



# A MEDITERRANEAN STRATEGY: THE GREAT SIEGE OF MALTA (1565)

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# BESIEGED MALTA 1565

VOLUME II

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Maroma Camilleri



Heritage Malta

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# A MEDITERRANEAN STRATEGY: THE GREAT SIEGE OF MALTA (1565)

ANNE BROGINI

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## 1565, a clash of empires

ON 6 OCTOBER 1564, in the Topkapi Palace of Istanbul, the atmosphere in Suleiman the Magnificent's *Divan* was particularly bellicose. Turkish and Barbarian counsellors were wondering whether or not they should send an armada against Malta, which in 1530 had become the fiefdom of the Hospitallers of St John, that the Ottoman Empire had already expelled from Rhodes in 1522. This time, unlike in Rhodes, the fleet that would attack Malta in 1565 would expel the Hospitallers from the Mediterranean definitely and would repel to the North the frontier between the Spanish and Ottoman empires.

Initially largely territorial, the Turkish Empire had taken on a new maritime dimension as of the early sixteenth century. Throughout the Middle Ages, its story was a progressive westward migration, which led the Turks from the steppes of Central Asia to the shores of the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> From the fourteenth century, the Ottoman dynasty continued its westward advance and also came into conflict with the Byzantines, laying the foundations of its power: in 1363, the conquest of Adrianople (which became the capital of the empire in the middle of the fifteenth century) allowed the Ottomans to enter the Balkans, thanks to the conquests of Thrace, Macedonia and Bulgaria which were added to Asia Minor, already Ottoman. The progression towards the Mediterranean took on a new pace after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, which made the Sultan Mehmed II the heir to the ancient empires and a pretender to the *dominium mundi*. Just like in Christendom, the Ottoman world adhered

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: the Story of the Ottoman Empire (1300-1923)* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 3-6; Jean-Pierre Roux, *Histoire des Turcs: deux mille ans du Pacifique à la Méditerranée* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

to a principle of universalism legitimized by a proselytizing religion; throughout the sixteenth century, both the Spanish and Ottoman empires thought they were the holders of a universal truth in their struggle against barbarism and obscurantism.<sup>2</sup> From the early years of the sixteenth century, the Venetian *bailes* compared the Turkish Empire to that of Alexander the Great, who knew and had conquered all the *Oikumene*.<sup>3</sup> The fall of Constantinople wove a particular connection between the Ottomans and the Roman Empire: the conquest of the second Rome gave the sultan the last link between Europe and Asia, after the Balkans, while making them the heirs to the *basileus*, heads of an empire with a universal vocation, and demonstrated the victory of Islam over the Christian world. Such were the reasons that explained why Mehmed II left Adrianople in 1457 and officially established himself in Istanbul to make the new capital the mirror of Ottoman greatness.

From the end of the fifteenth century and after the two wars against Venice from 1463-1479 and from 1499-1503,<sup>4</sup> Turkish maritime ambition was dominated by the desire to unify the Eastern Mediterranean under its own authority, which implied the conquest of shorelines and their submission to Istanbul.<sup>5</sup> With the conquest of the Arab lands of the Levant, the Turks could indeed claim themselves as heirs and restorers of the greatness of Islam, and finally the Masters of the Eastern Mediterranean where, despite the loss of the Holy Land States, the Christians had retained a maritime and commercial supremacy.<sup>6</sup> Even greater than the fall of Constantinople, the “major event of Ottoman greatness”<sup>7</sup> was therefore the conquest of Syria and Egypt between 1516-1517, which brought about the demise of the Mameluke sultanate of Cairo and of the Abbasid Caliphate. These conquests were followed by the immediate submission of the Sherif of Mecca, who controlled also Medina: in 1517, Selim I thus became Caliph, heir to the Grand Caliphate, head of State and chief of all Muslims.<sup>8</sup> The submission of Egypt and Syria gave the Turks the control of the commercial line connecting Istanbul to Alexandria (the “caravan of Alexandria”) and to the Levantine ports that supplied the empire in luxury goods. This shipping line required maritime security in the Eastern Mediterranean and therefore the eviction of the Hospitallers who had been present in Rhodes since 1309, and who had conducted corsair operations all along the Muslim maritime road. That is why in 1522, Suleiman the Magnificent, son of Selim I, drove the Knights out of Rhodes and the Levant. From then on, the last Latin possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean were Chios (property of Genoa) and Cyprus (property

2 Jean-Frédéric Schaub, «Une historiographie expérimentale», in *La mobilité des personnes en Méditerranée de l'Antiquité à l'époque moderne*, ed. by Claudia Moatti (Rome: Collection de l'École Française de Rome, 341, 2004) p. 310.

