Adversities at Sea: From Basra to Gujurat
Seydi Ali Reis, 1554

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Seydi Ali Reis was an Ottoman admiral who was born in the beginning of sixteenth century and died in 1562 in Istanbul. After participating in several Ottoman naval operations, he was promoted to the rank of admiral (kapudan). The first half of the sixteenth century witnessed a continuous struggle between the Portuguese and Ottoman navies to control navigation on the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Arabian Sea. These struggles culminated in 1552, when another famed Ottoman admiral, Piri Reis (‘reis’ means ‘captain’), led a fleet from Suez around the Arabian peninsula, capturing the port of Muscat and briefly laying siege to the main Portuguese fortress in Hormuz. But fearing the arrival of Portuguese reinforcements from India, Piri eventually withdrew from Hormuz and abandoned most of his fleet in the Ottoman port of Basra (an act for which he was executed shortly thereafter). In 1553, another commander, Murad Reis, attempted to return the fleet from Basra to Suez, but encountered a Portuguese patrol near Hormuz and was forced to turn back.

Finally, in 1554, Ali Seydi was charged with the task of bringing the Ottoman fleet, comprising fifteen galleys, from Basra to Suez. Ali Seydi arrived in Basra on 3 February 1554, and waited five months until the appropriate season for sailing, repairing the fleet over the winter. According to intelligence available to him as he set sail from Basra in 2 July 1554, there were only four Portuguese bargias on patrol in the Persian Gulf (or ‘the Sea of Hormuz,’ as the Ottomans referred to it). As he describes in a report submitted to the sultan and reproduced below, Seydi Ali would fail to reach the Red Sea due to a combination of Portuguese attacks and violent storms. Several of his ships were lost at sea and others were taken by the Portuguese; those that survived would be rerouted toward India, from where the captain and around 50 of his men would travel overland back to Ottoman territory.

On the first day of Shaban of 961 [2 July 1554] we left the harbor of Basra, to be accompanied by the frigate of Sherif Pasha as far as [the end of] the Sea of Hormuz. […] We arrived in Rey Shehr (Bushehr), a harbor on the coast of Shiraz province, and continued along the Persian coastline. We came across a spritsail and inquired about the whereabouts of the enemy, but the crew did not know. Thereupon we crossed over to the Arabian coast and arrived in the city of Katif situated near Hajar (Lahsa). There, too, we found a sailing vessel and asked about the enemy, but received no information. Then we continued on to Bahrain, where I conversed with the commander of the place, Reis Murad. He confirmed that there is no fleet of infidels out at sea. […] Next we stopped at the Islands of Kays (Old Hormuz) and Barhat, and several other small islands in the Green Sea (Sea of Hormuz), and nowhere did we receive news of the enemy fleet. Thus as we sailed out of the Sea of Hormuz we dismissed Sherif, who had escorted us since Basra at [governor of Basra] Mustafa Pasha’s behest, with the message that Hormuz was safely passed.

Clash with a Portuguese fleet
We proceeded along the coasts of Jalgar and Jadi, past the towns of Kumzar and Lima, and as we neared the town of Khorfakkan, forty days after our departure, which was the tenth day of holy Ramadan [9 August 1554], in the late morning, we suddenly spotted the infidel Christian fleet coming toward us. The fleet consisted of four assault bargias as large as frigates, three large galleons, six Portuguese caravels, and twelve galliots—twenty-five vessels in all. We
immediately struck the awnings, weighed the anchor, readied the guns, and, putting our trust in God Almighty and asking divine assistance from the prophets and friends of God, fastened the pennants to the masts. The flags were unfurled and, with full spirit and courage, yelling holy battle cries, we commenced fighting.

There are no words to describe the volleys from the guns and cannons. With God’s help, we struck and utterly destroyed one of the enemy’s galleons, which was carried away towards the island of Fakk al-asad and eventually sank. […] An arduous battle continued until after sundown. Finally, when the admiral’s lantern was lit [i.e., night fell], the admiral of the infidel fleet got frightened and commanded that a signal shot for retreat be fired. The bargias tacked and headed towards the Sea of Hormuz, and vanished from sight. Under the lucky star of the felicitous sultan and with the help of God, the enemies of Islam had been defeated. As darkness fell, suddenly a strong wind disturbed the calm waters. We put up the sails and pulled to a nearby shore. Using foliage as cover we continued along the shore until morning. The bay waters became clear. It poured rain overnight.

