it was gradually diverted to the Atlantic over the course of the following centuries. Already at the end of the 15th century, the Empire controlled a large swath of territory from eastern Anatolia to the northern Balkans, and commanded ample material resources necessary for shipbuilding. More pressing than finances or materials was its need for manpower, menial as well as qualified, to operate the vessels which it could turn out rapidly at the dockyards of Istanbul and Gallipoli. This imbalance between material and human resources was characteristic of the Empire's operations in general, and continued to be so even after rapid population growth in the 16th century. Therefore, it is not surprising that in order to meet its manpower needs, the navy had recourse to channels through which the Ottomans supplied labour to other imperial institutions, most notably the palace corps and the land forces. However, innovations were also made to suit the particular demands of maintaining a presence at sea in the competitive environment of the 16th and 17th centuries.

² For a detailed treatment of this formative period of the Ottoman navy and the diplomatic landscape of the time, see Palmira Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994).

The “galley labourers” this paper examines are primarily rowers whose main task was to man the oars below deck and propel the ships. In campaign years in the 16th century, the number of these rowers reached over fifty thousand, declining over the course of the following century.³ For reasons that will become clear below, the more conventional term in most Western languages is “galley slave,” but this fails to capture the diversity of the forms of bondedness aboard Ottoman vessels. Likewise, the simpler term “oarsman” is unsuitable as it does not reflect the range of work these labourers were expected to perform when on land nor their high degree of mobility. Broadly, however, the category of “galley labourer” includes men who were pressed into service or hired specifically to row, whatever direction their careers might subsequently happen to take. It excludes professional seamen as well land troops who were on deck either for transport or to fight.⁴ The men (for they were exclusively male) whom the Ottomans employed as galley labourers can be divided into five categories, four of which were mentioned above: statute labourers who were free subjects of the Empire, paid volunteers, convicts, foreign prisoners of war, and purchased slaves.⁵

Before delving further into these categories, a word about their proportions in the overall composition of the navy’s manpower is in order. Information on this matter is piecemeal and comes mainly from the very end of the period under study. In 1660, during the drawn-out Ottoman-Venetian conflict over Crete, 93.5% of the 12,391 oarsmen in the navy were free men, with volunteers making up 35.8% of the total.⁶ For the 17th century as a whole, Ottoman naval

³ Mehmet İpşirli, “XVI. Asrın İkinci Yarısında Kürek Cezası ile İlgili Hükümler” [“Decrees about the Galley Penalty in the Second Half of the 16th Century”], *İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Enstitüsü Dergisi* 12 (1982): 205.

⁴ The artillery carrying capacity of galleys and other oared vessels was significantly smaller than the sailing ships that would eventually replace them. For this reason, naval engagements generally took the form of ramming and boarding attempts, followed by hand-to-hand combat, and the Ottomans frequently employed Janissaries and *sipahis* in addition to *azabs* and *levends* (sailors); see Miri Sheffer Mossensohn, “Medical Treatment in the Ottoman Navy in the Early Modern Period”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50, no. 4 (2007): 557.

⁵ İdris Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı: XVII. Yüzyılda Tersâne-i Âmire* [Ottoman Naval Organisation: The Imperial Arsenal in the 17th Century], (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1992), 187.

⁶ Daniel Panzac, “The Manning of the Ottoman Navy in the Heyday of Sail (1660-1850)”, in *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1775-1925*, ed. Erik Jan Zürcher (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 44.

historian İdris Bostan notes that about 45% of rowers were hired⁷ while 14% were prisoners of war; the latter's proportion reached a peak of 27% in 1661-62.⁸ This last figure shows that the proportions could vary greatly from year to year, particularly during wartime depending on how the campaign was progressing. Nonetheless, although no precise figures exist, the proportion of foreign captives was almost certainly much larger in the 16th century, when more naval engagements occurred and the Ottomans undertook more frequent coastal raids; after the 1570s, changes in galley warfare meant that fewer captives were taken in the Mediterranean in general.⁹ Yet even then, the Ottoman seem to have relied on "free" labour (ie. statute labourers and volunteers) to a much greater extent than did any of their Mediterranean rivals except the Venetians. To European observers, including the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria who fought against Ottoman fleets on numerous occasions, this was a conspicuous weakness of the otherwise powerful and well-managed enemy navy. While oarsmen occupied the lowest rung on a ship's hierarchy and formed the most expendable part of the crew everywhere, they were still valued for their resilience and skills, which Doria strongly believed took at least two years to develop; he even pressured the Genoese legislature to pass harsher sentences on criminals for this reason.¹⁰

As there is no reason to doubt this assessment, and Ottoman admirals could hardly have been blind to the considerations which so occupied their Western colleagues, the question is why they nonetheless relied more heavily on the seasonal labour of statute draftees and volunteers. Once again, the availability of resources and political considerations are crucial to the explanation; as military historian John F. Guilmartin notes, the Spaniards (and to this we may add the other Western powers) were on the defensive against the Ottoman Empire

⁷ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 208.

