

The Maltese hawk

Prologue

When the ship was straightened out, the mascot, a little monkey, was the first who dashes out, squealing. Then the commander was found. He was still breathing. Dipped in the water up to his neck, he had breathed for hours and hours the air of a bubble that had formed inside the hull. No one else had survived. A suddenly typhoon had sunk four ships in the harbour of Malta. Mathurin Romegas (this was the commander's name) got off with a fright, but remained marked by that experience: his hands trembled when they raised a glass, but were steady when they clutched the hilt of a sword. A few years later, in 1565, that sword attracted another dreadful typhoon over Malta.

" Corsairs who flaunt crosses."

The island of Malta is small, rocky, barren and windswept. Water is scarce, the sun is scorching. But it is situated in a strategic position, essential for the control of the Mediterranean Sea. Now as then.

In 1530, the year of his coronation, the Emperor Charles V had "rented" the island to the Knights Hospitaller of St. John in payment of the annual gift of a falcon and of a solemn mass to be celebrated on All Saints Day.

The island had a splendid harbour called Great Harbour (Grand Port, in Maltese)- in which the two small peninsulas of Birgu and Senglea stretched themselves. A third peninsula, Sciberass, towered above both. Displaying a white cross on a red field, fast and agile ships departed from that harbour. They left empty, they returned with their holds full of clothes, gold, weapons, valuables, women and men. All strictly looted. The Knights, in fact, practiced privateering. In the name of Christ and for His greater glory, of course. Not surprisingly, the Brotherhood defined itself the *Holy Religion*, or, more simply, *the Religion*.

Their fleet was small for that sea and for those times. It disappeared if compared to the impressive fleet of the Sultan, to the agile flotillas of Barbary corsairs or to the golden rostra of the Most Serene (*Serenissima*) Republic of Venice. But the Knights were possessed by their mission. The religion in name of which they fought multiplied their forces and increased their boldness.

When in 1557 Jan Parisot de La Valette was appointed Grand Master of the Order, the pirate raids were intensified. Romegas, the Knight whose hands trembled, became the more dangerous and ruthless man. Muslim women evoked his arrival when they wanted to send their young children to bed. For children of the coasts of Anatolia and of Ottoman Greece of those times, Romegas was the equivalent of the "big bad wolf" or of the "black man" of our times.



As corsairs, the Knights did not mince matters, and their raids bothered a lot of people. The Sultan saw them as mortal enemies; Venice as dangerous competitors and as a threat to the delicate economic balances established in the Mediterranean Sea during centuries of negotiations and bribes. According to the *Serenissima*, the religion was only a pretext: in her opinion, the Knights were and continued to remain "corsairs who flaunt crosses." When in 1522 the Knights were expelled from Rhodes by Suleiman himself, Venice did not lift a finger. On the contrary, covertly, it rejoiced. For the Sultan Malta was a thorn in his side; for Barbary pirates a "nest of vipers"; for both it was an overriding objective. They had many times tried to conquer the island, but always in vain. Dragut (Turgut Rais), one of the most fearsome cruel and clever Barbary corsairs, had failed many times, even though he had left behind himself ruins and corpses. Once he had even deported the whole population of Gozo. In that "nest of vipers", Dragut had lost a brother. Now, after years, he was returning for closing the matter with Malta.

The ship of contention.

In the first half of the Sixties, for once, the Mediterranean had relatively remained peaceful. The voices of the going out of the powerful Ottoman fleet had been regularly contradicted by the facts; whole months had passed, but neither a sail had been sighted nor a gunshot had been heard. Whenever the spring came and the voices grew thicker, Christianity panicked. Philip II, king of Spain, alerted the Spanish forts of North Africa and intensified the building of galleys; the Pope thundered against the Turkish danger. Everything turned out in a soap bubble: the war, *that war*, had become a war of rumours and denials, of terror and sighs of relief, of alarms and ceased alarms. In other words, that war had become a phoney war. Then something began to move in Istanbul.

Everything began when Romegas captured a galleon and an old woman, aged one hundred and seven years. The capture of the galleon sent the sultan's harem into a rage; the capture of the old woman deeply wounded Suleiman The Magnificent's daughter, Mihrimah. The galleon was cruising by sea on behalf of the chief of the eunuchs, and she

was carrying all sort of good things for the favourites of the harem; the hundred seven year old, a former nursemaid of Mihrimah, was embarked on a ship returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca and sunk by Romegas nearby the Anatolian coast.

The galleon was anchored in the harbour of Malta as a challenge and a mockery; for the old nursemaid a ransom was asked. The indignant favourites of the harem complained to their lord and master; deeply sorrowing, Mihrimah remembered to her father his role as defender of the faith and guardian of sacred places: Suleiman felt humbled in his dual role of sword of Islam and defender of the true believers.

The Sultan was old and tired. In Venice, Rome, Madrid he was given up for dead every day and the other as well. Economic hardships, famines, hostilities with Persia, plagues, court intrigues, rivalry of his viziers, wars, successes and failures, the death of the beloved wife Roxelane-Hurren whom he has married for love, the execution of the favourite son Mustafa implicated in a palace coup, the assassination of his other son Benayez with his whole family, had marked him in body and spirit. He ate little, he drank only water, he attended meetings of the *Divan* (a kind of Council of Ministers) from behind a grating, he had little trust in his last son, Selim. But he continued to think to Rome.

And Malta was the key of Rome.

The ravelin of Europe.



