

# The Siege of Malta, 1565, Revisited

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## I

It was a fearsome spectacle of violent determination, of pikes and flashing scimitars, of muskets, bows and arrows, of howling men, thousands of them, in colourful turbans waving banners and invoking divine assistance in their imminent *jihad*, and of Janissaries,<sup>1</sup> the Ottoman Empire's elite and most disciplined standing force of infantrymen, indeed its armour of self-confidence. The formidable Ottoman armada,<sup>2</sup> under the command of Piãle Pasha, with Mustafa Pasha as general of the land forces, to be joined later by Dragut's corsair fleet and that of Hasan Pasha of Algiers, arrived at the shores of Hospitaller Malta on 18 May 1565. The next day, some 23-25,000 Turks disembarked. To resist them were 500 Hospitallers and some 8,000 men.

Ten painfully long days later, the siege of the small fort of St Elmo had begun, marking the first phase of this epic drama. St Elmo fell on 23 June, ironically on the eve of the feast of St John the Baptist, the Hospital's patron saint. The next Ottoman targets were Fort St Michael on Senglea and the bastion defended by the langue of Castile in Birgu.

It seemed only a matter of time before the central Mediterranean island, small, weak, and barren, would fall once more in Muslim hands, and its governing body, the military-religious Order of St John, now under the leadership of Jean de la Valette, would be permanently relegated to a fossilised past. In the last thirty years the Ottomans had twice emerged triumphant over the Hospitallers - at Rhodes in 1522<sup>3</sup> and at Maghribi Tripoli in 1551.<sup>4</sup> Malta would be the third occasion. Four months later, in the second week of September, however, that same mighty armada and what had remained of its men, horses, and war *matériel* retreated from the island's shores and, with all their hopes frustrated, sailed back home

— in haste, as the autumn storms in the Mediterranean were approaching, and in shame, as the resistance the small, accessible, vulnerable island offered them was a hideous blow to Ottoman pride and prestige.

The great Spanish relief force under Don Garcia de Toledo had arrived on 7 September,<sup>5</sup> signalling the lifting of the siege. By then ‘both besiegers and besieged had in fact reached the same pitch of exhaustion’.<sup>6</sup> This time the Turks failed to achieve their ultimate goal – to take Malta and destroy the chivalric institution of ‘corsairs parading crosses’<sup>7</sup> that for centuries had been harassing their men, women, and children, sacking their villages, blatantly interrupting their trade and commerce, interfering with their supplies, and inflicting heavy losses on their shipping. They left behind a tragic sight, whose realism would have stung Stendhal’s acute psychological finesse into immediate action — a ravaged countryside, a putrid stench of death with rotting corpses littering the whole place, a trail of smoke, dust, and widespread devastation, and crowds of people, most of them badly wounded, chanting the *Te Deum* solemnly amid scenes of horror, sorrow, and jubilation at the conventual church of St Lawrence in the tiny coastal city of Birgu. ‘Never,’ confessed Francisco Balbi di Correggio in his diary, ‘did music sound so sweet to human ears as did the peals of our bells on this day.’<sup>8</sup> With Spain’s naval forces and the Order’s three well-armed galleys around,<sup>9</sup> it is curious why the Turkish armada was allowed to sail out of Marsamxetto harbour unchallenged. If it is correct to assume that Don Garcia had had instructions not to engage the enemy, but simply to relieve the Hospitaller island ‘by a show of force’,<sup>10</sup> then why did he set off for the Levant, in mid-September, ‘in the hope of capturing at least some of the Turkish round ships in the rear of the [retreating] armada’<sup>11</sup>?

Basing himself on Spanish and Italian primary sources and other secondary literature, Fernand Braudel points out that ‘alarming reports’ had been spreading from as early as January 1565.<sup>12</sup> Indeed. A cursory survey of *Codex 91* of the *Libri Conciliorum*, the records of the Order’s Ordinary Council meetings kept at the National Library of Malta in Valletta, confirms that for the knights, the siege could not have been too

much of a surprise. The relevant minutes of the Council meetings are being reproduced in table-form below.

The Hospital's Ordinary Council Minutes  
recording the 'alarming reports'  
of 1565 and related matters

