BEYOND CAPTIVITY: CHRISTIAN PRISONERS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE DYNAMICS OF FORCED MIGRATION (1578-1774)

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Abstract

The capture and ransom of captives constituted a central element of migratory dynamics in the Luso-Maghrebi space. Beyond voluntary movements driven by political, religious or economic factors, captivity configured a specific pattern of forced mobility that linked the Christian coasts of the Iberian Peninsula with the corsair ports of the Maghreb. From the conquest of Ceuta (1415) to the peace treaties of the eighteenth century, thousands of individuals were displaced against their will as a result of frontier warfare, privateering and piracy. In this context, the Order of the Most Holy Trinity played a central role as a mediator, organising networks for fundraising and negotiating ransoms with Muslim authorities. By examining the evolution of these practices—from individual rescues to diplomatic exchanges—this study seeks to understand captivity as a form of coerced migration, distinct

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from slavery but essential to interpreting Luso-Maghrebi interactions in the early modern period.

Keywords

Forced migration; Captivity; Christian-Muslim relations; Captive ransoming; Order of the Most Holy Trinity.

Resumo

A captura e o resgate de cativos constituíram um elemento central das dinâmicas migratórias no espaço luso-magrebino. Para além das migrações voluntárias motivadas por fatores políticos, religiosos ou económicos, o cativeiro configurou um padrão específico de mobilidade forçada que articulava os litorais cristãos da Península Ibérica com os portos corsários do Magrebe. Desde a conquista de Ceuta (1415) até aos tratados de paz do século XVIII, milhares de indivíduos foram deslocados contra a sua vontade em resultado de conflitos fronteiriços, corso e pirataria. Neste contexto, a Ordem da Santíssima Trindade desempenhou um papel central como mediadora, organizando redes de recolha de fundos e negociações de resgate junto das autoridades muçulmanas. Ao abordar a evolução destas práticas – do resgate individual às trocas diplomáticas – este estudo propõe compreender o cativeiro como um fenómeno migratório coercivo, distinto da escravatura, mas essencial para interpretar as interações luso-magrebinas na Idade Moderna.

Palavras-chave

Migração forçada; Cativeiro; Relações entre cristãos e muçulmanos; Resgate de cativos; Ordem da Santíssima Trindade.

Introduction

The earliest references to the appropriation of captives resulting from military conflicts between Christians and Muslims appear in chronicles describing the territorial conquests associated with the formation of the Kingdom of Portugal. These conflicts, accompanied by regular exchanges of prisoners between the two belligerent sides, were a constant feature throughout the Middle Ages but gained renewed momentum with the conquest of Ceuta in 1415. From that moment onwards, the Portuguese presence in North Africa not only increased the number of

ransoms, arising from a policy of continuous military offensives, but also intensified the phenomenon of captivity between Portugal and the territory corresponding to present-day Morocco.

Captivity should therefore be understood within the broader phenomenon of geographical mobility, more specifically as a form of forced migration. Historiography has already shown that migration in the medieval and early modern Iberian worlds was far greater than commonly assumed, motivated by economic opportunities, religious pilgrimages, or escape from epidemics and warfare (Bennassar, Bennassar 1989; Braga 1998). Yet captivity stands apart as a form of mobility imposed externally and against individual will. It uprooted people from their communities and placed them in political, cultural, social and spiritual environments radically different from—and often hostile to—their native worlds. Moreover, captivity functioned as a barometer of the geographical proximity and tension between rival kingdoms, representing a form of coerced movement distinct from the enslavement of people because it arose directly from conflict, strategic disruption and negotiation practices. Classifying captivity as a form of coercive mobility thus situates it within broader debates on forced migration, while highlighting its specific logic within frontier societies. This perspective helps to illuminate the deep imprint captivity left on the history of the Mediterranean–Atlantic region. It was a bilateral process affecting both the Portuguese kingdom and its Atlantic islands, as well as the North African strongholds where the capture of captives was a central component of guerrilla warfare (Alberto 2011). As a phenomenon spanning time and space, it endured until the signing of the Peace Treaty with Morocco in 1774.

Throughout this period, captives, although forced to live in austere conditions, often became intermediaries in engaging with the reality of the «other», recognized as the enemy. They also inhabited a spiritual «frontier» where both religions encouraged conversion and where loyalty to one's original faith posed a moral dilemma, a test of resistance, and a constant danger. Within these spaces, religious orders created for the purpose of rescuing captives ensured the presence of Catholicism in the Islamic world. Their members also acted as representatives of the Portuguese Crown before Morocco's sultans. Considered a «pious business», the ransom of captives acquired major importance, especially in the field of charity assistance. In Portugal, the main institution

responsible for this activity was the Order of the Most Holy Trinity, which, since the 13th century, had been dedicated to redeeming Christian captives using funds from lay donors and the Crown (Braga 1998: 185-202).

