

The Interdependency of Ottoman-Venetian Trade

IB History Internal Assessment

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This investigation will explore the question “In what ways did the strategic positioning of Venice as a port city and the expansive access to resources in the Ottoman Empire create an interdependent trade partnership between the two states?” My aim is to explore the effects of geography and access to natural resources on the successful interdependency of Ottoman-Venetian trade relations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The first source analyzed in depth is a book titled *The Ottoman State and Its Place In World History* by Kemal H. Karpat and published in 1974. The book’s value as a source lies in its purpose which is to “serve as a link between the public and Middle Eastern social scientists.”¹ This means that the content of the book, a general analysis of Ottoman economic, political, and foreign policies, is valuable as it was intended to serve as a general education tool which was produced by specialists in the field of Middle Eastern studies. Simultaneously, the book has limitations in its content since it is aimed at the general public. This means that at times, the author has made sweeping generalizations which ignore the true, nuanced nature of the topic. The book is valuable in that it covers a variety of topics relating to the Ottoman Empire including its economic nature, especially concerning foreign and economic policies which were relevant at its height in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, thus the book has a high informative value. The book holds value in its content as it consolidates a lot of information which is generally difficult to find and that its content is reliable because of its source.

The second source evaluated in depth is the article “Venice’s Principal Muslim Trading Partners: The Mamluks, the Ottomans, and the Safavids,” from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website. The value of this piece is that it is produced by a group of scholars of Islamic History who have used a variety of sources for their research. The origin of this piece is limited, however, because it only recounts the Venetian perspective on its trade relations. Furthermore, the content of this piece is valuable as it provides

¹ Karpat, Kemal H. (1974). *The Ottoman state and its place in world history*. Leiden: Brill. p. 1. ISBN 90-04-03945-7

many facts that are otherwise hard to find as it recounts certain particulars of trade in Venice including the goods and services that were exchanged. It is, however, limited in its content as it does not provide significant evidence of the effects of trade relations with the Venetians that the Ottomans experienced. The purpose of this piece is valuable as it delineates the critical facts of Venetian-Ottoman relations and consolidates them in an easily utilized resource. This piece, however, is integral to this investigation because it is a source for many facts concerning trade between the Ottomans and the Venetians that are otherwise hard to find in Western Literature.

Section 2: Analysis

It is not uncommon to hear the centuries between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance be referred to as the 'Dark Ages.' While this term may be largely applicable to the Western world, it is a highly inaccurate descriptor of Muslim societies from the fifth to the fifteenth century.² It was, rather, an era of rapid expansion for many Islamic empires, including the Ottoman Empire which reached its height in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.³ At this time, Europe was on the brink of a new era which led it to look outside its own borders and exchange knowledge through trade with the rest of the world. At the forefront of this movement, which later came to be known as the Renaissance, was Venice, which served as the gateway from Europe to the rest of the world because of its strategic position as a trading partner with many prominent Muslim empires. Venice and its nearby trading partner developed a valuable and inter-dependent trading partnership because of their ability to fulfil the other's economic needs. This partnership was so successful, that it invariably lasted through the heights of both states.

The key Muslim empire of this time was the Ottoman Empire which covered a large swath of land in what is now known as the Middle East. These lands included, at the height of the empire in 1566, most of the northern African coast, the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and most of central and eastern Europe.⁴ Ottoman possessions as of 1566 are highlighted in the figure below. Venice's position is indicated by a star.

² ALI, RABIA UMAR. "Medieval Europe: The Myth of Dark Ages and the Impact of Islam." *Islamic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 155-68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23643958>.

³ Ibid

⁴ Shaw, Stanford Jay, and Malcolm Edward Yapp. "Ottoman Empire." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. November 27, 2018. Accessed February 1, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire/The-peak-of-Ottoman-power-1481-1566>.