⁸ Ibid., 210.

⁹ Daniel Hershenzon, *The Captive Sea : Slavery, Communication, and Commerce in Early Modern Spain and the Mediterranean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 48.

¹⁰ Williams, *Empire and Holy War*, 81-87.

throughout the 16th century, which obliged them to maintain a large standing fleet. Combined with the astronomical rates of inflation which affected Western Europe more than the Ottoman Empire, they were hard-pressed to cut costs, and captive rowers were simply the more economical option.¹¹ Conversely, for the Ottomans holding the initiative, it may have been cheaper to raise levies when they became necessary, that is, whenever the Sultan decided to wage a new campaign. However, this leaves the issue of crew capabilities unaddressed, and does not explain why the proportion of captives and convicts in the Ottoman navy declined over the course of the 17th century, when the Empire gradually had to assume a more defensive position itself. We must examine the system of labour provision in greater detail to understand what these changes may have meant.

Statute and Hired Labour as Sources of Manpower

The statute labour arrangement through which the Ottomans drafted free subjects into naval service was a regular part of the Empire's tax system, which lumped payments in cash, kind, and service under the same rubric of *avârız*. Populations living close to centres of strategically important industries like mining, or seen by the state as particularly suited to services such as urban provisioning, protection of mountain passes and bridges, and maintenance of staging posts and water channels¹² were often expected to fulfill their tax obligations by supplying labour, and would then be exempt from some (but rarely all) cash and kind payments.¹³ The selection criteria for target groups naturally varied according to the type of service, but it must be borne in mind that they extended beyond concerns for qualification and efficiency, and considerations of social and political control played a part. For instance, as

¹¹ John Francis Guilmarin Jr. *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 111.

¹² Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560-1660* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 88.

¹³ Halil Sahillioğlu, "Avârız", in *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* v. 4 (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1991), 109.

a result of its enduring anxiety to prevent alternative foci of power from emerging in society, the state assigned the unprofitable, and often ruinous, tasks of livestock provisioning and butchery to wealthy groups or individuals, whose finances suffered considerably almost without exception.¹⁴ This preoccupation with social control is easy to discern when we examine the professional urban groups (organised into guilds) who were obligated to provide labour for the galleys: in addition to porters and boat and ferry operators, whose trades will have made them particularly fit for galley work, they included tavern and winehouse owners as well as brewers of *boza*, an alcoholic beverage somewhat resembling beer.¹⁵ ¹⁶ In the case of the latter two, the obligation was almost certainly a penalty for occupations which the state tolerated only grudgingly; the fact that the *boza* makers had to provide around the same number of men as porters, and tavern owners sometimes more than twice as many as boat operators,¹⁷ makes this clear.

In rural areas, the labour *avârız* was imposed not to meet a predetermined quota but by household (*avârızhâne*), the basic unit of taxation. The list of regions which were required to send oarsmen for campaigns varied over time, as did the proportion of households required to send men; the latter usually ranged between one in fifteen to one in twenty-five households¹⁸ depending on how hard-pressed the navy was to find rowers; in the years following 1571, the ratio jumped to one in seven households as the navy scrambled to recover from its heavy defeat at Lepanto.¹⁹ The other households in the settlement, also recorded as *kürekçi* (oarsman) *avârızhanes*, would have to make a cash payment for the upkeep of the man

¹⁴ Minna Rozen, "The Corvée of Operating the Mines in Siderokapisi and Its Effects on the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki in the 16th Century", *Balkan Studies* 34 (1993): 35.

¹⁵ Mossensohn, "Medical Treatment", 555.

¹⁶ While *bozas* with negligible alcohol content continue to be commercially available today, before the 19th century the drink was about the same strength as wine, and *boza* houses were closed down alongside taverns whenever the state took it upon itself to enforce religious orthodoxy; see Priscilla Mary Işın, *A Bountiful Kitchen: A History of Ottoman Cuisine* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 199.

¹⁷ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 201-202.

¹⁸ Ahmet Kılınç, "Klasik Dönem Osmanlı Devleti'nde Uygulanan Kürek Cezasının Hukuki Tahlili", *Belleten* 79, no. 285 (2015) : 533.

