

**‘Commercial Exchanges: Algiers, Italy and the British Military
Commissariat, 1708-10’**

The Ottoman empire’s vassal states in North Africa remain, as Colin Heywood has argued, a ‘forgotten frontier’ of historiography. My paper aims to ameliorate this slightly, by examining commercial contacts between Algiers and Britain between 1708 and 1710. During this period, the territory provided large amounts of corn and other vital supplies for the commissariat of the British and allied forces fighting in Spain during the War of the Spanish Succession, foreshadowing similar exchanges during the rest of the eighteenth century. Although these later contacts have been examined in some detail, and relations in Algiers before 1708 and after 1710 by historians such as Heywood and J.G. Bromley, the missing period constitutes the height of the interaction between Britain and Algiers, as the resident consul, Robert Cole, coordinated the supply of corn to British forces. Using correspondence from figures such as Cole, it is possible to reconstruct not only the details of Britain’s contacts with Algiers but also its place within wider structures of commercial and financial exchange in the western Mediterranean.

I intend to argue, firstly, that Algiers proved an important source of corn to the army, and the use of the territory was part of a wider process of supply that also sourced corn in Tuscany, Venice, the Morea and Constantinople. North Africa was therefore closely integrated with wider Mediterranean trade, and the resort there a distinctly unexceptional practice. In its second part, the paper will compare and contrast the mechanisms and structures used to purchase and transship the grain in Italy and Algiers for the army in Spain. In both cases the role of the consul was crucial, since the provision of corn required not merely commercial but diplomatic and political competence. In Algiers, Cole was required to bargain directly with the Dey, and sent back a stream of letters recommending presents to be given, the coinage and trade goods to be used, and the ships to be sent. This also provides an insight into the mechanisms used by the Ottoman vassal states to manage and control their commodity trade, whereas existing studies tend to focus on the control of local

privateers. This section of the paper, like the first, will therefore argue that in both Britain and Algiers mechanisms were put in place by states to manage the purchase of corn and other goods for mutual advantage, and coordinate a wide range of commercial, financial, political and diplomatic factors.

Overall, my paper will therefore argue that, judged by the British state's actions between 1708 and 1710, the participation of North African territories in wider patterns of commercial exchange in the western Mediterranean was widespread and unexceptional. By no means a 'forgotten frontier' to contemporaries, Algiers provided an important contribution to the British war effort in Spain. Thus, even if commercial contacts were less frequent than elsewhere, they were nevertheless relatively unremarkable.

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