

Some Reflections on Piri Reis's Work "Bahriye"

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Abstract: In this article, certain reflections are presented on the work "Bahriya" by Piri Reis, a sailor and cartographer who lived and worked in the Ottoman Empire. In particular, the article analyzes the focus of the work's content, the regions to which voyages were undertaken, aspects of the author's personality, the purpose for which the work was written and the reason it was named "Bahriya." It also examines information related to the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, the physical appearance and way of life of the indigenous people inhabiting these territories, the arrival of Europeans, and the author's personal views on the oceans, all of which are explored through detailed analysis.

Keywords: Bahriya, Mediterranean Sea, Ottomans, America, Sultan Suleiman, prose, poetry, Magellan, Columbus, kiyah.

Turkish sailor and traveler Piri Reis is considered one of the famous researchers of the sixteenth century and made a great contribution to the science of navigation. He carefully studied the places he visited and, using both his own observations and the data of other scholars and explorers, created important cartographic maps. He included most of these maps in his work Bahriya. The author dwells on each map given in the work separately and strives to present it as broadly and completely as possible. The main feature of this work is that many of the maps it contains provide geographical information about the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, it includes cartographic data on the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. It thus serves not only as one of the most important examples of the geography and cartography of the Ottoman Empire, but also as a primary source for various disciplines, which accounts for its wide renown. The work consists of two parts, partly in verse and partly in prose.

Regarding this, the author himself states the following in Bahriya: "In this book, I have always described the state of the shoals, the compass, the charts and the winds in verse. Only the practical matters in the Mediterranean I wrote in prose. Had I continued in verse, the words would have multiplied. In the course of work, at night, or in some difficulty, long phrases are not appropriate. What is needed is a brief exposition that can be grasped at once. From now on, the explanations of each part will be written first, then the details of the regions will be recorded. During work, at night or in hardship, if one immediately consults this book and acts accordingly, they will, God willing, benefit from it¹."

There is no precise information about the date of Piri Reis's birth. Most historians assume that he was born sometime between 1465 and 1470². In Bahriya, Piri Reis introduces himself as the son of

¹ Piri Reis. Kitab-i Bahriyye. Kervan Kitabçılık A.Ş. ofset tesisleri. Türkiye cumhurbaşkanlığı Ankara. 1973. S.112

² Afet Inan, Piri Reis'in Hayati ve Eserleri, Ankara 1983, s.9; Fuad Ezgü, "Piri Reis", Islam Ansiklopedisi, M.E.B. 1964, c.IX, s.561-565.

the brother of Ghazi Kemal Reis, who was the son of Haji Mehmed³. He initially began his maritime career under Kemal Reis. According to his clerk Çelebi, after the death of Kemal Reis, Piri Reis served together with Barbaros Hayreddin Pasha. A French merchant ship loaded with timber, captured by Barbaros's "volunteer ships," was brought by Piri Reis to Istanbul. For this, he was awarded a robe of honor by the Sultan⁴. After that, Piri Reis stayed for a time in Gallipoli, where he drew a world map in 1513. The part of this world map that has survived to our day, showing the eastern coasts of Central and South America and the western coasts of Europe and Africa, is considered to be a fragment of that map⁵.

The main reason for writing Bahriya was to present it as a gift to Sultan Suleiman the Lawgiver. The author himself emphasizes this point in his work⁶. Of the two editions of this work, which consists of prose and verse, between 120 and 134 maps belonging to the prose edition have survived. Among nearly sixty manuscripts identified in internal and external collections, classified as either first or second editions, or as map-only and text-only versions, twenty-five belong to the first edition. Since the poetic sections of the second edition were written by Seyyid Muradi, the first edition is important as it came directly from the pen of Piri Reis. As can be seen, the work is extensive in volume, and in addition to cartographic information on the Mediterranean, Black Sea and Aegean Sea, it also presents his views on the discovery of America, as well as on the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and recounts events he personally witnessed during his voyages⁷.

In Kitab-i Bahriye, Piri Reis divides the ocean into two parts and stresses that the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean are in fact one and the same, not separate bodies of water. He also notes that the journey from South America to China was first undertaken by seven ships that set sail from Portugal, and that only one of these seven ships returned to Portugal. It should be noted that the event he describes occurred before the sea voyage carried out by Ferdinand Magellan in 1519. Magellan began his voyage with five ships, and only one of them—the Victoria—returned, with eighteen crew members on board⁸. To confirm the information recorded by Piri Reis, one can point to the terrestrial globes prepared by the German astronomer and cartographer Johannes Schöner between 1515 and 1520, on which the Magellan Strait is shown south of the Piri Reis map⁹. This shows that the views and information provided by the author were later developed by other scholars and cartographers, who expressed similar ideas in their own maps and books.

According to Piri Reis, those who carried out the earliest sea voyages mapped all the regions. In Bahriya, it is stated that these maps were taken to Portugal, where several people handed them over to a cleric who had reached a high level of knowledge. This cleric compiled all the information into a single book, correlating the data with one another. It is also said that this book contained the measurements of all the regions and islands from China to the Western Sea, that is, the American continent¹⁰. As mentioned above, the scholar also expresses his views on Christopher Columbus's discovery of America. While describing Columbus's route, he says: "To the west there is a boundless sea. Do not think it lies at Algiers. Look and see, where is it?" He notes that after this, people long sought its boundaries but could not find them and finally concluded that it was a vast, dark landmass lying under the influence of currents. Located in the west, that is, in the direction of the lodos wind, if one sails 4,000 miles westward from Ceuta, one reaches the island of San Salvador. From there, after sailing 230 miles, one reaches the island of Cuba. He then continues:

³ Piri Reis. Kitab-i Bahriyye. Kervan Kitabçılık A.Ş. ofset tesisleri. Türkiye cumhurbaşkanlığı Ankara. 1973.S.27.