3 Lucette Valensi, *Venise et la Sublime Porte: La naissance du despote* (Poitiers:Hachette, 1987), pp. 60-61.

4 Anastasia Papadia-Lala, *I Greci fra Venezia e i Turchi nell'arco della lunga durata*, in *I Turchi, il Mediterraneo e l'Europa*, ed. by Giovanna Motta (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1998), p. 187.

5 Robert Mantran, *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), pp. 133-135.

6 Fernand Braudel, *Grammaire des civilisations* (Paris: Champs Flammarion, 1993), pp. 88-91.

7 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 2 vols (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949, rééd. 1966), II, p. 16.

8 Alain Clot, *Soliman le Magnifique* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), p. 39; F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée...*, II, p. 16.

of Venice): these islands were taken by the Christians in 1566 and in 1570, and their conquest changed the Levant into an “Ottoman lake”, fully completed in 1669, when the Turks took Crete from the Venetians.

But the methodical penetration of the Mediterranean by the Ottomans was not limited to the Levant. In 1518, the Turks set foot in North Africa, thanks to the corsair Kheir-Ed-Din Barbarossa, who fought against the Spaniards and declared himself vassal of the Sultan: he created the Regency of Algiers thus giving the Turks the unification of the southern shore of the Western Mediterranean.<sup>9</sup> The process continued under the reign of Suleiman and his son Selim II, with the creation of two new Barbary Regencies, one in Tripoli founded by Dragut in 1551, and another in Tunis founded in 1574 by Euldj Ali. This irresistible military momentum allowed for a maximum expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean of the sixteenth century and inevitably led to its clash with Spain, which was trying at the same time to maintain the boundaries of its own maritime empire.

The mid-sixteenth century was indeed the time of a weakening in Iberian forces and a moment of setback of the Christian front, closely linked to the progressive recapture of the African *presidios* by the Barbary corsairs. The *presidios* (Melilla, Ceuta, Oran, Algiers, La Goulette, Tripoli) were fortified points defended by garrisons, which symbolized the frontier between Christendom and Islam; they were all conquered by the Spaniards shortly after the fall of Granada in 1492. In 1511, almost the entire Southern shore of the Western Mediterranean was under the dominion of Spain.<sup>10</sup> If the Spanish victories were numerous in 1520-1530, the first decade of the reign of Philip II (1556-1565) was marked by a process of withdrawal towards the north of the frontier in the Western Mediterranean. The successive losses of Tripoli in 1551, Mahdia in 1554, Bougie in 1555, the Mostaganem failure in 1558, the terrible defeat of Djerba in 1560, the rapid expansion of the influence of the Barbary corsairs on African territories and their maritime domination thanks to the *corso*, moved the area of contact and friction between the empires to the centre of the sea. The maritime frontier gradually materialized along a string of Christian islands, which for the most part were under Spanish authority: the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, Sicily, and Malta. In 1530, the Emperor Charles V gave Malta as a fiefdom to the Hospitallers; in 1565, the island was practising the same maritime and corsair war as the Barbary Regencies. The Knights' *corso* threatened both African coastlines (where many Muslims were caught and enslaved) and the Levant coastlines, and particularly the “caravan of Alexandria” which was the Hospitallers' favourite destination.<sup>11</sup>

9 Lemnour Merouche, *La course, mythes et réalités. Recherches sur l'Algérie à l'époque ottomane* (Paris: Bouchène, 2007), pp. 37-38; Jacques Heers, *Les Barbaresques. La course et la guerre en Méditerranée: (XIV-XVI siècles)* (Paris: Perrin, 2001), pp. 68-69.

10 Andrew Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier: a History of the Sixteenth Century Ibero-African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 59-60.

11 Anne Brogini, *Malte, frontière de chrétienté (1530-1670)* (Rome: Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 325, 2006); A. Brogini, *1565, Malte dans la tourmente: le Grand Siège de l'île par les Turcs* (Saint-Denis: Bouchène, 2011), pp. 53-58.