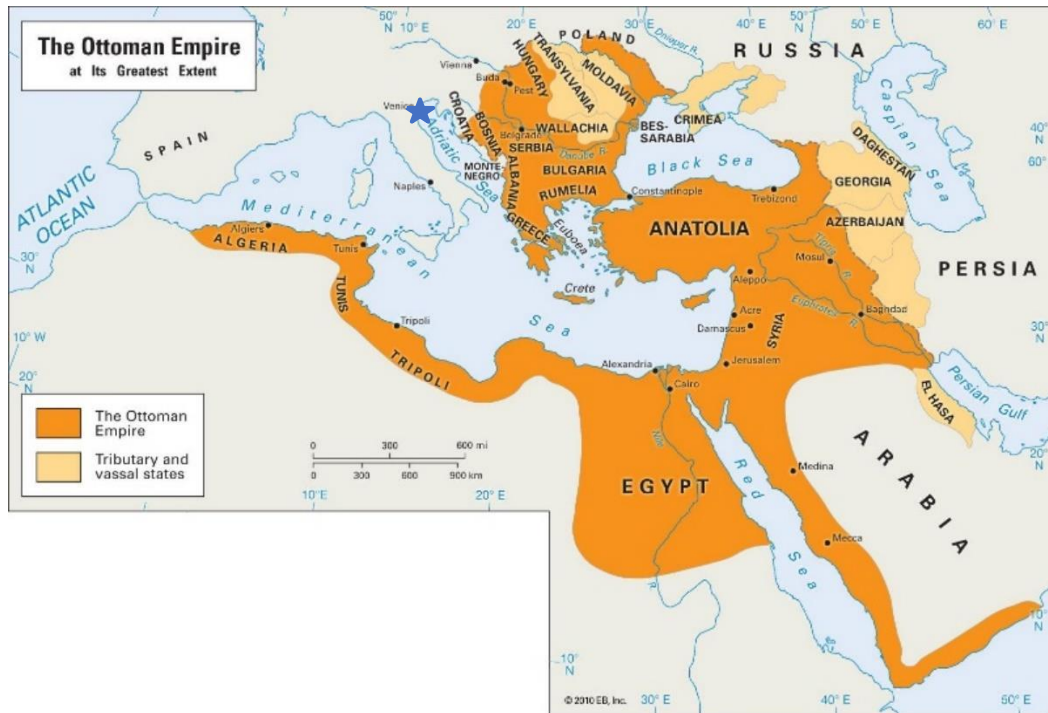


Figure 1 The Ottoman Empire at its Greatest Extent⁵

The lands which the Ottoman Empire possessed were largely fertile and rich in natural resources so much so that the principal exports of the Ottomans included many agricultural products such as silk, cotton, leather, and wheat.⁶ Furthermore, the land controlled by the Ottoman Empire included massive portions of the silk and spice routes.⁷ Because of their control over the silk and spice routes, the Ottoman empire had easy and reliable access these much-coveted goods.⁸ The merit for Venice of building a trade relationship with the Ottoman Empire is thus very clear: The Ottoman Empire simply held a monopoly on the resources which Venice had the greatest need for in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Venice, by all accounts could not produce agricultural products because of the nature of the city. Venice is simply a collection of hundreds of islands connected to each other by canals and as the city is made mostly of stone

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Carboni, Stefano, Trinita Kennedy, and Elizabeth Marwell. "Venice's Principal Muslim Trading Partners: The Mamluks, the Ottomans, and the Safavids." *Metmuseum.org*. March 2007. Accessed October 18, 2018. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vmos/hd_vmos.htm.

⁷ Karpát, Kemal H. (1974). *The Ottoman state and its place in world history*. Leiden: Brill. p. 111. [ISBN 90-04-03945-7](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00000000).

⁸ Ibid

and water, it was evidently impossible to grow anything in the city. As a result, the Ottoman Empire was Venice's nearest neighbor with the greatest ability to supply the products which it demanded the most. Simply because the Ottoman Empire was able to fulfil Venice's needs, the Ottoman Empire was a viable and useful trading partner for Venice. Eventually, the relationship became a fundamental aspect of commerce and society in Venice.

The Ottoman Empire demonstrated very little need for Venice's products, meaning Venice had nothing to offer in terms of tradable goods to Ottoman Merchants. However, Ottoman merchants could easily profit from selling their products to Venice. The profits most merchants gained from trade with the Ottomans made them increasingly reliant on the profits Venice offered in exchange for their products.⁹ The advantages of trade with Venice were further underscored by Venice's unique geography. Venice was strategically located on the Italian coast at a point in the northern Adriatic Sea which made it easily accessible for Ottoman merchants. Furthermore, the city itself is mostly ports, thus it had a unique advantage that allowed it to efficiently move boats through the city and maximize its imports. Its efficient processing of imports also allowed Venice to resell these goods to European countries.¹⁰ In order to gain access to the resources it needed to sell to Europe, Venice "relied on [the Ottomans] for wheat, spices, raw silk, cotton, leather, and calcified ashes for the Murano glass industry."¹¹ The massive demand for goods moving in Europe moved almost entirely through Venice. In return, the Ottomans were able to sell their surplus products to Europe through trade. Because of its principal economic function as a buyer and seller of goods, Venice was able to maintain a steady source of demand for the Ottoman Empire's abundant resources and a steady source of income for the Ottoman Empire's many merchants. Ultimately,

⁹ González Arévalo, Raúl. "Italian Renaissance Diplomacy and Commerce with Western Mediterranean Islam: Venice, Florence, and the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada in the Fifteenth Century." *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 18, no. 1 (2015): 215-32. doi:10.1086/680520.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Carboni, Stefano, Trinita Kennedy, and Elizabeth Marwell. "Venice's Principal Muslim Trading Partners: The Mamluks, the Ottomans, and the Safavids." *Metmuseum.org*. March 2007. Accessed October 18, 2018. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vmos/hd_vmos.htm.

it was Venice's unique positioning as a merchant state which made it an indispensable trading partner for the Ottoman Empire.