⁴ Katib Çelebi, Tuhfetü'l-Kibar fi Esfari'l-Bihar, Istanbul 1980, O.Ş. Gökyay tarafından yayıma hazırlanan nüsha, c.I, s.42-43.

⁵ Mine Esiner Özen, Piri Reis ve Müntehab-i Kitab-i Bahriye, Osmanlı Bilimi Araştırmaları VII/2(2006). Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, Revan 1633 numarada kayıtlıdır.

⁶ Piri Reis. Kitab-i Bahriyye. Kervan Kitabçılık A.Ş. ofset tesisleri. Türkiye cumhurbaşkanlığı Ankara. 1973.S.27.

⁷ O'sha asar 62-bet.

⁸ Bergreen L. Over the Edge of the World: Magellan's Terrifying Circumnavigation of the Globe. HarperCollins e-books, 2008. P391-392.

⁹ Дузер, чет ван, Глобус Иоганна Шёнера 1515 года: расшифровка исследование, издательство американского философского общества, 2010.

¹⁰ Piri Reis. Kitab-i Bahriyye. Kervan Kitabçılık A.Ş. ofset tesisleri. Türkiye cumhurbaşkanlığı Ankara. 1973.S.63

“See what the historians say,” and notes that this land was found in the year 870 according to the Hijri calendar, that is, in 1465 according to the Gregorian calendar¹¹. This occurred twenty-eight years before Columbus. From this it can be concluded that history was later rewritten. This region was called Antillia, that is, what we now know as the Antilles islands, while South America was referred to as Bertilia.

In his work, he also touches on the “redskins,” noting that their faces are flat and that the distance between their two eyes is wide. He says: “It is as if this distance were a span¹².” Here he does not mean an exact “span” but, by way of comparison, seeks to emphasize the breadth of the space between the eyes. He also mentions that their heads are adorned with bird feathers.

He then turns to a very important issue that deserves our closer attention. He writes that they have a plant called “kiyah,” and that after eating its leaves once, they show no mercy to the infidels in the Mediterranean. From this we may conclude that this plant causes some hormone to be produced in the human body that increases courage and strengthens bravery.

Describing Columbus’s arrival in America, he writes that one day ships arrived there from Spain to take a people captive. Since they had been there before, he notes that this region was already on the Spanish route. The sailors saw a boat at sea, followed it, and thus reached an island. In this way, Cuba was discovered. Because the population in Cuba was large, they were taken captive and used as slaves. It is said that the reason Columbus did not show Cuba on the map he sent to the king was precisely this. Piri Reis notes that two representatives of the indigenous population were sent from there to the King of Spain. After that, Columbus became the governor of this region.

The book recounts how the locals were given beads and, in return, handed over gold, and later again were given beads and this time gave pearls (or other valuables) in exchange. The fact that the information provided by Piri Reis is reproduced almost identically in the first book on American history written by Edward Eggleston in 1889 shows how accurate his accounts were¹³. As we can see, the author tried as much as possible to illuminate the geography and history of the regions. This greatly increases the value of the information he provides. As for why the work was titled precisely Bahriya, Piri Reis himself gives the explanation, saying: “I have written for you all the descriptions of the Sea of Rum; offer us a prayer. For, O man of perfect excellence, it is necessary for the people of this land to know the Sea of Rum and understand its state. For this reason, I have remembered it and called it “Bahriye”¹⁴.” Through these words, the scholar clearly sets out the reason.

In conclusion, we may say that Piri Reis’s work Bahriya is a unique source that occupies an important place in the history of maritime science, geography and cartography of the Ottoman period. The work provides detailed descriptions of the Mediterranean basin, ports, coasts, sea routes, winds and currents. For its time, the cartographer Piri Reis’s Bahriya was sufficiently comprehensive. As evidence, one can point to the fact that the information he provides in his work appears either verbatim or in slightly modified form in the books of other scholars and travelers. This confirms the accuracy and reliability of the data recorded by Piri Reis. He sought to depict as fully as possible the regions he visited, the population, and the seas and lakes he saw with his own eyes. Furthermore, the fact that the work was presented directly to Sultan Suleiman the Lawgiver, ruler of the Ottoman Empire, further increases its value. In particular, if we compare Bahriya with other maritime works of its time, its greatest advantage is that it is based on the author’s personal journeys and observations. In this respect, it is not only a theoretical treatise but also has significance as a practical manual.

Today the work serves as an important scholarly source for the study of history, geography and maritime science. In particular, the maps and depictions it contains help us understand the worldview of that period and the mutual influence between European and Ottoman scholarly

¹¹ O’sha asar, 105-bet.

¹² O’sha asar, 106-bet.

¹³ Edward Eggleston, American history, New York D.Appleton and company, 1889. P,10.

¹⁴ Piri Reis. Kitab-i Bahriyye. Kervan Kitabçılık A.Ş. ofset tesisleri. Türkiye cumhurbaşkanlığı Ankara. 1973.S.110.

traditions. For example, the information it provides on the activities of travelers such as Columbus and Magellan further broadens the scope of the work. However, Bahriya also has some shortcomings. Some of its geographical depictions do not fully correspond to modern scientific data, and certain regions are described from a subjective perspective. Nevertheless, the work was written at a high scholarly level for its time and secures Piri Reis a firm place in history as a great sailor and cartographer.

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