¹⁹ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 188.

sent to the galleys, usually 3000 *akçes* or aspers per man in the 17th as in the 16th century.²⁰ In 1640, there were close to sixty-three thousand *kürekçi avârizhânes* registered, corresponding to 52% of all *avârizhânes* in the Empire and supplying six thousand seven hundred rowers,²¹ which gives an idea about the importance of the navy for the Ottoman government. At first sight, it seems that the provision of able manpower was the state's main or exclusive concern in rural areas, and that considerations of social control played a smaller role than they did in the cities. The geographic distribution of the galley labour *avâriz* is a clear indicator of this concern; a striking 71.4% of the oarsmen recruited for the campaign year of 1660 came from the coastal provinces of Anatolia,²² with the expectation that the population of these regions would be more familiar with seafaring. Nevertheless, inland provinces also received some of the burden, particularly in the 16th century. In 1565-66, when there were preparations to take Chios, oarsmen were drafted from nearly all the provinces of Anatolia, in addition to Albania, Greece, Alexandria, and the islands of the Aegean and Mediterranean.^{23 24}

It was also possible for a man drafted into galley service to hire someone (called a *bedel*) to go in his stead, but such replacements had to be negotiated with government officials, and doing so without express and written approval was an offence.²⁵ Conversely, the state sometimes mandated that *avârizhânes* from certain regions, particularly those in the Anatolian interior, employ volunteers,²⁶ perhaps indicating its awareness that the obligation did not fall on only those who would be able to work effectively on the ships. We have less information on who these replacements were, but it seems safe to assume that they would have been

²⁰ Ibid., 199.

²¹ Ibid., 191.

²² Daniel Crecelius, "Recruiting Egyptian Oarsmen for Ottoman Ships in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *Varia* 48, no. 2 (2014): 253.

²³ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 189.

²⁴ It must be remembered that the *avâriz*'s area of application was coextensive with the *timar* system of land holding, which covered most of the Balkans and Anatolia, but not the easternmost regions of modern Turkey (which were not understood to be part of Anatolia in the Ottoman period) and only small parts of the Empire's Arabic-speaking domains.

²⁵ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 198.

²⁶ Ibid., 204.

professional seamen in coastal regions and cities, and men simply looking for work in inland and rural areas. Volunteer oarsmen were also sometimes directly employed by the navy. The Egyptian fleet, whose duties largely consisted of patrolling the shoreline and rarely involved naval engagements, attracted volunteers from as far afield as Syria and the Upper Nile Valley, mostly of lower middle class standing.²⁷ Hiring *bedels* became increasingly common after the Cretan War (1645-1669) near the end of the period under study,²⁸ but urban taxpayers in particular frequently resorted to it throughout the period. In fact, of the Istanbul guilds mentioned above, only boat and ferry operators regularly met their obligation through service. The other guilds had negotiated to do so by hiring rowers at a rate mandated by the government,²⁹ which was 950 aspers in the 1570s and increased to 6000 aspers over the course of the 17th century as inflation mounted. Such negotiation between taxpayers and the government also occurred in other areas where statute labour was applied. For instance, in the second half of the sixteenth century, the wealthy Jewish residents of Istanbul and Thessalonica were able to receive exemptions from cattle droving, becoming butchers, and operating mines by establishing a fund from which to pay the government a fixed sum each year.³⁰

Unlike their unfree counterparts who rowed on separate vessels, Ottoman draftees (and their hired replacements) only served during the campaign season, which ran from early April to late October in the Mediterranean³¹ and was even shorter in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.³² As such, their tasks did not extend to the menial labour which convicts and prisoners

²⁷ Crecelius, "Recruiting Egyptian Oarsmen", 259. While Crecelius claims that the system of drafting rowers by household was unknown in Egypt, the aforementioned information that Alexandrian rowers were drafted for the Chios campaign show that the region of Alexandria at least was included in the system, if sporadically.

²⁸ Neşe Erim, "18. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Kürek Cezası" ["The Galley Labour Penalty in the 18th Century Ottoman Empire"], *IXth International Congress of Economic and Social History of Turkey* (Ankara, 2005): 180.

²⁹ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 199-203.

³⁰ Minna Rozen, "The Corvée of Operating the Mines in Siderokapisi and Its Effects on the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki in the 16th Century," *Balkan Studies* 34 (1993): 43-45.

³¹ Hershenzon, *The Captive Sea*, 28.

³² Palmira Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 95.

of war had to perform in the Imperial Arsenal in winter. Combined with the possibility of paying one's way out of galley service altogether, it may appear that the burden of this obligation on the Ottoman subject population was fairly negligible. Likewise, the information on the popularity of the Egyptian navy as a destination for young men in the region suggests that being a rower was not so undesirable a career option if one was free. But as mentioned, the case of Egypt was exceptional in that the navy's primary task was to patrol the shoreline, and so the oarsmen on board its ships did not face the perils and hardships that campaign draftees did. Further, the very fact that most urban professionals who could hire replacements did so is a strong hint that rowing on the imperial fleet was not a pleasant task.