This article begins with the Battle of Ksar El-Kebir (1578), an event that marked a turning point in the history of captivity, due to the unprecedented rise in the number of Christians held in North Africa(1). This historical rupture provides the starting point for a broader reflection on the nature of captivity and its role within early modern mobility across the Mediterranean. The study's methodological framework is based on documentary research, with particular emphasis on the manuscripts of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity preserved in the National Archives of Torre do Tombo. Adopting a qualitative approach, it examines how historical knowledge of broad processes such as «captivity» and «forced migration» was constructed, and how these phenomena were conceptualized and interrelated in the early modern period. It analyses captivity as a form of forced migration in the Mediterranean region, distinguishes it from enslavement, and concludes with the Peace Treaty with Morocco(2). In this sense, the article makes three principal contributions. First, it offers a conceptual reframing of early modern captivity as a distinct form of forced migration, thereby integrating Mediterranean captivity into broader historiographical debates on coercive mobility. Second, it draws an analytical distinction between captivity and slavery, clarifying a conceptual conflation that has persisted in scholarship. Third, through systematic analysis of ransom registers, financial ledgers, and administrative correspondence of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity, it reconstructs the institutional mechanisms that transformed captivity from an episodic wartime phenomenon into a structured and negotiated system of displacement and return. By doing so, the article shifts the focus from captivity as an isolated religious conflict to captivity as a dynamic system of mobility that connected Portugal and North Africa over the longue durée.

(1) This study was carried out as part of the project «COEXIST - Forced migrations in the Mediterranean world: identities, confrontations, and integration between Christians and Muslims», an exploratory project support by CHAM, NOVA FCSH and UAç, through the FCT- Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia strategic project (UIDB/04666/2020 and UIDP/04666/2020).

(2) See section "Redemption and Governance: Pathways to the Liberation of Captives" of this article.

Captivity as a form of forced mobility

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a captivity network emerged in the Mediterranean, linking the Christian coasts of continental and insular Europe to the port cities of the Maghreb. Christians seized in corsair and pirates' attacks, or in frontier wars, were taken mainly to Algiers, Tunis, Sallé or Tetuán. During the early modern era, these cities became commercial centres where imprisoned individuals, Portuguese and from other European kingdoms, were held. In them, captives awaited ransom either by direct purchase, in cash, or through exchanges with Muslim captives imprisoned in the war or by the coastal defence forces. They also acted as redistribution centres: some captives were sold locally, others sent to Ottoman galleys or to more distant markets in inland Africa and the East. Privateers' ships could disembark dozens or even hundreds of people at a time, creating a constant flow of prisoners and sustaining both a labour and ransom market (Alberto 2005).

The ransom system was central to this world. Once captives were identified, merchants, family members or religious orders contacted intermediaries in the Maghreb ports. Orders created expressly for the redemption of captives, such as the Mercedarians and the Trinitarians, collected donations in Iberian parishes and towns, negotiated prices and travelled to North African ports to free the prisoners. This process could take months or years and involved a complex informal diplomacy (Alberto 2011: 176-224).

The personal experience of captives varied widely according to age, sex, occupation and available resources. Some were assigned to hard labour in the galleys or on public works, others to domestic or artisanal service in their masters' households. Escape or ransom was possible, but equally common were forced adoption, religious conversion or prolonged captivity. Many left autobiographical accounts, known as «captivity literature», describing not only their hardships but also the networks of solidarity they formed, their adaptation strategies and negotiations with local authorities (Baepler 1999; Vitkus, Matar 2001).

From the sixteenth century onwards, accounts by Christians freed or escaped from North Africa circulated throughout the Iberian and Italian Peninsulas, and France. Published as memoirs, letters, novels or sermons, they served multiple purposes: to express public gratitude for their release, raise funds for the ransom of others, to reinforce the image of

the «true faith» before the «other», or simply to narrate an extraordinary adventure. At the same time, they functioned as an informal «manual» for future captives explaining how to behave, whom to turn to and how to negotiate. These testimonies reveal that Mediterranean captivity was simultaneously a space of suffering and circulation, it displaced people, religions, languages and knowledge, producing intense cultural contact in a context of violence and coercion (Bravo Caro et al. 2020).

From an early stage, Portugal became a prime target for pirate incursions, due to its extensive maritime frontier, the strategically location of its Atlantic islands, and the steady circulation of fleets across the seas of an empire spanning across four continents. Barbary pirates and corsairs operated not only along the continental and insular coasts but also against vessels crossing the Atlantic, particularly on routes connecting Madeira and the Azores to Brazil. The Algarve's geographical features further facilitated these raids, enabling both assaults at sea and landings that led to plundering and the capture of individuals for ransom. Accounts of attacks on Portuguese fleets and coasts reveal objectives that extended beyond the seizure of goods and commodities: captives were also a key target. Ransom demands or the value attributed to captives in exchanges rose in proportion to an individual's social status, skills, gender and age (Alberto 2011: 121-175).

