TRANS IMPERIAL SUBJECTS IN THE 17TH CENTURY

Integration, Conversion, and Culture Brokering Through the Eyes of a Captive Ottoman Muslim in the Habsburg Empire

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Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Department of Undergraduate Studies

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Culture, Politics, and Society

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Vienna, Austria
2025

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to elucidate the vital political, religious, and social roles exceptional Trans-Imperial Subjects played in their own and new host empires through the eyes of Osman of Timişoara, an Ottoman Muslim who was forced to live for twelve years as a captive in the Habsburg Empire. The thesis seeks to explore both objective and subjective historiographical viewpoints in the larger social processes of servitude, conversion, and cultural brokerage in this Ottoman-Habsburg context. The methodology applied to this thesis follows Osman's narrative with insights from historiography, contrasting relevant macro-historical sources and his account of the events to provide a complete analysis of the events detailed in his memoir.

Osman's account is relevant, because it provides often overlooked insights into how individuals perceive and experience historical phenomena, offering a personal, contemporary outlook on historical events. This thesis will delve into Osman's accounts to better understand the vital role of cultural brokerage that these individuals were often compelled to assume during their times in foreign lands, deepening the understanding of the importance of such individuals to their empires and host empires and the intricacies of religious conversion in an imperial context.

This thesis advances the historiography of empire by foregrounding the lived experience of an exceptional Trans-Imperial subject. Osman's memoir is a testament to how such individuals resisted fixed identities and actively mediated between rival powers, thus enriching our understanding of early modern diplomacy, conversion, and cultural adaptation.

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INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL SETTING

In the late 17th century, Europe was marked by intense conflict and significant transformation. The Great Turkish War (1683-1699), also known as the War of the Holy League, saw the Ottoman Empire clash with a coalition of European powers, including the Habsburg Monarchy, Poland-Lithuania, Venice, and Russia, as part of a long-standing struggle between Christian European states and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. The conflict, ignited by the second Ottoman Siege of Vienna in 1683, was marked by constant shifting borders and frequent military engagements: Ottoman forces, led by Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa Pasha, attempted to capture the Habsburg capital to expand their influence in Central Europe. The siege marked the zenith of Ottoman territorial ambition in the region. However, the attempt ended in a decisive failure when a relief force led by Polish King Jan III Sobieski and his renowned "winged hussars" broke the siege on September 12, 1683[1]. This defeat signaled the beginning of a series of Ottoman military setbacks, as the forces of the Holy League launched counter-offensives that gradually pushed the Ottomans back. In the wake of the failed siege, the Habsburg Monarchy and its allies embarked on aggressive campaigns to expel Ottoman forces from Central Europe. These campaigns were brutal and protracted, featuring numerous sieges, pitched battles, and constant skirmishes. The border regions were devastated, leading to widespread destruction and the displacement of countless populations.

Amid this chaos, the practice of ransom slavery became a harsh reality: with parties from both sides conducting expeditions into enemy territory to capture civilians and soldiers alike to hold them for ransom, turning the borderlands between the Ottoman and Habsburg

[1] Militiades Varvounis, *Jan Sobieski: The King Who Saved Europe,* (Xibris Corporation, 2012)

empires into zones of severe human suffering, where the fates of captives were precarious and reliant on complex and often protracted negotiations.

Osman of Timişoara was one individual caught in the maelstrom of this conflict. A young Muslim soldier from a well-connected family, Osman was captured by Habsburg forces in 1688 following the aftermath of the Siege of Vienna, enduring twelve grueling years of captivity. His story epitomizes the experiences of many individuals who lived at the crossroads of powerful empires, navigating a world where cultural, political, and social boundaries were perpetually in flux. The multicultural nature of the life experiences and the tendency of such individuals to partake in cultural exchange in their own and new host empires characterizes these special historical actors as Trans-Imperial subjects. They are differentiated from regular imperial subjects who did not experience the same level of cultural exchange that individuals like Osman did throughout their lives, giving them a different outlook on questions such as conversion, repatriation, and even their personal opinions toward neighboring empires.

This thesis delves into Osman's life and the broader implications of ransom slavery, religious conversion, and cultural brokerage in the context of the Great Turkish War. By exploring his account of his experiences and comparing them to macro-historical analysis of the same period, we gain a deeper understanding of the human dimensions of this historical time. This thesis also inquires about the purpose and the narrative tactics in Osman's Ego-document. Considering the circumstances of writing of his memoir, the accounts present in it should not be simply accepted as the truth, but instead, as reflections of the anxieties and expectations of one exceptional Ottoman subject. Ego-documents such as Osman's let us hear the voices of those who have been little heard in historiography. Such documents, especially when narrative in nature, "provide insight into historical events and periods by illustrating how individuals—in correspondence with their own (in)actions, (in)decisions, and (mis)convictions

as well as emotions, fears, aspirations, and frustrations—experienced and perceived these historical phenomena from a contemporary personal viewpoint.[2]"

This thesis will be divided into three main sections and a conclusion, all chronologically linked to Osman's account of the story. The first section explains and defines key terms such as Trans-Imperial subjects and Ransom Slavery, as well as serving as an introduction to Osman of Timişoara. The second section deals with the issues of conversion both in the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires, linking them to Osman's personal struggles of identity and belonging as a captive. Finally, the third section aims to define the role of Trans-Imperial subjects as cultural brokers, reflecting on Osman's later years as an ambassador and diplomat in Habsburg territory after his escape from captivity.

