



# Measuring the military decline of the Western Islamic World: Evidence from Barbary ransoms ☆



Eric Chaney\*

*Harvard University, United States*

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## Abstract

This paper uses data on more than 4000 captives ransomed from the Barbary corsairs to track the military power of the Ottoman Empire's most powerful North African regency over time. Results suggest that as the seventeenth century advanced, Algerian-based corsairs found it increasingly difficult to capture “hard” targets. These results do not appear to be driven by changes in ransoming preferences or by other unobserved factors and provide insights into both the timing and reasons behind the military decline of the Western Islamic World.

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For generations, scholars have argued that between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the Western Islamic World fell decisively behind Western Europe (e.g. Hess, 1972; Lewis, 1982; Inalcik, 1994). These “decline” narratives often highlight the defeats of the armies and navies of the Western Islamic World, implying that the relative military decline also reflected an increasing gap in the levels of economic and technological development between Western Europe and the Islamic West. In many ways, recent research has supported this assumption by suggesting that military technology was less likely to be blocked by elites than other technological advances (e.g.

Pamuk, 2004). Consequently, the relative military position of the Western Islamic World may actually be a conservative proxy for its relative level of technological and socioeconomic development.

Existing scholarship has generally focused on the military standing of the Ottoman Empire, which is generally thought to have ruled – either directly or indirectly – much of the Western Islamic World during the putative period of relative decline.<sup>1</sup> For example, Bernard Lewis notes that during this period the Ottomans found it “more and more difficult to keep up with the rapidly advancing Western technological innovations” and in the eighteenth century “fell decisively behind Europe in

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 617 495 7730.

E-mail address: [echaney@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:echaney@fas.harvard.edu).

<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of the paper the term Western Islamic World will refer to both the Ottoman Empire and its North African Regencies. See below for a discussion of the increasing autonomy of Ottoman North Africa over time.

virtually all the arts of war.” Interestingly, he suggests that this decline can be seen “most clearly in the contrast between the Muslim and European fleets” and claims that “Ottoman and North African naval construction failed to keep pace with the major developments that took place in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Lewis, 1982, p. 226).

Other authors have suggested different dates for the start of this decline.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally many historians have viewed the Ottoman defeat at the battle of Lepanto in 1571 CE (e.g. Hess, 1972, p. 53) as the start of the Empire’s decline, but more recent research has tended to suggest a significantly later date. For example, Murphey (1999, p. 105) critically notes that there is a “persistent view that Ottoman deficiencies in the development and use of weaponry influenced their ability, especially in the second half of the seventeenth century, to confront the West successfully” and argues that any technological divergence did not actually occur until the mid-eighteenth century (Murphey, 1999, p. 108). Grant (1999) argues that the exact timing of the Ottoman decline depends on which state one compares the Ottomans to. He argues that the Ottomans were able to maintain military parity with the Russians and Venetians, successfully adopting military innovations coming from Europe from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Agoston (2005, p. 54) suggests that throughout the seventeenth century the Ottomans remained a “capable and formidable naval power” when compared to the Venetians and Spanish.

This paper provides new evidence regarding the timing of the naval decline of the Western Islamic World by tracking the fortunes of Algerian-based corsairs in what has been called the “little war of piracy” during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Friedman, 1983, p. xviii). Using a data set on over 4000 captives ransomed by Spanish clerics from the Ottoman Regency of Algiers between 1575 and 1692, I develop three metrics to proxy for the relative military power of the Regency, which emerged as a major center of corsairing activity in the sixteenth century. These include the proportion of ransomed captives caught fishing, those caught on land and those captured in the Atlantic. The evolution of these metrics supports the hypothesis of a decline in the relative power of the Algerian-based corsairs during the seventeenth century. For example, the proportion of ransomed captives captured while fishing jumps towards the end of the

seventeenth century. Since fisherman presented easier, but less valuable targets than other categories, this trend implies a shift towards less militarily ambitious raids. I also show that both the proportion of captives captured on land and the proportion captured in the Atlantic decline as the seventeenth century advances. Although there is some variation across metrics, all three metrics suggest that the regency was less militarily powerful after 1675 than at the start of the seventeenth century.

Do these changes in the characteristics of the ransomed population denote a decline in the military power of the corsairs? Perhaps the most worrying alternative explanation is that the results reflect a change in ransoming preferences or procedures as the seventeenth century wore on. I show, however, that the available data are not consistent with this possibility.

When taken in unison, the results provide the first systematic quantitative evidence that the Barbary corsairs had begun to lose naval power by the end of the seventeenth century. Given evidence that the corsairs were more technologically advanced in the naval arena than other areas of the Ottoman Empire during this period (e.g. Soucek, 2004, p. 256), this may provide a conservative estimate of the start of the decline in the Empire’s naval fortunes.

Interestingly, this timing coincides with what one military historian has called the Ottoman Empire’s first “significant military failures” (Agoston, 2005, p. 201) suggesting that the start of the decline of the corsairs coincided with that of the rest of the Empire. In this sense, the results complement the large literature dating the start of the Ottoman decline between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and contribute to the naval and military history of the Ottoman Empire more generally.<sup>3</sup>

What drove the military decline of the Barbary corsairs? One line of the literature attributes the ultimate decline of the corsairs to differences in technological dynamism between Europe and North Africa. This literature notes that while European and Algerian fleets were evenly matched through the first half of the seventeenth century (Panzac, 2005, pp. 27, 28), European technological advances such as the improvement of artillery in the second-half of the seventeenth century (Greene, 2002) left the Algerians increasingly behind (Panzac, 2005, p. 32).

Another line of research attributes the decline of the corsairs to institutional differences between Europe and North Africa (e.g. Hess, 1978, pp. 208–209). This alternative view notes that from the start the Barbary

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, I will use decline as shorthand for relative decline. It is worth noting, however, that there is a consensus that both the military power of the Ottomans and the Western Europeans were increasing over time and that the relative decline was driven by a greater rate of increase in this power among European states.

<sup>3</sup> For prominent contributions to this literature see Murphey (1999) and Agoston (2005).

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