The forced displacement of people from the Iberian Peninsula to the Maghreb laid at the heart of the system of corsair warfare and captivity that shaped the Mediterranean between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Those who crossed the sea were not voluntary migrants, but sailors, fishermen, soldiers or inhabitants of coastal villages captured in raids or frontier campaigns. Others were seized on land along the Iberian costs and Atlantic islands, then transported by sea to North Africa (Alberto 2014: 494-507). It was not a marginal phenomenon but part of everyday life in coastal regions, which responded by building watchtowers and fortifications, organizing coastal patrols and collecting parish funds for ransom. The result was a permanent web of economic, diplomatic and religious ties linking the two shores of the Mediterranean.

Upon arrival in the Maghreb, captives were registered, assessed and distributed. Some were sent to hard labour in galleys, ports and public works; others to domestic service or craft workshops, while those from wealthier families were held in expectation of ransom. This forced transit meant not only physical displacement but also social reconfiguration:

the loss of family networks, cultural and linguistic shock, and exposure to forced adoption or religious conversion. The captivity narratives left by freed Iberian captives provide vivid testimony of this involuntary displacement, describing the moment of capture, the sea crossing, the slave markets, the attempts at ransom or escape and, often, the eventual return to the Peninsula, another form of mobility, this time negotiated rather than coerced (David 2004).

Although captives could be subjected to treatment resembling that of slaves during their imprisonment, captivity did not equate to slavery in the conventional sense. Even though the term «captive» is often employed as a synonym for «slave», the two concepts denote fundamentally different realities. While the latter refers to a social condition, the former conveys an ideological and religious dimension. Over time, this distinction has often been blurred, leading to widespread confusion (Cipollone 1993: 444-445). The key difference lies in the transcendental nature of captivity. A captive is an individual whose status depends on their religious affiliation, often opposed to that of the captor, and may be redeemed or released. In contrast, a slave is legally and socially bound to an owner. The captive exists in the hands of an enemy, while the slave exists in the hands of a master (Kaiser 2008: 1-24).

The ideological dimension of this distinction has been noted in the historiography. The Catholic Church's approach underscores a clear separation between captives and slaves. Whereas slavery as a legal institution deprives individuals of their human attributes, the ecclesiastical stance shifts in the context of Christian–Muslim relations: Christians were never to be considered legitimately enslaved by Muslims, under penalty of apostasy and eternal condemnation. Consequently, the distinction emerges clearly: «The slave is a social concept, whereas the captive was ideological» (Diaz Borrás 2001: 19-29). In this order of ideas, King Alfonso X *El Sabio* (1221-1284), in *Las Partidas* precisely defines the concept: «Captives are called, by law, those who fall into the hands of men of another faith» (Alfonso X, II, 29: 90).

Here, captives are seized by enemies of a different religion and may be killed, imprisoned, or treated as servants, all out of religious contempt. Two elements stand out: religious confrontation and the partial assimilation of captives to the status of slaves. King Alfonso X clarifies that they were not truly servants, despite appearances. Christian captives, in particular, could not be enslaved by non-Christians; even

redemption mechanisms recognized them as captives, never as slaves (Diaz Borrás 2001: 23-24). Portuguese sources confirm this distinction. The *Ordenações Afonsinas* refer specifically to Moorish captives or the ransom of Christian captives, distinguishing them from other types of prisoners (Liv. II, tit. CXIII; Liv. IV, tit. CXI).

Despite these normative and doctrinal clarifications, modern historiography has not always maintained this distinction consistently. In several general studies on Mediterranean slavery, the terms «slave» and «captive» are frequently used interchangeably, sometimes for analytical convenience, sometimes as a reflection of sources in which the two conditions overlapped in practice. This tendency can be found in broader syntheses of Mediterranean servitude and privateering, where the emphasis falls on systems of coerced labour and slave markets rather than on the ideological grammar of captivity. By contrast, scholars such as Wolfgang Kaiser (2008), Andrés Díaz Borrás (2001) and Bartolomé Bennassar & Lucile Bennassar (1989), among others, have insisted on the necessity of preserving the conceptual distinction already present in medieval and early modern sources. Their work demonstrates that, particularly in the Iberian and Maghrebi context, the captive was defined above all by religious alterity and by the expectation of ransom or redemption, whereas the slave was embedded in a more stable legal and socio-economic regime of ownership. Recovering this distinction is not merely a semantic exercise: it allows us to understand captivity as a specific form of forced mobility structured by confessional confrontation and legitimised within both Christian and Islamic frameworks. In the Mediterranean world described above, the slave is primarily a category of property, while the captive embodies a temporary, negotiable and ideologically charged status, central to the dynamics of war, diplomacy and interreligious exchange between Portugal and the Maghreb.