[2] Aksoy Sheridan, R. Aslıhan. "Nostalgia of a Frustrated Ottoman Subject: Reading Osman Agha of Timişoara's Memoirs as Self-Narrative." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): pp 325.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis engages primarily with *Prisoner of the Infidels* by Giancarlo Casale[3], a translated and edited edition of Osman of Timișoara's memoir, which serves as a foundational ego-document through which early modern trans-imperial experiences are explored. Casale's work offers a rare, firsthand Ottoman Muslim narrative of captivity in the Habsburg Empire, providing a deep insight into the lived experience of cultural brokerage, forced integration, and the ideological and material dimensions of conversion. As a richly annotated and contextually situated primary source, this text does more than recount Osman's experience: it offers a lens through which the mechanisms of imperial interaction can be examined from the bottom up. Casale's editorial interventions provide historical context and interpretive commentary, positioning Osman as a paradigmatic "trans-imperial subject" who defies simple categorizations of loyalty and identity.

Casale's framing of Osman's life aligns with the theoretical approaches advanced in Natalie Rothman's *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul.*[4] Rothman's work is especially pertinent in conceptualizing the role of cultural intermediaries who operated across the porous boundaries of empires. While Rothman focuses on Venetian-Ottoman interactions, her insights into the fluid identities and institutional negotiations of dragomans (interpreters) and renegades provide a critical comparative framework. Rothman emphasizes how such figures were not passive transmitters of information but actively shaped political outcomes through their embodied cultural knowledge. This complements Casale's portrayal of Osman as someone whose language skills, religious

[3] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021)
[4] Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012)

steadfastness, and adaptability positioned him as a valuable diplomatic asset upon his return to Ottoman lands. Rothman's scholarship helps establish the broader category of the "trans-imperial subject" as a productive analytical tool beyond the individual narrative[5].

Tijana Krstić's *Contested Conversions to Islam*[6] is likewise essential for understanding the ideological stakes of religious transformation in the early modern Ottoman Empire. Krstić situates conversion as a site of intense negotiation and symbolic power, both at the level of imperial propaganda and personal piety. Her argument that conversion narratives were often crafted to serve state-building purposes by reinforcing Islamic orthodoxy and legitimizing Ottoman rule[7] resonates with Osman's post-captivity emphasis on his unbroken Islamic faith. Krstić helps explain why Osman so explicitly asserts his religious fidelity upon returning to the Ottoman Empire: it is not only a personal truth but also a socially and politically necessary act of self-legitimation. Her work also sheds light on how imperial institutions responded to the ambiguity and anxiety surrounding apostasy and returning converts[8], further contextualizing Osman's concerns with reputation and belonging.

The socio-legal framework of ransom slavery, as laid out in Géza Pálffy's "Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier"[9], provides an indispensable background for understanding the structural conditions under which Osman was captured, detained, and eventually escaped. Pálffy's meticulous archival research reveals the extent to which ransom slavery was normalized along the Ottoman-Habsburg frontier and regulated by both customary

[5] Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012) pages 10-15.
[6] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford University Press, 2011)
[7] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford University Press, 2011) page 173.
[8] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford University Press, 2011) chapters 3-4.
[9] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007)

and written laws. His account emphasizes the economic and political dimensions of captivity, demonstrating how the fates of captives were entangled in broader interstate relations and local power structures. Pálffy's typology of captive experiences, including their varied legal statuses and the economic mechanisms of ransom, adds depth to Osman's negotiations for his release, including his deliberate downplaying of social status to lower his ransom. In combination with Casale's commentary, Pálffy enables a more robust understanding of the coercive structures that framed Osman's narrative.

Aslıhan Aksoy Sheridan's article "Nostalgia of a Frustrated Ottoman Subject"[10] adds a valuable literary perspective to the reading of Osman's memoir. By treating the text as a self-narrative rather than merely a factual account, Sheridan explores how Osman engages in deliberate self-fashioning to project a particular image of religious constancy and moral integrity. Her analysis highlights the performative and rhetorical dimensions of ego-documents, a view that helps decode Osman's emphasis on his resistance to conversion and his eventual elevation to diplomatic service. Sheridan also connects Osman's rhetorical strategies to broader Ottoman discourses of belonging and loyalty, reinforcing the thesis's attention to the anxieties faced by returnees in reintegrating into Muslim society.