1565

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 19 January  | Soldiers recruited in Naples and Sicily to serve in Malta; other defence measures taken for an eventual Turkish assault.<br><i>AOM,* cod. 91, fol.143v; Bosio,* iii, 496.</i>   |
| 7 February  | Chapter-general postponed ( <i>prorogata est</i> ) to 18 February. Three days later postponed again to first Sunday in May because of current rumours of a Turkish invasion.<br><i>AOM, cod. 91, col. 144; Bosio, 495.</i>  |
| 10 February | A general tax of 30,000 gold <i>scudi</i> imposed on all priories to finance further defence measures.<br><i>AOM, cod. 91, col. 144; Bosio, 495.</i>  |
| 23 March    | Reports of a very likely assault reach Council.<br><i>AOM, cod. 91, col.148; Bosio, iii, 498.</i>   |
| 10 April    | Council seeks detailed information as to the exact number and quality of servants in the employ of the Hospitallers;<br>Council orders all servants who could not bear arms, and all Maltese and foreign <i>donne di malaffare</i> to leave for Sicily.<br><i>AOM, cod. 91, col.150; Bosio, iii, 501.</i> |
| 17 April    | Council decrees that a roll-call should be made of all knights and servants-at-arms residing at the auberges, and that these should examine carefully the state of their arms, etc, both defensive and offensive.<br><i>AOM, cod. 91, col.151; Bosio, iii, 504.</i>                                       |
| 30 April    | Chapter-general again postponed to the first Sunday in July.<br><i>AOM, cod.91, col.151v.</i>   |
| 4 May       | Measures taken for a better defence of Gozo.<br><i>AOM, cod. 91, col.152; Bosio, iii, 503-504.</i>  |
| 9 May       | A four-man commission assigned the task of seeing that all provisions of wheat, barley, and vegetables were collected and taken to Birgu.<br><i>AOM, cod. 91, col.152; Bosio, iii, 510.</i>   |

[\*AOM: Archives of the Order of Malta,  
National Library of Malta, Valletta

Bosio: Iacomo Bosio, *Dell' Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.ma Militia di San Giovanni Gierosolimitano. Parte III.* (Rome, 1602)]

If Balbi di Correggio's account of the episode is anything to go by, it was Süleyman's 'dearest wish to capture Malta'.<sup>13</sup> Not that the island itself was of any great importance to the Empire,<sup>14</sup> but it 'lay,' observes Jacques Heers, 'in the path of every Turkish raid or campaign westwards, and every time the Turks sallied forth, or returned East, they came across the Knights and their guns and ships'.<sup>15</sup>

Balbi di Correggio's diary is a first-hand account of what the sixty-year-old Spanish arquebusier had personally witnessed during the siege. He identifies two reasons motivating Süleyman's attempt. Once Malta was in Ottoman hands, he quotes the sultan as saying, 'other more large-scale enterprises' would follow in an endeavour to realise what Süleyman's father had failed to accomplish — the conquest of Calabria; in 1480 the city-port of Otranto had already been taken (but then lost the following year).<sup>16</sup> The sequence of events subsequent to 1565 raises important questions, prompting me to challenge the authenticity of Balbi di Correggio's claim — even if only to invite historians of early modern times to rethink the narrative about these years. In 1574, the Ottomans took Tunis permanently, which lies nearer Sicily than Malta does. How many attempts did the Ottomans make to realise their objective, to seize Sicily and the whole of Latin Europe from their comfortable base in Tunis after that date? None that I know of. Why? Was there a change of heart? Did they start having second thoughts about the sanity of Süleyman's project? Were the 'strategic narrows' between Tunis and Sicily fraught with greater perils now than those between Hospitaller Malta and Sicily had been before 1565? Was it because of Malta's ever-present naval forces in the area, which tends to reconfirm the Order of the Hospital's unfailing political relevance to Europe? Lepanto, the much celebrated but meaningless Christian victory, could not have been that determining to change the course of Mediterranean history. The decisive factor, as Fernand Braudel points out, was the truce between the two major powers of the day which rendered the return of peace in the Mediterranean possible and marked the beginning of the 'naval decline' of the Ottoman empire. But that was concluded in 1581.<sup>17</sup>

There was a second reason, perhaps a more significant one as it had taken precedence in the diarist's thinking. Earlier in his account, Balbi di Correggio had underscored the sultan's increasing hatred and fury against the Order of St John<sup>18</sup> for the great and irreparable damage their piratical adventures in the Levant were causing the Empire. I am inclined to believe this to have been the sultan's true driving force. Lionel Butler once claimed that 'it is open to doubt whether they wished to acquire Malta, which they regarded as poor, unhealthy, and exposed'.<sup>19</sup> Whether Süleyman would have besieged Malta had not the knights been settled there is a moot point, certainly not an exercise in historical retrospection.

It is still not sufficiently clear why the powerful military machine of the Ottoman Empire had to wait so long to strike. The Ottoman triumph at Djerba in 1560 was a significant event;<sup>20</sup> but, like the Habsburg siege of Tunis in 1535 ('Charles V's greatest victory against Islam'<sup>21</sup>) and the battle of Lepanto in 1571, it was one without a morrow. In 1560, or perhaps the year after, the Ottomans appear to have missed a golden opportunity. The Habsburg expedition had ended up in a complete disaster, with half the armada sunk and some 600 of 'Spain's best men' lost.<sup>22</sup> The following year, Dragut destroyed seven more Spanish galleys, while in 1562, a storm wrecked what was left of that mighty armada, some 25 more galleys, off Malaga.<sup>23</sup> That would have been the right moment to strike at Malta when the Habsburgs could not have afforded to send any relief force to the Hospitaller island. With Tripoli in Ottoman hands, and Algiers, Bougie, and almost the rest of the Maghribi coast under the control of Süleyman's corsair-vassals, 'the Turks,' says André Clot, 'were masters of the sea'.<sup>24</sup> David Abulafia claims, and rightly so, that the victory at Djerba 'boosted the confidence of the Turks. They had good reason to feel that they were on the verge of a breakthrough.'<sup>25</sup> Molly Greene makes a similar remark: 'The Ottomans were now firmly in control of the central Mediterranean'.<sup>26</sup>