Redemption and Governance: Pathways to the Liberation of Captives

In Portugal, it was the members of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity who bore the responsibility for ransoming individuals captured by Muslims, whether through armed conflicts with Christian kingdoms or through seizures carried out by pirates and corsairs. Founded in France in 1198 and established in Portugal a few years later at the invitation of King

Sancho I (1154-1211), this religious order had as its principal mission the provision of assistance to Christian captives and the organization of their redemption. From the fifteenth century onwards, this charitable mission expanded beyond the Iberian Peninsula to North African territories, following the Portuguese conquest of Ceuta, Tangier, Arzila and other fortifications or attempted conquests. As a result of this proximity, conflicts between Christians and Muslims became more frequent, and captivity an inevitable outcome. In the following centuries, the situation grew more complex with the rise of privateering activities by the port cities of Sallé, Tripoli, Tunis and, above all, Algiers. Algerian corsairs sailed the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, attacking Christian vessels as well as the coastal and insular areas of the Iberian Peninsula (Alberto 2010: 121-175).

The organization of the ransoms of captives was entrusted to the friars of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity, and to the «Provedoria» or «Tribunal da Redenção dos Cativos», subordinate to the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens». Since King Sebastião's rule (1554-1578), a contract signed between the monarch and the religious order stipulated the mandatory presence of two Trinitarian friars, bearing the title of redeeming priests, in the organization of any rescue (Alberto 2011: 85-105).

The narrative of Friar Jerónimo de São José, chronicler of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity, constitutes the most comprehensive source for the study of the Order's history in Portugal, the foundation of its convents, and the general ransoms organized by its priests (S. José, 1789-1794). Having drawn upon documents and ancient chronicles of the Order held in the archives of the Convent of the Trinity in Lisbon, today preserved in the National Archives of Torre do Tombo, the chronicler provided an invaluable record of the institution's activities.

Another fundamental source consists in the registers of freed captives that the Trinitarian priests were required to deliver to the officials of the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens» immediately upon arrival in Lisbon, and which were subsequently disseminated in printed form. These lists identified each person ransomed, noting name, parentage, place of origin, age, years spent in captivity, and occasionally the price paid for their freedom.[3]

(3) These lists can be found in the documentation of the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens» and in «Convento da Santissima Trindade de Lisboa», in the collection of the National Archives of Torre do Tombo (ANTT), the Portuguese national archives. Some of these lists are transcribed and published in Alberto, Sousa 2023: 174-310.

The information gathered from printed and manuscript chronicles, as well as from the registers of ransomed captives, can be cross-checked and enriched with the Order's financial books, which recorded receipts and expenditures for each ransom operation, though not all have survived. Complementary insights come from manuscripts authored by the redeeming fathers during the ransoms themselves. Together, these sources provide detailed accounts of maritime and overland journeys, the negotiations conducted, and the amounts paid for the liberation of captives. Equally important is the extensive documentation exchanged with the officials of the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens», the tribunal responsible for overseeing ransom operations and administering the «Cofre dos Cativos», where all monetary contributions for captives' redemption were collected.

Redeeming captives thus had a dual dimension: the physical rescue from captivity and the spiritual rescue of souls, to prevent apostasy. The Portuguese kings themselves exalted this work as both divine and royal. In 1689, King Pedro II (1648-1706), in an ordinance issued to the priests and officials of the ransom mission to Meknes, declared: «I hope that, in so important a cause, on which so much depends the salvation and relief of my vassals, you will conduct yourselves as you ought, in accordance with the willingness with which I have appointed you to so pious a work in the service of God and myself» (ANTT - Mesa da Consciência e Ordens - Cativos, mç. 13, unnumbered document). In the ordinance for the redemption to be carried out in Algiers in 1695, he reinforced the same idea, stating that he ordered the ransom «considering how necessary it is to come to the aid of my vassals held captive in Barbary, so that by means of their freedom they may be delivered from the hardships and injuries they suffer, and from the danger to which (for lack of it) they may succumb by abandoning our Holy Faith» (ANTT - Mesa da Consciência e Ordens - Cativos, mç. 13, unnumbered document). Years later, King João V (1689-1750) reaffirmed this view, stating that «this work is so pious and worthy of the zeal you have for the service of God and for the good of the kingdom» (Oliveira, 1888, X: 361-362).

Beyond its charitable dimension, spiritual benefits for those contributing to this pious work soon emerged. In 1734, the same monarch, through the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens», ordered the printing of a summary of the papal indulgences proclaimed up to

that date, which granted spiritual privileges to Christians who made donations for the liberation of captives (ANTT - Mesa da Consciência e Ordens - Cativos, mç.14, unnumbered document). This set of benefits attests to the importance attached by the Catholic Church to the act of contributing to the redemption of captives. At stake was the concern to prevent apostasy, to avoid losing Christian faithful to the Islamic world.