Wael B. Hallaq's "Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations"[11] contributes the theoretical underpinning for understanding Islamic legal attitudes toward captivity, conversion, and repatriation. His exposition of *fiqh* principles concerning ransom, ownership of captives, and apostasy offers a critical context to both Ottoman legal practices and Osman's concerns about remaining a legitimate member of the *ummah* (Islamic community) after prolonged contact with infidels. Hallaq's analysis supports the thesis's exploration of how Islamic

[10] Aksoy Sheridan, R. Aslıhan. "Nostalgia of a Frustrated Ottoman Subject: Reading Osman Agha of Timişoara's Memoirs as Self-Narrative." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021)
[11] Wael B. Hallaq – *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, 2009

jurisprudence shaped the treatment of captives and their reintegration[12], especially through its doctrinal insistence that public recitation of the *shahada* (declaration of faith) constitutes irreversible entry into the Muslim community. This doctrinal rigidity, paradoxically, both enabled and constrained the choices available to captives like Osman.

Taken together, these sources not only corroborate the central themes in Casale's edition of Osman's memoir but also allow the thesis to transcend conventional biographical storytelling and engage with broader historiographical questions. The literature collectively advances an understanding of trans-imperial subjects not merely as historical anomalies but as structurally significant figures who mediated between empires, ideologies, and legal systems. Osman's life is emblematic of the tensions inherent in early modern imperial borderlands, and through a careful reading of both primary and secondary sources, this thesis contributes to ongoing discussions about identity, mobility, and agency in a fragmented but interconnected imperial world.

[12] Wael B. Hallaq – *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, page 307.

PART 1: ON OSMAN, TRANS-IMPERIAL SUBJECTS, AND RANSOM SLAVERY

"In 1688, in the tumultuous aftermath of the failed Ottoman siege of Vienna, a Muslim soldier surrendered to the Habsburg army and became a prisoner of war. Young and from a well-connected family, he expected to be quickly ransomed and reunited with his loved ones. Instead, Osman of Timişoara would spend twelve long years in captivity, finally regaining his freedom only after a daring cross-border escape that could easily have cost his life. By that time, although still a comparatively young man, Osman had faced enough adversity to last many lifetimes: torture by a sadistic master, brutal confinement in a dungeon, the hunger and contagion of an army camp in winter, and worse. But Osman persevered, and as the years of his captivity wore on, he managed gradually to improve his condition and even to win the esteem of his captors."[13]

Osman of Timişoara was one of many individuals who lived most of his life operating at the intersection of multiple imperial systems; these historical actors, whether they chose to live in such a manner or not, played a pivotal role in mediating between empires and navigating the complexities of diverse cultural, political, and social landscapes. Their experiences shed light on the difficulties of living in a world where empires intersect, and familiar boundaries may change overnight. One can think of historical actors like Osman as trans-imperial subjects not only because of their life experiences operating within multiple imperial systems but also because of their ability to embody multiple personas while doing so. This allowed them to bridge the gaps between the native and foreign inhabitants of the

[13] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Page 1.

empires and communities that they were part of, even if only in a transitory way, as we will explore with Osman's case.

Osman's story begins during a failed military enterprise, where he was captured by the Habsburg forces and forced to live as a captive until he could pay his ransom. A widespread practice at the time, especially in border regions, ransom slavery consisted of the capture of individuals (either civilian or military from opposing factions) to hold them for ransom. Once caught, the captives were subjected to various forms of treatment and conditions: they could be imprisoned in dungeons and strongholds, serve as enslaved servants for their captors, or even be set "free" to collect their ransom (for themselves and/or for other captives as well), as was the case of Osman's first capture[14]. The fate of the captives was almost always uncertain and heavily depended on the circumstances of their capture, the policies of their captors, and the potential monetary return that they offered or claimed to be able to offer.

Ransom slavery was deeply embedded in the legal and social structures of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. This system was a byproduct of wartime capture and a structured practice with specific regulations and norms. In the Ottoman Empire, ransom slavery was governed by Islamic law (*Sharia*)[15] and local customs (*örf*), usually dictated by the royal border fortress commanders[16]. The *Kanun* (secular law) often provided supplementary regulations. For example, the *kanunname* (law codes) of specific regions included detailed provisions about the treatment and ransoming of captives, in addition to specific guidelines dictated by the Ottoman War Council[17]. It is important to emphasize that captives were considered the property

[14] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Page 37.
[15] Wael B. Hallaq – *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, page 307.
[16] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007) page 50.
[17] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007) page 49.

of the state or the capturing individual, oftentimes considered to be spoils of war. Therefore, they could be sold, exchanged, or held for ransom. The legal process of ransom (*fidya*) involved negotiations that could take place between captors and the families or governments of captives[18]. In the Habsburg territories, local laws and customs influenced the practice of ransom slavery. For instance, the 1683 siege of Vienna resulted in numerous captives whose ransoms were dictated by military commanders and local authorities[19].

