

Swedish reciprocal ransoms and multinational solutions to insecurity in the Mediterranean, c. 1720–1740

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Abstract: This article compares the Swedish government's legal practices to secure protection for its trade and shipping with the legal strategies for protection which circulated among sailors and consuls along the Swedish trade route to the Mediterranean in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. One major threat to Swedish commercial interests at the time were the 'Barbary corsairs', and the challenges when they captured ships and seized crews, whether Swedish sailors (many of them from Sweden's Baltic and German provinces) on foreign-flagged ships or foreign sailors on Swedish ships. Consuls and traders knew of the problems caused when sailors crossed legal borders and challenged the rules of state protection. To counter this a more international model of maritime security was tested by attempting to strengthen the presence of the state in ransoms affairs in northern Africa. This model was developed when the Swedish Levant Company was founded. The main idea was shared responsibility between nations to ransom sailors serving under foreign flags, culminating in 'reciprocal ransom agreements' in 1742. Even though reciprocal ransom agreements were short-lived, it shows two different modes to counter insecurity in the Mediterranean, one based on local customs and regional elite networks and the other on multinational agreements and the discourse of international law.

Keywords: Swedish Levant Company, Barbary captivity, ransom, diplomatic consul, international law.

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Introduction

In 1661, Johan Arvidsson sent a begging letter from Algiers to the Admiralty in Sweden, describing himself as a galley slave in desperate straits and in need of help. The Admiralty forwarded the message to the Church authorities, asking whether they could organise alms for a ransom. Arvidsson was one of many Swedes at the time who made similar appeals, and a sort of ad hoc ransom infrastructure was already on hand to protect Swedish sailors. In the end, Arvidsson's case was taken up by the Lord High Admiral Carl Gustaf Wrangel, and the same year the Admiralty agreed to pay a ransom.¹ With increasing numbers of seized ships and crews lost to captivity in the regencies of Algiers and Tunis in northern Africa, the Board of Trade argued in 1688 that Sweden badly needed peace treaties 'so that our subjects can trade under secure conditions'. That year alms were collected across Sweden for the ransoming of captives.²

The new Swedish presence in the Mediterranean in the 17th century was driven by the need for cheap salt for preserving food for the winter, and the hunt for markets for Swedish staple commodities, especially iron and timber.³ The authorities knew of the dangers in the Mediterranean, especially of the raids on shipping by 'Barbary corsairs', and by mid-century the letters from captured Swedes in Algiers, telling of enslavement and suffering.⁴ However, attempts to negotiate peace with the most powerful Ottoman regency, Algiers, failed. In light of the threat, Swedish merchants turned to Amsterdam for insurance, but financial security, welcome as it was, did not diminish the threat to their ships and sailors.⁵ In the 1690s, increasing numbers of Swedish merchants traded with the Mediterranean, so in 1693 the first Swedish consul was appointed in Lisbon and then in Cadiz in 1694.⁶ In 1729, a trade and peace treaty was finally concluded with Algiers, followed by similar treaties with Tunis in 1736, Tripoli in 1741 and finally Morocco in 1763.⁷

Between Arvidsson's plea for help in 1661 and Sweden's peace treaty with Morocco in 1763 there was a century of strategies designed to protect Swedish ships and sailors in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean was a region where competing powers struggled to control irregular and undefined borders. Empires, states, trading companies

¹ Ekman (1962: 70).

² Riksarkivet (Swedish National Archives), Stockholm (RA), Skrivelse från Kommerskollegium till K.M,t, 25 Apr. 1668.

³ Olán (1921); Ekegård (1924); Müller (2004); Östlund (2010; 2014). See also Veluwenkamp & Scheltjens (2018).

⁴ RA Turcica Diplomatica, Bihang Algerica, vol. 15, 1662.

⁵ Söderberg (1935: 140).

⁶ Müller (2004: 55).

⁷ Almquist (1912); Müller (2004: 142, 232); Högberg (1969, 294–7).

and private interests (including pirates) laid claim to stretches of territory—often narrow coastal strips—and enclaves of various sizes. With the merchants, sailors and captives went their various legal systems and political jurisdictions, travelling with them across boundaries, and leading to impressively complex clashes of legal culture. Sweden, for example, faced the very specific problem of protecting its subjects from its Baltic and German dominions, which included many who sailed under the flags of Hamburg or the Dutch Republic.