The three remarks offer a plausibly realistic assessment of the situation, but it is not followed up by the pertinent question of *why* the Ottomans did not act then? Why did the Turks fail to exploit Spain's obvious

weakness? This seeming strategic error on the part of the Ottomans may explain their retreat empty-handed in September 1565. But appearances in the past could have been as deceptive as they can be today. There were forces at work which appear to have defied the cold logic of geo-politics and geo-strategic thinking. These may go far to convince historians that the opportunity the immediate Djerba aftermath had offered was not altogether inexplicably missed. It is one of the historian's tasks to offer explanations, to say why this or that event happened. But the reasons put forward, however plausible they may sound, may not necessarily be the real ones.

Interpretations may sound valid and convincing, and at the same time, as in the present case, be miles away from what had really motivated inaction. Some historians talk of the sultan's contemporary war against the Persians on his eastern frontier. A spirit of uncertainty, insecurity, and rebellion pervaded the empire. After the execution of Prince Mustafa in 1553, the prevailing 'fratricidal strife' between his two surviving sons, Bajazid, who had fled to Iran in 1559,<sup>27</sup> and Selim,<sup>28</sup> was a major preoccupation. With the Janissaries taking sides, more inclined to offer their support to the former, their loyalty to the sultan was put in doubt. The peace treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (April 1558), which ended the 65-year struggle (1494-1559) between Spain and France for control of Italy, deprived the Ottomans of access to the safe and convenient base at the French port of Toulon, from where they could organise devastating activities against the Spain of Philip II, her trade, and dependencies.<sup>29</sup> There was, moreover, a raging famine and a plague epidemic, both of which could have disrupted the military programme. These conditions may have dictated Ottoman inaction in Western waters, indeed 'paralysing' Süleyman's movements and his ability to decide.<sup>30</sup> John Wolf further explains that without the sultan's physical presence at the theatre of war in the Western Mediterranean, his forces were 'immobilised'.<sup>31</sup> But would not the Turkish fleet under Piãle Pasha at Djerba weaken this claim? And what about the siege of Malta itself? Other than the Hospitallers, the Ottomans in 1560 had no one else to fear.

The knight Romegas, 'the most notorious' Hospitaller-pirate,<sup>32</sup> and 'the only Christian buccaneer to rival Dragut and Barbarossa in piratical panache' — perhaps an unfair assessment of the several other 'crusading corsairs',<sup>33</sup> including La Valette himself who in 1564 had authorised his nephew's expedition to seize Malvasia (Malmsey)<sup>34</sup> — made remarkably daring feats off Alexandria, preying on vessels laden with Oriental silk and other precious wares on their way to Mecca.

In these middle years of the [sixteenth] century [writes Braudel<sup>35</sup>], the boldest western corsairs were the Knights of Malta, led by La Valette, in the years 1554-1555 and by Romegas in about 1560. In 1561, the latter captured 300 slaves and several rich cargoes at the mouth of the Nile; in 1563, having set out with two galleys, he was seen sailing back to Cape Passaro with over 500 slaves, black and white and, heaped on to two ships (the rest had been sunk) the cargoes of eight ships he had captured. These prizes, the letters add, 'must have been very rich since they came from Alexandria'. In 1564, Romegas brought home three *corchapins* laden with oars, tow and munitions for Tripoli in Barbary, and a Turkish round ship of 1,300 *salme* which had left Tripoli for Constantinople with a cargo of 113 black slaves. The ship was taken to Syracuse, the *corchapins* to Naples

All these spectacular episodes, and more chilling ones besides, only provided the occasion for the siege. The true causes ran deeper and were of much longer standing. The Ottoman plans to gain control of the central Mediterranean can be traced to the mid-fifteenth century. In the first place, the conquest of Hospitaller Rhodes, a strategic gateway to the western Mediterranean, was long considered vital to the realisation of this policy. It explains the first significant attempt of 1480.<sup>36</sup> And so does the siege of Otranto that same year. The timing for both sieges appeared ripe. On the one hand, Albania had just been conquered, as had been almost the entire chain of Aegean islands, large and small.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, endemic rivalry persisted among the major centres of power on the Italian peninsula - Venice, Milan, Naples and the Papal States.<sup>38</sup> But both campaigns failed. Was Rhodes' and the Italian port-city's resistance far stronger than Mehemet II's invading force, or was

it the sultan's sudden death and the instability and fear of the unknown in the succession process that forced the Ottomans to retreat?<sup>39</sup>