Additionally, social norms would often dictate the treatment of captives: high-ranking officials and nobility could expect better treatment and more complex negotiations for their release, reflecting their social and political value[20]. These frameworks were not static, however: they evolved in response to political, economic, and social pressures. For instance, during intense conflict, the terms of ransom might become harsher, reflecting the increased hostility between the empires. Conversely, terms could be more lenient during diplomacy and peace[21].

Ransom slavery had significant economic implications for both the captors and the captives. For captors, ransoms provided a substantial source of income, which could be used to fund further military campaigns or strengthen their political position. For captives and their families, the financial burden of paying a ransom could be devastating, often leading to the sale of property or relying on the charity of the community to raise the necessary funds, taking on significant debt. This economic dynamic added another layer of complexity to the already harsh realities of ransom slavery.

[18] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007) page 55.
[19] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007) page 36.
[20] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007) page 43.
[21] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007) page 38.

In most cases, there was no fixed amount for ransom, and negotiation between the two parties would ensue to establish the value of the debt that must be paid by the captive in order for him to secure his freedom[22]. In the case of Osman, he personally negotiated his ransom with the officer in charge of the prisoners, reaching a reasonable agreement by dressing in peasant clothes and convincing the officer that he was "a man of little reputation"[23], a prevalent yet risky practice at the time. The ransom amount would also vary greatly from individual to individual, and currency was not the only possible or even the most desired payment method in some cases. The ransom amount could include cash, weapons, livestock, valuable items, or even political favors if dealing with a specifically influential individual.[24]

In cases where the captive was unwilling or unable to pay his ransom, they were most likely to face harsh consequences: torture, physical punishments, and prolonged captivity were widespread coercion tactics to force individuals to pay their ransom. Those who, for many reasons, were not able to or were simply unwilling to pay even after such punishments could be sentenced to death or perpetual captivity, with their only hope of freedom being a bold escape or an act of goodwill from a fellow guard or prisoner[25]. It is important to note that the concept of reciprocity was integral to this practice's functioning. Both parties were expected to adhere to certain customs and norms regarding the treatment of captives; violations of these norms by one party (such as excessive violence or forbidding begging) could result in retaliatory actions taken by the other side[26]. However, this standard law system in the border "was never codified in writing… for these traditions existed only temporarily (for a period of

[22] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007) page 55.
[23] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Page 37.
[24] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007), page 47.
[25] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007), page 56.
[26] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007), page 53.

300 years) and were soon forgotten after Ottoman rule ended in Hungary in the late seventeenth century."[27] This meant that there was a general loose sense of these norms and how they would apply to some instances.

Unfortunately, for many unlucky captives, the fact that these traditions were never coded in writing meant that their captors could take advantage of the loose definitions of justice practiced at the time; Osman felt the injustice deep in his bones when, even after successfully paying his ransom, he was tricked into remaining a captive by his master and forced to endure life-threatening situations that for many, meant certain death. Osman was lucky in many ways, perhaps to the same proportion of his misfortunes. He was fortunate enough to have endured years of hardship in captivity until finally finding himself in a better situation after working for the family of a famous general on their estate. After the general's untimely death, the widow Countess pressured Osman to convert to the Christian faith; having ultimately refused, Osman ultimately succeeded in being moved to the capital, Vienna, to serve as a servant for the Count of Schallenberg[28], where he would become among other things, a famous pastry chef and a well-known servant in one of the more noble houses of the Habsburg Empire.

It was then, in Vienna, that Osman of Timişoara truly became a Trans-Imperial subject; he learned the German language, how to write in an occidental style, and how to behave according to the customs and traditions of the Habsburg empire; however, at the same time, the captive never abandoned his Muslim roots, refusing conversion until his escape. Had he chosen to convert to Christianity, Osman could have had a completely different

[27] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007), page 36.
[28] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Page 163

experience living in Habsburg territory. However, the doors to the Muslim world would be forever closed for him. The next part of this research will approach the topic of conversion in further detail and the differences between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires concerning converts.