There was a long tradition of slavery in the Mediterranean region. Ottoman ideas and practices had their antecedents in both Islamic history and the Christian Byzantine Empire, and before that in ancient Greece, Rome and the Near East.⁸ Both Muslims and Christians in the Mediterranean were vulnerable to capture and various forms of unfreedom in the early modern era.⁹ For captives in North Africa, slavery encompassed a variety of experiences, meanings and functions. Some slaves did menial labour or were attached to households, while others did skilled work. Between the mid 17th century and the late 18th century the total number of Swedish captives in North Africa was somewhere between 500 and 1,000, and the price for ransoms ranged from 500 to 1,500 Swedish riksdaler depending on the captive's social status, age and skills.¹⁰

This article will investigate where legal praxis as defined by states intersected with the legal strategies as practised by sailors and consuls in the Mediterranean in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. As Wolfgang Kaiser and Guillaume Calafat have argued, ransoms and captive exchanges in the early modern Mediterranean had considerable military, political and economic ramifications.¹¹ Ransoming changed over time according to power relations in the Mediterranean. A general shift that many scholars agree on was that while high-ranking captives were prioritised by states in the 17th century, the 18th century saw greater protection for ordinary sailors.¹² However, when comparing countries such as Sweden to the likes of Italy, Spain or France, which lost far more of their citizens to Barbary captivity, it is evident that their strategies and possibilities of ransoming differed. By examining how ransoming changed over time, it is possible to uncover related changes in Sweden's conception of security, and especially the extent to which it revolved around citizenship. The necessity for Sweden to import salt from southern Europe to secure food supplies for

⁸ See for example, [Sobers-Khan \(2020\)](#); [Zilfi \(2010\)](#); [Toledano \(1998\)](#).

⁹ Research on Barbary captivity has become a vibrant field with numerous titles, for example: [Friedman \(1983\)](#); [Bono \(1993\)](#); [Gozalo \(2000\)](#); [Colley \(2002\)](#); [Torres \(2004\)](#); [Matar \(2005\)](#); [Weiss \(2011\)](#); [Ressel \(2012\)](#); [Östlund \(2014\)](#).

¹⁰ [Östlund \(2014: 94–9\)](#).

¹¹ [Kaiser & Calafat \(2014: 125\)](#).

¹² [Weiss \(2011\)](#); [Matar \(2005\)](#); [Colley \(2002\)](#); [Östlund \(2014\)](#).

winter meant its trade in the Mediterranean was important, and therefore even more vulnerable to war, interruption or sailors' fear or unwillingness to join the merchant fleet. Sweden needed to secure sufficient numbers of experienced sailors against the day the next war broke out, and long-distance trade guaranteed that. The process of securing Sweden's position, in the Mediterranean context, must therefore be understood in multiple perspectives, as it spanned salt imports, maritime competence and the legitimacy of the long-distance trade. For fear of captivity and Barbary slavery was a threat to this important and expanding state enterprise.

The Swedish presence in the Mediterranean and the policy of ransoming of its own subjects from Barbary captivity have interested scholars in recent years.¹³ One of the most discussed cases was when the Swedish authorities challenged the Hamburg *Sklavenkasse* (lit. slave fund, a ransom insurance scheme) in 1732, demanding they pay to ransom Swedish sailors taken captive in North Africa while serving on ships from Hamburg. The conflict ground on from 1732 to 1747. When Ernst Baasch later wrote about it in 1897, he claimed the Swedish government was the first in Europe to challenge a *Sklavenkasse*.¹⁴ In recent years, Magnus Ressel and the author have revisited the case to consider the protection of the individual, but with slightly different interpretations of the factors behind the change.¹⁵ Other examples have not been studied in much detail in the literature, an example being when Sweden proposed reciprocal ransom agreements in 1742, an episode investigated here as one way of securing Sweden's position.

Ad hoc ransoms

To understand Sweden's proposal in 1742 for a reciprocal ransom agreement, one has to look at earlier challenges to its ransom policy. In the 17th century, that had evolved as an ad hoc response to information received about enslaved subjects, whether from family members or captives seeking aid or in travellers' reports of large numbers of captives in cities such as Algiers and Tunis. The authorities expressed a variety of opinions about whom to ransom and how much to pay, making it somewhat difficult to generalise, but the majority of the captives were ordinary sailors, while there are only two known examples of burgher or gentry captives and they were in the 18th century.¹⁶

¹³ Müller (2004); Östlund (2010); Östlund (2014).

¹⁴ Baasch (1896: 221–4).

¹⁵ Ressel (2010; 2012).

¹⁶ RA, Sammansatta kollegier till Kungl. Maj:t 5 Feb. 1740; RA, Skrivelser till Kungl. Maj:t Ang. den i algeriska slaveriet varande fältskiären Hiedenreichs.