Jan Parisot de La Valette, from [it.wikipedia.org / wiki /](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/)

In Malta, General Captain of the Sea appointed by Philip II, the expert commander Don Garcia de Toledo, was watching the harbour from the heights of Sciberras. It was a beautiful day in April, clear and windy. Besides him, wrapped in the red surcoat of the Knights, there was the septuagenarian Grand Master of Order, Jan Parisot de La Valette. Forty years earlier, after having honourably fought, La Valette had left Rhodes with the survivors of that heroic resistance. Cornered by the deadlock that had arisen on the battlefield and urged by the imminent winter, Suleiman had offered honourable terms of surrender. The Grand Master of that time, Philippe Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, had accepted them. The banners of the Knights were folded and their ships had left the island for returning never more. According to La Valette, accepting Suleiman's conditions had been a mistake. Forty years after, he continued to think so.

From Istanbul had come bad news, Don Garcia was reporting. Throughout the winter the

shipyards had worked at full steam; craftsmen- blacksmiths, carpenters, shipwrights- had been recruited from all parts of the empire and brought into the capital; food had been stored , cannons had been casted , gunpowder had been manufactured , oarsmen had been enlisted ; two important generals (Piale Pasha and Mustafa Ali) had been seen at the palace. So much movement and so many manoeuvres only for feeding rumours of a going out of the fleet? So much large-scale employment of money and manpower just to write another chapter of the phoney war? No, this time there was something big brewing. And, indeed, to the end of March, the fleet had left the Golden Horn, continued Don Garcia. The war had ceased to be a phoney war: whom would have been the turn of?

Don Garcia was not aware of it : perhaps La Goulette, perhaps Sicily, perhaps Cyprus. He was collecting a fleet - or, better, he was trying to do it among a lot of difficulties- to be ready to parry the blow. Money lacked , time lacked , ships also lacked, precise measures lacked, perhaps also a strong desire to fight lacked. Only rivalries, mistrusts and cautions abounded. The *Prudent* Philip II tergiversated, he sent dispatches right and left and waited answers, when his august father, the Emperor Charles - God rest his soul, Don Garcia said- first acted , then asked advice.

Don Garcia was concerned, La Valette even more. And if had the turn of Malta been? The fortifications were weak, it would have been necessary to evacuate women and children, it would have been necessary to create water supplies and food, to gather the cattle , to reinforce the garrison. And time was pressing.

La Valette complained for not having fortified Sciberras, as , time before, some Italian engineers had advised to him: if he had followed their advice, he would have easily been able to control, in case of invasion, the access to the harbour. Don Garcia turned back to gaze out to sea. It is no good crying over spilt milk; you do with what you have, he answered. Then he pointed to a small star-shaped fortification on the end of Sciberras, able to control both the main harbour, and the parallel bay of Marsamxett .

That fortress, said Don Garcia, was the key of the whole defensive system. But it was necessary to reinforce it on the west side by a ravelin(i.e. by a buttress of support separated from main casing). Before leaving Malta, the Spanish admiral asked to borrow the galleys of the Knights for his being formed fleet: La Valette, politely refused them to him. In case of invasion, those galleys would have been useful in Malta to carry reinforcements from one point to another point, to communicate with the outside, to evacuate civilians and wounded.

It had been understood also in Istanbul, where plans to invade the island were being prepared , how much important was the fort St. Elmo . Were Mihrimah with her rant and the harem with its complaints those who convinced Suleiman? Maybe. But the Sultan for a long time was working about that project: Romegas' raids had only accelerated its course. Behind Malta, Suleiman was seeing the shadow of Rome and the dream of the Ottoman emperors: a single empire, a single religion, a single emperor. Between him and his dream there were a small stony island and, on the island, a small fort, dedicated to the patron saint of sailors. Could a tiny and most incomplete fortification stop his dreams and his ambitions?

He proclaimed : Malta, "den of infidels" had to be conquered to make safe the voyage to Mecca. The Christian chroniclers at the time will retort: Suleiman's words have nothing to do with the religion: the Sultan wanted only to humiliate Philip II and the Christianity. The real interpretation was different: those who had held Malta would have controlled the whole Mediterranean Sea, this was the truth. A Spanish official said: with the island in the Sultan's hands , we all would have been forced to pay him a tribute. Now more than ever, Malta had become, according to La Valette's words , "the ravelin of Europe".

Preparation and omens.

On May 18, Friday, when the Ottoman fleet was sighted on the horizon, something had been done in Malta. Women, children, old people had been evacuated in near Sicily. Many men had gone with them, but also many had asked and obtained to remain. Imitated by many women, too. The ravelin had been raised in a hurry in front of St. Elmo: more than a stonework, it was a tower of clay covered with stones. Don Garcia had sent some soldiers: Spaniards and Italians. Lured by the prospect to loot, many adventurers had flocked from all over Europe; five hundred Knights had accepted the Grand Master's appeal; three thousand inhabitants of Malta had been armed and trained. The rations were stored in deep holes closed by boulders and the water was collected in some cisterns; a plan for polluting the wells located outside the walls had been put in place. The precious gunpowder- including the gunpowder sent the year before by the Duke of Florence- had been placed in safe and sheltered; the cavalry had been detached in the walled city of Mdina, in the island's centre, with the task of making sorties.

But there was still much to do. The fortifications of Birgu and Senglea were not yet completed; those ones of St. Elmo were insufficient; most of the cattle were still in the fields along with the shepherds and herdsmen; who had remained, had need of shelter. With the Ottoman fleet on the horizon, La Valette gave the most urgent orders and sent two letters, one to the Pope and another to King Philip, asking soldiers and money. He was in desperate need of both.

On the contrary, men did not lack to Mustafa Ali, the Ottoman commander of the whole shipment. And also weapons, guns, gunpowder, money did not lack to him. According to Ottoman custom, everything had been prepared in detail. The ships were carrying the timber needed to build emplacements for guns or bridges for the assaults; the holds were full of food, of gunpowder, of picks, of shovels for digging trenches and tunnels, of explosive projectiles, of huge stone balls. In order to crumble the walls of the fortifications, some powerful guns had been taken on board. One of them had already smashed the walls of Rhodes almost half a century earlier.