So the Barbary corsairs' exasperation was in line with the increasing irritation of the Ottomans who thought they had solved the problem of the Christian *corso* when they had chased the Knights from Rhodes. In 1565, the interests of both shores suddenly focused on Malta. Four actors were to enact a maritime strategy: the Spanish Empire and its vassals, the Hospitallers, the Ottoman Empire and its vassals, the Barbary corsairs. On the Christian side, the Viceroy Don García de Toledo and King Philip II could not consider losing Malta, last outpost which protected the kingdom of Sicily. As for the Order of St John, it could not retreat in front of the Barbary corsairs, nor lose a new battle after the fall of Rhodes in 1522 and Tripoli in 1551: if the Knights lost Malta, they would be definitively driven out of the Mediterranean. In spring 1565, there were no more alternatives: Malta became an issue between the two shores of the Western Mediterranean and war was inevitable.

## The Siege

After the Divan of 6 October 1564, the Turks managed to maintain secret the destination of the battle. The mobilization of Turkish arsenals provoked many rumours in Christendom, but the Spanish authorities believed that the objective of such a large fleet had to be an important place, such as Sicily or the *presidio* of La Goulette.<sup>12</sup> In April, during a stopover in Malta on the road to La Goulette, the Viceroy of Sicily mocked the Grand Master Jean de Valette who was worried about the defence of the island: the Viceroy replied that “the walls of Birgu seemed so resistant that even women could defend them”!<sup>13</sup> The Grand Master had to insist that the Viceroy give him 250 soldiers in case of danger. But Malta really was the target of the armada. On the morning of 18 May, de Valette wrote to Don García de Toledo informing him that the Turkish fleet was in front of the harbour of Malta and he thanked him for having sent him 250 soldiers a month before.

For four full months, from 18 May to 12 September, about 10,000 Christians (500 Knights, 2,500 soldiers and 7,000 Maltese), bravely resisted the Muslim army three times superior in number. Composed of 220 ships, of which about forty were commanded by Dragut Raïs and Euldj Ali Raïs,<sup>14</sup> the fleet included nearly 35,000 men who came from across the Ottoman Empire, including 12,000 Janissaries and *Sipahi*, the elite corps of the Turkish army.<sup>15</sup> The armada had 60 big guns, 25,000 bullets, several thousand bags and baskets laden with earth, and all the tools to undermine the fortifications and digging trenches (10,000 spades, 10,000 picks, 25,000 shovels).<sup>16</sup>

12 Colección de Documentos Inéditos para la Historia de España (CODOIN), tomo XXIX, *Malta y La Goleta. Correspondencia de Felipe II con Don García de Toledo y otros* (Madrid, 1856), p. 24, 18 January 1565 and CODOIN, XXIX, p. 87, 11 April 1565.

13 CODOIN, XXIX, p. 86, 10 April 1565.

14 Archivo General de Simancas (AGS), Estado Sicilia, Legajo 1129, ff. 70r-70v, 21 May 1565.

15 AGS, Estado Sicilia, Leg. 1129, f. 5v, 10 February 1565.

16 Antonfrancesco Cirmi, *Comentarii d'Antonfrancesco Cirmi, Corso, ne' quali si descrive la guerra ultima di Francia, la celebratione del concilio Tridentino, il soccorso d'Orano, l'impresa del Pignone e l'istoria dell'assedio di Malta* (Rome, 1567), p. 46.

The ships carried 22,000 quintals of powder, 100,000 musket balls, hundreds of tons of fresh water, dozens of animals and 65,000 qantars of biscuits – that is to say a reserve for six months.<sup>17</sup>

From 25 May, the Turkish artillery began to shell the forts and the cities, and until the end of June, the Muslim assaults targeted Fort St Elmo, which was the most fragile fort because it was isolated from the rest of the fortifications.<sup>18</sup> For an entire month, the fort was subjected to murderous assaults and received between 14,000 and 19,000 cannon shots that felled the wall. Finally, the fort fell on 23 June: the siege of St Elmo caused the death of more than 2,000 Muslims and 1,500 Christians.<sup>19</sup> After the fall of St Elmo, the siege lasted another two months, while the Muslims concentrated artillery fire on the port cities. Reinforced by a “*Piccolo Soccorso*” of 600 soldiers, Christian troops resisted all summer; the towns of Birgu and Senglea suffered several assaults and the besieged had to constantly monitor the breaches and repair the damages. Three bloody offensives were conducted against the two cities on 15 July, between 6-7 August and 20-22 August. The fighters resisted only through the intervention of the Grand Master in person, who mobilized his men (he was incidentally injured on 7 August).<sup>20</sup> By late summer, both the Christians and Muslims were exhausted. Then, on 7 September, the Christian fleet of 95 galleys finally arrived from Sicily. Faced with the landing of about 10,000 men,<sup>21</sup> the Muslim army hastened to break camp and left Malta on 12 September.<sup>22</sup>