It becomes clear that this option would have been beyond the means of most peasants, however, when we consider that the money demanded to hire a replacement could be twice as much as what *avârızhânes* that did not supply labour would be required to pay for a draftee's upkeep, which amount corresponded to a major part of the taxes owed by about fifteen households. Also relevant is the fact that the campaign season coincided with the harvest season, and those who were called up to serve in the galleys were exclusively young, able-bodied men. Although serving in the galleys exempted their families from many taxes, it also deprived them of much-needed agricultural manpower not only for that year, but, considering the high risk of death, mutilation, or captivity, potentially forever. The statutory imposition of galley labour, then, constituted a heavy burden for the Empire's legally free subjects, and fell disproportionately on the economically disadvantaged peasantry. It can also be thought of as an early form of military conscription, which was not applied in the Ottoman land forces until the 19th century.³³

³³ For details, see Erik Jan Zürcher, "The Ottoman Conscription System, 1844–1914," *International Review of Social History* 43, no. 4 (1998): 437–449.

Penal and Captive Labour

A third group of Ottoman subjects who served on the galleys were convicts. Galley labour was not one of the punishments recognised in the traditional canon of Islamic law. Rather, it appears to have been introduced into the Ottoman legal system through imperial decrees (that is, by means of “customary” rather than religious legislation) over the course of the 16th century in response to the growing manpower needs of the navy, and possibly in imitation of other Mediterranean navies; the Venetian Senate had informed judicial officials in 1545 that they could sentence convicts to galley labour rather than to prison time,³⁴ and in France, the Ordinance of Orléans forbade galley labour to last less than ten years from 1561 onwards,³⁵ an indication that the practice had been in place for some time. In the Ottoman Empire, galley sentences were not less than one year, and appear to have lasted about eight years on average.³⁶ These calculations are complicated by the fact that many sentences did not specify the time to be served. Rather, it was left to the captain or admiral to release convicts as he saw fit, sometimes when he was convinced that the convict had “reformed himself”,³⁷ but the need for hands on deck must doubtless have played a part in the decision.

There was a wide range of crimes which could be directly punished with galley labour, including theft, atheism, drunkenness, homicide, brigandage, sedition, prostitution, sodomy, sexual assault, bribery, document forgery, and counterfeiting.³⁸ The inclusion of sexual and religious offences alongside theft and homicide once again illustrates the state’s preoccupation with regulating social morality through the threat of forced labour. Yet this should not be understood only in the narrow sense of upholding the tenets of Islam. Rather, it was a concern for preserving the existing power relations which extended to all aspects of the established

³⁴ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 213.

³⁵ Kılınç, “Kürek Cezasının Hukuki Tahlili”, 561.

³⁶ Rudolph Peters, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 99.

³⁷ Mehmet İpşirli, “Kürek Cezası” [The Galley Labour Penalty], *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi supp. 2* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2019), 114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

order, including the non-Muslim communities whose leaders cooperated and mediated their members' interactions with the Ottoman government. It was therefore in the interests of the regime to maintain those leaders, and their structures of control over their communities, in place. In 1703, for instance, it was decreed that those Armenians who abandoned their own Gregorian rites and entered the Frankish (ie. Catholic) church were to be sentenced to galley labour; the same order was repeated in 1706.³⁹ It is worth noting that conversion to Catholicism in the 18th century, and then to Protestantism in the 19th, occurred primarily among the rural Armenian poor, and increasingly took on a social revolutionary character in the late Ottoman period.⁴⁰ Another event from the 19th century, although it took place more than a hundred years after the end of the period under study, is worth mentioning in this connection as it demonstrates the link between forced labour and social control, which lasted beyond the "golden age" of galleys in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. In 1826, three Jews from Istanbul were imprisoned by Ottoman authorities upon the appeal of Jewish community leaders when it became known that they had converted to Christianity. The American missionary who had converted them wrote that the three men were destitute, and he had simply given them money to save them from starvation. Upon the Jewish community's request, the grand vizier declared that any Jew converting to Christianity "would be bound to end his days doing penal service in the galleys," which by this time meant forced labour in the Imperial Arsenal in the Kasımpaşa district of Istanbul rather than at sea, though according to the missionary, a rabbi attempted to influence the court's proceedings with a bribe to get the men executed.⁴¹

³⁹ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 215.

⁴⁰ For a detailed treatment of this topic for the later period, see Hagop L. Barsoumian, *İstanbul'un Ermeni Amiralar Sınıfı [The Armenian Amira Class of Istanbul]*, (İstanbul: Aras, 2013) and Hakan Özdemir, "Osmanlı İdaresinin Ermeni Okullarına Yaklaşımı (1878-1900)" ["The Ottoman Administration's Approach to Armenian Schools (1878-1900)"], *Tarih Okulu* 13 (2012): 115-148.