PART 2: CONVERSION AS A TOOL FOR INTEGRATION, SELF-SALVATION, AND STATECRAFT

The act of religious conversion by a captive must be understood as "an act akin to the forces of modernity in its appeal to personal (rather than collective) choice, will, and action."[29] That is, when a renegade or a prisoner opts for conversion, that is no longer a choice motivated by the collective will of religious and political communities but, instead, a choice motivated by the betterment of the living conditions of the convert as a clear attempt to renegotiate the boundaries of social exclusion and inclusion experienced by the outsider. On the government's side, conversion is a valuable tool to encourage migrants and settlers from neighboring empires to consolidate themselves in their new territories. It is also an attempt to subject these newcomers to a standard set of societal norms enforced by religious discipline.

However, it goes beyond that attempt: religious conversion in the Ottoman-Habsburg context carries a broader symbolic and political meaning, which carries onto issues of diplomacy, state legitimacy, and imperial identity. From the Ottoman state's perspective, each conversion of a Christian captive, especially if the captive was originally from one of the Habsburg's realms, meant not only a religious gain but a manifestation of Islam's (and therefore the Ottoman Empire's) moral, religious, and political superiority. It also characterizes, on a much deeper and symbolic level, an inversion of the Christian missionary narrative that was prevalent since the age of the Crusades. Conversely, from the Habsburg state's perspective, similar to their neighbors in the East, the conversion of Muslims to Christianity was framed as a spiritual victory in the struggle between the cross and crescent

[29] Gauri Viswanathan (1998, 75), quote borrowed from Natalie Rothman's *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012), page 122.

and supported a larger narrative of state prestige and superiority. It was also of great interest to the Habsburg Empire to enlarge their Christian Catholic population, motivated by intense opposition to the rising Protestant movement in Europe, even after agreeing to the terms of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

For captives like Osman, however, opting for or against conversion could be the difference between living a comfortable or a miserable life. During his years in captivity, Osman of Timişoara was pressured to convert to the Catholic faith in various instances; however, he ultimately chose to stick to his Muslim faith, as his hopes of returning to the Ottoman Muslim side had not vanished, even if that meant facing limitations in social climbing and overall acceptance in the Viennese society. However, this was not the case for many renegades and captives in the Habsburg empire, and conversion was viewed as one of the few possible exits from a captive state.[30]

In contrast to their neighbors in the West, the Ottoman Empire had a much more relaxed stance when dealing with converts and non-Muslim subjects. There was a sense of religious pluralism in the territory, although the official religion was still Islam: Muslims, Catholics, and Jews were able to coexist within the imperial framework. However, in certain instances, the Ottomans would offer a series of benefits conditional to the conversion to Islam: converts could benefit from more significant opportunities to achieve social mobility and were considered valuable assets in governmental jobs that required a certain degree of variety and inclusivity[31], such as ambassadors, and foreign agents, essentially becoming cultural brokers in their new host empires.

[30] Géza Pálffy. *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman-Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2007), page 52.
[31] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford University Press, 2011), pages 1-2.

"The early modern Ottoman Empire was remarkably integrationist towards converts in comparison to its Christian contemporaries- there were no "purity of blood" laws or Inquisition in the Ottoman domains. (...) However, that does not mean that conversion to Islam did not pose a challenge to Ottoman Muslim society's constantly evolving sense of community and orthopraxy."[32]

In spite of society's generally good view on conversion stemming from imperial narratives of religious superiority, many problems still arose from problematic subjects around empires. Especially in the much stricter[33] religious communities of Islam, issues concerning the nature and intention of converts and conflicts and tensions regarding religious identity and belonging naturally lead to difficulties in establishing, defining, and maintaining an actual Ottoman religious boundary. Additionally, the conversion of Christian captives to Islam created a judicial barrier to returning converts to Christian states, even under diplomatic treaties: once an individual publicly declared the *shahada* (testimony of faith), they were regarded as members of the *ummah* (Islamic community), and therefore could not be forcibly relocated or returned to a non-Muslim territory, as this would risk apostasy (*irtidad)*, a grave offense in Islamic law.[34]

On the Habsburg side, the intersections of political interests and religious conversion would also often lead to conflicts and power struggles among different factions and communities in their territories. There were also similar struggles regarding the repatriation of baptized converts, since they were also formally protected from extradition by both canon law and imperial decrees. To return a baptized convert to the Ottoman Empire would imply

[32] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford University Press, 2011), pages 1-2.
[33] By saying "stricter", I am referring to the overall nature of the Muslim faiths, beliefs, and communities, which required a higher degree of fidelity and commitment to the sacred texts than its Catholic counterpart.
[34] Wael B. Hallaq – *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 318-319.

apostasy (*relapsus*), and open dangerous precedents to undermine Christian sovereignty. These problems further evidence the complicated relationship between state and religious affairs, already a central point of discussion even in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, there was also a profound psychological impact of conversion: converts often experienced a deep sense of loss, identity crisis, and alienation from their original communities[35]. This internal conflict was compounded by the external pressures of living in a society that might still view them suspiciously or as outsiders. Converts had to constantly navigate these dualities, finding ways to reconcile their new religious identities with their cultural and familial ties. The social implications were equally significant, as converts frequently faced discrimination, social exclusion, and limited opportunities despite the promises of social mobility that conversion ostensibly offered.