However, that powerful strength had a limit: the time. From Istanbul - almost eight hundred kilometres away- supplies could come sporadically only; Don Garcia was mustering a fleet; sooner or later, Philip II would counterattack. Either they ended the whole issue in three, four months, or they would have had to give up.

In addition, the command structure was poorly organized. Mustafa had the responsibility of the shipment, but Piale (or Piyale) Pasha, the fleet's commander, was jealous of his own prerogatives and of his own vessels; Dragut had been sent from Tripoli to Malta for "suggesting" both the former and the latter. Suleiman had remained in Istanbul, but he had sent a beautifully decorated and decked ship to remember everyone that, even if he was absent, he was there and was seeing everything. Too much pressure, too much ambiguity, in other words. And too many rivalries in the high command. And the fleet, in the rush to put to sea, had not paraded as usual in front of the mausoleum of the great Haradin Barbarossa.

Bad omen?

"A consumptive body."

The invasion force debarked at Marsaxlokk bay located on the southeast side of the island. The country was devastated, the guns were dragged to the heights above Birgu and Senglea and the fighting began: ambushes, clashes in the open field (at least until the Knights decided to withdraw inside their fortifications), artillery fire. The explosions followed one another, the smoke enveloped everything, the night was flood-light. Especially in St Elmo

– under pressure from May 30- hell seemed to be unleashed. The ravelin barbican resisted during five days, then was captured because of a lack of attention of its guards.

The fort's defenders repulsed the Janissaries' attacks by pouring boiling oil on their heads, by shooting shrapnel or chained balls, by messing their rows up, by using rudimentary flamethrowers, by combating hand-to hand, by closing the breaches, by performing prodigies of valour.



Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, The Siege of Malta: from Wikipedia

Less than five hundred meters of still waters separated St Elmo from Birgu. And along that short stretch of water, guiltily vacated by the attackers, reinforcements, food and ammunition were arriving in St. Elmo. In dribs and drabs, but they were coming. Five hundred meters back, hundreds of people of any sex and any age were carrying stones, were raising earthworks and parapets, were creating fields of fire, were preparing obstacles and pitfalls. More St. Elmo resisted, more Birgu and Senglea were being strengthened; more Birgu and Senglea were being strengthened, more the chances of victory for the Ottomans diminished. La Valette had not forgotten the lesson of Rhodes where the low morale of the population had been one of the causes of the defeat: now we do not withdraw, now we win or die together. Inspired preachers inflamed hearts and minds; barrels of wine and ready money calmed the impetuous and lifted the depressed; some lies about the imminent arrival of Don Garcia with the rescue fleet multiplied the energies more than hundred truths. Surrounded by flames, bombarded by the guns, wrapped in the smell of gunpowder, of boiling pitch and sweat, St Elmo was seeming about to fall at any moment. But it was not falling.

The situation, however, was becoming more and more desperate. St. Elmo was not only small but also had a lot of flaws and imperfections. Bluntly, a Spanish officer had compared it with "a consumptive body." The expert Dragut, arrived in the meantime from Tripoli, had "advised" Mustafa to submit St Elmo to a strong artillery fire from two sides; dozens of snipers fired with deadly accuracy at every moving shadow; violent bursts of gunfire beat the parapets, preventing the defenders to raise their head; embankments were rose in order to bring the guns higher up the walls; hundreds of diggers dug trenches in the hard rock, closer and closer. Inside the fort, whole units or groups of Spanish adventurers threatened to mutiny and to drop everything. But then it was enough to ring the bells announcing an alarm or even to tell some pitiful lie about Don Garcia's arrival and the purposes of mutiny fell and men returned to their seats determined, more than ever, to fight. Defending Malta seemed to have become for everyone a moral obligation and, in those days, in those hours, St Elmo *was* Malta.

Mustafa was livid with rage. He was seeing the ranks of the Janissaries, the best of his elite troops, to make thinner after every attack; every failed attempt made mount the distrust; every little progress cost a lot of good soldiers and vast quantities of gunpowder. Piale was trembling for his precious ships exposed to the vagaries of the Maltese winds of Marshaklokk; Dragut was making no secret of finding ill-conceived the plan to take St

Elmo; the impassive observers of the Sultan were taking note of everything. Suleiman would have been informed: how would he react? It was necessary urgently to force the hand.

The umbilical cord that tied Saint Elmo with Birgu had to be cut. Mustafa took a while to figure it out, but eventually he moved his guns and his troops on the discovered side and sealed St Elmo. The fort was doomed. However, Mustafa's decision arrived late and could not erase the time given to Birgu and Senglea. When the Ottomans had attacked St. Elmo, La Valette had given thanks to God (or, at least, it is said he has done so): that choice would have given breath to the whole island.

The attacks were always following one another, but the fort was holding out. The defenders were fighting with the courage of despair, comforted by faith or by ready money, animated by the priests and sustained by their commanders. They knew they were at the end, but they did not want to give up. The holy images were buried and hidden to prevent their desecration, then everyone entrusted himself to God.

Not to the winners' clemency. When the fort fell, an orgy of cruelty and blood broke out. Nobody except a few lucky, was spared. Piale Pasha himself was horrified by so much violence. The crucified and beheaded bodies of a priest and of some Knights were thrown into the sea in front of Birgu.

The Christians were just as ruthless. The Muslim prisoners were decapitated together on the walls of St. Michael and those who were detained in Mdina followed their fate, one every day. From the fort St. Angelo, heads detached from bodies were shot by guns in the Ottoman camp. When Rhodes has surrendered, Suleiman had allowed the defenders to leave the island with their weapons, treasure and flags. He had admired and recognized their courage, baring his head before them. Those times, the times in which the honour counted, had died for ever and would have never returned.