On entering the harbour, the fleet found a scene of desolation. Cities were bleached white, their population was decimated, their weapons destroyed and their walls had collapsed. The siege caused many deaths on both sides. The Muslims lost between 15,000 and 20,000 soldiers; more than half of the Hospitallers had perished (282), as well as 2,000 Christian soldiers and almost 6,000 or 6,500 Maltese civilians, most of them killed by artillery, the collapse of walls and houses, lack of water and food, injuries and diseases. The Grand Master came on foot to meet the viceroy, escorted by his advisers and followed in order by his emaciated Knights, covered in blood and rags. They walked between a hedge of civilian survivors (women, elderly, children, wounded), acclaimed by soldiers and enlisted civilians who were defending the destroyed walls. Christian leaders were officially invited to the Grand Master’s Palace, where the banquet was composed solely of the last Maltese provisions. However, Jean de Valette agreed that the rations taken from the reserves of the Christian fleet should be distributed to the besieged, who ate for the first time in months. Appalled, the viceroy

17 AGS, Estado Sicilia, Leg. 1129, f. 5v; 10 february 1565 ; CODOIN, XXIX, p. 8, 7 december 1564; Cirmi, p. 46. (Editor’s note: one quintal was equivalent to 100 kg while one qantar equalled 40.951 kg.)

18 Francisco Balbi da Correggio, *La Verdadera Relación de todo lo que el anno de MDLXV ha sucedido en la Isla de Malta, de antes que llegasse l’armada sobre ella de Soliman Gran Turco* (Barcelona: Pedro Reigner, 1568), f. 31r.

19 AGS, Estado Sicilia, Leg. 1129, f. 95r, 25 June 1565.

20 Balbi da Correggio, *La Verdadera Relación...*, f. 90v.

21 Ibid., f. 81r.

22 Giacomo Bosio, *Dell’Historia della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, 3 vols, 2nd imp. (Naples, 1684), III, pp. 704-705.



wrote the same day to Philip II that “we could have anticipated all this a month and a half before, thus avoiding the death of many Knights and persons in Malta”.<sup>23</sup>

## A new maritime equilibrium

The Siege of Malta, which brought together the four elements identified by the historian Michel Winock (intensity, unpredictability, impact, consequences),<sup>24</sup> was as a result a real event, which upset the balance of powers in the Mediterranean. The “return of the event”<sup>25</sup> is again present in historiography, and there is also a new interest in “battle history”,<sup>26</sup> especially in the Mediterranean.<sup>27</sup> Historians are interested once more in the event, studied as a destructive and creative element of a new present, or studied for its “aftermath”,<sup>28</sup> a more or less long period during which one has the idea that something different was born, that changed a former state of things. The event is important for the traces it leaves and the echoes that it has sometimes long afterwards.<sup>29</sup>

The intensity of the Siege of Malta can be explained by the sheer size of the armada that had befallen the island: a fleet of about 220 ships, that is to say almost as many as in Lepanto in 1571. The surprise was great. Neither the Pope, nor the King of Spain and the Viceroy of Sicily, nor the Knights themselves (even if they said the opposite later), no one could have sincerely believed that Malta could be a real military issue. Letters by Philip II and Don García de Toledo are very explicit on this point. Before the arrival of the fleet in the Western Mediterranean, the Viceroy wrote without hesitation that he “was certain that it would go to La Goulette, because [he] was not able to consider Malta as a serious target.”<sup>30</sup> Christendom also remained stunned by the fierce resistance of the Hospitallers, of the Maltese people and of the enlisted soldiers or volunteers, so much so that the siege caused a great stir. Publicity had been immediate, thanks to the Grand Master who wrote to all the sovereigns of Europe, thanks to histories written to the glory of the Knights and thanks to the honours granted to the Hospitallers by the Pope and by the princes.