The strategy to counter the threat from corsair raids in the 17th century was similarly ad hoc. For example, in the conflict between Algiers and Britain in the late 1660s, the Swedish regency government communicated with both sides in the hopes of concluding a peace treaty with Algiers and ransoming all the Swedish captives and slaves. Even though this ended in failure, doomed by unrealistic ambitions and a lack of money, it is evident that the government operated on the principle that all Swedes should be ransomed, even the ones caught by the British while serving on ‘Turkish ships’ owned by the Dey of Algiers in the conflict.¹⁷ Apparently, Swedes serving in the Algerian fleet were not excluded from any ransom or the right to freedom. This should be compared with the arguments made in the course of a later case in 1694, when a Swedish ransom agent recommended ransoming ‘the best, the most functional, the youngest and purest Swedes’ while old, injured and ‘un-Swedish’ bodies (referring to loyalty to the king and Church in Sweden) should not be liberated.¹⁸ The agent also reported that many had been there over ten years, and most had been captured on ships from Holland, but because of their Swedish citizenship they had been left in captivity when Dutch sailors from the same crew had been ransomed.¹⁹ These were indeed the ransoming practices among other European states. In the Netherlands, for example, it was explicitly decided in 1663 to ransom only Netherlanders, and not Scandinavians or Germans captured when crewing Dutch ships.²⁰

By the early 18th century, several important steps had been taken in developing a more regular Swedish system of maritime security. The impact of European expansion in the Mediterranean was gradually felt in the Ottoman provinces, and there were conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and its Venetian, Habsburg and Russian neighbours, and between the British and the French. The behaviour of British privateers, for example, was the cause of numerous disputes between the Ottoman government and British representatives in the Levant. For centuries, maritime piracy, particularly along the coast of North Africa, had functioned as an unorganised method of collecting revenue from maritime commerce.²¹ This system was put on a more systematic footing and came under the control of the European powers because of their stronger maritime presence in the Mediterranean. The Swedish strategy was to seek peace treaties with Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli and Morocco, and, once they were secured, to develop collaborations in trade and maritime transport with local elites. Compared to other European states, though, Sweden never tried gunboat diplomacy to ‘renegotiate’ its treaties and tributes.

¹⁷ RA, *Diplomatica Turcica*, Bihang Algerica, vol. 15, memorial, n.d.

¹⁸ RA, *Diplomatica Turcica*, Bihang Tripolitana, vol. 7, 1694.

¹⁹ RA, *Diplomatica Turcica*, Bihang Tripolitana, vol. 7, 1694.

²⁰ Van Krieken (2002: 62).

²¹ Firges et al. (2014: 59–62).

Maritime security policies

With the end of the Great Northern War (1700–21), secure trade and a strong economy were imperative for the bankrupt Swedish state. This can be seen in its decisions about Swedish shipping in the Mediterranean. In 1724, a Swedish Convoy Office (*Konvojkommisariatet*) was founded to organise and secure convoys, to finance peace treaties and consular services in North Africa, and to ransom captured Swedes.²² The question of a Swedish insurance system was also raised because many shipowners were disappointed with the convoys.²³ However, these problems were less pressing once peace treaties with Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli and Morocco were completed and new practices were adopted to help secure the Swedish presence in the Mediterranean.

The changes were intended to strengthen protection for trade and sailors. The 1730 instructions for the sea-passes Sweden issued for ships bound for 'Algeria' were strict, with clearly specified fines if they were not followed. If a ship that did not have a sea-pass were captured, the skipper—if he ever returned to Sweden—would be punished by a month in prison.²⁴ In 1739 a Swedish insurance company was started specifically to break the dependence on foreign insurers. In the mid-18th century, the first of several shipping offices (*sjömanshus*) was set up in Stockholm to help seamen's families.²⁵ The sea-passes, locally available insurance and the shipping offices were all factors in the Swedish policy in the Mediterranean, which had two aims to secure its shipping: to obtain the release of Swedish crew and ships; and to conclude treaties which would halt the capture of ships.

When peace treaties were concluded, the consular service followed, and captivity and ransoming were formalised with clear sets of rules. It should be noted, however, that the treaties did not automatically protect Swedes who were taken captive after the agreement. Under Article 11 of the treaty with Algiers, for example, slaves who escaped 'aboard any of the said warships' had to be returned to Algiers, and under Article 12 it was the slave owner who decided whether a slave was for sale or not. Consent was required from both parties and a relative to the slave was neither forced to ransom. In that sense, the 1729 peace treaty did nothing for Swedes captured on board non-Swedish ships.

²² Kreüger (1856: 25–7).

²³ Olán (1921: 49–52); Ekegård (1924: 468–72).

²⁴ Sandklef (1973: 369–71); Arne (1952: 88–9).

²⁵ Stockholms Stadsarkiv, Sjömanshuset, Gratiansökningar 1749–1775 E IVa/3; *ibid.*, 1750–1756 E IVa/1.