Such ferocity by the Ottomans had the opposite effect to that intended. Not the fear, but the determination to resist occupied the hearts and the minds of the defenders of Malta, civilians and military, men and women, believers and atheists, idealists and opportunists. The headless corpse of the crucifix priest carried by the weak stream of the bay had closed forever the door to a second Rhodes: there would have been no collapse of the population. The defenders of Malta would have won or would have died together.

St Elmo would have had to fall in four, five days according to the calculations of Mustafa's military engineers: it had been necessary almost a month to have reason of it. On June 23, two hours after the death of the fort, even Dragut died because of the consequences of friendly fire. A few days before, while he was inspecting the lines, he had stopped to regulate the shooting of the gunners. At the time of shooting, a cannon had fired too low and hit the wall of a trench. A rain of sharp splinters of stone had hit the battery. Reached by a splinter in his throat, Dragut had slumped to the ground losing consciousness. Mustafa had made transport him in secret to his tent, ordering the witnesses to keep shut their mouths.

Dragut was eighty years old. Earlier, a soothsayer had predicted to him that he would have died in Malta.

Two strokes of luck.

It was easy to predict next Mustafa's movement. With St Elmo conquered, with the fleet now anchored in the safe and peaceful Marsamxett bay, would have been the turn of the Grand Harbour's defences. The question was: where and how would have the Ottomans attacked first? At Birgu? At Senglea? In both places at once? Their surrender requests had been rejected in no uncertain terms by La Valette: the fighting would have soon resumed. The defenders of Malta needed a miracle. And if not a miracle, at least a stroke of luck.

The strokes of luck were even two. First, "enlightened by the Holy Spirit," a deserter - a certain Philip Lascaris, Greek nobleman captured when he was a child and grown up in Istanbul - reached Birgu with the details of the plan of attack; then, evading the blockade, some ships of Don Garcia's fleet had landed on the Maltese coast a small rescue unit of about seven hundred men. They had arrived safely in Birgu, passing through Mdina, at the command of Marshal de Robles.

When Mustafa received the news, flew into a rage and blamed Piale because the rescue expedition had slipped through his ships. Piale bore a grudge. Until that time the two commanders had tolerated themselves in an attempt to neutralize Dragut, detested by both. Dragut's death had wiped out the hypocrisies and tactics: from now on we go our separate ways and we see who will enter first Malta and firmly the Sultan's good graces. This they were thinking, this they were doing.

Mustafa had in mind to enter the Grand Harbour from the "back door", carrying ships by land over Sciberras: a risky move, but deadly whether it had succeeded. The peninsula of Senglea- the target of Ottomans - was protected on the eastern flank from Birgu, but it was totally open on the western side. A landing in that area would have been decisive. The ships were placed on well lubricated wooden rollers, yoked to strong yokes of oxen and trailed along the slopes of Sciberras.

For his part, La Valette, after having received the news from Lascaris, had taken action. Now a wooden bridge supported by sealed barrels joined Birgu and Senglea, allowing the movement of forces from one place to another; a makeshift but effective barrier had been erected in the sea on the weak side of the peninsula, had been created a mobile force, ready to intervene at critical points. The Grand Master himself, accompanied by two pages and by a jester (though, in those moments, there was little to laugh, as a chronicler of the time wrote), was constantly moving among the lines, inspecting, correcting, exhorting by his example. After having taken Malta, the Ottomans had in mind to go to the sword all the survivors, civilian or military, but to save La Valette in order to bring him as a gift to the Sultan. People were aware of it, the Grand Master was aware of it. La Valette's answer was: no one will catch me alive. He swore it solemnly, increasing the determination of everyone.

Orchestra rehearsal.

In Malta the defenders always hoped in Don Garcia. Studded with requests for help, the Admiral was trying desperately to persuade Philip II to decide. But *the Prudent* King did not decide. He was terrified of losing his ships. Okay, Malta is precious for us. Let us assume for a moment - God forbid - to lose it. If we lose it, but a strong fleet remains to us, we can still win. But without the fleet we could not do anything.

Don Garcia quivered reading these arguments. Was it possible that the king did not understand the importance of what was at stakes? Was it possible that he placed the integrity of his ships before the lives of thousands of brave or before the safety of the whole of Europe? Evidently it was possible. And Don Garcia's anger did rise even more when his thoughts went to the defenders of Malta, among which there was his own son. They believe in me, they trust in me and what am I doing for them? At this time, they will be wondering: why is Don Garcia not moving? Why is he not coming in our rescue? What is he waiting? What could I say? Blame your king, not me? Would it be useful?

Mustafa was in no better condition. It was hot, the water had been polluted, his soldiers suffered by dysentery and other diseases, the rations arrived with difficulty and late, someone grumbled. Suleiman would have kept in touch soon. And he would have wanted to know. In his sharp and lapidary style he would have asked: at what point are you? Which parts of Malta have you conquered? When will the island fall? Has Dragut arrived? What could Mustafa answer? That he had spent almost a month to have reason of "a

consumptive body"? That Malta was still withstanding? That Dragut had died? There was only one possible answer: to weed out quickly that "nest of vipers," whatever the cost. From Sciberras he looked at his ships advancing in formation into the waters of Senglea. In front of the fleet, the Greek pirate Candelissa, astride a ship's side, was waving a flag as if he was directing an orchestra. It was mid-July.

Chains and spurs.

The attack failed. The barrage built on the western side of Senglea (a palisade crossed by a strong chain) curbed the impact of the galleys and the Ottoman landing troops were forced to take land into deep water, under enemy fire. The military units on the so-called Spur Bastion (*Lo Sperone*, at the seaward end of the peninsula) where it was set up a fighting position, disbanded at the beginning, but then counterattacked successfully; Mustafa tried to circumvent the barrage, but his landing force was swept away by a battery of guns placed at Birgu. Rejected across the board, the Ottomans tried to reach their ships. The nearest vessels were literally mobbed by the retreating soldiers and many of them were overturned. Piale ordered that the ships did not approach the shore; Mustafa corrected the order, but the fire of the guns of St. Michael and St. Angelo prevented the Ottoman soldiers from embarking. No quarter was given.

