



The Turkish Raid on Iceland in the Year 1627

Ólafur Egilsson

Ólafur Egilsson (1564 – 1 March 1639) was an Icelandic Lutheran minister. In 1627, he was abducted, along with his wife and two sons, by Barbary Pirates under the Ottoman Empire during their raid on Vestmannaeyjar. The raid is known in Icelandic history as *Tyrkjaránið* (The Turkish abductions). He returned to Vestmannaeyjar in 1628 but his wife Ásta Þorsteinsdóttir did not return until 1637 and his sons never returned. He later wrote a memoir of his abduction and return, which was published both in Iceland and in Denmark.

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About The Turkish Raid on Iceland in the Year 1627:

Early on Monday morning, July 16, 1627, people on the island of Heimaey spotted three unidentified sailing ships approaching. The ships were still far off, and, in the uncertain light of early day, it was hard to make them out.

“Pirates!” some of the islanders cried and hurried to the defensive ramparts at the island’s harbour to man the cannons mounted there.

Others were not so sure and stood on the rocky shoreline, squinting into the distance, trying to make out what sort of ships they might be. Iceland was a Danish possession at this time, and the Danish Crown sent out protective warships to patrol Icelandic waters every summer. This summer, they were late. The approaching ships were coming from the east, as the patrol ships always did.

“It’s the Danish ships,” several among those on the shore insisted. “Come at last.”

When he heard news of these unidentified ships, Lauritz Bagge, the island’s Danish Factor, sent out messengers to tell everybody to congregate in the settlement at the harbour on the island’s north end and to man the defenses there, for Heimaey was a rugged, rocky place, and the only sure way the pirates could come ashore—if indeed they were pirates—was at the harbor.

People began straggling in, singly or in groups, some detouring on the way to gaze uneasily at the approaching ships, which were sailing into a stiff headwind and making little headway. A crowd of women and children and old folk gathered in and around the Danish merchant houses at the harbor. Lauritz Bagge called the men together and handed out muskets, shot, and powder and then organized others into teams to operate the brace of small cannons mounted on the harbor front.

Meanwhile, lookouts continued to keep track of the incoming ships’ progress, which was still slow. Young boys scrambled agilely across the island’s hummocky lava fields, carrying messages back and forth. The islanders kept coming in until several hundred people—the majority of Heimaey’s population—were gathered at the harbour settlement, milling about, glancing apprehensively at each other, trying to calm fretful children.

The men who had been assigned the muskets looked to their priming and murmured fervent prayers.

The Heimaey islanders had good reason to be uneasy.

Three and a half weeks earlier, on June 20, a lone Barbary corsair ship from Salé had appeared out of nowhere. The corsairs sacked the Grindavík district, on the southern shore of the Reykjanes Peninsula, on Iceland’s southwest coast, and then assailed Bessastaðir, on the peninsula’s northern shore, where the Danish Governor of Iceland had his official residence—and where he amassed the taxes he collected for the Danish crown.

The Governor had been informed of the corsairs’ presence by some escapees from Grindavík, and he ordered a makeshift protective rampart to be erected, complete

with cannon emplacements. This defense prevented the corsairs from taking Bessastaðir. Thwarted, they sailed north-westwards past *Snæfellsjökull* into the waters off the West Fjords, *where they captured the crews of several English fishing boats.*

The English fleet, which arrived every summer to fish for cod in Icelandic waters, and which in the summer of 1627 consisted of no fewer than 150 vessels, was escorted by two English warships. Rather than risk a confrontation with such large, heavily armed ships, the corsairs slipped away and disappeared, headed back to Salé with something like 50 or 60 captives, possibly more (an exact number is hard to come by).

News of these shocking events spread quickly, and the Heimaey islanders heard all the details. The general opinion was that the pirates were gone for good, too wary of the English warships to hang around, and that they no longer posed a threat. Besides, the Danish patrol ships were due any day. Once they arrived, the waters would be safe.

Nobody knew anything for certain, though. The pirates might be anywhere, biding their time, waiting to strike again. And these pirates were especially dangerous.

The villages and ports along Iceland's southern coast had suffered pirate attacks before. But those had been opportunistic brigands—amateurs—who stole what they could and then fled. Some English adventurers, for example, pillaged Heimaey in 1614. They terrorized the islanders, but their real interest was the portable goods they could load aboard their ship (including the iron bell from out of the Landakirkja church). The Barbary corsairs were a different sort of pirate entirely: **they stole goods, but they stole people as well.** The inhabitants of Grindavík had not fled to safety when the corsairs first came ashore because it never occurred to them that they themselves might be the booty the corsairs sought.

Seventeenth century Icelanders were used to relying on the safety provided by their island's isolation, and they had no organized defense force. The captains of the two warships that accompanied the English fishing fleet were willing to help, at least in principle, but by the time official messages had been passed back and forth between the Danish authorities and the English, the corsairs who had attacked Grindavík and Bessastaðir had vanished. In any case, the warships' mission was to guard the English fishing fleet, not to protect Icelanders.

