

The Ottoman-Venetian Border (15th-18th Centuries)

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Conclusion

A topic such as the passage from the frontier to the border may be faced from many points of view: it may be oriented towards the past and the ancient world; it may involve the land, the sea and even the sky; it may unfold in thorough tales of *histoire événementielle*; it may confine itself to micro-history; finally, it may be considered within a wider discussion of economic or social relations or flow into geo-politics and current affairs, into the wars being fought today and the peace that is so difficult to be reached. It is a complex subject that may be dealt with only from a limited point of view in a single book to avoid the risk of losing oneself in too general discussions. The aim of these pages is to consider some basic elements regarding the relations developed between the Muslim and the Christian worlds from the end of the Middle Ages through the Modern Age.

There is already a huge body of works dealing with the Andalusian frontier and the continuous withdrawing, in the Iberian peninsula, of the limits placed to separate the Moorish and the Christian reigns. The same cannot be said of the frontiers between Muslim countries and Europe in the Modern Age. The Ottoman historiography of the last century was strongly influenced by the idea of frontier, but only with reference to the early history of an empire that, at its maximum expansion, dominated almost all the Islamic world. To consider Osman's and his first successors' advance as a *ġihād* or to find other reasons for it meant to side with a specific school of thought. Luckily the positions have softened and today it is possible to pick the positive elements from each of them without forgetting the pragmatism that always characterised the Ottoman behaviour. There are few pieces of writing about this Empire's frontier in the Modern Age and its following transformation into a border. Almost twenty-five years ago, Andrew C. Hess wrote a book on the contacts between the sultan's subjects and the king of Spain's ones in North Africa. Some essays by Rifa'at Ali Abou El-Haj about what happened at the time of the Treaty of Karlowitz date back to almost thirty years ago. Only the proceedings of a few more recent conferences show the development of a certain interest in this subject. In this field, however, books and papers often repeat preconceived ideas that it is still difficult to get rid of. The constant study of documents is the only way to provide solid bases for new hypotheses.

This volume starts from the terms used both in Europe and in the Arabic-Turkish world to label the concepts of frontier, border and other related elements, trying to define the precise shades of meaning that distinguished

them. Exactly understanding the different points of view is, as a matter of fact, the necessary starting point for every further discussion. The historiographical point of view of frontier is considered broadly exploring the debate that arose in the twentieth century. The next step was taking into consideration the peace agreements between Muslim and European countries. It is notable how the closeness or distance between the two sides influenced the type of agreement they entered into: if the two countries shared a common land border, the document chosen by the Muslim side was usually a truce (*hudna*); on the contrary, if this was not the case, they fell back on a safe-conduct (*amān*).

The people and the societies that once existed along the land and sea frontier between Christianity and Islam provided further material for research. The relations between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire give clear and numerous examples of the contacts established in such areas throughout the centuries. A study of piracy and privateering in the Adriatic demonstrates close ties, which have remained unknown up until now, between the Maghrebi people and Albanian Ottoman subjects.

After having studied the frontier, the passage to the border was considered. Few books have dealt with this topic until now; the establishment of a border line, usually decided on the basis of bilateral agreements, represents the realisation of the peace and the material acknowledgment of the other country's right to exist as an independent entity. In the relations between Christianity and Islam the existence of a shared border marked the passage beyond a pure war logic and the acceptance of the peaceful coexistence of different entities; hence, the importance of clarity in the agreements concerning a border line. A thorough analysis of the documents regarding the relations between the Republic and the Empire let us overcome the theory according to which Ottomans had accepted the idea of a western border only after the Treaty of Karlowitz. Border agreements already existed in the second half of the fifteenth century, when the sultans' empire had already come into direct contact with countries that had a consistent military strength. Throughout the centuries, the practice used for such agreements changed: in the most ancient times, the sultan issued a document with an final ratification that could even modify what had been decided far from the capital. In the sixteenth century, instead, the local agreements decided by bilateral committees formed by diplomats and technicians were considered to be sufficient, whereas the sultan's decree concluding the works was regarded only as a relic of the past. What changed with the Treaty of Karlowitz were not Ottoman ideas on the possibility of a border with Christian countries but the extension of the border itself, which bounded also the area close to the Habsburg Empire.

The research on the practice used to establish a border raises questions about the types of society developed on one side or the other. If there were violence and misunderstandings, there were also attempts to reach an

agreement made, although in a spatially limited field, by people of different religions and countries. The division of the land was of special interest since the separation of fiscal and property interests did not always match the limits imposed by the states.

Also the sea was a frontier for many centuries. It is impossible to place boundary stones or markers on a liquid element to distinguish what belongs to a state or to the other. Yet, common conventions were chosen to place limits there. The European manner of viewing maritime possessions had its origin in the Roman law and did not coincide with Islamic thought. Europeans considered the sea as a common freely accessible good, while Ottomans held a different view that was more similar to that of land. In some cases, they considered it as the prince's property that could be defined by more conventional devices.

It was the latter point of view that was generally welcomed by the modern states, maybe unaware of a likely and far-off Muslim origin. A limit, thus, could be conventionally established also on the water: the first reference was the distance from the coast indicated by the range of a cannon shot; then, even wider spaces were split. Already in the first half of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman rulers faced the new developments in a practical manner once again by establishing, however unilaterally, a maritime border using a short distance from the coast first and then an imaginary line through the open sea.

Studying the Ottoman geo-politic point of view allows to notice the economic importance of the route that linked Istanbul and Alexandria. In ancient times, before the conquest of the Mamluk sultanate by Selim I, it was considered to be an international route, but then it became a route within the Empire. At the beginning, the sultans tried to defend first of all their own ships from the thread posted by pirates and privateers: as a matter of fact, the sultans attempted to conquer the entire Mediterranean basin by capturing mostly wide and weakly fortified areas and leaving the strongholds and the better fortified zones for a later wave of conquests. The failed siege of Malta revolutionised the sultans' geo-political point of view, pushing them to defend the Istanbul-Alexandria route and, thus, to destroy the dens of pirates that still existed in some islands of the eastern Mediterranean. The wars fought to conquer Cyprus and then Crete, which were the last shreds of the Venetian empire in the eastern seas, fall under the same reasoning.

A border is not only the mark dug into the ground. A border can be something else, such as what separates two ways of living and thinking; hence, the importance of the elements that allow to identify those who are different as to culture, origin, religion and who cross others' territory. Unlike the frontier, which is an area seen from a single standpoint and intended as a place where battles are fought and a force advances and the other withdraws, the border line is used to separate lands in a more

lasting and peaceful way. In general, it is not an impassable limit. Many categories of people could cross it. The means of identification become very important: in the most ancient times, they were aimed mostly at detecting the belonging to a specific group but then, with the passing of the Modern Age, they were intent on identifying people in themselves, as single individuals, different from those who came from the same area, shared the same profession or professed the same religion.

In this slow process, the spread of epidemics, which experienced a recrudescence, pushed European countries to control more and more strictly the origin of people, animals and things that came from areas exposed to a greater risk of contagion, such as the Muslim lands in general and the Ottoman ones in particular. Because of health reasons, the opposite journey was often considered as a sort of descent to hell. With the first documents of personal identification, the discourse can count itself to be finished. The slow development in the relations between Christianity and Islam that had started in the Middle Ages led to long-lasting results.

Only the birth of new technical tools allows to establish new borders today. They are no longer tied to space, but rather involve the image one holds of himself and of others and, most of all, the way of living and conceiving time.