

England's Forgotten Muslim History



Murad III, left, Elizabeth I, right.

ULLSTEIN BILD, VIA GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); THE PRINT COLLECTOR / GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)

By JERRY BROTTON, *The New York Times*, 17 September 2016

London — Britain is divided as never before. The country has turned its back on Europe, and its female ruler has her sights set on trade with the East. As much as this sounds like Britain today, it also describes the country in the 16th century, during the golden age of its most famous monarch, Queen Elizabeth I.

One of the more surprising aspects of Elizabethan England is that its foreign and economic policy was driven by a close alliance with the Islamic world, a fact conveniently ignored today by those pushing the populist rhetoric of national sovereignty.

From the moment of her accession to the throne in 1558, Elizabeth began seeking diplomatic, commercial and military ties with Muslim rulers in Iran, Turkey and Morocco — and with good reasons. In 1570, when it became clear that Protestant England would not return to the Catholic faith, the pope excommunicated Elizabeth and called for her to be stripped of her crown. Soon, the might of Catholic Spain was against her, an invasion imminent. English merchants were prohibited from trading with the rich markets of the Spanish Netherlands. Economic and political isolation threatened to destroy the newly Protestant country.

Elizabeth responded by reaching out to the Islamic world. Spain's only rival was the Ottoman Empire, ruled by Sultan Murad III, which stretched from North Africa through Eastern Europe to the Indian Ocean. The Ottomans had been fighting the Hapsburgs for decades, conquering parts of Hungary. Elizabeth hoped that an alliance with the sultan would provide much needed relief from Spanish military aggression, and enable her merchants to tap into the lucrative markets of the East. For good measure she also reached out to the Ottomans' rivals, the shah of Persia and the ruler of Morocco.

The trouble was that the Muslim empires were far more powerful than Elizabeth's little island nation floating in the soggy mists off Europe. Elizabeth wanted to explore new trade alliances, but couldn't afford to finance them. Her response was to exploit an obscure commercial innovation — joint stock companies — introduced by her sister, Mary Tudor.

The companies were commercial associations jointly owned by shareholders. The capital was used to fund the costs of commercial voyages, and the profits — or losses — would also be shared. Elizabeth enthusiastically backed the Muscovy Company, which traded with Persia,

and went on to inspire the formation of the Turkey Company, which traded with the Ottomans, and the East India Company, which would eventually conquer India.

In the 1580s she signed commercial agreements with the Ottomans that would last over 300 years, granting her merchants free commercial access to Ottoman lands. She made a similar alliance with Morocco, with the tacit promise of military support against Spain.

As money poured in, Elizabeth began writing letters to her Muslim counterparts, extolling the benefits of reciprocal trade. She wrote as a supplicant, calling Murad “the most mighty ruler of the kingdom of Turkey, sole and above all, and most sovereign monarch of the East Empire.” She also played on their mutual hostility to Catholicism, describing herself as “the most invincible and most mighty defender of the Christian faith against all kind of idolatries.” Like Muslims, Protestants rejected the worship of icons, and celebrated the unmediated word of God, while Catholics favored priestly intercession. She deftly exploited the Catholic conflation of Protestants and Muslims as two sides of the same heretical coin.

The ploy worked. Thousands of English traders crossed many of today’s no-go regions, like Aleppo in Syria, and Mosul in Iraq. They were far safer than they would have been on an equivalent journey through Catholic Europe, where they risked falling into the hands of the Inquisition.

The Ottoman authorities saw their ability to absorb people of all faiths as a sign of power, not weakness, and observed the Protestant-Catholic conflicts of the time with detached bemusement. Some Englishmen even converted to Islam. A few, like Samson Rowlie, a Norfolk merchant who became Hassan Aga, chief treasurer to Algiers, were forced. Others did so of their own volition, perhaps seeing Islam as a better bet than the precarious new Protestant faith.

English aristocrats delighted in the silks and spices of the east, but the Turks and Moroccans were decidedly less interested in English wool. What they needed were weapons. In a poignant act of religious retribution, Elizabeth stripped the metal from deconsecrated Catholic churches and melted their bells to make munitions that were then shipped out to Turkey, proving that shady Western arms sales go back much further than the Iran-contra affair. The queen encouraged similar deals with Morocco, selling weapons and buying saltpeter, the essential ingredient in gunpowder, and sugar, heralding a lasting craving and turning Elizabeth’s own teeth an infamous black.

The sugar, silks, carpets and spices transformed what the English ate, how they decorated their homes and how they dressed. Words such as “candy” and “turquoise” (from “Turkish stone”) became commonplace. Even Shakespeare got in on the act, writing “Othello” shortly after the first Moroccan ambassador’s six-month visit.

Despite the commercial success of the joint stock companies, the British economy was unable to sustain its reliance on far-flung trade. Immediately following Elizabeth’s death in 1603, the new king, James I, signed a peace treaty with Spain, ending England’s exile.

Elizabeth’s Islamic policy held off a Catholic invasion, transformed English taste and established a new model for joint stock investment that would eventually finance the Virginia Company, which founded the first permanent North American colony.

It turns out that Islam, in all its manifestations — imperial, military and commercial — played an important part in the story of England. Today, when anti-Muslim rhetoric inflames political discourse, it is useful to remember that our pasts are more entangled than is often appreciated.

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