The pious work of redeeming captives thus emerged as an action inherent to the Christian's duty to assist fellow devotes, while also securing fundamental privileges in the believer's life, both in daily practice and after death. The most evident aspect of this Christian charitable action was revealed in the organization of «resgates gerais» (general ransoms). These meant the liberation, at a single time, of a large number of Portuguese prisoners under the auspices of the Trinitarian religious men, thereby optimizing the logistics, reducing the expenditure, and creating an atmosphere of redemption in the religious sense of the term. These general ransoms, in a given place and date set by the redeeming priests, resulted from negotiations between the Portuguese Crown and the rulers of Morocco or Algiers and constituted the official, both political and religious, mode of carrying out this activity (Alberto 2011: 106-115).

While the conditions of the ransom were being arranged, it fell to the Trinitarian friars to publicize it throughout the city of Lisbon and across the realm. This act consisted of the posting of notices and the holding of a solemn procession through Lisbon, carrying the images of Our Lady of the Ransom and of the Order's founding saints, John of Matha and Felix of Valois (ANTT, Mesa da Consciência e Ordens - Cativos, mç. 13, unnumbered document). The notices maintained a standard form across the various general ransoms, updating only the reference to the provincial father in whose name the redemption was organized and who signed the document.

Following the publication of the notice, the relatives of captives would go on specified days to the Convent of the Most Holy Trinity in Lisbon, where the redeeming fathers and the clerk recorded the donations made. When family members were unable to travel to the convent, they were represented by legal agents, by the priest of their parish of residence, or by merchants. In a dedicated ledger opened specifically for each «resgate geral», the patron's name and address were recorded, together

with the identification of the captive relative and the circumstances of his or her capture.

The *Livro da receita e despesa do dinheiro que entregão as partes pera resgattes de seus captivos*…, referring to the 1671 ransom to be carried out in Algiers, constitutes an example of this system designed to identify and provide monetary assistance for Portuguese captives (ANTT, Ordem da Santíssima Trindade, Convento da Trindade de Lisboa, liv. 23). Spanning over forty folios, the records detail the donation amounts, the names of the donors, and the intended beneficiaries, with reference to the circumstances of captivity.

The ransoms organized by the Portuguese Order of the Most Holy Trinity were carried out at the court of the Sultan of Morocco and in the city of Algiers. In the first case, the captives resulted both from military conflicts between the Portuguese strongholds and the Kingdom of Morocco and from the seizure of vessels, especially by the corsairs of Sallé. In the case of Algiers, the captives derived from the policy of privateering instituted by the governors of this port city, targeting vessels navigating the Mediterranean and Atlantic and attacking coastal and insular settlements.

A «resgate geral» involved a complex process of organization that could take several months. From the royal authorization to the negotiation of ransom conditions with the Sultan of Morocco or with the governor of Algiers (the *Dey*) through the appointment of the redeeming priests and royal officials (treasurer and clerk), the chartering of ships, the publicizing and ceremonial procession of the ransom, the preparation of diplomatic gifts, and the raising of funds, all formed part of a complex logistical operation whose aim was the liberation of Portuguese who had been taken as captives to Meknes or Algiers (Alberto 2011: 176-223).

Regarding Algiers, the procedure differed from that of Morocco, reflecting a very different political reality. Unable to keep all captives under state control, the city's governor sold them to private citizens, in whose possession they awaited ransom, working as servants until redeemed by the authorities of their places of origin. It is estimated that one-third of the inhabitants of Algiers were captives from various European kingdoms, performing a wide range of occupations as artisans for their owners or in the service of the governor within his palace and the city's institutions. The less fortunate were sent to the galleys as rowers (Davis 2004; Fletcher 2003).

Redeeming Freedom: The Ransom of Captives between Portugal and Morocco, 1578-1774

Drawing on the results of the project «Moving City: Cities for War», the outcome of the Battle of Ksar El-Kebir had a profound and lasting impact not only on the Mediterranean world, but also on the Iberian imperial domains themselves[4]. Like other early modern armies, the carefully prepared campaign led by King Sebastian functioned as a true mobile community. Beyond the soldiers, it included carpenters, blacksmiths, physicians, architects, painters, bakers, artisans, as well as numerous women and children (Alberto, Sousa 2023: 8-12). While the outcome of the battle had political and economic consequences, it also deeply affected human lives, since, as in any military confrontation, this entire moving city was taken captive in North Africa.

Thus, although Ksar El-Kebir occupies a central place in sixteenth-century Portuguese historiography, and remained vivid in collective memory for centuries, the study of its human composition has long been neglected and pushed to the margins of history. The first significant recent contribution came from the research carried out by the «Moving City» group. In the aftermath of the battle, the Trinitarian friars assumed responsibility for ransoming the hundreds of women, children, and men of different origins who had been taken captive. The innovative contribution of the project was precisely to examine both the military and civilian composition of the Christian side, through the numerous ransom lists compiled by the Order of the Most Holy Trinity.