⁴¹ Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky, "Sentencing Jews to Work on Ottoman Naval Ships and in Forced Labor at the Imperial Arsenal from the Early 16th Century to 1839", *Miscellanea Historico-Iuridica* 19, no.1 (2020): 437-438.

While the converts in this case were released early through the intercession of the British ambassador, their plight illustrates a number of important points. The first is that before the institutionalisation of prisons in the second half of the 19th century, the threat of forced labour was used as a tool for social discipline not just by the state but also by its agents and allies in Ottoman society. While 20th-century historiography has tended to identify the Ottoman “ruling classes” exclusively with Muslim officeholders in the government and military,⁴² the state relied on the cooperation of local and corporate intermediaries to exercise effective control over its subjects, particularly before the centralising reforms of the 19th century, and was willing to use the tools at its disposal to enforce the authority those intermediaries, effectively making them partners of the imperial enterprise. The second point, which follows directly from the first, is that such discipline was disproportionately inflicted on the economically and socially disadvantaged subjects of the Empire, whether they belonged to the Muslim, Christian, or Jewish confessional community. It was just as true for the Ottoman as for the Habsburg government, then, that it used galley sentences to enforce social control, even if the proportion of convicts in the Ottoman navy never reached the levels in Spanish fleets.

The inequalities inherent in the galley labour system did not end there, however. Apart from the offences mentioned above, galley sentences could be issued “in lieu” (*bedelî*) of other sentences if there was a demand for rowers from the imperial or local fleets. The manpower needs of the navy took precedence over legal considerations when judges passed their final sentence, as we periodically encounter express decrees from the government prohibiting prisoners condemned to execution from being sent to the galleys,⁴³ but just as often, orders to local judges to send death row prisoners to the galleys instead, particularly in the years

⁴² For the most extensive and influential treatment of this term in the Ottoman context, see Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vols. 1 & 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁴³ İpşirli, “Kürek Cezası ile İlgili Hükümler”, 210.

following the Battle of Lepanto.⁴⁴ The pragmatic aspect of the galley sentence is even more apparent in cases where, contrary to legal principles, lighter punishments such as confinement in a fortress dungeon were converted to galley labour.⁴⁵ The discriminatory aspect of this practice, of course, is that only young and able-bodied males would be considered for galley labour in the first place, whether this proved to be to their advantage or not in any given case. The grim reality of a penal system subordinated to the demands of imperial projects is that what separated life and death was often whether one was physically fit enough to pull an oar. This point is important to stress in view of the prevailing (and in many ways justified) tendency in Ottoman historiography to emphasize the state's classification of its subjects by confessional and gender identity; the value of the human capital they represented also affected their interactions with the state and the opportunities it afforded them to work and prosper, or simply to live.

The human capital needs of the state played a particularly important role in determining the fates of prisoners of war. As the Mediterranean was the Ottomans' main theatre of naval warfare in both the 16th and the 17th centuries, the majority of these prisoners tended to be Christians from European countries with seafaring traditions that stretched back centuries. They would either be captured during raids on coastal towns or in naval engagements, where the most common tactic across all navies was to ram and board enemy ships, the main goal being not to capture the vessel but the crew.⁴⁶ This fact alone demonstrates the premium placed on qualified labour in early modern fleets. Although the ships themselves were very costly to produce, the provision of manpower remained the overriding concern of admirals everywhere, as without it, ships could not be operated. This explains why Ottoman statesmen believed that the most catastrophic side of the crushing defeat at Lepanto was the men lost; twelve thousand

⁴⁴ Kılınç, "Kürek Cezasının Hukuki Tahlili", 536.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 545-547.

⁴⁶ Mossensohn, "Medical Treatment", 557.

Christian galley slaves were freed after the Battle of Lepanto.⁴⁷ European powers shared this priority; although they lost hundreds of ships in the campaign near Djerba off the North African coast, a decade before Lepanto, the real loss was felt to be in skilled manpower.⁴⁸ In a similar vein, when the aforementioned Genoese admiral Andrea Doria captured twelve Ottoman vessels in 1537, he had the Muslim slaves transferred to his ships, then burnt all but one of the taken vessels.⁴⁹

Galley Labour and the Social Implications of Captivity

However, a number of factors differentiated the Ottomans' management of naval labour from that of other Mediterranean powers, and meant that prisoners of war in particular faced different prospects in the Ottoman Empire than they did in the West. The first factor, alluded to above, is that the Ottomans lacked a naval tradition and had no standing reserve of qualified manpower to draw upon when Bayezid II decided to build a full-scale fleet in the 1480s. The territories where the *timar* system of landholding was applied, and in which the state could use the *avârız* rubric to extract manpower, were populated predominantly by Turkish-speaking Muslims in Anatolia and Slavs in the Balkan, both peoples living mostly inland and engaged in agriculture.⁵⁰ Although a significant portion of the native Greek population lived in coastal areas and were seafarers, the Empire's domestic resources of human capital in this area still compared poorly with those of other Mediterranean states. Thus, while the need for oarsmen might be met through statute impositions, the Ottomans were particularly hard-pressed to fill positions above deck, from gunnery officers to captains and even admirals.