_Clash with another Portuguese fleet_

The next day we shoved off the coast, jibed, and continued our previous course. We arrived in Khorfakkan after a day’s trip, where the soldiers took in water. Thereafter we reached Amman (Sohar). We cruised another seventeen days and arrived in the vicinity of Muscat and Kalhat on the twenty-sixth of Ramadan, i.e., the holy Night of Power. That morning, twelve large bargias and twenty-two gharabs—thirty-two vessels in all—under the command of the Captain of Goa, the son of the Governor [i.e., Portuguese Viceroy], advanced toward us from the harbor of Muscat. They carried a large number of troops. The bargias and the galleons obscured the horizon with their mizzensails and small sails all set. The caravels spread their round sails and embellished their ships with pennants.
With full confidence in God’s protection, we prepared for battle on the coast side and awaited them. The bargias attacked our galleys. The battle that raged with cannon and guns, arrows and swords is beyond description. The balls of our basilisk cannons pierced the bargias like sharp knives and the shayqa cannons tore large holes in their hulls. They, in return, turned our galleys into hedgehogs with javelins they threw down from the crow’s nests of their ships, and showered stones on us like rain. […] One of our galleys was set on fire by a bombshell, and yet by divine providence, the bargia that fired the shell also burned. Five of our galleys and as many of the enemy’s boats were carried away towards the shore, where they sank and perished. One of their bargias ran aground with the thrust of its sails and was wrecked. In short, there were a great number of casualties on both sides. Our oarsmen grew exhausted from against the current, and firing cannons. We were compelled to drop anchor, but moving the anchors to the stern, we continued to fight as best we could.

Finally we let down the rowboats. Alemshah Reis, Kara Mustafa, and Kalafat Memi, captains of some of the foundered galleys, and Dürzi Mustafa Beg, the commander of the volunteers, with the remainder of the Egyptian soldiers and two-hundred sailors, were taken on rowboats. As the rowers were Arabs, when they made it to the shore, they were hospitably treated by countless Arabs of Najd who came to help the Muslims and guided them onshore. The infidel gharabs had likewise taken on board the crews of their sunken vessels, and as there were Arabs amongst them, too, they also had found shelter on the Arabian coast. God is our witness. Even in the war between Khaireddin Pasha and Andreas Doria no such naval action as this has ever taken place. When night fell, the bay of Hormuz once again churned and a strong wind arose. Their bargias each dropped two ancorettas, that is, large anchors, they made fast two sheet shots. They had the gharabs rowed to the shore. Our galleys were carried towards the shore while dragging their anchors in the bottom of the sea. Though the crews were exhausted, we were compelled to move away from the shore, and had to set sail again.

**Ottoman fleet carried away towards Indian Ocean**

That night we drifted away from the Arabian coast into the open sea, passed the province of Kerman, and finally reached the coasts of Jask. This is a coast with shallow waters, and has no harbor. When we could see the shore we let down the lines and roamed about for two days before we came to Kech-Makran, located in the province of Makran. As the evening was far advanced, we could not land immediately. We anchored close to the shore, but had to spend another night at sea. A strong swell that lasted until morning tired out the crew. At last, after unheard-of troubles and difficulties, we approached the harbor of Chabahar early the next morning.

Here we came upon a pirate man-of-war along with a prize. As the watchman sighted us, their men disembarked and stormed our ship. We told them that we were Muslims, whereupon their captain came aboard our vessel. He led us to a source of water, for we had not a drop left; and thus our exhausted soldiers were invigorated. This was on the day of the Ramadan feast, and for us, as we now had water, a double feast-day. Escorted by the pirate captain, we entered the harbor of Guador. The people there were Beluchistanis and
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their chief was Malik Djalaladdin, the son of Malik Dinar. The governor of Guador came aboard our ship and assured us of his unalterable devotion to our glorious Padishah. He said that he shipped boats of supply and men when the Ottoman navy came to Hormuz, but the fleet had already left. He promised also that henceforth, if ever our fleet should come to Hormuz, he would undertake to send 50 or 60 boats to supply us with provisions, and to be of service to us in every possible way. We expressed our hope that they be ready for service when necessary, adding the saying (Ar.) ‘all affairs are contingent upon their exact time.’ We then wrote a letter to the native Malik Djalaladdin to request one navigator for the seas and a separate one for the shores, upon which two skilled guides were sent to us; thereby demonstrating obedience to our felicitous sultan.