Forty-two years later Süleyman succeeded where Mehemet had failed. In 1522 the knights were driven out and Rhodes turned Ottoman. Secondly, Ferdinand the Catholic's extension of the *reconquista* to a number of strategic points (*presidios*) on the western portion of the North African coast — the fortified island of Peñón de Velez on North Morocco was seized in 1507, Oran in 1509, and Algiers, Bougie, and Tripoli, all in 1510 — was in the long term a major force of permanent change. Not only did these developments promote the creation of the Barbary Regencies, enticing the Ottoman expansionist drive westward; they confirmed the great strategic potential of the central Mediterranean zone and the wisdom of Habsburg and Ottoman policy to try and gain complete mastery of it. The resultant clash between Christianity and Islam, which marked the history of the Mediterranean in the long sixteenth century, may therefore be attributed to Ferdinand's expulsion of the Moors from Granada in 1492 which inspired his ruthless *realpolitik* on the Maghribi coast.

## II

Much has been written about the siege of Malta, both in its immediate aftermath and since.<sup>40</sup> Yet it would still be legitimate to ask how meaningful this siege is to the history of the Mediterranean. The year 2015 marks the 450th anniversary of this episode, which the enlightened eighteenth century considered unique and which contemporary chroniclers and later historians did not hesitate to call a great event.<sup>41</sup> This is perhaps understandable. To those who lived and witnessed directly the excitement of that savage experience with its massive loss of life, when thousands were slaughtered in the name of God, the term greatness invoked tragic drama, spectacle, heroism, and even the extreme of butchery. A similar perception is likely to be also entertained by the common man-in-the-street today, whose innocent knowledge of the episode was built on what s/he had learned in her/his early days



at school or simply through historical novels.<sup>42</sup> Interesting, exciting, and elegantly written though these may well be as literary works, they should be treated as pure fiction. The siege, no doubt, was impressive in its various manifestations — as much in the defenders' heroic resistance and in its ruthlessness and carnage as it was in the two sides' religious fanaticism and firmness of purpose to annihilate the enemy of the Faith. Moreover, the material and psychological extent of the disaster is acknowledged by the episode's absence from any narrative of contemporary Ottoman history. The event remains unaddressed in official Ottoman chronicles. Palace chroniclers did not dare, as was their traditional practice, record an Ottoman humiliation. Failure to achieve an intended purpose had to be erased from the Empire's collective memory. The chroniclers' own career, indeed their life, would have been at stake.<sup>43</sup>

However, one should sound a cautionary note here. With the development of historical scholarship, the professional historian is today familiar with the long-term perspective. To him the qualifying term (*la longue durée*) speaks a different dialect, devising a different vision of reality. It goes far beyond emotion and coldly poses several questions that help sustain a more meaningful dialogue with the past, not solely with the great men of the past.<sup>44</sup> Over how long a period were the effects of the siege felt? To what extent did its impact spread out through the Mediterranean, its broader, more immediate, and forcefully determining geophysical context, sufficiently to influence the prevailing conditions — by halting their development, perhaps by modifying them, or indeed by significantly redirecting them? Did the siege really break the advance of the Ottoman Empire into the Western Mediterranean? At certain levels, as will be shown, the effects remained vividly alive; at others, they soon faded out. The Order did succeed, for example, in keeping the Christian victory alive in the Hospital's collective memory and that of the Maltese as a significant event through its annual liturgical commemoration on 8 September. It is still observed today on Malta. On the other hand, to regard the siege, as some of my undergraduate students have been taught to do, as unparalleled and unequalled anywhere else is too fanciful, reaching the acme of parochialism, often the bane, unfortunately, of

Maltese historiography. Neither is it correct to claim that Hospitaller Malta was the first to show that the Ottomans were not invincible after all. That had already been spectacularly demonstrated at the siege of Vienna thirty-six years earlier, in 1529.

