

The Siege of Malta, 1565

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Abstract

This paper explores and examines the 1565 siege of the Island of Malta and its defense by the Knight of the Hospital of St. John against the forces of the Ottoman Empire including its outcome and impact on military history.

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On Friday May 18th, 1565, watchmen from the forts of St. Elmo and St. Angelo, on the Island of Malta, the home of the Knights of the Hospital of St. John, sighted the Fleet of the Grand Turke.¹ Probably the largest fleet to every sail from the Golden Horn, this armada represented the power and military might of Suleiman the Magnificent.² The army being sent by the aging Sultan consisted of between 30,000 and 40,000 men and was transported in a fleet in excess of 200 ships, including 130 galleys, thirty galleasses, eleven of the largest type of merchant ships, a multitude of smaller frigates and barques, and a host of smaller private vessels filled with pirates and assorted renegades.³ The fleet had traveled across almost 1,000 miles of sea and was forced to bring with them practically everything necessary for a siege, even such items as wood for cooking and entrenching, since the inhospitable and rocky island of Malta offered very little to them.⁴

The fleet included 6,000 of Suleiman's elite infantry musketeers (Janissaries), another 9,000 cavalry (Spahis), and 4,000 religious fanatics (Jayalars). It also carried 70 huge siege cannons, some of which could hurl 600 pound stones a mile and a half through the air.⁵ Later the Ottoman force would be augmented by more pirates, led by Dragut, the dread corsair and governor of Tripoli and forces led by Hassan, ruler of Algiers. Francisco Balbi di Correggio, an arquebusier with the Spanish Corps during the siege, would estimate that a total of 48,000 men would make the actual assault on Malta.⁶ The massive force came with a single mission; to destroy the Knights Hospitaller, the infidel warrior-monks of Christendom who had plagued the great Sultan for all the many years of his reign.

Defending the island of Malta from this seemingly overwhelming force, was a small group of Hospitaller Knights and their allies. Balbi states that the original defending forces consisted of only 6,100 defenders; five hundred Knights of the Hospital, perhaps 2,000 soldiers, mostly Spanish and Italian mercenaries, around 3,000 Maltese militia, and a number of assorted irregulars.⁷ Giacomo Bosio, the Order's official historian, estimated the defending force slightly larger at 8,500.⁸ Whatever the exact total, this small force, and the walls of the forts of St. Elmo, St. Michael, and St. Angelo, were all that stood to contend with the assembled might of the Ottoman Empire.

The purpose of this paper will be to analyze the cultural factors that influenced both the Knights of the Order of St. John and their Ottoman foes in the conduct of the siege. It will also explore the long martial relationship shared by the adversaries and their commitment to warfare against one another. Additionally, it will consider the factors and events that allowed a vastly outnumbered and outgunned group of defenders to withstand the might of one of the greatest empires in history.

¹Ernle Bradford, *The Great Siege* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 44.

²Ernle Bradford, *The Knights of the Order* (New York: Dorset Press, 1972), 150.

³ Bradford, *The Knights of the Order*, 145.

⁴ Bradford, *The Knights of the Order*, 144.

⁵ Tony Rothman, "Clash of Religions," *Military Heritage* 6, no. 9 (June 2008): 44.

⁶Francisco Balbi di Correggio, *The Siege of Malta, 1565*, trans. Ernle Bradford (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 36.

⁷ Balbi, 41.

⁸ Rothman, 48.

The Protestant Queen Elizabeth of England noted shortly before the battle, "if the Turks should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom."⁹ This was the opinion held by many in western Europe. A successful Ottoman occupation of Malta could provide a springboard from which to attack Sicily, Italy, and the rest of Europe.¹⁰ The western Mediterranean was largely controlled by the European power of the Hapsburgs. The eastern Mediterranean was primarily controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Malta, at the narrow straits between Tunis and Sicily sat in the middle.¹¹ The fight for Malta was a fight for power over the Mediterranean Sea. It was as the ultimate battle between the forces of Christianity and Islam for control of this vital area.

