

Migrations | Privateering and captivity in the Mediterranean | Privateering in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean was once the theatre of memorable battles between privateers.

Unlike pirates, privateers were legal operators commissioned by sovereign states to attack enemy ships and coastal villages. All privateering activities were governed and regulated by inter-governmental treaties. Among the booty taken, more than a million Christians and Muslims are assumed to have been captured in the Mediterranean between 1500 and 1800. The Ottomans meanwhile, who controlled the Levantine and Anatolian coasts as well as those of the Balkans, captured around 3 million prisoners. Captives rarely saw home again. Many were sold and enslaved. Others rose to fame, fortune and high rank, just like some of the privateers that had captured them – the 16th-century Barbarossa brothers, sons of a Sicilian convert to Islam, Turgut Reis, an Ottoman privateer of Greek origin, and Osta Moratto Genovese, an Italian who later became Bey of Tunis, among the latter.



Working Number: TN 039

Name: Privateer ship flags

Holding Museum: Palais de la Rose – Musée de l'Armée

Date: 19th century

Materials: Wood, fabric

Curator
Justification: These flags represent the late 18th/early 19th-century emblems of a privateer acting on behalf of the Regency of Tunis. Unlike pirates, privateers were commissioned by governments, and their maritime activity was referred to as privateering. They were given authorisation to attack enemy merchant ships during war time.



Working Number: IT1 037

Name: A battle between Algerian ships and ships of the Naples Royal Navy, which chased the Algerian ships and ultimately destroyed them by firing cannon shots on 17 May 1792

Holding Museum: State Archives of Naples

Date: 1792

Materials: -
Curator
Justification: -

Privateering wars were constant problems in the Mediterranean. Here, the frigate of the Kingdom of Naples is seen destroying the privateers from Algiers, the most important privateering hub in North Africa. The incident took place in 1792.



Working Number: IT1 083

Name: Chorographical plan of the attack waged by Lord Exmouth against Algiers on 27 August 1816

Holding Museum: State Archives of Turin

Date: December 1816

Materials: -
Curator
Justification: -

Control of Mediterranean trade routes was one of the main sources of conflict between European powers and the North African provinces, referred to as the “Barbary Regencies” of Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli.



Working Number: FR 051

Name: General Hullin's audience, provided by the Dey of Algeria

Holding Museum: National Library of France

Date: 19th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Algeria was the foremost privateering hub in North Africa, focusing primarily on the attack of British and French vessels. In August 1802, riled by the constant Algerian looting of French ships, Napoleon Bonaparte sent General Hullin with a warning message to the Dey of Algiers, Mustapha Pasha.



Working Number: DZ 044

Name: Vue d'Alger

Holding Museum: Musée National des Beaux-Arts

Date: 1816

Materials: Colourised lithography

Curator Justification: North African rulers engaged in privateering not only because it was lucrative, but because their trading vessels were not allowed into European ports. Algiers – seen here before the bombardment by the British fleet in 1816 – was the foremost privateering city state until Algeria was conquered by France in 1830.



Working Number: IT1 038

Name: Letter from the Dey of Algiers, Muhammad Pasha, to Ferdinando IV of Bourbon, King of Naples, granting a two-month truce from corsairs' attacks (in Arabic with Italian translation)

Holding Museum: State Archives of Naples

Date: Algiers, 12 March 1787

Materials: -

Curator Justification: The Dey of Algiers thanked the King of Naples for the truce he granted to the privateers of Algiers.



Working Number: TN 107

Name: Treaty of Peace and Trade between France and the Tunisian Regency

Holding Museum: Archives Nationales

Date: 1799

Materials: -

Curator
Justification: Until the early 19th century, relationships between European powers were dominated by the consequences of privateering in the Mediterranean. The treaty signed guaranteed the safety of the crew and cargo of French ships at sea and in Tunisian ports.



Working Number: TN 108
Name: Passports that French ships were obliged to carry in order to be allowed to practice privateering
Holding Museum: Archives nationales
Date: 1799
Materials: -
Curator
Justification: A type of document bearing a seal and a signature that had to be carried by French ships to ward off attacks from Tunisian privateers in the Mediterranean.



Working Number: TN 113
Name: Letter from Marshall Forteguerra, commander general of the navy of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, confirming the purchase of Tunisian slaves in Naples
Holding Museum: Archives Nationales
Date: 1797
Materials: -
Curator
Justification: Throughout the 18th century, relations between the Regency of Tunis and the kingdoms of Italy and Tuscany were confrontational. There were also many Muslims captured in Spain and Malta. In 1798, after Malta was taken by Napoleon Bonaparte, all of the Muslims being held there – around 2,000 people – were released.



Working Number: IT1 092
Name: Declaration by the Bey of Tunis assuring that in future wars with any European power prisoners will not be enslaved
Holding Museum: State Archives of Turin
Date: Palace of Bardo (Tunis), 17 April 1816
Materials: -
Curator
Justification: Following European warnings, in particular the expedition led by Lord Exmouth (1816) to prohibit privateering, a peace treaty was signed between the Bey of Tunis and Lord Exmouth, commander-in-chief of the Royal British Navy on 17 April 1816.



Working Number: TN 115
Name: Disembarking captives at La Goulette Port, Tunis.
Holding Museum: Archives Nationales
Date: 1800

Materials:

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Curator

Justification:

This print shows privateers overseeing the unloading of captives at the port of La Goulette, Tunis. Some captives might regain their freedom after paying a ransom, but most were put to work or had to serve as galley slaves. Others who converted to their captors' religion and were sufficiently qualified could become important state officials. Eligible women might end up in royal households and even as wives of princes.