To consider the siege as marking the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman Empire is historically untenable.<sup>45</sup> It simply did not mark a decisive turning point in its history. It did not bring the Empire's expansionist strategies and efforts to an end. It did not mitigate the intense fear it had so severely generated throughout Christian Europe by one iota.<sup>46</sup> Nor did the frenetic pace of shipbuilding and repair activity at Galata, Gallipoli, and the other naval arsenals of the Empire slow down. Its traditional objectives and its ready access to over-abundant timber supplies and manpower continued to sustain its warlike policies and to support the construction of new galleys. Islands and coastal villages in the western Mediterranean remained as vulnerable to Muslim corsair raids as they had been before 1565, providing the Empire with a constant flow of slaves. In 1566 the Turkish fleet sailed into the Adriatic with some six to seven thousand men, ravaged the towns of Ortona-a-Mare, San Vito, and Vasto on the coast of Abruzzo, and then set them on fire.<sup>47</sup> That same year witnessed, too, both Süleyman's massive expedition with some 300,000 men to Central Europe (Szigetvár, in Hungary) and the capture of Chios from the Genoese. Two years later the Ottoman armada sailed in defence of Muslim Sumatra against the Portuguese. By May 1570 the conquest of Venetian Cyprus was nearly complete. From Malta to Lepanto, 'the Ottomans still maintained,' notes Onur Yildirim,<sup>48</sup> 'their diplomatic relations with the principal political powers of their time in terms favourable to enhancing their supremacy against their eastern and western neighbours'. Yildirim is referring in particular to the truce with Austria and the revised terms of peace with Poland in 1568. In the summer of 1573, notwithstanding the crushing defeat the Ottomans had experienced at Lepanto, a new fleet, constructed within five to six months,<sup>49</sup> ravaged the coasts of Sicily and southern Italy,<sup>50</sup> and at the same time 'subdued' Yemen after years of revolt.<sup>51</sup> The following year, the Ottomans took Tunis and La Goulette permanently from Spain. Fez on Morocco was captured in 1576.<sup>52</sup> To

these 'astonishing achievements' should be added Murad IV's recapture of Baghdad, '22 years after it had been lost in 1617,' Crete in 1669, and in 1683 Vienna was besieged again.<sup>53</sup> If, by the later half of the sixteenth century, 'further expansion of the empire' did in fact begin to grind gradually to a halt, betraying early symptoms of decline, it may only be attributed to the death of Süleyman in September 1566<sup>54</sup> and to 'a number of fundamental weaknesses', like 'inflation and financial difficulties, rural depopulation, problems with the *timariote* system which had important social and economic consequences, undue influence of court favourites and women in the affairs of state.'<sup>55</sup> Other contributory elements included the sultanate itself,<sup>56</sup> like Süleyman's own 'unworthy successor', Selim II, 'the first of the do-nothing sultans'.<sup>57</sup> These were more determining factors than the repulsion of the huge Ottoman armada at Malta, which 'merely strengthened the desire for revenge'.<sup>58</sup>

Desmond Seward puts the argument very neatly and succinctly: 'the siege had decided nothing, and the Turks completed their conquest of the Levant.'<sup>59</sup> The 'military threat to the Christian west,' says Henry Kamen, 'continued to be very real.'<sup>60</sup> That the need was felt to form with urgency another Holy League between the papacy, Venice, and Spain over the question of Cyprus was further proof of this. Moreover, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, like, for example, that of the Republic of Venice, was in part a relative phenomenon. The extent of one's power is measured by contrasting it with that of its rivals. One's might grows, or appears to grow, relatively weaker if that of its rivals is seen to grow stronger. If one does not keep up with the enemy's progress, one starts falling behind. In its various manifestations, the rise of the nation-state in Europe with its accompanying strengths — political consolidation, military sophistication, steady economic growth, restructure of society, and cultural development — was one major element which rendered the Ottomans weaker by comparison. The Ottomans failed to progress at the same pace as Europe.<sup>61</sup>

Within the sphere of Hospitaller history, the far-famed victory of 1565 was necessary — to revive its morale, regain its self-confidence and

sense of direction, recover its prestige, reaffirm its political relevance to Christian Europe, and reclaim its traditionally close rapport with its patrons. Ironically, it was in the Order's interest to keep the threat of Islam alive, as it alone could underscore the Hospital's political relevance and sustain its reason for existence. If there was no such threat, real or feigned, the Order would have had to create it.

Within the context of the local history of Malta, the siege had set in motion forces which not only modified the island's physical, social, and cultural physiognomy: they determined the shape and form its structural transformation would assume. As pointed out elsewhere over a decade ago,<sup>62</sup> the observations David Herlihy made on the Italian city of Pistoia<sup>63</sup> apply perfectly well to the central Mediterranean island — 'changes in the size and character of its population, the economic activities of its people in town and countryside, governmental institutions, distribution of wealth, social divisions, and culture in both its religious and secular manifestations'.