Without the season's contingent of Danish warships to patrol their waters, the Icelanders were left with no real means of protecting themselves except for whatever *ad hoc* barricades could be thrown up on shore—as had been done at Bessastaðir—under the auspices of the local Danish Factors, who exercised control over whatever armaments were available.

So the Heimaey islanders ended up huddling together in and around the Danish merchant houses at the harbor at the island's north end, trying to make the best use of what defensive resources they had: a couple of small-bore cannons—no threat to the approaching ships themselves, but adequate for discouraging shore parties—a few muskets, and limited supplies of powder and shot.

They were used to making do, though. They were a tough lot. And they had every reason to expect to survive this latest challenge. They were forewarned; they were armed; they were prepared. Heimaey's coastline was mostly steep and rocky. The only place ships could make an assured landfall was the harbor, and the islanders had their cannons aimed at the entrance, ready. Men with muskets patrolled the strand. At Bessastaðir, the pirates had been driven off. The Heimaey islanders intended to do the same—if they *were* pirates.

Everybody still hoped—and earnestly prayed—that they were not...

...Among the captives taken to Algiers were Reverend Ólafur Egilsson, a Lutheran minister in his sixties, and his young family.

Slavery, as practiced by Barbary corsairs, was fundamentally a ruthless business enterprise, with the real profits coming not from the sale of captives in the slave markets but from the exorbitant ransoms demanded for them. All the Icelanders taken to Algiers, including Reverend Ólafur's young wife and three small children, were auctioned off in the *Badistan*, the slave market. Reverend Ólafur, however, was appointed as a go-between to arrange ransom payments from the King of Denmark (Iceland was a Danish possession at the time).



Left: *Seventeenth century Barbary corsair*

Forced to leave his family, Reverend Ólafur set out, penniless, across the Mediterranean to Italy, then to France, and from there to Holland, eventually reaching Denmark after six months of arduous travel. There was to be no ransom money for him, though. Denmark had been faring poorly in the Thirty Years' War, and the royal coffers were too depleted. Reverend Ólafur had to return to Iceland, alone.

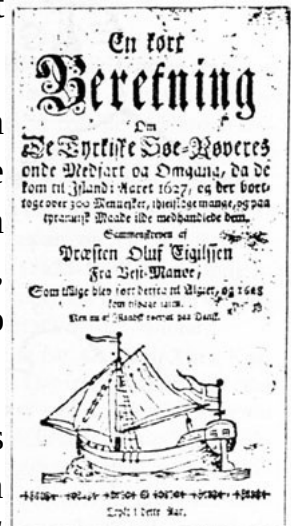
It took ten years to collect the necessary funds.

In the end, only thirty-four of the Icelanders enslaved in Algiers were freed. Reverend Ólafur's wife was among them. The couple had three years together before Reverend Ólafur died, at the age of seventy-five, in 1639. They never saw any of their abducted children again.

After Reverend Ólafur returned to Iceland, the local bishop asked him to write down an account of his experiences. He did so, producing a manuscript of about 20,000 words.

There was no publishing industry in Iceland in the seventeenth century, and Reverend Ólafur's text was never intended to be published as a book. Instead, he wrote it out by hand and then circulated that hand-written copy, which was read, passed on, copied, recopied, and recopied again and again for over two hundred years.

A Danish translation of one version of Reverend Ólafur's narrative was printed in 1741, but it was not until 1852 that an Icelandic language version finally appeared in print as the *Lítill saga um herhlaup Tyrkjans á Íslandi árið 1627* (*Short Saga of the Turkish Raid on Iceland in the Year 1627*).



Aside from the eighteenth century Danish translation (which is little known), Reverend Ólafur's narrative had never been translated out of the original Icelandic until recently, and so his story, and the remarkable story of the 1627 corsair raid, have been mostly unknown outside Iceland...

...Reverend Ólafur was a careful observer, and his narrative is filled with a wealth of detail—social, political, economic, religious—from both Muslim North Africa and Europe in the early seventeenth century (Reverend Ólafur was born in the same year as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Galileo Galilei). It is also a moving story on the human level: we witness a devout man recounting a bitter personal tragedy, and, like others before and after him, struggling to reconcile such calamity with his understanding of God...

...In the summer of 1627, two groups of Barbary corsairs raided Iceland, one from Salé, on the Moroccan coast, and one from Algiers. Between them, they killed dozens of people and captured over four hundred, packing the captives aboard their ships and transporting them to North Africa to be sold in the slave markets there. Most of these captives were taken from Heimaey, one of the Westman Islands...



...The corsairs landed over 200 men on Heimaey and in two days of violent raiding captured nearly 250 people, including many women and children. Adding these new captives to the more than 100 they had already taken in East Iceland, they then set sail for Algiers, their home port.

In Algiers, many of the captive Icelanders quickly succumbed to disease and shock. Those who survived were auctioned off into slavery and forced to endure hard servitude until a ransom expedition was finally organized to liberate them, almost a decade after their initial capture...



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