
The Odyssey of Olafur Egilsson

*A new translation of a very old book recalls another
slave trade zone in the world.*

By Michael Engberg

AS TITLES GO, *THE TRAVELS of Reverend Olafur Egilsson: The Story of the Barbary Corsair Raid on Iceland in 1627* (The Catholic University of America Press) is a model of understatement, presumption and historical precision. The understatement resides in the fact that Reverend Egilsson's wanderings were much more of an odyssey than a travel-agency tour, with enough torture, suffering and desperation to evoke the trials of Odysseus himself. The presumption stems from the calculation of the publisher that a narrative that sat untouched for centuries except for Icelandic and Danish renderings has found a potentially receptive audience in America in the new millennium. And the exactness of the subtitle heads off very contemporary leering about the religion practiced widely in North Africa. As translators Karl Smari Hreinsson and Adam Nichols make clear, we're talking about more here than Muslims, pirates or Muslim pirates.



The Maghreb is generally described as most of the region of northwest Africa east of Egypt. This includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and, more recently, Mauritania.

In fact, we're not talking about pirates in the traditional sense at all while the Muslims involved in Reverend Egilsson's description of his misadventures belonged to a cast of thousands, many of them scabrous Europeans.

In the 17th century as for a couple of centuries before and after it, so-called "privateers" were not sailing the seas against individuated enemies and in pursuit of loot just for such European powers as England and Spain, but were a recourse for any country that wanted to protect and enrich itself without having to lavish expenses on a national navy. Typical arrangements called for the privateers and ruling government or monarch to split the swag obtained from raids fifty-fifty. As an insurance policy against being taken for lowlife pirates, the privateers were armed with documents attesting to their semi-official status. Hreinsson and Nichols point out in their concise introduction to the Egilsson writing that such a system attracted mercenary

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sea dogs from every state in Europe, so the odds were pretty favorable in the period that every fifth or sixth ship spotted on the Atlantic horizon was a privateer, making it time for full speed ahead. (They toss in the pertinent aside that while these mercenaries are generally thought of as having faded from the scene in the 19th century with the consolidation of national navies, they are hardly alien to the private "contractors" given conspicuous roles in modern war zones.)

REVEREND EGILSSON'S TROUBLES, KNOWN IN ICELAND AS the Tyrkjardnio (the Turkish Raid), began in June 1627 when one privateer pushed north from Sale (present-day Morocco) and three others from Algiers in order to add more European slaves to those already in captivity in the Maghreb. Iceland as an attack destination might have seemed ambitious from such departure harbors, but it was encouraged by numerous factors, including newly adopted round-bottom vessels permitting longer voyages. No less important, the crews counted Scandinavians, Dutchmen, Germans and other Europeans whose buccaneering pasts made them very familiar with northern waters. By one estimate cited by the translators, "from the latter part of the 16th century well into the middle of the 17th and beyond, over half the corsair [captains] were Europeans, ex-privateers wishing to continue their lucrative profession and/or captives who had 'turned Turk,' become Muslim and worked their way up to positions of power." One last ingredient in the success of the raids was that Denmark, then ruling Iceland, was late in sending a regularly scheduled naval patrol ship to its territorial possession; by the time the Danes arrived, the corsairs were already heading back to the Mediterranean with their latest captives.

While the raiders from Sale attacked Iceland's southwest corner in the vicinity of Grindavik, those from Algiers landed on the Westman Islands off the south coast. About 40 people were reported killed in clashes, with 380 rounded up for taking back to Algeria. Among them was the Lutheran pastor Egilsson, his pregnant wife, and their several small children. Their last view of their homeland as they were being put aboard the ships of the corsairs was of flames devouring the main buildings of their settlement.

Then things got bad.

Shortly after the raiders started back home, Egilsson was singled out by their captain as the kind of leader who would know where treasure was hidden, so he was bound hand and foot and worked on for the information.

"The captain beat me, striking and kicking me while I screamed helplessly with the pain of it. I do not know how many blows he gave me, but he beat me as hard as he could until I was too hoarse to scream any longer. Then a



Dutch renegade Jan Janszoon has been mentioned as the organizer of the raid on Iceland.

man was brought forward who spoke German. He asked me if I knew about any money that might be anywhere. I said forcefully that I knew of none, and wanted only that they beat me to death quickly and have done.”

Although hardly in a position to appreciate it at the time, the pastor’s behavior during the beating ultimately contributed to the sparing of his life. That was hardly a foregone conclusion for him or any of his fellow captives.

Once in Algiers, they got an immediate idea of their new status. “Icelanders were separated from each other—friend from friend, children from parents—and driven through the streets, from one house to another, to the market where they were put up for auction as if they were sheep or cattle.” Under corsair rules, the first two slaves went to the ship’s captain, after which the local ruler was entitled to choose every eighth prisoner. Unfortunately for Egilsson, one of those eighths was his 11-year-old son. (“When he was taken from me, I asked him in God’s name not to forsake his faith and not forget his catechism. He said with great grief, ‘I will not, father! They can treat my body as they will, but my soul I shall keep for my good God.’”)