In this context, the central figure in the organization of captive redemptions was Friar Roque de Espírito Santo (1520-1590), a Trinitarian priest experienced in ransom operations since the reign of King João III (1502-1557) and one of the main figures responsible for establishing the Order's convent in Ceuta. After the battle, this convent became a crucial point of coordination between the Portuguese kingdom and its agents, both religious and lay, operating in North Africa to redeem Christian captives. His action was, in fact, immediate: less than a month after the

(4) Project MOVING CITY- *Cities mades for war: a European army in late Sixteenth-Century Morocco* (EXPL/HAR-HIS/1521/2021) funded by national funds through the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT). The outputs – ebook, articles, transcribed documents - can be consulted on the project website: https://moving-city.mozellosite.com/

end of the confrontation, on September 6, 1578, at the request of Cardinal Henrique (1512-1580), he travelled to North Africa accompanied by Friar Inácio Tavares, Friar Diogo Ledo, Friar Francisco da Costa, and Brás Alemão to recover the body of King Sebastião and some captive nobles (São José, I, 387-409).

In parallel with this ransom operation, which was repeated several times in the following years, additional redemptions were carried out in Algiers, where Christian captives were known to have been sold, as well as in Melilla, the Barbary Coast, Fez, Salle, Tetuán, and Marrakesh. This liberation process, as already explained, was laborious and required considerable financial, human, and negotiation efforts with the owners of the captives. Nevertheless, the operations led by the Trinitarians were highly structured, with detailed guidelines regarding the logistics of the redemptions. Among the documents attesting to this organization are the *Traslado do regimento dos preços dos resgates de Alcácer Quibir (*Copy of the regiment of the prices of the redemptions of Ksar El-Kebir); *Instruções sobre os cativos da Batalha de Alcácer Quibir dadas a D. Francisco da Costa (*Instructions about the captives of the Battle of Ksar El Kebir given to D.Francisco da Costa); *Instruções de Fr. Roque do Espírito Santo para os redentores de cativos (*Instructions of Fr. Roque do Espírito Santo for the redeemers of captives) and *Provisões e regimento para o resgate dos cativos de Fez de 1608* (Provisions and regiment for the ransom of the captives of Fez in 1608)[(5)].

It should also be noted that, beyond the central role of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity, other institutions collaborated in this effort, notably the «Santa Casa da Misericórdia» and the Society of Jesus. An emblematic case of this inter-institutional coordination involves the Jesuit Father Amador Rebelo (1538-1622), who, according to Friar Bernardo da Cruz, was appointed in the early 1580s by Cardinal Henrique to embark for North Africa together with Father André Álvares, with the mission of supporting the ransom process, a responsibility that exceeded the capacities of the Trinitarians alone. For this purpose, he received 17,000 cruzados from royal alms, which he used during the journey to Valencia to purchase valuable goods. These were subsequently sold in Algiers, increasing the initial sum to

(5) The full transcription of these documents can be found in Alberto, Sousa 2023: 318-354.

25,000 cruzados, an amount that made it possible to ransom numerous captives (BNP, Cruz, s.d., cap. XCIII[6]).

In this sense, the actions of the Trinitarians and other agents involved in the ransoms allow us to understand that the phenomenon of geographic mobility affected not only those held in captivity but also their redeemers, both religious and lay. Indeed, they were part of constant dynamics of movement between the Kingdom and different locations in North Africa. The very practice of ransom thus involved continuous travel, negotiations across multiple cities, and direct contact with diverse political, religious, and cultural communities. Accordingly, captivity and its subsequent redemption emerge as phenomena deeply connected to broader patterns of human migration and circulation, in this case, patterns of mobility imposed by war.

Regarding the captives of Ksar El-Kebir, both civilians and military personnel, the question arises as to the extent to which their initial relocation to North Africa was truly voluntary. Altough many professional soldiers and nobles accompanied King Sebastião out of loyalty, ambition, or personal interest, a significant portion of people was recruited through long-standing coercive mechanisms, such as the «ordenanças». Likewise, the presence of women, children, and civilians, connected to families or support roles, cannot be understood as a freely chosen movement. For many, from the very outset, it constituted a forced relocation, in which the military campaign inherently required the mobilization of resources forming a heterogeneous community in terms of people and trades.

Thus, beyond the act of crossing the Strait of Gibraltar toward Morocco as a form of coercive migration, the human component that was captured, as noted, underwent a series of forced relocations as they were sold, exchanged, acquired, or transferred between different Moroccan regions. Far from remaining static at their initial site of captivity, these people became part of broader networks of circulation extending throughout North Africa and, in some cases, beyond. Their trajectories therefore demonstrate that captivity did not constitute a fixed condition, but rather an experience deeply marked by patterns of coerced mobility.

