

Moral Economy and Maritime Violence in the Mediterranean

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This paper examines the behavioral patterns within seafarer groups in reference to sailors' choice of pursuing corsairing activities in the seventeenth-century Mediterranean. Among a sailor's career options, piracy existed as an alternative that bore high risks and offered high returns. As 'merchant adventurers' found means of protection and solidarity through institutions such as guild organizations or religious orders, pirates tried to eliminate risks related to their operations by attributing an institutional character to their activities. They sought legitimacy under the shield of holy war and pursued solidarity among themselves by standardizing onboard hierarchies.

In this paper, I identify differences between piracy and corsairing and question the existence of these differences in the case of Mediterranean corsairs. I argue that corsairing emerged as a defense mechanism when 'pirates' faced the marginalizing effects of market forces and gradually gained an institutional character as a result of the externalization of economic/rational motivations in pirate activities. In this context, predominant and seemingly opposite views on piracy—one romanticizing pirate groups as democratic and egalitarian societies, and the other relating piracy to a moral decline—appear as the two sides of the same coin.

The paper examines two texts in detail: first is *Maḳāle-i Zindāncı Maḥmūd Ḳapūdān*, a *meddāḥ* story recorded in the late seventeenth century; and second is a corsair code (*Ḳorṣān Ḳānūn-nāmesi*), included in a seventeenth-century epistolary collection (*inṣā' mecmū'ası*) from Ottoman Tunisia. The former is the narrative of Warden Captain Mahmud, who is prudently willing to sacrifice material benefit for honor and integrity and embodies all the qualities of an ideal corsair captain: a competent sailor, an effective leader, and a source of inspiration for his crew. The latter, the corsair code, comprises a short text articulating the conventions in sharing the rewards of a raid and presents established hierarchies within a corsair crew.