Balancing vulnerabilities

Neither peace treaties nor consuls nor insurance were enough, given the realities of shipping in the Mediterranean. The sailors who were furthering the economic interests of their country and merchant houses were in effect the victims. Many of the problems regarding their social welfare and security were not only defined by the dangers of being taken captive by Barbary corsairs, but by the harsh working conditions of the Mediterranean shipping industry. Several Swedish consuls, recognising this issue, reported how important it was to improve working conditions and security for Swedish sailors in the merchant fleet. In Tripoli, the consul Jöns Wijnberg explained that conditions forced Swedish sailors to flee Swedish service and serve under foreign flags. To rectify this, the Swedish consul in Smyrna, Andreas Rydelius, argued for government funding to support Swedish sailors in the Mediterranean who needed hospital.²⁶ Olof Rönling in Tunis explained the dilemmas of long-distance trade, both for the sailors and for their families at home, and argued for the need to take better care of Swedish sailors so they did not 'escape from their ships, to get home to their wife and children'. The reasons for these problems were also said to be the long time spent in the Mediterranean, three to four years, but also the harsh discipline and poor conditions on the ships. Rönling argued that 'other nations take better care of their sailors' than Sweden.²⁷

Besides these difficulties, the consuls also recognised the ongoing challenges facing Swedish captives taken while serving on foreign ships, often under the Dutch or Hamburg flag. Information about them is scattered in the consular correspondence, but provides an important insight into their and all sailors' lives in the period. In 1735, for instance, Logie heard there were Swedish captives in Meknes in Morocco, who ten months later turned out to have been captured on a Dutch ship.²⁸ More information was gathered about the case when the consular secretary George Giädda in Algiers wrote to the Board of Trade on 27 May 1736 to report that four of the Swedish captives in Tétouan in Morocco had been taken captive when serving under the Dutch flag.²⁹

²⁶ RA, Konsulatet i Tripoli, vol. 5, Wijnberg; RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet [vols. 8, 438, 467, 468] EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 438, Andreas Rydelius, Smyrna 19/30 Oct. 1747.

²⁷ RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet, EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 8, Logie till Kommerskollegium, Algiers 8 June 1743.

²⁸ RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet, EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 8, Logies skrivelse till Kommerskollegium, Algiers 13 Jan. 1735; RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet, EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 8, Logies skrivelse till Kommerskollegium, Algiers 10 Sept. 1735.

²⁹ RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet, EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 8, Giäddas skrivelse till Kommerskollegium, Algiers 27 May 1736.

It is possible to reconstruct events concerning some of the Swedish subjects captured while serving under a foreign flag from the correspondence between North Africa and Sweden, but other cases have left no trace in the Swedish consuls' and government officials' correspondence. The documentation left by the Dutch consul, Ludvig Hammeken, consisting of detailed information about captives in Algiers taken from a total of 66 Dutch ships in the period 1690–1726 is a case in point.³⁰ The list shows that on almost half of the ships (27), Swedes were listed as crewmembers. Swedes and Danes, with 45 individuals apiece, formed the largest groups of non-Dutch crew, meaning that approximately two Swedes served on each Dutch ship. This figure also corresponded with estimates by the historian Robert Bohn that of the foreign crews on Hamburg ships between 1700 and 1710 around 16 per cent were Swedish.³¹ Inevitably, captured Swedes in North Africa came not only from Swedish ships. If nothing else, it shows why the protection afforded by treaties, sea-passes, insurance and other security measures was not enough.

Swedish sailors under foreign flags

Parallel with the institutionalisation of Mediterranean shipping, new security strategies were tested when Swedish government officials ran up against other states' legal practices. The old security regime that applied to Swedish ships and their Swedish crews was transferred to strengthen the security of Swedish crews even when sailing under a foreign flag. Since many Swedes from the Baltic provinces served under the Hamburg flag, Swedish state representatives put pressure on the Magistrate in Hamburg, who were criticised for not ransoming Swedes taken captive while serving on Hamburg ships. Since the Convoy Office was struggling to finance the protection of Sweden's Mediterranean commerce, some in Stockholm argued that it was only reasonable to force the Hamburg Sklavenkasse to pay the ransoms.

By the end of the 16th century, the city-republic of Hamburg had developed strong trade connections with Atlantic Iberia and the Mediterranean. Hamburg was one of the most active ports in all of Europe, but was almost wholly reliant on sailors from nearby rural regions to maintain its seaborne commerce. Since Hamburg owned few warships to defend its interests, ships from the city were vulnerable to attack from Barbary corsairs. To ensure their safety, the city government became involved by

³⁰ Nationaal Archief (National Archives of the Netherlands), The Hague (NA), Staten Generaal, 1550–1796, Inv. nr. 6939, Hammekens rapport, 'Lijst en rolle van alle de Slaven von Neederlandse Natie, ofte diem et sheepen in den Staat der Verlenigde Nederlander t huys horende, tzeedert het Jaar 1690 tot 1712, en vant Jaar 1715 tot 1726 incluyt doec de Algerse Caapers genomen ende tot Algeirs obgebragt Zyn'.