(6) Portuguese National Library (BNP). Bernardo da Cruz (sec. XVII). *Crónica del Rei dom Sebastião o pr[imer]o deste nome Rei de Portugal*. pba-186, cap. XCIII.

Finally, the ransom process itself can be understood as a final form of migration: an attempt to return captives to their place of origin. However, the redemption of these individuals and their return to the Kingdom rarely represented a peaceful or immediate reintegration. Many were subjected to intense scrutiny by the Holy Office, interrogated about their fidelity to the Christian faith and their experiences in the lands of the «enemy», in this case Muslims. The numerous inquisitorial records preserved at the National Archive of Torre do Tombo reveal that return did not simply mean freedom, but also subjection to new forms of surveillance, judgment, and suspicion (Torres 2021).

Take, for example, the case of Pedro Nunes, aged 35, that was redeemed in the 1590s and brought before the Inquisition in May 1596. According to the Inquisition's documents, he was the son of two «Old Christians», Diogo Nunes and Maria de Jahem, and had resided both in Castile (Bairro da Fonseca, in Cuenca) and in Lisbon (Rua do Congro). He had also served as a retainer to Afonso de Aguilar, a Castilian nobleman who fought at Ksar El-Kebir. Although his lord was killed in the battle, Pedro himself fell captive to the Moorish king. Upon his return, however, the trial proceeded against him on the charge of having practiced Islam (ANTT, Tribunal de Santo Ofício, proc. 5294).

The Battle of Ksar El-Kebir was, indeed, a unique case in terms of military, political, and juridical implications between the Iberian kingdoms and the North African authorities, but it was also an exception in the human dimension due to the thousands of captives taken. The ransom process was never, and could never be considered, fully completed; nonetheless, efforts continued repeatedly, with records of the redemption of battle participants extending as late as 1613-1614. Nevertheless, the exceptional episode of Ksar El-Kebir, which, as we have seen, resulted in a sudden surge in the number of Christian captives in North Africa, the phenomenon of captivity had already existed in previous centuries and continued for many decades after the battle's outcome.

In the broader context of seventeenth-century captivity, these ransom operations carried out by the Portuguese Crown and the Order of the Most Holy Trinity must be understood as responses to the systematic threat of corsair activity in North Africa and the western Mediterranean. Thus, the general ransoms documented in Algiers in 1621 and in Morocco in 1622, 1625, and 1627, culminating later in Tetuán in 1655, reflect the concrete measures adopted to confront the captivity phenomenon during

this century. This temporal hiatus between ransoms (1627 to 1655) can be explained, in part, by the growing political instability that the Portuguese kingdom experienced during the 1630s and 1640s, and later, with the outbreak of the Restoration War. Indeed, the period accompanying the process of political restoration and the struggle for independence (1640-1668) represented a crucial moment in which the Kingdom's military and financial priorities were focused almost exclusively on the Iberian front, relegating the organized effort to redeem captives in North Africa to a secondary concern. It also entailed the loss of one of the most important strongholds in this ransom process due to the refusal of the captains of Ceuta to recognize the newly acclaimed King João IV (1604-1656). Although Ceuta remained definitively connected to the Spanish crown, the captain of Tangier, D. Rodrigo Lobo da Silveira (?-1653), eventually yielded and swore allegiance to the Portuguese side in 1643 (Costa 2017: 188).

For these reasons, although the need to ransom captives in North Africa had been recognized during the 1630s and 1640s, it was only in March 1653 that King João IV issued the royal charter directing resources toward a new ransom, now based in Tangier, instructing the governor to provide the necessary support to the Trinitarians. The operation was carried out by Fathers Henrique Coutinho and António de Madre de Deus, who successfully redeemed 183 captives, the vast majority originating from coastal areas (Braga 1994: 124-125), confirming the previous assertion regarding the regions most affected by corsair activity. In the following years, the rescues continued in Moroccan lands and, above all, in Algiers, freeing hundreds of Portuguese captives. Among them are the natives of the Azores islands, often devastated by attacks by corsairs and their inhabitants taken as captives.

Based on the documents from the Lisbon convent of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity and the «Mesa da Consciência e Ordens», it should be further noted that we are dealing with a daily reality for Portuguese society that persisted from the foundation of the Portuguese kingdom until its definitive resolution in the early nineteenth century. In the case of Morocco, with the accession of Sidi Mohammed to the throne in 1757, a policy was developed to create conditions leading to treaties of friendship and commerce with European kingdoms, stipulating a mutual obligation not to capture individuals. Following this policy, the first exchange of captives between Portugal and Morocco took place in 1760 in preparation for a peace treaty (Neto 1996). From this point on,

ransom operations became a matter of diplomacy, ceasing to be framed as a religious war and transitioning into agreements between nations. The Peace Treaty, signed on 11 January 1774, marked a new phase in the relationship between the two courts, carried out through intense diplomatic exchanges (*Relações …*, 212-224).