Ultimately, the personal decision to convert to the religion of the new host empire was heavily influenced by the captive's hopes of eventually returning to their nation of origin. This hope, however, could be seen suspiciously by the masters of the captives, as refusal to convert also meant that the captive could attempt a possible escape in the near future. Captives that refused conversion like Osman were forced to navigate even narrower paths in order to avoid reincarceration, being forced to hide their true intentions even from people with whom they have built solid foundations of trust. Osman details a conversation he had with his master's wife, the Countess of Schallenberg, just before securing his transfer to Vienna:

"His wife, too, always looked on me kindly. Once or twice, in private, she even said openly, "My husband is very fond of you. If you were to adopt our faith, he would make you

[35] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford University Press, 2011) pp 72.

his head of wardrobe, that is to say, Kammerdiener, such that we would become your patrons." My response was simply to bow before my mistress and say, "I am not the man for such an appointment, but I pray that my lord will never regret his looking kindly upon me, his slave." Thereafter, they offered to send me as an apprentice to a confectioner, and in order to not reveal my true intentions, I accepted."[36]

Osman's steadfast refusal to convert in his memoir also reflects another important aspect of life upon returning to Ottoman lands: the explicit narrative effort of ex-captives to assert how they remained faithful Muslims serves as a clear attempt to silence voices of gossip in their own empires. Their stories and accounts serve both as evidence for their narratives of non-conversion and religious fidelity and more modestly as resumés of their professional experience operating outside Ottoman territory: serving not only a form of self-fashioning but also playing an important role in reassuring the ex-captives of allegiance to their empires as a mean of self-protection from accusations of infidelity. The need for emphasis on such narratives evidences the anxieties and insecurities of Trans-Imperial subjects who managed to return to their home empires, suggesting that even officials in the Ottoman imperial machine such as Osman could be viewed suspiciously by their societies upon their return.

[36] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Page 94.

PART 3: TRANS-IMPERIAL SUBJECTS AS CULTURAL BROKERS AND OSMAN AS A CULTURAL BROKER

When discussing the role of Trans- Imperial subjects either in their new host empires or upon returning to their native societies after living "abroad" for the more significant part of their lives, it is essential to emphasize that no man or woman is the same and that the willingness to engage in activities that interact with subjects from other empires varied significantly from individual to individual. Having said that, a significant number of those individuals (some naturally to a greater extent than others) went on to fulfill the role of cultural brokers in their societies. A cultural broker is an individual who facilitates communication, interactions, and exchanges between different cultural, social, or political groups[37]. Cultural brokers did not operate in isolation; they were often part of broader, interconnected networks that facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and diplomatic messages across empires. These networks were maintained by merchants, diplomats, scholars, and other key figures who played crucial roles in cross-cultural interactions[38]. These individuals were of immense value to empires, as they were not only capable of speaking in both their native and foreign tongues but were also familiar with the cultural differences and nuances between the two parties, ensuring effective dialogue between the two groups without the perils of miscommunication. Furthermore, some individuals (Osman being a perfect example of such an individual) had preexisting networks of trust and communication in their old empires[39], further facilitating the establishment of future trans-imperial networks of trade and dialogue.

[37] Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012) pages 37-42.
[38] Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012) pages 3-7.
[39] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Page 156..

Building on Natalie Rothman's analysis in *Brokering Empires,* Osman's later years can be understood through the prism of cultural brokerage as a powerful force of imperial worldmaking. Rothman argues that brokers were not merely diplomatic aides but active participants in shaping how empires perceive themselves and their rivals[40]. In this sense, Osman's post-captivity role as a dragoman (translator) and an envoy was not limited to practical negotiation, he also played a part in revising Ottoman conceptions of the Habsburgs from antagonistic "infidels" to potential allies. His embodied knowledge from his time in captivity served as an instrument through which more pragmatic and relational forms of diplomacy emerged.

However, as Rothman emphasizes, the power of intermediaries was always tempered by deep ambivalence[41]. Osman's familiarity with both Ottoman and Habsburg cultural codes made him a valuable conduit, but also a source of anxiety. His ability to speak German, navigate Habsburg court society, and forge close ties with European elites led to suspicions regarding his loyalties. Upon returning to Ottoman society, he was compelled to reaffirm his Islamic faith and his allegiance, an act not only of devotion but of political necessity, exemplifying the fraught space Trans-Imperial subjects like Osman occupied: indispensable, yet perpetually scrutinized.