The two distinct historical contexts, the Order's and Malta's, were mutually interactive. It was in part the outcome of the siege, but to a greater extent (as will be shown later) la Valette's own failure to find a better place for his Convent, which retained the Hospitallers permanently on Malta.<sup>64</sup> In the long term, the regular flow of funds from their vast estates in Europe, channelled and invested on the island, the knights' own lavish standard and style of living, their consistent crusading activities, their wide network of diplomatic representations throughout Europe, their consular agencies set up in almost every port city in the Mediterranean, their aspirations of grandeur and claim to sovereignty — all these collectively helped to transform Malta radically for the better. By the time the French Revolution broke out in 1789 the island which the eight-man commission had visited and reported upon so negatively in 1524 was no longer recognisable. On the other hand, Malta too contributed its small, but significant, share to the Hospital. It helped the Hospitallers 'to survive' as an institution and to retain, by and large, unlike all the other military orders, its original character.<sup>65</sup> Secondly, Malta, with its 'relatively isolated, self-contained and easily

controllable environment', helped to enhance the Hospital's 'devotional side'.<sup>66</sup> Thirdly, the island 'also gave the Order sovereignty'.<sup>67</sup> This multifaceted interaction between the two phenomena, Malta and the Hospital, may only be attributed to the outcome of the siege of 1565.

There is one other issue worth reflecting on — the controversial figure of Jean de la Valette, as he is more popularly known. No controversy surrounds his heroic performance, first, in the whole tragic drama, in forcefully leading his knightly team and Maltese subjects to withstand the Turkish assault, and, secondly, immediately after the siege, in building the new fortress-city in all its Renaissance splendour, majesty, and elegance.<sup>68</sup> He died in 1568. His dominating physical stature, his overwhelming personality combining intelligence, religious conviction, and military discipline, elicited fear, reverence, and reassurance. He could not fail to leave a lasting impression on whoever came in his presence. His image has barely changed since then. A closer look at the true man, not at Antoine de Favray's artistic representation on canvas, where he is depicted as a demigod, but at the pen-portrait extant in surviving archival documentation, provides a better understanding of one of the most outstanding masters of the Order of St John. It reveals an underlying reality which historians had for long inexplicably tended to ignore — the Hospitaller warrior's attitude towards his principality, the negative perception he consistently entertained of Malta's potential. This is where controversy lies. He was a mortal like everyone else. He detested the island's weaknesses and the stark limitations its size inevitably imposed on the Order, too physically small and restricted to meet his grandiose ambitions. The person who is generally acclaimed as one of the island's greatest heroes, to whom a majestic bronze monument has fairly recently been erected in the heart of Valletta, did all he could within his powers to transfer his Convent to a better place. His appeal to the general-chapter in 1548 to move the Hospitaller headquarters to Tripoli is one classic example. There were others, in 1559 and 1567.<sup>69</sup>

To conclude: it has often been claimed that the knights defended the Christian cause with dedication and great determination.<sup>70</sup> However,

in the Ottoman siege of Malta, what really lay at stake was not the Christian cause. In the late fifteenth century, Venice had lost a whole string of important islands and other strategic posts, like Lepanto on the Gulf of Corinth, Modon, Coron, and Navarino, and yet Christendom remained intact. Rhodes was lost in 1522, with the leading Christian powers (the Habsburgs and the Valois) taking barely any notice, totally absorbed in making political and territorial gains on the Italian peninsula. Yet Christian Europe survived unharmed, as it would again and again after the fall of Cyprus in 1570, the loss of Tunis four years later, of Crete in 1669,<sup>71</sup> and of the Morea late in the second decade of the eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup> So, if one strips these and similar events of all their political rhetoric, what really was at stake in 1565 could not have been the Christian cause. Nor could it have been Malta's. If the island surrendered, most of its inhabitants would have probably been put to the sword or enslaved; those spared the ordeal would have either had to await being ransomed or experience a radical cultural change, a process of Islamisation like that of other Christian islands captured by the Turks or Barbary corsairs. For two centuries from AD 870, Malta had experienced Muslim rule,<sup>73</sup> without disappearing from the map of the Mediterranean. Was not Hospitaller Malta, after all, the great-grandchild of Muslim Malta? In the siege, what lay quintessentially at risk of total extinction was the Hospitaller institution. On this occasion, it was definitely not a question of the conventual headquarters being brutally forced to migrate to another location. It was literally a pure struggle for survival. La Valette and his knights knew very well that, if Malta capitulated to the Turkish forces, not only was there nowhere else to go, they could not expect to be treated the same way they had been on leaving Rhodes. The loss of Malta would have annihilated the Hospital completely.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Cameron W. Bradley, 'Hybrid Identities: Ethnicity, Religion, and the Janissaries in Sixteenth-Century Constantinople', in *Mediterranean Identities in the Premodern Era: Entrepôts, Islands, Empires*, ed. John Watkins & Kathryn L. Reyerson (Surrey, 2014), 53-71. Also André Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, trans. Matthew J. Reisz (London, 2005), Appendix 3, 'The Janissaries', 338-39.
- <sup>2</sup> Cfr. Idries Bostan, 'Ottoman Maritime Arsenals and Shipbuilding Technology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilization*, iii, ed. K. Cicek *et al.* (Ankara, 2000), 735-744; Colin H. Imber, 'The Navy of Suleyman the Magnificent', *Archivum Ottomanicum*, vi (1980), 211-82; Andrew Hess, 'The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453-1525', *American Historical Review*, lxxv, 7 (1970), 1892-1919; Palmira Johnson Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (Albany, 1994).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, N. Vatin, *L'Ordre de St. Jean de Jérusalem, l'Empire Ottoman et la Méditerranée entre le deux sièges de Rhodes (1480-1522)* (Louvain, 1994); Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204-1571*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1976-84), iii, 203-216; Ettore Rossi, *Assedio e Conquista di Rodi nel 1522 secondo le relazioni edite ed inedite dei Turchi* (Rome, 1927); id., 'Nuove ricerche sulle fonti turche relative all'Assedio di Rodi nel 1522', *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, xv (1934).
- <sup>4</sup> On Hospitaller Tripoli, Ettore Rossi, *Il dominio degli Spagnoli e dei Cavalieri di Malta a Tripoli (1510-1551)* (n.p., 1937); id., 'Il dominio dei Cavalieri di Malta a Tripoli (1530-1551) e i rapporti dell'Ordine con Tripoli nei secoli seguenti (1551-1798)', *Archivum Melitense*, vi, 2 (1924), 43-88.
- <sup>5</sup> See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London, Collins, 1972-73), 1017-1020; John Guilmartin Jr., *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1974), 176-93.
- <sup>6</sup> Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 1017.
- <sup>7</sup> This is how the Senate of the Venetian Republic dubbed the knights of Malta. See Alberto Tenenti, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice 1580-1615*, trans. from *Venezia e i corsari, 1580-1615* (Bari, 1961) by Janet & Brian Pullan (London, 1967), 39.
- <sup>8</sup> Francisco Balbi di Correggio, *La Verdadera Relación de todo lo que el anno de MDLXV ha succedido en la isla de Malta* (2nd edn, Barcelona, 1568). Trans. Ernle Bradford, *The Siege of Malta 1565* (London, 2003), 168.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-81.
- <sup>11</sup> Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 1019.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1015.
- <sup>13</sup> Balbi di Correggio, *La Verdadera Relación*, 32.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Jacques Heers, *The Barbary Corsairs: Warfare in the Mediterranean, 1480-1580*, trans. Jonathan North (London, 2003), 96.