In Algiers, the last general ransom of captives took place in 1811, following the Treaty of Truce and Ransom signed on 6 July 1810. This treaty secured the liberation of six hundred Portuguese captives in four successive stages. The agreed sums were very high, necessitating the organization of a national fundraising campaign to enable payment of the requested ransom. The Luso-Algerian Peace Treaty was subsequently concluded on 21 June 1813 under British auspices.

The study of captive ransoms thus constitutes an attempt to reveal a reality intrinsic to Portuguese society, particularly experienced in coastal settlements which, due to their geographic position, were more exposed to attacks by North African pirates and corsairs. Redeeming captives became an act of charity and mercy, aimed at the liberation of those imprisoned in North Africa, encompassing both physical and spiritual dimensions.

Conclusion

The captivity of Europeans in North Africa from the early modern period through the nineteenth century represented a crucial, yet often overlooked, dimension in the history of forced migrations. Along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, thousands of individuals were seized by corsairs and pirates operating from Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. These captives experienced a range of fates, including enslavement, forced labour in households, or galleys, and, at times, coerced integration into local institutions.

This phenomenon constituted a form of coerced mobility that profoundly reshaped the demographic, social, and economic landscapes of both Europe and North Africa. Families were torn apart, communities destabilized, and flows of human labour redirected across the Mediterranean under duress. The captivity of Christians in North Africa thus exemplifies how religious, political, and economic conflicts generated involuntary migration, creating enduring networks of negotiation, ransom, and redemption.

Moreover, the systematic practice of captivity and ransom institutionalized forced mobility. European powers and religious orders developed extensive logistical and financial systems to negotiate the release of captives, raising funds from private donors, kings, and charitable institutions. The processes—capture, negotiation, and liberation—illustrate the interplay between coercion and diplomacy, as well as the broader implications of human displacement for cross-cultural encounters, state formation, and collective memory. In this sense, North African captivity should be understood not merely as an episode of Mediterranean piracy but as a pivotal chapter in the *longue durée* of forced migrations, highlighting the intersections of power, faith, and mobility in early modern and modern history.

This phenomenon must also be situated within the wider context of the Mediterranean as a dynamic and contested zone of human movement, interaction, and boundary-making. Far from serving as a mere backdrop to political and religious conflict, the Mediterranean functioned as a space where diverse communities (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and others) interacted in ways that were at once cooperative, competitive, and coercive. Maritime routes, port cities, and coastal settlements were hubs of commercial and cultural exchange but also zones of vulnerability to piracy, enslavement, and military incursions.

The capture of Europeans by North African corsairs and the subsequent ransoms coordinated by religious orders, monarchs, and local communities exemplify the entanglement of coercion and negotiation that shaped mobility across the Mediterranean. These movements were not only physical but also social and symbolic, producing networks of familial, religious, and political obligations that crossed national and confessional boundaries. The Mediterranean thus emerges as a space in which forced migrations, voluntary trade, and diplomatic negotiation were inseparably intertwined, revealing the porous nature of borders and the constant negotiation of territorial, political, and religious boundaries.

Furthermore, the Mediterranean served as a venue for cross-cultural encounters, in which captives, traders, diplomats, and religious agents mediated interactions between communities that might otherwise have remained segregated. The lived experience of captivity underscores the intersection of vulnerability, agency, and negotiation, showing how individuals and institutions navigated the overlapping claims of sovereignty, faith, and commerce. Networks of ransom, relief, and correspondence

between European and North African actors attest to a Mediterranean world defined not by rigid separation but by mobility, interaction, and the continual contestation of geographic, political, and religious borders.

By framing captivity explicitly as a form of forced mobility, this study aligns with and extends recent historiographical debates that interpret pre-modern migration as encompassing not only voluntary movement but also displacement generated by warfare, enslavement, and religious conflict. Although captivity in the Mediterranean has been extensively examined through the lenses of piracy, slavery, conversion, diplomacy, and ransom practices, it has seldom been conceptualised as a specific modality of involuntary migration. Viewing captivity in this way highlights it as a structured mechanism of human displacement shaped by frontier dynamics and sustained by diplomatic, religious, and charitable networks that sought to manage and negotiate this coerced movement across the Mediterranean. Recognizing it as such highlights how these displacements were structured and managed through complex networks—religious orders, monarchs, charitable institutions, and local intermediaries—coordinating capture, negotiation, and redemption. This perspective reveals captivity not simply as episodic suffering but as an organized system of human mobility embedded in the political, social, and religious landscapes of the Mediterranean.

In this way, the captivity of Europeans and the systems of redemption in North Africa illuminate the Mediterranean as a complex arena where human mobility, cross-cultural encounter, and the negotiation of difference were central to social, economic, and political life, offering a lens through which to understand broader patterns of migration, exchange, and frontier formation in early modern history.

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