Scholars tend to agree that Venice's trade relations were undeniably strong with the Ottoman Empire. However, the reason behind the value Venice put in its relationship with the Ottomans is highly contentious. Some scholars argue that developing trade relations with the Ottomans was crucial to the survival of the city as the military might of the Ottomans was more threatening to the welfare of the city and its industry than the vast control of resources and raw materials by the Ottomans was to its survival. Simply because Venice was threatened by the possibility of war with the Ottomans, they chose to develop a trading partnership instead. Scholars argue that the longevity of the Ottoman Empire coupled with its military might which had resulted in the conquest of some land near and around Venice and thus forced Venice to befriend the empire lest it was consumed by it. As such, Venice sought to evade invasion by developing trade relations with the Ottomans and making itself indispensable to the Empire. The Ottomans, therefore, held no trade advantage over Venice.¹² This implication is invalid as the Venetians had already engaged in wars with the Ottomans, but upon finding that there was a greater economic advantage in trading with the Empire, Venice decided to instead develop trade relations with the Ottomans.¹³ It was, rather that the Ottoman Empire and Venice were able to fulfil the needs of the other and create a long-standing trade partnership that drew them together. Otherwise, Venice could have just as easily stood in animosity against the Ottomans.

The trade relation which developed between the Ottomans and Venetians had a significant impact on their politics and in turn, affected both economies. Venetian relations with the Ottomans ran so deep as

¹² Kortepeter, Carl M. "Ottoman Imperial Policy and the Economy of the Black Sea Region in the Sixteenth Century." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 86, no. 2 (1966): 86-113. doi:10.2307/596423.

¹³ Carboni, Stefano, Trinita Kennedy, and Elizabeth Marwell. "Venice's Principal Muslim Trading Partners: The Mamluks, the Ottomans, and the Safavids." *Metmuseum.org*. March 2007. Accessed October 18, 2018. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vmos/hd_vmos.htm.

to have generated an “artistic and cultural exchange [between the two countries].”¹⁴ Furthermore, Venice held its relationship with the Ottomans in such high esteem that the Venetian ambassador to the Ottoman Empire was the highest position amongst Venetian diplomats.¹⁵ The Venetian ambassador to the Sublime Porte (the title of the ambassador to the Ottoman Empire) is even known to have claimed that “[Venice] cannot live without [the Ottomans],”¹⁶ despite the long-standing animosity between the Islamic and Christian world which had grown stronger during the Crusades. Venice developed a trade-based relationship with the Ottomans because of its heavy need for the products that fueled its industry and which only the Ottoman Empire could provide to them.¹⁷ This relationship eventually grew to become economic interdependency; thus, Venice was an indispensable ally to the Ottoman Empire. Both states were able to efficiently provide what the other needed. This advantage, which was enhanced by the proximity of these states, ensured that the two would become strong, reliable trading partners and that this partnership would endure throughout the height of both empires. The prolonged interdependent nature of Ottoman and Venetian merchants ultimately resulted in a powerful relationship between the two states. This partnership is known to have been so strong and integral to the functioning of both societies, that it essentially created a cultural exchange as a byproduct of their interdependence. This demonstrates to us that the nature of this partnership was extremely critical to the economies of both societies.

¹⁴ Carboni, Sefano, Trinita Kennedy, and Elizabeth Marwell. "Venice and the Islamic World: Commercial Exchange, Diplomacy, and Religious Difference." Metmuseum.org. Accessed October 18, 2018. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cedr/hd_cedr.htm.

¹⁵ Carboni, Stefano, Trinita Kennedy, and Elizabeth Marwell. "Venice's Principal Muslim Trading Partners: The Mamluks, the Ottomans, and the Safavids." Metmuseum.org. March 2007. Accessed October 18, 2018. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vmos/hd_vmos.htm.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pedani, Maria Pia. *The Ottoman-Venetian Border (15th-18th Centuries)*.

Section 3: Reflection

This investigation was driven by my personal interest in Islamic History as this is a topic we do not generally discuss in American High Schools. I personally am very curious about the ways the Muslim world interacted with Western Civilizations especially during the Renaissance. I feel that I have also learned a lot about finding different perspectives through the methods historians use to gather information about the past. I have also developed my skills in analyzing historical texts to find varying perspectives and using these to help build an argument.

For my research, I read books by various historians specializing in Islamic History as well as European History so that I could familiarize myself with the various arguments surrounding my topic. I searched through primary sources including Arabic manuscripts and I also had the opportunity to read literature in foreign languages which is another method used by historians.

Some difficulties I faced in this investigation include the fact that I do not personally have access to many Islamic primary and secondary sources through my school. As such, it was difficult for me to find many sources that pertained to my topic. After a lot of research, however, I was able to find some sources which helped me develop a stronger argument in response to my research question. It was then my job to draw a conclusion from my argument in response to my question. I focused principally on secondary sources as these were the only sources available to me. However, it would have been advantageous for me to find some primary sources which would help me to directly qualify or refute my argument.

I found that frequently, I encountered sources written from the western perspective with evident bias and which utilized an orthodox perspective on history. This challenged me to find differing opinions and perspectives so that I could allow for a more holistic analysis.

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