The consequences affected the three main players of the Siege. Firstly, the Hospitallers officially chose to be called from now on “Order of Malta” and renewed with their ancient Crusade zest. Secondly, the devastated port was rebuilt thanks to the building of Valletta, a new city deemed impregnable and named after the Grand

23 AGS, Estado Sicilia, Leg. 1129, f. 131v, 8 September 1565.

24 Michel Winock, «Qu'est-ce qu'un événement?», *L'Histoire*, n. 268, 2002, 30-35.

25 Pierre Nora, *Le retour de l'événement*, in *Faire de l'histoire* ed. by Jacques Le Goff et Pierre Nora, Tome I, *Nouveaux problèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

26 Hervé Drévilion, *Batailles. Scènes de guerre de la Table Ronde aux tranchées* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

27 Alessandro Barbero, *La bataille des trois empires. Lépante, 1571* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012); Daniel Nordman, *Tempête sur Alger. L'expédition de Charles Quint en 1541*, Paris, Bouchène, 2011.

28 François Pernot and Valérie Toureille, *Lendemain de guerre... De l'Antiquité au monde contemporain : les hommes, l'espace et le récit, l'économie et le politique* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2010).

29 François Dosse, *Renaissance de l'événement. Un défi pour l'historien : entre sphinx et phénix* (Paris: PUF) 2010.

30 CODOIN, XXIX, p. 87, 11 april 1565.

Master who emerged victoriously from the Siege. Thirdly, the Western Mediterranean changed with the emergence of Malta as a new strategic place, symbolic and soon commercial. For the Ottomans, the 1565 event was not simply a setback after a long series of conquests and victories. Even if the Siege did not designate a winner between the empires, it broke the Turkish dynamic and announced the beginning of an Ottoman maritime reflux and the subsequent concentration solely in the Eastern Mediterranean. After 1565, it was difficult, if not impossible, for Muslims to be able to repel the Spanish frontiers in the Western Mediterranean, as they were being stabilized and fortified. While the control of the *presidios* was often a dead end for the Catholic monarchy, the stabilization of the Christian front in the Western Mediterranean was based on many coastal fortifications. The defeat of 1565 forced the Barbary corsairs to focus their efforts on the African coasts and forced the Turks to steer for the first time their military interests towards the Eastern Mediterranean and towards Europe. And it was not a coincidence that Suleiman the Magnificent died in Hungarian territory, on the night of 6-7 September 1566. The old sultan, who had not gone to war for almost ten years, had chosen to lead his troops into Europe, while in 1565 he was not at the head of his fleet to attack Malta.

Despite the worry of the Venetians, the Spaniards and the Hospitallers during the winter of 1565-1566, the Turkish fleet which left Istanbul in March 1566 attacked only Chios, one of the last Latin possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>31</sup> This Turkish failure to penetrate into the Western Mediterranean demonstrated the new Ottoman maritime interests in the Levant: Chios was conquered in 1566, and then Cyprus was taken from the Venetians in 1570. Certainly, the conquest of Cyprus led to the formation of the Holy League linking Venice, the Holy See and Spain; certainly, the Holy League won at Lepanto on 7 October 1571. But by then, the Levant was almost entirely in the hands of the Ottomans. The last Latin possession remained Venetian Crete which did not hinder or very negligibly did Ottoman trade since it was located further west, and in 1669 it too was finally conquered. The battle of Lepanto ended what the siege of Malta had begun: the beginning of a Turkish maritime reflux and its relegation into the Levant.

After the Siege of Malta, only two great battles (Lepanto in 1571, Tunis in 1574) brought face to face the opposing fleets of the empires before the truce of 1577. In the Western Mediterranean, the frontier had stabilized around fortified points which nobody thought of attacking, except corsair raids for kidnapping and enslaving the coastal population. Neither the Turks nor the Barbary corsairs ever returned to Malta for a serious assault.<sup>32</sup> After 1565, the Mediterranean did not cease to be a space of tensions and exchanges, but they now included Malta. When the two empires stopped fighting, the island became a corsair and commercial focus point, the heart of a sea basin to which it belonged, without having ever been an actor in it before.

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31 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, II (Paris, Armand Colin, 1966), p.336.

32 They returned in 1614, but the Muslim disembarkation led to no real fight or assault.