- <sup>16</sup> Balbi di Correggio, *La Verdadera Relación*, 32. Also Frederick C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore/London, 1973), 236-37; M.E. Mallett & J.R. Hale, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State: Venice c.1400 to 1617* (Cambridge, 1984), 51; Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power* (Basingstoke, 2002), 36.
- <sup>17</sup> Braudel, 1139-1142.
- <sup>18</sup> Balbi di Correggio, *La Verdadera Relación*, 28.
- <sup>19</sup> Lionel Butler, 'The Order of St John in Malta: An Historical Sketch', in Council of Europe, *The Order of St John in Malta with an exhibition of paintings by Mattia Preti, Painter and Knight*, ed. Council of Europe (Malta, 1970), 23-46: 28.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, G. Monthicourt, *L'expédition espagnole contre l'île de Djerba* (Paris, 1913).
- <sup>21</sup> Gábor Ágoston, 'Information, ideology, and limits of imperial policy: Ottoman grand strategy in the context of Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry', in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, ed. Virginia H. Aksan & Daniel Goffman (Cambridge, 2007), 75-103: 98.
- <sup>22</sup> David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London, 2011), 429.
- <sup>23</sup> Henry Kamen, *Philip of Spain* (New Haven/London, 1997), 88-89.
- <sup>24</sup> Clot, *Suleiman*, 172-74.
- <sup>25</sup> Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 429.
- <sup>26</sup> Molly Greene, 'The Ottomans in the Mediterranean', in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, ed. Virginia H. Aksan & Daniel Goffman (Cambridge, 2007), 104-116: 109.
- <sup>27</sup> See *Négociations de la France dans le Levant*, ed. E. Charrière (Paris, 1886), 569-570.
- <sup>28</sup> Christine Woodhead, 'Perspectives on Süleyman', in *Süleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern World*, ed. Metin Kunt & Christine Woodhead (London/New York, 1995), 164-190: 178, 179.
- <sup>29</sup> See Dahiru Yahya, *Morocco in the Sixteenth Century: Problems and Patterns in African Foreign Policy* (Harlow, 1981), 33.
- <sup>30</sup> Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 989-990.
- <sup>31</sup> John W. Wolf, *The Barbary Coast: Algeria under the Turks 1500 to 1830* (New York/London, 1979), 41.
- <sup>32</sup> Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 429.
- <sup>33</sup> For both quotes, Stephan O'Shea, *Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (London, 2007), 297, 298.
- <sup>34</sup> Ubaldino Mori Ubaldini, *La Marina del Sovrano Militare Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta* (Rome, 1971), 216-217, 250.
- <sup>35</sup> Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 875-876.
- <sup>36</sup> See Setton, *The Papacy*, ii, 346-63.
- <sup>37</sup> Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, i: Empire of the Gazis: The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Empire 1280-1808* (Cambridge, 1976), 47-49 *passim*.