SUCH PIETIES COURSE THROUGHOUT EGILSSON’S ACCOUNT, each of his 27 brief chapters concluding with a Biblical citation attesting to the virtues of long-suffering. But what distinguishes the document are intervening descriptions of daily life in Algiers, the pastor jotting down impressions of everything from the ubiquitous camels and donkeys in the city streets to the kind of clothes favored by Algerian men and women. Turning to the city itself: “I want to explain that it is white as chalk from limestone that is boiled in big iron kettles, under each of which fire burns in four places. The town is built up to a mountain. It is very narrow at the upper end near the top of the mountain and very long and very wide at the sea.”

Through the summer that he spent in Algiers, Egilsson also found out that the fairly regular forays out for new slave labor were dictated by the poor health of those brought back from earlier raids. While some of them fell prey to diseases of one kind or another, others simply couldn’t handle heavy labor in their generally weakened condition. Aggravating the labor market still further was an interdiction against Muslims owning other Muslims as slaves. Inevitably, this led many Christian abductees to claim a religious conversion. As transparent a ploy as this was in a number of cases, it also left the locals in a bind since they were assiduous (brutally so at times) about trying to convert their captives, every religious recruit marking a triumph over Christianity. It was within this ambivalent context that both sides, captors and captives,

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leaned on ransom extortions since, in contrast to the situation of black slaves in America, those in the Maghreb were freed if they persuaded their homelands to pay for their liberty. More visible than other Icelanders to the Algerians, especially after his beating, Egilsson was informed in September that he was being returned to Europe with a safe conduct pass to collect ransom for his fellow Scandinavians.

Things didn't get much easier.

ACCOMPANIED BY A DOZEN OTHER EUROPEANS WITH IDENTICAL missions to pick up ransom payments from their homelands, Egilsson sailed back across the Mediterranean on a journey that would take him to Italy, Malta, France, Germany, Holland and Denmark. Along the way, "I suffered great hardship and distress, and at one point, for the lack of water and proper food, I was reduced to drinking water that a lion, a bear, an ostrich and some monkeys and poultry had drunk from and befouled. Even so I was glad, so thirsty was I." It didn't help that some would-be ports of call, such as Sardinia, wanted nothing to do with the corsairs and their passengers, in one instance keeping them off the coast until gales persuaded the captain to move on to Malta and a relatively better reception. Because the ship's captain was from Livorno, he next headed there. After a thorough examination by physicians to insure that they weren't carrying any diseases, the passengers were allowed into the city, and for a couple of days Egilsson ate respectably. But his plan to go on toward the north through Germany was scotched when he was advised that German soldiers were summarily shooting foreigners they encountered. So he went back to Livorno for weeks, where he detailed the city's appearance and customs along the lines of his earlier description of Algiers.

Perceptive as his commentary could be, Egilsson was anything but an impeccable guide. While in Italy, for example, he claimed that he could see the lights of Rome from Genoa and mistook Milan for Venice. In France, he took it too much for granted that his clerical status would bridge his general neediness and an Icelandic atheist in Marseilles was barely prevented from throwing him out of her inn. As with Germany, his stay in France also had a major detour when his intention of walking from Marseilles to Paris came up against a plague of murders of foreigners along the trail. On the other hand, it was also while in southern France that he found his greatest benefactor, a Dutch captain named Caritas Hardspenner who first made sure he had decent clothes and ate adequately while in Marseilles and who then transported him through Holland to Denmark.

Egilsson ended up spending almost two months in Copenhagen. On a

personal level, he was treated extremely well, with both Danes and fellow-countrymen from Iceland making sure that he always had enough to eat and had a few coins in his pocket; talk of his arduous experiences also garnered him an audience with King Christian IV. But because the Thirty Years' War had depleted Denmark's coffers, the pastor's hopes for obtaining the needed ransom money in Copenhagen, especially for his wife and children, went for naught. By his own admission he lapsed into a depression testing his faith ("My choice in these matters, in these mournful days of distress, is to flee to the Lord and to still hope for His mercy, both for me and my family, and all others who have walked or will walk the path of adversity.").

IT WAS IN THIS MOOD THAT HE SET OUT ON THE FINAL LEG OF his journey—what turned out to be a storm-buffed 31 days as part of a Dutch trading fleet to his Westman Island home. His reception was overwhelming. ("The poor people received me as if I had been their best friend returned from death . . . I met my beloved fellow neighbors, relatives and good friends, who received me with complete joy and did everything for me they could—so much so that I cannot write it all.") And indeed, aside from effusive thanks to God for seeing him through his tribulations, that was the end of Egilsson's account. In supplementing it in their English-language version, Hreinsson and Nichols have produced a number of other letters written by Icelanders victimized by the *Tyrkjaranid*. In their piecemeal accounts, they corroborate Egilsson's experiences.

As for the Reverend himself, he lived out his days on Heimaey and continued to press for the funds that would free the Icelanders still held in Algiers. It took him eight years, but he finally raised enough money to get his wife and a couple of dozen others back home. The reunion with his wife lasted for three years before he died at the age of 75 in March 1639. Neither ever saw their children again.



A fantasized view of Barbary pirates in their relentless pursuit of wealth and abducted victims to be held for ransom.

Michael Engberg is a freelance book reviewer.