The second factor was a feature of the Ottoman imperial system as a whole. From the early 15th until the late 17th century, recruitment into the professional Janissary army and the

⁴⁷ Bornstein-Makovetsky, "Sentencing Jews", 426.

⁴⁸ Mossensohn, "Medical Treatment", 557.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Empire and Holy War*, 77.

⁵⁰ See Halil İnalcık, "Timar", *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* v. 41 (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı), 168-173.

palace corps, which was the entryway into the highest positions in the Ottoman government, was open only to non-Muslim-born men, whether Ottoman subjects or foreigners. The conventional explanation for this practice is that it was instituted by Ottoman sultans to eliminate the influence of the Turkish-speaking aristocracy who had played a leading role in the Empire's early conquests.⁵¹ The debates surrounding this power struggle are a separate topic of discussion entirely, but it is relevant for this paper that conversion, acculturation, and (where necessary) training represented the main path of entry into all branches of imperial service in the period under study. Closely related to this is the nature of Ottoman identity, which was predicated on political allegiance, faith, and a shared mode of life rather than ethnic or racial traits, as was increasingly becoming the case in European proto-nations from the 16th century onwards. While this Ottoman identity imposed very real social distinctions and often correlated strongly with class, it nonetheless allowed for more fluidity and better prospects for outsiders to the system. It is estimated that during the Indian Ocean conflict with the Portuguese in the early 16th century, native Turkish-speaking Muslims made up less than a quarter of the Ottoman fleet's manpower and were even less numerous in the high command; of all the Ottoman admirals in this century, only two belonged to this category, while the rest were converts.⁵² In the dizzying world of naval warfare, a captive with the right skill set often need not even convert before being catapulted into a position of great responsibility (and freedom) on the ship. The Ottoman polymath Katib Çelebi, writing in the mid-17th century, cites numerous instances of Ottoman fleets being sabotaged or even kidnapped by their European captives-cum-officers during naval engagements.⁵³ Along with the shrinking scale of coastal raids following the Spanish-Ottoman truce in 1581,⁵⁴ such incidents explain why the Ottomans

⁵¹ Once again see Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire* v.1, 26-45.

⁵² Giancarlo Casale, "The Ethnic Composition of Ottoman Ship Crews and the 'Rumi Challenge' to Portuguese Identity", *Medieval Encounters* 13 (2007): 127-129. The article provides a thoughtful analysis of the differences between Ottoman and Portuguese self-imagination in the context of rivalry over the Indian Ocean.

⁵³ Mossensohn, "Medical Treatment", 559.

⁵⁴ Hershenzon, *The Captive Sea*, 48.

began to rely on fewer prisoners of war in their galleys in the 17th century, though converts continued to be prominent as officers and admirals. By contrast, though it was also fairly common for Muslim captives who served on the fleets of Western powers to convert to Christianity, there is limited evidence that their conversion afforded them better labour conditions or more professional opportunities.⁵⁵

In the Ottoman system preoccupied with optimal integration and allocation of human capital, what decided a captive's station was the skills he had to offer. Unlike free Ottoman subjects either drafted into or volunteering for navy service, or slaves "rented" from their owners for the campaign season,⁵⁶ convicts and prisoners of war had to serve the navy year round, and once the campaign season ended, they were sent to work in the Imperial Arsenal (*Tersâne-i Âmire*) on the northern banks of the Golden Horn. The testimony of a 16th-century Habsburg diplomat, Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw, gives us a glimpse of what life was like for captives there. After being imprisoned on charges of espionage, the baron spent close to a year first in the arsenal, then on a galley, and finally in the dungeons before obtaining his release. In the arsenal, he worked (and was confined) alongside Christians from all walks of life, but the hierarchies that would have normally obtained among them had undergone a curious reshuffling. His description is worth quoting at some length:

In the principal building there are captives of various nations, artizans [sic] who construct galleys, and divers other things [...] These are the best off of all [...] above all, they have hopes of release before the rest [...] Such prisoners as are priests, scribes, scholars, citizens, or gentlemen, are in the greatest misery,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁶ Information on the navy's use of such privately-owned slaves is too scant to allow for a full discussion here, although according to Bostan, they were hired from their owners at the same rate that volunteers received, and this favourable arrangement ensured that the navy was rarely short of rowers; Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 213. 17th-century English diplomat Paul Rycaut, who served in the Ottoman Empire for more than twenty years, confirms that slave owners made "hefty sums" this way; Mossensohn, "Medical Treatment", 556.