The push.



Matteo Perez d'Aleccio from [it.wikipedia.org / wiki / The siege of Malta](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_siege_of_Malta)

The day after, Suleiman's first letter arrived from Istanbul. Mustafa's hurry increased. And his nervousness as well. The bad weather was approaching with great strides, at nearly a thousand kilometres from Istanbul, the fleet was vulnerable; Piale did not want to continue the campaign in the winter: they risked stalling as in Rhodes. There was only one thing to do: to repeat large-scale St Elmo and raze the whole island. The guns were put in place and the bombardment began.

The bombardment was continuous, incessant, interminable. The Ottoman cannons were firing day and night, directing their fire now on the ramparts of the forts, now on the houses of the civilian population, now on the entrenched camp. They fired when soldiers were eating their rations, or at the hour of Mass, or late at night. Sometimes the barrel had no time to cool down and more than a cannon split, making explode some deposits of gunpowder.

Backed by that massive fire, teams of sappers were digging into the hard rock trenches and were building rooms for the mines; units of arquebusiers were storming the parapets with a hail of blows. The fire and the smoke of the hell seemed concentrated in those few square

meters of rubble, of ravaged earth , of mutilated corpses. The attacks were following the attacks, the water was beginning to run low, and only when a source beneath the floor of a private home in Birgu was found by chance , the situation came back under control. The conformation of the sites was helping the defenders. The front did not exceed nine hundred meters both in Birgu, and in Senglea: Mustafa could not deploy on that limited space the whole power of his army. Sometimes the luck was helping out. One day the defenders of fort St. Michael saw a spear which was appearing from the ground , withdrawing, appearing again. It took little to understand what was happening: the Ottoman engineers had dug a tunnel and they were probing to see how were far from the surface to place the mines in the right place. A quick action by a defenders *commando* nullified their threat.

Other times it was wrong. A Spanish officer who was aware of many things, a certain Francisco de Aguilar, defected and gave to Mustafa valuable information about the weak points in the defences, about the morale of the defenders and about the difficulties of Don Garcia. After having received the information from Aguilar, Mustafa prepared to give the final blow. Accompanied always by two pages and the jester, La Valette inspected the defences and prepared countermoves by strengthening the weak points.

Cavalrymen and children .



El Greco: Portrait of Vincenzo Anastagi

Domenikos Theutokopoulos, alias El Greco, has painted a portrait of Vincenzo Anastagi, an Italian Knight of St. John. He is a dark-haired and bearded proud-looking young man, his expression is honest. He is a soldier, not a courtier; he is wearing a breastplate made of bronze, not a rich embroidered shirt; next to him on the ground, there is a helmet, not a book. During the days of Malta's siege, Anastagi commanded a detachment of cavalry stationed in Mdina. Since some time, he was keeping a watch the Ottoman field of Marsa. In a relationship to La Valette , he wrote something like this: the Turks are concentrated on what happens in front of them and they do not care at all about the zone behind the lines. There are often no guards.

On the day when Mustafa launched the main attack against Birgu and Senglea reduced to a pile of rubble, Anastagi and his cavalry unit were very close to the enemy camp. They were hidden in order to await developments.

The Ottoman attack to the entrenched field of Birgu and Senglea was hindered by a fierce resistance. On the one side and on the other side, the casualties were high. On the walls of St. Angelo and St. Michael, Marshal de Robles, Don Garcia's son, and a La Valette's nephew fell, along with hundreds of soldiers. The Grand Master himself, was wounded in a leg. The resistance was so fierce that at one point the Janissaries refused to attack, if Mustafa himself had not led them. The commander did not need coaxing, he dismounted from his horse and put himself at the head of his men. He did not go very far: an arquebus shot carried off his turban. Mustafa lost his balance and tumbled to the ground: his body was not wounded, his pride bled for a long time.

Through the wooden bridge thrown between the two peninsulas, strong units were moving from one point to another according to necessity; the mobile force of emergency ordered by La Valette closed more than a hole. But the pressure exerted by the Ottomans was huge and, little by little, the assault troops reached the ruins of the ramparts. The end seemed imminent.

When at first the attack lost force and then turned into a more or less orderly withdrawal, many defenders found it inexplicable. Why were the Ottomans leaving when they were two steps away from victory? Looking better, they found the answer: from the enemy camp columns of smoke were rising. Had Don Garcia arrived? The General Captain of the Sea had nothing to do with that event: he was still in Syracuse, Sicily, to gather ships and he was champing at the bit waiting for a reply or for a decision of Philip. If Don Garcia was still in Syracuse, who had set those fires?

Those fires had been set by Anastagi's cavalymen. Charging swords in hand, they had gone like the wind across the Ottoman poorly guarded and defended camp, killing the wounded, the sick, the guards and setting fire to the curtains. Then just as quickly, they had repaired in Mdina. Mustafa made a blunder and mistook that sortie led by a handful of men for an attack in force. And with him, his soldiers made the blunder. They were feeling demoralized because of the infinite prolongation of the siege and they were suffering because of their failures. For this reason the attack had finished at the crucial moment.

Anastagi had saved Malta.

(A few days after, the Ottomans suffered another humiliating defeat. Taught by what had happened and decided to finish with Mdina, which was a thorn in his side, Mustafa commissioned Piale to settle the issue. Piale ambushed Anastagi, inflicted to him heavy casualties and pursued him until Mdina. Piale expected to find almost undefended the walls of the town, he found instead a mass of pikes and muskets. Without guns, he did not try either, but backed down and returned to the camp. Veterans who were accustomed to every battle had been put to flight by peasants, women and, above all, children wrapped in two sizes too big clothes and put on the walls to make up a number).