This delicate balance is mirrored in Osman's memoir, which serves both as a testimony and a defense. Through these lenses, ego documents themselves are forms of cultural brokerage, as they aim to reconcile personal history with cultural expectations. Osman's insistence on declaring his religious fidelity throughout his memoir coupled with his careful recounting of service to Ottoman officials suggest a narrative strategy designed to

[40] Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012) page 11.
[41] Natalie Rothman, Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul, (Cornell University Press, 2012) pages 32-33.

mitigate or silence potential accusations of apostasy and/or betrayal. His memoir thus functions as a rhetorical tool to secure a place within the Ottoman moral order, which also possibly explains why he only wrote his memoir decades after his return to Ottoman lands, upon his move to the empire's capital Istanbul. There, he needed to reaffirm himself as a loyal Ottoman subject, seeing that his pre-existing networks of familial ties and trust had been almost extinguished[42].

As detailed in Osman's memoir, after his successful escape back to Muslim territory, he worked as a translator and diplomat for thirteen different pashas over the course of many years in his hometown of Timişoara, where he enjoyed the privileges of repatriation thanks to his preexisting networks of trust: even being reinstated his previous military post as barracks chief[43]. Later, having lost most of his earnings and loved ones due to wars and tragedies, Osman worked at the Habsburg embassy in Istanbul, closely collaborating with the young Habsburg diplomat and translator Heinrich von Penkler, who described Osman as a "dignified, elderly gentleman" and indicates that he was widely respected in Vienna[44]. Their partnership and shared efforts in diplomatic activities show the willingness of two previous enemies to work together even after experiencing torture and captivity at the hands of one another[45]. While also showcasing a significant level of cross-cultural exchange between the two parties, regardless of the anxieties surrounding their collaboration. This collaboration promoted awareness, sensibility, and a sense of adaptability in intercultural communication, further evidencing the crucial need for cultural brokers in the inner life of empires. Osman

[42] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021), Page 159.
[43] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021), Page 153.
[44] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021), Page 19.
[45] Little is known about the life of Heinrich von Penkler other than the fact that he was born in Vienna in 1700 and served as a diplomat and an interpreter for the Habsburg Empire in Istanbul. It is reasonable to assume, however, that during his lifetime he experienced at least some kind of disturbances during the years of conflict between the Ottoman and Habsburg forces.

mentions this willingness to work together with some of the same generals that had caused him a great deal of misfortunes in one of the final passages of his memoir:

"*I was sent to Transylvania, Arad, Szeged, Petrovaradin, and other places all over the map to meet with Habsburg generals about matters of the highest importance. Not once on any of these occasions was I greeted with a harsh word or a sour look from any of them. Rather, I was always treated with the utmost politeness and grace. I genuinely enjoyed the generals' company, respected them, and treated them with goodwill. In return, I received all manner of gifts from them, and in this way, friendship and good neighborliness was established between us, as it should be."*[46]

Osman's attitude towards his former captors is a testament to the power of cultural brokerage in bridging divides and cultivating mutual understanding between disparate groups of people, regardless of their political and religious affiliations. Through individuals like Osman, empires could transcend their differences, even (and especially) during periods of peace.

[46] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Pages 155-156.

PART 4: CONCLUSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The life and narrative memoir of Osman of Timișoara offers a compelling lens into the complex and often contradictory roles played by trans-imperial subjects at the intersection of early modern empires. As an Ottoman Muslim who spent twelve years in captivity under the Habsburg Empire, Osman's memoir illuminates the structural realities of ransom slavery, the ideological pressures of conversion, and the ambivalent yet crucial function of cultural brokers in the machinery of empire. More than a narrative of victimhood or survival, Osman's memoir reveals the agency, adaptability, and strategic navigation exercised by individuals forced to operate across imperial and cultural frontiers.

This thesis has shown that ransom slavery, far from being a marginal or chaotic wartime practice, was embedded in the legal, economic, and diplomatic systems of both the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. The transactional nature of captivity, where lives could be negotiated, valued, and exploited, reveals how early modern states institutionalized practices of violence and exchange in ways that simultaneously dehumanized and instrumentalized borderland populations. Osman's manipulation of ransom system, particularly his strategic self-presentation as a low-status peasant to reduce his ransom value, reveals both the constraints and possibilities that captives could exploit within these systems. His case also highlights the limits of reciprocity in early modern ransom practices, especially when oral traditions and unwritten codes of conduct could be disregarded by unscrupulous captors.

Religious conversion, in this context, functioned not simply as a personal spiritual journey but as a politically charged act embedded with meaning that reflects the needs and anxieties of imperial subjects on an individual and collective level. Osman's focus on asserting his steadfast refusal to convert to Christianity, even when it would have improved

his social standing or living conditions, was not only an act of piety but a calculated preservation of identity, reputation, and future reintegration into Ottoman society. Drawing on the work of Tijana Krstić[47] and Wael Hallaq[48], this thesis has demonstrated that conversion in the early modern period was deeply embedded in legal, symbolic, and political frameworks. Publicly reciting the shahada or undergoing baptism was not simply a spiritual declaration, but a binding transformation with irreversible consequences, often excluding return or repatriation, regardless of diplomatic treaties.