because they have not learnt any handicraft, and no value is set upon them. The second prison is for common prisoners who know no handicraft [...] These are taken, in the beginning of spring, on board the galleys as rowers. When they return from the voyage [...] they must perform [any contemptible work].⁵⁷

Rather like Ottoman convicts sentenced to death, then, the fate of foreign captives depended on whether they could provide the Ottoman navy with the services it required, and their place in their new environment on which of those services they could provide. But unlike Ottoman subjects, these captives could not rely on their socioeconomic advantages in the outside world to stay out of the navy's orbit. The only valid currency inside the arsenal was satisfactory service, and it could buy the keys to that outside world, too, as artisans who had particularly pleased the Ottoman official with their work in charge of the arsenal would be released on parole.⁵⁸ Inside, men were allowed to produce handicrafts which they sold through connections in the city, and they used the money to supplement their paltry diet,⁵⁹ of which more will be said below. Given the seasonal nature of naval warfare in this period, this situation was not unique to the Ottoman arsenal. During the winter, galley slaves on French and Spanish fleets worked in workshops or were rented out to artisans and were permitted to keep a small portion of their earnings, which they could save toward their ransoms or use to make purchases.⁶⁰ But the third group of prisoners in the Ottoman arsenal, the lettered but tradeless gentry like Wenceslas himself, while generally being less well-off than the artisans, occasionally found opportunities to rise in a way neither they nor captives on Western fleets

⁵⁷ Wenceslas Wratislaw, *Adventures of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw of Mitrowitz*, tr. Albert Henry Wratislaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 125-127.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶⁰ Hershenzon, *The Captive Sea*, 29.

could ever dream of, thanks to the recruitment principles of the Ottoman government described above.

Wenceslas describes how, after hiring a Muslim priest to give him Turkish lessons with the money he had earned selling his handicrafts, he attracted the attention of the Ottoman grand admiral, who expressed desire to make him a member of his own household. Though he would still technically remain a slave, this would have drastically improved Wenceslas' living conditions and almost guaranteed him eventual manumission, and as help did not seem to be forthcoming from the Austrian government for his release, he had every reason to be tempted. However, unlike on the galleys where the vagaries of warfare could allow captives to break free from their fetters while remaining Christian, entering into an Ottoman pasha's household required conversion. In fact, throughout their time in the arsenal and the dungeon, Wenceslas and his fellow prisoners from the Austrian delegation were offered better conditions if they accepted Islam on multiple occasions, sometimes by overseers who seemed sincerely sympathetic to their plight, and sometimes on threat of death. This raises the issue of whether captives were allowed their freedom of conscience. Although both Christian canon law and the Muslim sharia forbade forced conversion,⁶¹ and the threats Wenceslas mentions were never acted upon, it is clear that prisoners of war on both Muslim and Christian fleets were pressured along "a sliding scale of compulsion and remuneration"⁶² in the words of Giancarlo Casale, not only to cooperate but also to renounce their faith. Arguably, in circumstances where one is deprived of one's physical freedom and faced with severe material constraints, the issue of freedom of conscience cannot be meaningfully discussed. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that none of Wenceslas' fellow prisoners accepted the Ottomans' offers. Wenceslas himself stopped his Turkish lessons out of fear that the grand admiral might force him to convert. It is also worth remarking that this grand admiral, known as Cığalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha, had been

⁶¹ Ibid., 34.

⁶² Casale, "Ethnic Composition", 133.

born to a Genoese noble family before being captured in an Ottoman raid in his youth and converting to Islam. He would eventually become the second most powerful man in the Empire as grand vizier.

Living and Working Conditions

Regardless of how one had ended up there, life on an early modern galley was nasty, brutish, and often all too short. Concomitant with their greater economic utility to the navy, craftsmen in the arsenal were generally treated better by their overseers than were the unskilled “common prisoners”, who were struck and beaten for the least misconduct,⁶³ and received similar or worse treatment when they rowed on galleys. While there are no surviving first-hand accounts from statute labourers or volunteers, it may be assumed that they were generally treated better, but even so, in light of the information about conditions aboard galleys, there seems little reason to doubt many contemporary Western observers’ impression that peasants forced to row on the Sultan’s fleet “hated the galley as much as death”.⁶⁴ Even for convicts for whom that would be the only other option, the galley sentence was popularly seen as scant improvement on the death penalty. Indeed, prisoners sent to the galleys were often considered as good as dead by their relatives.⁶⁵ The hardships of being forced to row on the imperial fleet did not end with harsh treatment and the dangers of battle, however. I noted earlier that many European admirals took it as axiomatic that oarsmen had to serve at least two years before they began to be really useful. The reasoning behind this belief had to do not so much with the fact that rowing was a difficult skill to master, which it was, but with the much grimmer reality of disease. Almost without exception, captive oarsmen spent the majority of their first two years

⁶³ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Empire and Holy War*, 53.

