“Slaves, Slavs, Turks, and Renegades: the ‘Ottoman Captivity Narrative’ as a Cross-Cultural Genre”

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The memoirs of Captain John Smith, who was captured by the Powhatan tribe, and saved by its chief’s daughter, Pocahontas, are often considered the earliest of the “Indian captivity narratives,” which have come to be seen as the first truly American literary genre. Linda Colley’s study Captives (2002) suggests a cross-cultural model for the captivity narrative, following the British Empire’s shifting borders around the world from the American frontier to the Barbary regencies. However, as Nabil Matar points out in Britain and Barbary (2005), these parallels were not only overlooked, but actively concealed for political reasons: “There was a concerted policy in England to advertise the horrors of Barbary captivity to the English reading public – and ignore or suppress those of North America.” This comparative perspective expands the range of captivity narratives, but still anchors the development of this genre within English-language literature. Yet as Joe Snader has explained, highly influential and even earlier representations of the Near East were written by authors like Johann Schiltberger and Bartholomew Georgijević who had survived captivity in the Ottoman Empire. This paper will examine if the methodology developed for the “Indian” and “Barbary” narratives can applied to “Ottoman” narratives in German, Latin, and Slavic languages by writers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, such as Georgijević, George of Hungary, Václav Vratislav z Mitrovic, and Štefan Pilárik. The “Ottoman captivity narrative” later shaped emerging national literatures in Central and Eastern Europe, much as the “Indian captivity narrative” left its mark on the development of American literature. Even the “true travels” of John Smith, from Transylvania to his captivity in Istanbul, and from the Barbary states to his later captivity in Virginia, suggest a broader framework for this genre between America, the Middle East, and North Africa.