Osman's post-captivity emphasis on his religious fidelity was more than autobiographical, it was a socially required narrative of rehabilitation. Ego documents like his memoir were crucial for reasserting belonging and trustworthiness within the Ottoman moral and political order. His memoir, written years after his escape, can thus be understood as both testimony and self-defense. The act of writing, and the specific rhetorical choices made in framing his story, were tools to reestablish his identity not only as a faithful Muslim but also as a valuable and legitimate Ottoman imperial subject.

Most critically, this research has highlighted the indispensable yet precarious role of trans-imperial subjects as cultural brokers. Building on Natalie Rothman's *Brokering Empire*[49], this thesis has shown that individuals like Osman were not only practical intermediaries but also active agents in reshaping imperial worldviews. His later service to thirteen Ottoman pashas and eventual collaboration with Habsburg diplomats illustrate how embodied cultural knowledge and linguistic fluency made him an asset to both empires. In Rothman's framework, brokers like Osman participated in the semiotic labor of empire,

[47] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford University Press, 2011)
[48] Wael B. Hallaq – *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
[49] Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012)

helping define categories of difference, negotiate trust, and enable diplomacy. Yet, such figures were viewed with deep suspicion: their dual familiarity made them simultaneously indispensable and threatening, especially in cases where the individual had prolonged contact with important and influential actors from neighboring empires.

This duality runs through Osman's narrative. His closeness to former captors, his ability to function fluently in Habsburg courts, and his late-life diplomatic service raised questions about loyalty. The very skills that made him an ideal intermediary, (linguistic dexterity, cross-cultural awareness, and personal ties) also made him a potential security risk in the eyes of his native community. That tension is evident in the careful structure and tone of his memoir, which often anticipates doubt and preempts criticism. Osman's rhetorical strategy of repeated professions of loyalty and religious commitment reflects this need to manage alterity, a phenomenon Rothman identifies as central to the lives of cultural brokers[50].

Osman's example also reveals the relational and reciprocal nature of imperial diplomacy at the individual level. His cordial interactions with former captors, his missions to Habsburg generals across Transylvania, and his warm reception by former enemies showcase how personal bonds could transcend structural hostilities. As he wrote, "Friendship and good neighborliness was established between us, as it should be."[51] In this, Osman exemplifies the possibilities and the extent of networks of trust and knowledge built informally between individuals despite formal imperial boundaries.

[50] Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empires: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul,* (Cornell University Press, 2012) page 12.
[51] Giancarlo Casale and Osman of Timisoara, eds., *Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth Century Europe* (University of California Press, 2021) Pages 155-156.

This thesis has also sought to bring Osman's experience into dialogue with broader patterns of early modern global history. While focused on the Ottoman-Habsburg frontier, Osman's story echoes similar patterns across early modern Eurasia: from Mughal envoys navigating Persian courts to Chinese intermediaries dealing with Jesuit missionaries, the role of trans-imperial subjects as translators, emissaries, and negotiators was universal. These individuals formed a parallel infrastructure of governance and exchange, one that helped empires maintain power not through rigid exclusion, but through mediated and contingent forms of inclusion.

In drawing historical conclusions from Osman's life, this research also gestures toward modern parallels. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the need for individuals who can navigate multiple cultural frameworks such as diplomats, translators, immigrant entrepreneurs, and NGO workers is more relevant than ever. The ambiguities faced by Osman mirror the precarious situations of many modern migrants, dual nationals, and cultural brokers who straddle different legal systems, political identities, and cultural expectations. The lesson from Osman's story is not simply about survival or loyalty, but about the constructive, if uneasy, potential of individuals who move between worlds and build bridges where others see boundaries.

Ultimately, Osman's life reveals the complicated dynamics at play for those caught between empires. Trans-imperial subjects did not merely survive the empire, they helped constitute it. Through their movements, negotiations, and narratives, they formed the connective tissue of early modern diplomacy and cultural exchange. Their stories complicate binary understandings of loyalty, identity, and faith, and reaffirm the human adaptability required to navigate a world defined by flux and fracture.

By featuring Osman's voice alongside rigorous analysis of secondary scholarship, this thesis contributes to broader historiographical conversations about the role of individuals in imperial structures, the politics of conversion, and the importance of ego documents in reconstructing historical subjectivities. In bridging early modern realities with modern reflections, Osman's story stands not only as a record of a unique life but as a case study of the enduring challenges and opportunities of cultural translation across borders.

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