³¹ Bohn (1999: 120).

establishing the Hamburger Sklavenkasse or Slave Fund in 1624, an initiative that was copied by Lübeck in 1627. They were funded by the sailors themselves, by ship-owners, and by regular church collections. Hamburg's Sklavenkasse was wound up in 1810, Lübeck's in 1861.³² Hamburg viewed Sweden and Britain, Denmark–Norway, and the Dutch Republic as its trade competitors. When Sweden concluded a peace treaty with Algiers in 1729, the merchant elites in Hamburg and Copenhagen saw how Sweden had profited by it and began their own efforts to conclude peace treaties. Denmark approached the Algerians in 1736 and succeeded in 1746.³³ Hamburg had unsuccessfully tried to be included in a peace with the Algerians with either the British or the Dutch, from 1661 to 1715. Later they tried using convoys for protection, but their inflexibility in negotiations with Algiers between 1741 and 1744 left them without treaty of their own.³⁴ A breakthrough was finally reached on 22 February 1751 when the Algerians accepted a peace treaty with Hamburg. The many nationalities of sailors on Hamburg ships and Hamburg's difficulties in concluding a peace treaty with Algiers are important for understanding the conflict with Sweden over the Sklavenkasse.

The Swedish attempt on the Hamburg Sklavenkasse began in 1731, following a request from the Swedish resident in Hamburg, Carl Christoph Stralenheim, to the responsible authorities in the city. Stralenheim had been instructed to secure the ransom of 10 or 12 enslaved Swedes left in Algiers, who had been taken captive on Hamburg ships.³⁵ The conflict unfolded in three periods: 1730–2, 1734–40 and 1742–7, and can be followed in a number of documents to the end of 1747.³⁶ The row gives a detailed insight in the arguments used by Swedish officials to convince the Hamburg Sklavenkasse to pay the Swedes' ransoms, even though the sailors had not been insured. Sweden's efforts were in vain, and the only outcome was the introduction of a new Swedish regulation that Swedes taking service under the Hamburg flag could not expect Sweden's protection if they did not insure themselves with the Sklavenkasse.³⁷

³² Ressel (2010: 129–32; 2011: 3).

³³ For the negotiations, see Wandel (1919: 5–12); Andersen (2000: 37–54).

³⁴ Baasch (1896: 13–18); Ressel (2012: 258–75, 496–506).

³⁵ Staatsarchiv Hamburg (Hamburg State Archives), Hamburg (StAHH), 111-1 Senat C1. VII Lit. Ca Nr.2 Vol.3 Fasc.5 a, Document 1.

³⁶ RA, Topografiska registret, Medelhavet ang. tryggandet av sjöfarten i Medelhavet samt ang. den s.k. slavkassan i Hamburg m.m.; RA, Kanslikollegium till Kungl. Majt, vol. 23, 30 Jan. 1735; RA, Sammansatta kollegier till Kongl Majt, vol. 13, ang. svenska slavars utlösande i A., 12 Apr. 1738; RA, Sammansatta kollegier, vol. 14, ang. den i algeriska slaveriet varande fältskiären Hiedenreichs, 5 Feb. 1740; RA, Sammansatta kollegier, vol. 15., ang. säkerhet för svenska sjöfarande mot algeriska kryssare, 6 Sept. 1743; RA, Kanslikollegium, vol. 37, ang. några svenska slavars i A. utlösande genom kollekter, 6 Dec. 1746.

³⁷ *Publication, Angående The Swenske Siömäns utlösen 1748.*

There was an interesting shift in tone on the discursive level, as Sweden switched from moral to judicial concepts to argue that the Sklavenkasse was responsible for foreign sailors. For instance, when the Swedish agent Strahlenheim argued in 1732 that ransoming was a question of reciprocity according to the rules of international law ('ein reciprocirliches Völcker Recht'), it introduced a new perspective on the protection of sailors, and recognised the realities of sailors' working conditions and movements across state borders in the Mediterranean.³⁸ 'Völcker Recht' literally means 'people's right', a concept referring to contemporary discourse on natural law and international law. At this date the term was widely discussed among jurists, and prompted new questions about the relationship between the state and the individual. The discussion of the concept was characterised by openness and sprawl rather than doctrinal thinking.³⁹ When Strahlenheim set out to make responsibility for the ransom of Swedish captives a point of international law, he was using it in the broadest current sense of the term. Rather than explain the sailors' ransom in terms of its morality, it was formulated as a question of relations between states.