⁶⁵ Kılınç, “Kürek Cezasının Hukuki Tahlili”, 539.

battling various maladies that killed many of them, such that those two years are perhaps more properly seen as a Darwinian trial of elimination than an apprenticeship period.

In the absence of hard data from the Ottoman Empire, we have to rely on European figures, and it is estimated that 50 to 60% of captives on French, Spanish, and Venetian navies died during the course of their time on the ships, mostly from illness rather than in combat.⁶⁶ Although there were medical facilities in the Imperial Arsenal back in Istanbul, we can guess that death rates were even higher on Ottoman vessels than on European ones, as provisions on the latter were much more meagre, and inadequate in light of the heavy work they were expected to do. In 1540, oarsmen on Spanish galleys received four pounds of meat a month, and ships were also stocked with bacon, chickpeas, salt cod, cheese, tuna, vinegar, wine, and olive oil.⁶⁷ While rising food prices over the 16th century diminished the Spanish oarsmen's portions, they still fared better than their Ottoman counterparts, whose rations were limited to less than two pounds of hardtack on the ships,⁶⁸ and two loaves of bread in the dungeons.⁶⁹ The difference seems to be due to the dietary practices, grain-based and largely vegetarian, prevailing among Muslims in early modern Anatolia and the Balkans across most social classes.⁷⁰ Officers received essentially the same provisions of hardtack, with rank distinctions becoming apparent only in the quality of the flour used, as the hardtack given to oarsmen was baked from whole wheat flour,⁷¹ which ironically had a higher nutritional value than white flour even if it was cheaper. Yet this must have been cold comfort to the oarsmen forced to

⁶⁶ Williams, *Empire and Holy War*, 80.

⁶⁷ Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys*, 270.

⁶⁸ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 210-11.

⁶⁹ Ibid. and Wratislaw, *Adventures*, 127.

⁷⁰ This occasioned remarks from multiple European travellers to the Empire, including Habsburg ambassador Oghier Ghiselin de Busbecq, who wrote in the mid-16th century, "Give them but Bread and Garlic, or an Onion, with a Sort of *Bonniclabber*, or sour Milk [...] They feed like Farmers, and desire nothing more [...] As for hot Meat, or Flesh, the Turks don't much use them in their Travels"; Oghier Ghislain [Ghiselin] de Busbecq, *Travels into Turkey* (London: J. Robinson, 1744), 68-69.

⁷¹ Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilâtı*, 246.

abandon their fields or shackled to the benches of an enemy ship without knowing when, or if, they would walk again on dry land as free men.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper we may return to the question raised at the very start, of where to locate Ottoman galley labourers on the spectrum between complete bondedness of the chattel slavery type and freedom. As I hope the foregoing discussion has shown, Ottoman oarsmen came from a wide variety of backgrounds which influenced the forms of compulsion, inducement, and opportunity they were faced with as well as their working conditions. Galley labour therefore cannot be treated as a discrete category of bondedness independent of such factors as religion and one's standing with the law. The operation of these factors on the form which bondedness took was often different from what obtained in the navies of the Ottomans' European rivals in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Here was a system in which non-Muslim foreign subjects, deprived of their most basic freedoms, nevertheless had greater prospects for upward mobility than native, free-born Ottoman subjects. On the other hand, the uneven burden placed on the marginal, the socially and economically disadvantaged, seems to be a constant across time and region. From the perspective of Ottoman historiography, the chief interest of the topic of naval labour is that it provides an example of the various ways in which the state, in its capacities of dispenser of justice, main employer, and imposer of discipline and obligations, read and inscribed human bodies into its project of aggrandizement and self-perpetuation. The fact that people from all the legal categories around which we might organise the concept of freedom were represented and existed side by side, on the registers of the admiralty if not actually on the galleys, makes galley labour an ideal case to see how the Ottoman state interacted with its subjects and what considerations guided those interactions. The main point to emerge from this study is that manpower occupied a central place among

those considerations, and that labour was used as an instrument of classification whereby Ottoman subjects became legible to the state apparatus. I believe this in turn points to the great relevance of labour history in the study of the Ottoman Empire and early modern states in general, where it is frequently neglected because chattel slavery was not practiced and industrial development was not yet advanced enough for the complete proletarianisation of the legally free workforce.

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