To leave or to wait?

Meanwhile, the letters continued to travel along that stormy sea. Suleiman insisted on being informed: sending bad news to Istanbul was dangerous, but Mustafa could not do otherwise. La Valette requested Don Garcia for help and into his heart he cursed the General Captain's inactivity; Philip II did not change his idea: he wanted to help Malta without risking his fleet (and how would it have been done?). And he was repeating: nobody can move without my permission.

In the Ottoman camp meetings were holding. To leave or to continue the siege, this was the question. Mustafa would have wanted to continue: he feared Suleiman's reaction for the injury done to his "invincible sword." Piale was seeing the issue differently: what had they to reproach? They had done everything possible and perhaps more of the possible: the magnanimous and wise Suleiman would have understood.

In arguing his point of view, Piale talked mostly *pro domo sua*. Cold winds were blowing over the sea, a little later the bad season would come; locked in Malta, the fleet, so dear to the sultan, would have suffered serious damage. If that had happened, Suleiman's magnanimity would have turned into ruthless intransigence. It was necessary to give up everything and to be off, while it was time.

And there was one more reason to do so, even though the two *Pashas* were not still aware of it: the Prudent Philip, after much thinking and rethinking, had finally decided. On August 22, to Don Garcia the long awaited approval arrived: we start, but beware: forbidden to risk the ships. In his heart, Don Garcia told him to go to the hell: he would do on his own. When everything will have finished, Don Garcia will pay that decision dearly.

On August 25, the first rain fell

Wet powders.

When he left Syracuse the first time, Don Garcia never managed to get anything right. Rain, windstorms and heavy sea hampered the navigation. The fleet came apart, went around and around and ended up off course somewhere near Trapani. The corsair Uluc Ali, sent to patrol the strait between Sicily and Malta, sighted the ships and gave the alarm. Don Garcia had no choice but to return, empty-handed, to Syracuse. He struggled to curb the crews tried and terrified by what they had seen and spent at sea in those days, and cursed the bad luck: I do my utmost to sail and when I can finally do it, I lose my bearings.

In Malta, meanwhile, the fighting was continuing, but the situation was now at a standstill. The Ottomans had lost men, materials, opportunities, chances. The gunpowder was ending, Don Garcia would return. In Birgu, in the location named "Castile", the men were facing each other, soaking wet because of the rain or soaked with sweat because of the sweltering heat. In some places, the trenches of the defenders and the trenches of the attackers were so close that the occupants could shake their hands. Sometimes, in the rare pauses of the fighting, the soldiers of the opposing forces were passing the word round; other times -but these episodes were most unique that rare- the fighters of the opposing factions exchanged fruit, a piece of bread, a slice of cheese. On one such occasion, someone let out: Allah does not want that Malta is conquered.

Mustafa was not in the same opinion, he still hoped to win. One day, taking advantage of the heavy rain, he attacked again. Because of wet fuses of the arquebuses and because of the impossibility to use arsonist material, the defenders were vulnerable. But they were also equally determined not to succumb. The muskets were replaced by crossbows, the wheels of fire were replaced by rocks and stones. When the rumour of an abandonment of the position and a general retreat in St. Angelo spread, La Valette ordered the drawbridge of the fortress were cutting: no one would be withdrawn. The rain stopped, it was put hand to the barrels of powder sent from the Duke of Florence, the arquebuses began to function and the attack was repulsed

Last act.

When, on September 7th, Don Garcia's expedition finally landed on the coast of Malta, it was not countered. In just over an hour, ten thousand men were landed. Many were veterans of *tercios* (regiments) based in Milan and in Lombardy (Spanish dominions in Italy), others were adventurers in search of plunder, others were nobles come from all over Europe in defence of the faith or in search of glory. Don Juan of Austria, King Philip's half brother, had arrived late for the appointment and could not participate to the

expedition. Six years later, at Lepanto, he will be luckier.

Disembarking in the quiet bay of Mellieha, Don Garcia had taken a big risk. If Uluc Ali had not been sent elsewhere, according to yet another miscalculation, the fleet would have had to face a naval battle the outcome of which could have been uncertain. When the cold (of character) Philip was aware of it, he flared into a rage: those were not the orders: the orders were to avoid confrontation and not risk the ships. At that exact moment, Don Garcia was fired.

On the island, the Ottomans were demobilizing. Maltese scouts had reached the front line trenches and they had found them empty. The guns had been re-embarked, even if some of them had to be abandoned and others fell into the sea. Although hit by a couple of shots, the galleon captured by Romegas was always safe in the Grand Harbour. Mihrimah's nursemaid had died.

Mustafa was struggling to accept the reality and was clinging to anything to save his face. When in the Ottoman field came a *Morisco* deserter with unreliable information, Mustafa believed him. The *Morisco* said that the commanders of the relief force - Alvaro de Sende, Spanish and Ascanio della Corgna, Italian- had in common only the "de" of the last name, but apart from that, they hated each other. He said also that the soldiers are tired and exhausted because of the long and tormented navigation, that they were suffering from dysentery and that they were not more than five thousand.

Determined to break the bank, Mustafa gathered ten thousand men and moved against the enemy. It went amiss: too tired and unmotivated his men, too fresh and certain of the victory, the others. Put to flight, the Ottomans gained with difficulty the beach and, at the time of re-embark, many of them were killed in the water or on shore. The next day the Ottoman fleet left Malta for the open sea.

It had been four months since his triumphant arrival.

Epilogue

The fleet sailed into the harbour of Istanbul at night, almost in secret. Suleiman was disappointed, but he did not let it show. He rewarded the Janissaries, he distributed money and promotions, he kept in his place Piale, he spared Mustafa's life. He put pressure on the shipyards, intending to return to Malta as soon as possible. He dictated the policy: in the firmament of the Ottoman enterprises, the episode of Malta was nothing if compared to the stunning victories of the Ottomans in all parts of Europe, by land and sea. "Malta does not exist," became the official version.