Strahlenheim's arguments had no effect on the Magistrate in Hamburg. And, simultaneously, the Swedish authorities voiced their suspicions of their own consuls in another drawn-out ransom discussed in May 1739, as reported to the King in Council. According to the report the consuls were not effective as negotiators, and instead it was proposed that several Stockholm merchants take over arranging the ransom. The reason given for choosing private individuals was that they demanded less than the professional ransom agents or consuls charged for such services:

*When the ransom is arranged through private hands, then the same can be achieved for a smaller sum than when countries' agents or consuls arrange the same, and, moreover, Consul Logie is now so far away that he cannot take care of arrangements.*⁴⁰

The question was raised whether ransoms were more expensive when arranged through 'ministers, agents, consuls, or other public persons' than by 'private actions always able to obtain better prices', and the report concluded with the hope the King in Council would allow the ransom fund reserve at the Convoy Office's disposal to be used to ransom the men, and that cheaper and faster ways be found that would spare the victims unnecessary suffering.

³⁸ StAHH, 111-1 Senat Cl.VII Lit.C a Nr.2 Vol.3 Fasc.5 a. Pro Memoria [8].

³⁹ Grotke (2008: 156).

⁴⁰ RA, Skrivelser till Kungl. Maj:t, vol. 14, Sammansatta kollegier till Kungl. Maj:t., Ang. 2ne i Tangervarande svenska fångars utlösen, 2 May 1739.

A new ransom regime

Until the beginning of the 18th century, then, the protection of trade and the ransoming of Swedish subjects operated within a national framework: the protection of individuals was the business of the king with the administrative support of the Church. Often, the payment of ransoms depended on the initiative of the captives, who wrote to ask for help, hoping for the goodwill of relatives, county governors, the Church, the Admiralty, the King in Council or the Board of Trade.⁴¹ The government's dispute with the Hamburg Sklavenkasse and growing distrust of the economic rationale of its own consuls in North Africa signalled a break in this approach. The Royal Declaration of 19 November 1742, which announced reciprocal ransom agreements, marked a mature preventive strategy to protect sailors serving in the Swedish merchant fleet by making their security a multinational concern—a different approach to the traditional captive exchange in the Mediterranean between the regencies in North Africa and European countries such as France, Italy and Spain.⁴² Captive exchange was never an option for Sweden, since it refused to countenance Swedish raids on Muslim ships.

Instead, as we can see in the initial correspondence about the reciprocal ransom agreement centred on the Swedish consulate in Smyrna, and especially its main advocate, consul Henrik Hackson, the shift in policy went hand in hand with the newly established Svenska Levantiska Compagniet (Levant Company). Like many European seafaring nations, Sweden wanted a trading company which would strengthen its position in the eastern Mediterranean. The result was the founding of Levantiska Compagniet in Stockholm in February 1738. Its charter assigned the business of representing Sweden's interests to the newly appointed Swedish consul in Smyrna, Henrik Hackson. The company had few successes, however, and after ten years its charter was renewed and its privileges were made even more exclusive, which did not help matters. After 1752 the company's trading operations effectively ceased. Yet while the trading company failed, trade between ports in the Mediterranean became profitable, and especially Swedish cargo operations.

More important, in terms of Sweden's security concerns, the Levantiska Compagniet charter of 1738 was backed up by further declarations of the intent to strengthen trade in the Mediterranean. In a four-page report, dated 14 March 1743, written by consul Hackson in Smyrna for the Board of Trade, he referred to a resolution issued by the King in Council regarding the safety of Swedish sailors in the Mediterranean. The resolution ordered that if Barbary corsairs captured a Swedish ship and enslaved the crew, all foreign seamen aboard would be treated as Swedish nationals and the Swedish government would pay their ransom. However, this offer

⁴¹ Östlund (2014).

⁴² Weiss (2011: 82).

would only be acted on if Swedish seamen were guaranteed the same rights as foreign seamen under a reciprocal ransom agreement:

*All seafarers and sailors of foreign nations serving on Swedish ships with the bad luck to be seized and made slaves by corsairs from the Barbary coast, should receive the same mercy as Swedish nationals.*⁴³

In his report to the Board of Trade, Hackson explained that he had informed the European consular community in Smyrna about the royal declaration of reciprocal ransoms. The letter also reported that similar reciprocal ransoms had been practised when Englishmen, serving on a Swedish ship captured and taken to Tangiers, were ransomed by the Swedish state.⁴⁴ The ship had been seized in 1735, and the crew, including three Englishmen, were ransomed in 1742.⁴⁵ From the sources it seems only Hackson described it as an example of reciprocal ransom.

The next known example was a Danish ship seized by Algiers in 1743 where a Swedish sailor was among the captives: one Jöns Arfwidson Halin, a 25-year-old from Halmstad on the west coast of Sweden. When Swedish officials referred to the case in 1743 they said that ‘reciprocal praxis’ had resolved the ransom.⁴⁶ Danish documents confirm that the Danish government financed the release of Jöns Arfwidson Halin. In 1744, the Swedish minister to the Danish court was ordered by the Swedish king to ask the Danish council to agree that if all foreigners taken in captivity in North Africa while serving on Swedish ships were ransomed ‘there should be no difference between Swedes and others, if other nations show the same reciprocity towards those of Swedish Nation serving the Danes’.⁴⁷ This suggestion was accepted, and in January 1744, after further correspondence, the Danish government agreed to pay the ransom for the Swede.⁴⁸ The fruitful negotiations were a sign of a changing dynamic in Sweden’s practices to secure its sailors, and equally of the viability of international consensus in providing security in an ill-defined legal space like the Mediterranean.