- <sup>38</sup> On the state of the various powers on the Italian peninsula in early modern times, *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300-1550*, ed. John M. Najemy (Oxford, 2004); and *Early Modern Italy 1550-1796*, ed. John A. Marino (Oxford, 2002).
- <sup>39</sup> For an overview of Mehemet II's vast conquests, Shaw, *Ottoman Empire*, i, 55-70.
- <sup>40</sup> See, for example, Giacomo Bosio, *Istoria della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana di Rodi e di Malta*, iii (Rome, 1620), books xxiv-xxxiii; Pierre Gentile de Vendôme, *Della Historia di Malta* (Bologna, 1566); C.S. Zabarella, *Lo Assedio di Malta* (Turin, 1902); J.F. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys* (Cambridge, 1974), 176 *et seq.*; Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 1014 *et seq.*; Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204-1571*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1976-84). The siege is discussed in vol. iv. See also Victor Mallia-Milanes, 'The Birgu Phase in Hospitaller History', in *Birgu: A Maltese Maritime City*, ed. L. Bugeja, *et al* (Malta, 1993), i, 73-96; Stephen C. Spiteri, *The Great Siege. Knights vs Turks mdlxv: Anatomy of a Hospitaller Victory* (Malta, 2005).
- <sup>41</sup> That is how the Turkish invasion of Hospitaller Malta gradually came to be popularly known as the Great Siege.
- <sup>42</sup> These include, for example, Nicholas Prata's *Angels in Iron*; David Bell's *Ironfire: An Epic Novel of Love and War*, also titled *The Sword and the Scimitar*; James Jackson's *Blood Rock*; and *The Religion* by Tim Willocks. The list can be stretched indefinitely.
- <sup>43</sup> Onur Yildirim, 'The Battle of Lepanto and its Impact on Ottoman History and Historiography', in *Mediterraneo in Armi*, ed. R. Cancila, ii (Palermo, 2007), 533-556.
- <sup>44</sup> See, for example, Fernand Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*', in Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (London, 1980), 25-54.
- <sup>45</sup> For an excellent overview of the history of the Mediterranean in early modern times, Michel Fontenay, 'The Mediterranean, 1500-1800: Social and Economic Perspectives', in *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798: Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, ed. Victor Mallia-Milanes (Malta, 1993), 43-110.
- <sup>46</sup> See, for example, Alexander H. De Groot, 'The Ottoman Threat to Europe, 1571-1830: Historical Fact or Fancy?', in Mallia-Milanes, *Hospitaller Malta*, 199-254.
- <sup>47</sup> Salvatore Bono, *I corsari barbareschi* (Turin, 1964), 154-155.
- <sup>48</sup> Yildirim, *Battle of Lepanto*, 538.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.
- <sup>50</sup> Shaw, *Ottoman Empire*, i, 179.
- <sup>51</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 1137; also Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power* (Basingstoke, 2002), 61-62.
- <sup>52</sup> See Yahya, *Morocco*, 67-68.
- <sup>53</sup> Clot, *Suleiman*, 299-300.
- <sup>54</sup> See, for example, Henry Kamen, *Spain, 1469-1714: A Society of Conflict* (4th edn: London, 2014), 116.
- <sup>55</sup> Clot, *Suleiman*, 299.

- <sup>56</sup> H.G. Koenigsberger & George L. Mosse, *Europe in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1971), 194.
- <sup>57</sup> After Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 1046.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>59</sup> Desmond Seward, *The Monks of War: The Military Religious Orders* (London, 1972), 288.
- <sup>60</sup> Kamen, *Spain*, 116.
- <sup>61</sup> See Shaw, *Ottoman Empire*, i, 169.
- <sup>62</sup> Victor Mallia-Milanes, 'Introduction to Hospitaller Malta', in Mallia-Milanes, *Hospitaller Malta*, 11-12.
- <sup>63</sup> David Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200-1430* (London, 1967), 13.
- <sup>64</sup> The Hospital's resolution to settle permanently on Malta has often been attributed to the outcome of the siege. There was a time when I, too, used to ascribe to this view until I had the opportunity to study the Grandmaster's ideas and personality more closely.
- <sup>65</sup> Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Hospitallers: The History of the Order of St John* (London, 1999), 116.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>68</sup> See Victor Mallia-Milanes, 'Frà Jean de la Valette 1495-1568: A Reappraisal', in *The Maltese Cross*, ed. T. Cortis (Malta, 1995), 117-129.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.
- <sup>70</sup> See, for example, Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 432.
- <sup>71</sup> Shaw, *Ottoman Empire*, i, 212-213; Lane, *Venice*, 409-410.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 410-411.
- <sup>73</sup> Charles Dalli, *Malta: The Medieval Millennium* (Malta, 2006), 51.