And, perhaps, Malta did not even exist for the defenders, over the moon for having survived and having saved Christianity, but terrified to see the Ottoman fleet reappearing at any moment. The defences were broken, the homes reduced to piles of rubble. It would take tons of money and years of work to remedy. No one doubted: Suleiman would have taken advantage of the situation and, when the good weather had come, he would have returned to settle the bill. Then the advice of Italian engineers was remembered and above Sciberras the foundations of a fortified citadel were hastily dug.

Suleiman did not come back. Neither to Malta nor from Hungary, where he went to combat a new war, the last of his life. In the White Sea, the waters subsided. On Sciberras, the fortified town could be completed. In honour of the Grand Master, it was named Valletta.

Today it is the capital city of Malta.

The events at a glance.

February 1564: Philip II, King of Spain, appoints "Captain General of the Sea" Don Garcia de Toledo, a "serious" man, "with good judgment and extensive experience". In October, Philipp II will confer to him the title of Viceroy of Sicily.

June 4, 1564: the Knight of St. John, Romegas, at the head of a flotilla of galleys, first takes possession of a galleon and its rich cargo, then sinks off the coast of Anatolia an Ottoman ship, taking prisoners some persons of high rank, including the former nursemaid of the sultan's daughter, Mihirimah. In Istanbul, both episodes are received with outrage and anger.

October 6, 1564: Suleiman officially took the decision to move against Malta, "headquarters of infidels" and serious threat to "the route used by Muslim pilgrims and merchants in the eastern part of the White Sea in the direction of Egypt." Earlier, the corsair Dragut had described the island "a nest of vipers."

December 1564: Suleiman designates Mustafa Pasha, a veteran of campaigns in Persia and Hungary, commander of the expedition. He places to him side by side Piale Pasha, the winner of Djerba, and, as an adviser to both, the nearly eighty year old Dragut. In this tripartite structure of command, many contemporaries and modern scholars will see one of the reasons for the failure of the expedition.

March 30, 1565: among thunders of cannon, sound of flutes, murmur of prayers, ceremonies of delivery of flags and banners, the Imperial fleet leaves the Golden Horn towards Malta. The traditional lucky charm parade in front of the corsair Barbarossa's mausoleum is not performed.

18 May 1565: at dawn the Maltese watchmen sights on the horizon the Ottoman invasion force. On late evening the fleet throws the moorings in the bay of Marsaxlokk. The next day Mustafa begins to land his forces, estimated at more than twenty thousand combatants, whose backbone is made up of six thousand Janissaries, the elite Ottoman troops. In the face there are about eight thousand men, mostly Spaniards. The Knights are no more than five hundred, the Maltese soldiers are about three thousand. The defenders are under the seventy year old Jan Parisot de La Valette.

May 20: The Ottoman army advances: the defenders oppose by setting ambushes.

May 21: a first Ottoman attack in force is rejected outside the fortifications. La Valette orders his men not to make more sorties and to await the enemy in the forts St. Angelo, St. Michael, St. Elmo and in the entrenched camp of Birgu.

May 22: first disagreements between the Ottoman commanders. Piale Pasha is concerned about the fleet, exposed to Maltese winds and to attacks by fire ships. During a council of war, it was decided to concentrate the pressure on the small fort St. Elmo, placed at the mouth of the bay-Marsaxmet(which Piale considered safer than Marsaklokk) and the Grand Harbour. The attack will be carried out even if Dragut with his galleys has not yet arrived.

May 30: the Ottoman guns began to bombard St. Elmo, reinforced, on the west side, by a ravelin. Snipers hit with extraordinary precision everything that moves on the fort's walls. Sappers erect embankments to place the guns in a raised position with respect to the walls. Meanwhile in Birgu and Senglea (the other parts of the island) the defenders are tirelessly working to raise embankments and building fighting positions.

June 2: Dragut, "the sword of Islam", reaches Malta with their galleys. Apparently he disapproves by words the solution adopted by Piale and Mustafa in his absence, but does not change things. He makes increase the number of guns, he makes push them close to the fort and he insists in order that the ravelin of St. Elmo is taken as soon as possible. "Even at the cost of many good soldiers."

June 3: taking advantage of the lack of attention of the sentinels, the Ottomans approach their assault troops to the ravelin and conquer it. The battle for the fort begins. La Valette tries to fill the losses by posting, at night, men and materials.

June 16: another attack to St. Elmo is rejected, with heavy losses on both sides.

June 18: while he is inspecting a gun battery and giving provisions to correct the shot, Dragut was hit squarely by a rain of splinters that had broken away from the wall of a trench as a result of a shot fired too low. Badly wounded, the corsair is transported in secret to his tent. However the news is not slow to spread. He dies five days later. The Christian version of some chroniclers attributes the death of the old corsair not to the friendly fire, but to the excellent aim or to a lucky shot of a Genovese gunner.

June, 20: the Ottomans permanently block the waterway which had made possible supplying Elmo from Birgu. The fort is sealed.

June 23: After days and days of attacks and counterattacks, of threats of mutiny from both sides, of acts of heroism and bravery, of rejected proposals of surrender, Elmo falls. Its fierce resistance has allowed to La Valette to reinforce the defences of the peninsulas of Birgu and Senglea.

July 4: the bombing of the Senglea peninsula begins.

July 15: Ottoman warships boldly transported by land through the Sciberras attack the western side of Senglea. The attack is rejected.

July, 22 : the bombing of Birgu and Senglea begins.

August, 6 : a Spanish officer, Francisco de Aguilar, deserts and brings to Mustafâ information about the defences of the island.