⁴³ RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet, Konsulatet i Smyrna, EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 438, Hackson till kommerskollegiet, 14 Mar. 1743.

⁴⁴ RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet, Konsulatet i Smyrna, EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 438, Hackson till kommerskollegiet 14 Mar. 1743.

⁴⁵ RA, Diplomatica Turcica, Bihang maroccana, vol. 4, Brev från Johan Malmberg, Tangiers 26 May 1736; RA, Kommerskollegium, Skrivelser från Konsuler Vol EVIaa vol. 224; RA, Kommerskollegium, Skrivelser från Konsuler Vol EVIaa vol. 224, Lissabon.

⁴⁶ RA, Sammansatta kollegier, vol. 15, Ang. säkerhet för svenska sjöfarande mot algeriska kryssare, 6 Sept. 1743.

⁴⁷ Landsarkivet for Sjælland, Lolland-Falster og Bornholm (Regional Archives of Sjælland, Lolland-Falster and Bornholm), Copenhagen (LA Sjælland), EA-001, Sjaellands Stift, 1715–1758 Kopibog for udgaaede breve vedr. slavekassen, Bind 1734–1745, fols. 212–214.

⁴⁸ LA Sjælland, EA-001 Sjaellands Stift, 1715–1758 Kopibog for udgaaede breve vedr. slavekassen, Bind 1734–1745. fols. 235–9.

The end of the reciprocal ransom experiment

However, despite this positive outcome, not all commentators were convinced. At around the time Jöns Arfwidson Halin's release was secured there was also criticism of reciprocal ransom agreements. For instance, the Swedish consul in Tunis, Rönling, commented on the question in a letter to the Swedish Board of Trade on 10 June 1743 when he outlined the case of three English sailors ransomed by the Swedish government after a Swedish ship had been taken by corsairs from Tangiers. He questioned the viability of reciprocal ransoms, and their novelty, when he reported his discussion with the other consuls in Tunis: the French consul had said France had always done that, and 'each and everyone taken while serving the French flag had been released, no matter what nation they belonged to'. That was also the case when a large number of captive sailors of Italian origin who served under the French flag were ransomed in Algiers, and the principle was the same for the Dutch Republic, according to the Dutch consul: the Netherlands ransomed its foreign crew, albeit after Dutch nationals. The English had also acted like that for a long time, according to Rönling, who explained that when foreign sailors were captured under the English flag they were 'perceived as nationals'.⁴⁹ One can conclude from Rönling's letter to the Board of Trade that he did not support reciprocal ransom agreements, if only from his references to existing practices among the English, Dutch and the French consuls who 'have always ransomed captive foreigners under their national flag'. However, as we have seen, Rönling was exaggerating or even lying.

The Swedish authorities were aware of the challenges for the consuls since the end of the 17th century, especially in Algiers. An obvious example of this was the information gathered by the Dutch consul in Algiers, Ludolf Hammeken. He reported 66 captured Dutch ships between 1690 and 1726, with Swedish crew on 27 ships totalling 42 men, of whom 13 were public slaves (*Deylick slaven*) owned by the Algerian state or the Dey and 29 were private slaves (*Particulier slaven*) serving in private households.⁵⁰ None of this information ever reached Sweden, and there is no indication of whether the Swedish crew from Dutch ships were ransomed or not.

We can only guess why Rönling did not support reciprocal arrangements. Probably all the consuls were aware of the problem, and it is even possible to believe the Swedish proposal was perceived as a threat to the Mediterranean's ransom economy. Consuls were state representatives, but also had loyalties towards local elites and commercial communities with interests in the lucrative ransom economy. If preventive ransom treaties were agreed between states, the consuls' control of the ransom economy would be undermined.⁵¹ In 1739, prompted by an attempted ransom in Morocco, the Board of

⁴⁹ RA, Kommerskollegium, Huvudarkivet, EVI aa, Skrivelser fr sv konsuler, vol. 468, Rönlings skrivelse till kommerskollegiet, Tunis 10 June 1743.

⁵⁰ Östlund (2014: 94–9).

