Letters from the Red Sea: Correspondence of the *vālī* of Ḥabeş and Jeddah, 1725–1727

Otto Spies Memorial Series

edited by Stephan Conermann & Gül Şen

Volume 7

Henning Sievert

Letters from the Red Sea: Correspondence of the *vālī* of Ḥabeş and Jeddah, 1725–1727

EBVERLAG

Bibliographic information published by
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available at [http://dnb.ddb.de].

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher or author, except in the case of a reviewer, who may quote brief passages embodied in critical articles or in a review.

Images on the cover: *top*: Aqueduct of Mustafa Pasha, (late 1490s), near Skopje
Photo © Machiel Kiel, 2005.
below: Entrance to the "Institut für Orient- und Asienwissenschaften" formerly called Orientalisches Seminar, Bonn
Photo © Gül Şen, 2015.

Layout: Rainer Kuhl

Copyright: © EB-Verlag Dr. Brandt
Berlin 2024

ISBN: 978-3-86893-295-9

Homepage: www.ebverlag.de
E-Mail: post@ebverlag.de

Printed in Germany

Table of Contents

1. General introduction

This contribution explores the letter book of Ebū Bekr Paşa, a governor-general of the Ottoman Red Sea province serving in the early eighteenth century. Such a source, representing a broader range of views than the usual exclusively metropolitan or localised perspective, is very rare and may complement the more usual sources in a significant way. My objective in introducing the letter book is to indicate what topics are touched upon and may thus deserve further analysis in connection with other sources. While this overview is mainly descriptive, it is to be hoped that future research will make Ebū Bekr Paşa's letters, and perhaps other still untapped sources, an object of further analysis.

The Ottoman Red Sea region is very under-represented in well-documented source material for historians, partly because British incursions and Wahhābī action in the region did not commence until the mid-eighteenth century. Both these factors, however, shaped the latter part of the century, still more so the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; they may, more often than not, also shape historians' views of Western Arabia and the African Red Sea coast. Taking slightly earlier source material into consideration before these developments may therefore provide a fresh perspective.

Western Arabia became part of the Ottoman Empire with the conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517, which had exercised supremacy over the region and in particular the Islamic sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina. The Ottoman ruler now succeeded the Mamluk monarch as custodian of the holy places (*khādim al-ḥaramayn al-sharīfayn*). The Ottoman occupation of the African coast south of Egypt along the littorals of Sudan and Eritrea made the Red Sea an Ottoman lake, opening up access to important trade routes and bypassing Portuguese incursions. But with the passing of the Portuguese threat, at the close of the sixteenth century the African coast of the Red Sea was losing strategic importance to the Sublime Porte, which gradually reduced its strategic control to a

few ports and to the still-important harbour of Jeddah on the opposite shore. From an imperial point of view, the Red Sea region was peripheral and could even seem marginal during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; yet at the same time Mecca and Medina were at the centre of the Muslim world as spiritual hubs, sites of encounter and imperial legitimacy.[1]

Section 2 situates the region, Ebū Bekr Paşa himself, and the letter book in their contexts and cast some light on practices of letter-writing and also of delivery. Sections 3 and 4 follow the pasha on his journey from Istanbul through the Mediterranean to Egypt, and then, via Sinai, overland to the Hejaz, with Jeddah and Mecca as his principal bases. Important topics as evidenced by the letters are treated on the way and looked at from his point of view. Finally, the pasha's tasks and difficulties in his area of responsibility are discussed by way of example, as later or earlier governors might have set different priorities, and other scribes might have copied different letters in their master's name. To facilitate future use of the letter book and of this introduction, the text is followed by five appendices: a list of letters contained in it, a glossary of terms and titles, a list of frequently mentioned persons, the facsimile reproduction and full transcript of six letters mentioned several times, and two map sketches of the travel region and the relevant area around the Red Sea.

Finally, I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the staff of T. C. Süleymaniye Yazma Eser Kütüphanesi, who supported my research on more than one occasion with great kindness and unfailing competence. I dedicate this booklet to Professor Stefan Reichmuth, who, among other things, sparked my interest in the Red Sea region.

[1] It should also be kept in mind that the Ottoman realms as an empire cannot be measured by the same yardstick as a modern nation state. Modern authors who characterise the Ottoman state of 1725 as weak, or local notables as precocious nationalist leaders only waiting for it to disappear, are committing this anachronistic mistake. After the stirrings of Wahhābī unrest and the onset of British forays in the mid-eighteenth century, new factors were loaded onto the delicate balance – the French invasion of Egypt, the subsequent rise of autonomous Egypt, and Ottoman centralising modernisation policies – which threatened Ottoman rule and were later amplified by colonialist and nationalist tendencies.