August, 7 : a big attack is brought against Malta's defences . The attack fails because of the intervention of Vincenzo Anastagi's cavalymen, who devastate the bad watched Ottoman camp at Marsa.

August 21: heavy fighting light up around the location named "Castile" , located at the base of the peninsula of Birgu.

August 22: Philip II allows the departure of of Don Garcia's relief force. But he orders: forbidden to risk the ships and accept battle at sea.

August 25 : don Garcia's fleet puts to sea. The weather is dreadful and the fleet is forced to return to Sicily.

September 5: The rescue fleet is back at sea

Sept. 7: in the quiet bay of Mellieha, the landing force of Don Garcia , formed by ten thousand men, almost all expert combatants, takes lands entirely undisturbed.

September 12: last Mustafa's sudden reversal is shattered by the most experienced and fresh troops just landed and placed under the command of Spanish Alvaro de Sende and Italian Ascanio della Corgna. The latter had been released from papal prison where he was serving a sentence of rape and extortion, in order to put his sword and his experience to the service of faith.

September 13: the Ottoman fleet leaves Malta and heads toward Istanbul.

To read:

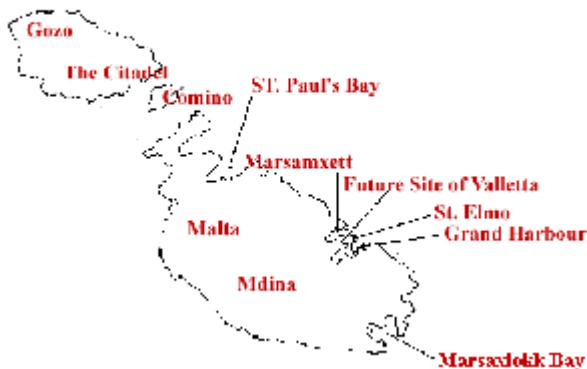
Crowley, Roger. *Empires of the sea : the final battle for the Mediterranean, 1521-1580*

Tim Pickles. *Malta 1565: Last Battle of the Crusades*

Stephen C. Spiteri. *The Great Siege: Knights vs. Turks, 1565*

Maps (Click on maps to enlarge them)

The Malta of the Siege



The Harbour Area



Maps site: www.storialibera.it/...ed.../assedio_di_malta_1565/ -

Other sites : Facebook, [bludragon.t/medioevo](https://www.facebook.com/bludragon.t/medioevo). (The two Knights), Wikipedia (other pictures)

A couple of questions, finally.

Why do not the Ottomans, just set foot on the Maltese soil, head towards Birgu and Senglea as La Valette fears , but they take time, first marching along the coast and devastating the countryside, then focusing on St Elmo? One answer may be the following: the two commanders do not see the issue in the same way. If Mustafa wants to attack Grand Harbour , Piale is worried for his fleet. He especially wants to leave Marsaklokk - too exposed to the treacherous Maltese winds and to surprise attacks- to repair into the safer Marsamxett bay. He overcomes , and St Elmo becomes the main goal. The time it takes to conquer the fort is for Piale gained time (the fleet is at anchor into Marsamxett), for Mustafa lost time , for the defenders of Birgu and Senglea, a gift.

In the early stage of the campaign, the Ottoman's advance is countered with attacks and ambushes in the open field. When the fleet arrives in sight of Marsaklokk, for instance, armed units of Knights and Spaniards are waiting for it . Mustafa then continues along the western side of the island, always followed by the defenders, and makes to drop anchor in some bays. Under cover of darkness, he comes back to Marsaklokk and begins to land his men. The next morning he advances again , devastating the countryside, but guiltily neglecting the walled citadel of Mdina at the centre of the island. It will be a mistake. Starting from Mdina, the cavalry of the Knights will make sorties, will disturb the supply lines, will keep on the alert the nervous Ottomans, at least in one case (the attack of Anastagi), it will be decisive. Mdina, moreover, is used as a point of collection of any rescue forces. A few years later, in Cyprus, the Ottomans won't repeat this mistake, and before besieging Famagusta, they will take away Nicosia, situated, as Mdina in Malta, in the centre of the island.

It remains to understand why the defenders of Malta have withstood so long despite their numerical inferiority. Surely, the role played by La Valette was decisive: his intransigence, his example, his confidence in victory, his almost mystical fervour helped the defenders in those difficult moments. But even its military capabilities were first class. He spared the

forces, not exposing them to risks; he forbade too-expensive fighting in the open , and he organized an excellent defence of the fortifications and the fortified camp of Birgu. The time played in his favour, and he was aware of it: every day lost by the Ottomans , would have approached the bad season; every day lost by the Ottomans would have made closer Don Garcia. Malta was not Rhodes. Rhodes was near the Ottoman coast, Malta was hundreds of leagues afar; who was besieging Rhodes could have been supplied with continuity from the motherland, who was besieging Malta received supplies with the dropper or not received them at all. With the arrival of winter, operations at Rhodes could be suspended pending the following spring without demobilizing the army and bring back the fleet to Istanbul. In Malta, the operations could not be suspended: they had to be cancelled and the fleet would have to resume his way home.

Another decisive factor was the unity of purpose between the civilian population and fighting units . In Rhodes, the population had been pressuring l'Isle-Adam in order to accept the surrender conditions offered by Suleiman : the civilians had heard of Belgrade and the terrible fate of the people of that city and were afraid of being equally treated in case of defeat. In Malta no one ever thought of giving up. In contrast, the civilian population fought with a bravery almost equal to that one of professional soldiers. Decisive turned out the three thousand Maltese soldiers in which, paradoxically, at the beginning of the fighting, La Valette had little confidence. They fought for their island and their families, and this fact multiplied their boldness and courage.

Finally, Don Garcia. He was decisive, it is clear. But the situation already was at a standstill and most likely the Ottomans would have left Malta before winter.