Trade and the Royal Chancery (*Kanslikollegium*) wrote separately to complain to the king about the consuls' interests in the ransom economy. Both letters suggested that 'private traders' should take over from 'agents, consuls or other official individuals' in negotiating ransoms.⁵² This was considered a serious option, both to lower costs and, in the specific Moroccan case, to speed things up. The consuls countered that they were the experts and knew all about the changing prices of captives in the ransom economy. When the Swedish consul in Algiers, George Logie, informed the Magistrate in Hamburg of his competence as a negotiator, he wrote that 'private slaves' had been cheaper, while carpenters were often valued at the same price as a navigating officer. The prices changed—sometimes the ransoms were half the normal price and sometimes more—but one thing was clear, said Logie: he always negotiated with great care, as if 'the Money was to come out of my own Pocket'.⁵³ Logie was active in arranging ransoms for several European countries, by his account because of his personal contacts with the Dey of Algiers: 'I am entirely in favour with this Dey and I am Sure I can redeem the Slaves from him cheaper than can any other'.⁵⁴ Ransoms were big business, as was obvious when Logie went on to ask the Magistrate in Hamburg if they were to recommend any contacts to him who could aid help him ransom a number of Danish captives, it would save them 'some thousands of Dollars'.⁵⁵ As this suggests, arranging ransoms was a lucrative way to earn money. It was also true for the Swedish consul in Tunis, Olof Rönling, who over the years had a hand in the ransom of at least 50 Italians.⁵⁶ Normally, consuls acting as middlemen could claim 10 per cent or more of the ransom.⁵⁷

In this, everyone seems to have differentiated between the consular communities in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. In Smyrna, the Swedish consul Hackson reported confidently when promoting the reciprocal ransom agreement, while the view was rather different for those at the centre of the ransom economy in North Africa. While no objections were reported from the European consular community in Smyrna, in Tunis the European consuls instead argued there was no practical need for agreements. Ransom agreements were not mentioned in their correspondence, whether by the consuls themselves or the authorities in Sweden. And yet there were continuing reports of Swedish sailors taken captive while serving under a foreign flag.

⁵¹ RA, *Diplomatica Turcica, Bihang Algerica*, vol. 4, *Svenska konsulers skrivelser*, George Logie, 24 Apr. 1754.

⁵² RA, *Skrivelser till Kungl. Maj:t*, vol. 14, *Sammansatta kollegier till Kungl. Maj:t*, Ang. 2ne i Tanger varande svenska fångars utlösen, 2 May 1739; RA, *Skrivelser till Kungl. Maj:t* vol. 14, *Sammansatta kollegier till Kungl. Maj:t*, Ang. utlösen av styrman Malmberg m.fl. från slaveriet i Tanger, 19 July 1739.

⁵³ StAHH, 111-1 Senat Cl. VII Lit. Ca Nr.2 Vol.3 Fasc.5 b, Document 5.1, SH.

⁵⁴ StAHH, 111-1 Senat Cl. VII Lit. Ca Nr.2 Vol.3 Fasc.5 b, Document 5.1, SH.

⁵⁵ StAHH, 111-1 Senat Cl. VII Lit. Ca Nr.2 Vol.3 Fasc.5 b, Document 5.1, SH.

⁵⁶ RA, *Konsulatarkivet i Tunis*, vol. 4, *Kanslibok 1738*, 8 Mar. 1762.

⁵⁷ Östlund (2014: 224).

As all these episodes demonstrate, Sweden's strategies to protect its commerce in the Mediterranean and the lives of Swedish sailors who made it possible were shaped not only by the legal and social contexts of Swedish long-distance trade, but also by the political and cultural conditions in the Mediterranean. In this way, intra-European commercial competition, the threat from corsairs and the movement of sailors across national borders all contributed to the complex environment, and to the contestation of the Swedish strategy among those individuals, the consuls, who were meant to represent it.

Conclusions

The Swedish maritime presence in the Mediterranean was a source of insecurity for Swedish sailors. From the mid-17th century to the mid-18th century, ransoming was a complicated and contested business, based on different networks and geographies, and developed in parallel. One system of security developed in the highly international environment in North Africa; another, wedded to the idea of the sovereign state, developed in Europe. Consuls and traders knew of the challenges caused by the captivity of sailors.

Consuls were state representatives, but also often powerful actors in their own right in the local sphere. Ransoming could be made into a lucrative business by the often underpaid consuls who served their country far from home. The Royal Declaration of 19 November 1742, proposing reciprocal ransom agreements, came simultaneously with the founding of the Swedish Levant Company and against the background of the failure to change the rules for insuring Swedish crew on Hamburg ships. Both initiatives gave the Swedish government a greater presence in the Mediterranean world, creating a conflict between local customs and new multinational concepts of security. Consuls, firmly attached on the local level in North Africa, defended their own interests and tried to keep states out of the existing ransom culture. The two security cultures, one based on local communities and the other on multinational agreements, had not only different resources and capacities to protect sailors in Barbary captivity, but also concepts of security. This was evident when the Swedish agent Stralenheim in 1732 argued that ransoms should follow the rules of international law, 'ein reciprocirliches Völcker Recht'.

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