Another attempt towards the Red Sea
By God’s mercy, with a favorable wind we left the port of Guador and sailed out to the Indian Ocean, i.e., the Circumambient Ocean, and with the help of some wind again steered for Yemen. […] We were out in the ocean for a several days and presumably crossed beyond Ras al-Hadd, and arrived nearly opposite of Dhofar and Shihr, when suddenly from the west arose a great storm known as the ‘elephant’s flood.’ We therefore turned back, but were unable to set the sails, not even the storm jibs. […] The tempest raged with increasing fury. The foul weather in the western oceans is mere child’s play compared to these tempests; and their towering billows are as drops of water compared to those of the Indian sea. Night and day became alike, and because of the frailty of our craft all ballast had to be thrown overboard. In this frightful predicament, we had no option to yield to our fate and trust in divine providence. We kept our unwavering hopes in God’s aid and divine assistance from the prophets and friends of God. [...]}

Fleet once more cast towards Persian coast
For about ten days the storm raged continuously and the rain came down in torrents in the Indian Ocean. We never once saw calm waters. I did all I could to encourage and cheer my companions, and advised them above all things to be brave, and never to doubt but that all would end well. A welcome diversion occurred in the appearance of fish about the size of two galley lengths, or more perhaps. The navigators advised not to be afraid of these blessed animals. Strong tides occurred here. As the sea level rose very high, we approached the gulf of Kutch. We saw many unique creatures: sea-horses, large sea-serpents, turtles in great quantities, and eels.

The color of the water suddenly changed to white. The navigators broke forth into loud lamentations; they declared we were approaching whirlpools and eddies. Whirlpools out in the Indian Ocean are a myth; they are, however found in two places: at Girdifon (Arkiko?) on the coasts of Abyssinia and in the bay of Kutch in the neighborhood of Sind, and hardly a ship has been known to escape their fury. So, at least, we are told in nautical books. We took frequent soundings, and when we struck a depth of five arm-lengths we furled the main-sails, cleared the yard, let down the lines, heeled over to the weather side as much as possible. As the ship stayed upright, we rowed all night and all day. At last, by God’s mercy, the sea level fell low, the wind, too, made drizza, that is, it died down, and changed to athwart, perhaps even to a stern-prow direction.

The following morning, we amained, that is, we hauled down and took the sail off. An able sailor from among the topmen was tied to the yardarm; the bare yard was hoisted to its highest point, then the qazi ['butt end of a lateen yard'] was pressed down to the heel of the mast [so that] the apli ['upper end of a lateen yard'] was raised to the height of an additional mast. Taking a survey of our surroundings the sailor caught sight of an Idol-Temple on the coast of Djamher (Jamnagar?). The sails were drawn in a little more; we passed Porbandar and Mangrol, and directing our course toward Somnath, we passed by that place also. Finally we came to Diu, but
for fear of the unbelievers which control this place, we did not set any sails and continued on our course with all sails furled. Meanwhile, the wind had risen again, and as the men had no control over the rudder, large handles had to be affixed with long double ropes fastened to them. Each rope was held by four men, and with great exertion they managed to control the rudder. No one could keep on his feet on deck, so of course it was impossible to walk across to the forward part of the ship. Sailors’ pipes could not be heard from the noise of the riggings. They communicated with the riggers on the front by transmitting the order from mouth to mouth. The captains and the sailingmasters were unable to stand even a moment on the conning bridge, and, finally, most of the hired sailors were packed into the hold. The storm took the rails from on board ship and carried them away. It was like doomsday.

Ships damaged by reefs in the Gulf of Khambat
At last we reached the province of Gujarat in India; where exactly we were, however, we knew not. The navigators suddenly exclaimed: “On your guard! A rocky bank in front; watch out!” Quickly the anchors were lowered, but the ship was dragged towards the bank with great force and nearly submerged. The rowers broke their fetters, the panic-stricken crew threw off their clothes. Some prepared barrels, others leather-bags [to serve them as life-preservers during the shipwreck], and they said their good-byes to each other. I also stripped entirely, gave my slaves their liberty, and vowed to give 100 florins to the poor of Mecca [if I were to be saved]. Finally, one anchor broke off at the ring and the other at the bottom of the trunk [of the ship]. We quickly dropped two more anchors, secured them, and thus we cleared off the bank a little. The navigator declared that the bank was a shoal, and is between Diu and Daman. If the ship went down here, no one would survive. We should immediately set the sails, and strive for the coast. This humble one calculated the ebb and flow during the time we had been at sea; that is to say, I took its drift and, taking the bearing on the chart, I ascertained that the shore was near. I also searched for a sign in the Koran, and found it wiser to not rush. We inspected the well rooms and found that the water filled up the frames and even covered the flooring in all the storerooms. The ships having taken in too much water, we started immediately to bail it out with pails. At various places we removed the skin of the ship and found leaks. The leakage was thus somewhat brought under control.

Toward afternoon the weather had cleared some, and we found ourselves about two miles off the port of Daman, in Gujarat in India. The other ships had already arrived, but being close to the shore, some of the galleys had suffered severe damage from constant clashing against the rocks. They had lowered their oars, boats, and barrels on the sea, all of which eventually were borne ashore by the rapidly rising tide.