The Siege of Malta represents a true clash of cultures and religion. The Knights Hospitaller were perhaps the last true remnant of the great Christian crusades that began in 1095. Nearly five centuries after the First Crusade, the Knights were still dedicated to their mission of battling Islam in the name of the Christian God. Suleiman the Magnificent represented the forces of Islam and the apex of the strength of a burgeoning Ottoman Empire intent on the expansion of Muslim rule.

The Order of the Knights of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist traces its origin to a hospice for pilgrims founded in Jerusalem in 1070 by some merchants of Amalfi. In 1100, Brother Gerard Tum was elected master of the Order. Gerard switched the Order from Benedictine rule to that of St. Augustine and adopted John the Baptist as the Order's patron.¹² In 1113 Pope Paschal II placed the Order under his special protection. Under Brother Gerard's leadership the new Order became greatly respected and received many gifts and estates for their work in the nursing and feeding of pilgrims.¹³ Brother Gerard was succeeded as master by Raymond de Puy and under his direction the Order began its transition from simply a nursing order to a nursing order with a military arm.

In 1136 the Hospitallers were given the important castle of Bethgeblin in the south of Palestine to hold against the Muslims.¹⁴ By 1168 the Order had command of a number of castles in Syria, including the famous Krak des Chevaliers, and were able to contribute 500 knights, together with suitable mercenary troops to a crusading venture to Egypt.¹⁵ By 1187 the Knights Hospitaller controlled more than 20 great strongholds in Outremer.¹⁶ This illustrates just how quickly the military character of the order developed. It is important to note that, despite the marital character that developed, the Knights Hospitaller continued their mission of caring for and nursing the sick throughout their long history.

The Knights Hospitaller, along with the Knights of the Temple of Solomon, or Knights Templar, became the two greatest Military Orders of the crusading age. The crusader states, always short of trained military forces, relied on the two Military Orders to provide them with the professional knights and dedicated manpower necessary to maintain its foothold in the Levant. As Thomas Asbridge states, "Together, the Templars and Hospitallers brought a desperately needed influx of manpower and martial expertise to crusader states starved of military resources."¹⁷ The two Orders would become the disciplined fighting force of Outremer. They based their code on the monastic rules set forth by St. Benedict. They would not retreat unless the odds against them were three to one and they would fight to the death because the Order would not ransom them if captured.¹⁸

All members of the Order of the Hospital of St. John took strict vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the rules of the order.¹⁹ Despite the individual knight's vow of poverty, the Orders themselves became vastly wealthy. It was common for royalty and nobility to affirm their devotion to God by giving alms, often land or its revenue, to religious movements. The popularity of the Military Orders led to their receiving rich donations across Europe and in Outremer. For example, the King of England, Henry II, left significant bequests in land and money to both the Hospitallers and

⁹ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 168.

¹⁰ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 142-3.

¹¹ Roger Crowley, *Empires of the Sea, The Siege of Malta, The Battle of Lepanto, and the Contest for the Center of the World* (New York: Random House, 2008), xv.

¹² Desmond Seward, *The Monks of War* (London: Folio Society, 2000), 15.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., 27

¹⁶ Seward, 19.

¹⁷ Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades, The Authoritative History of the War for the Holy Land* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 170.

¹⁸ W.B. Bartlett, *God Wills It! An Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 111.

¹⁹ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 27.

the Templars in his will.²⁰ This was a common occurrence among many European sovereigns. Additionally, the Orders developed a secure system of international finance that effectively made them the bankers of Europe, bringing in additional wealth.²¹ The Military Orders, answering only to the Pope, gained unprecedented economic, military, and political influence in the Latin East.

The military capabilities of the Knights Hospitaller were rivaled only by the Knights Templar. They were the feared shock troops Outremer. It was the Hospitallers who cautioned against moving to meet Saladin at the Horns of Hattin in 1187. They counseled delaying and forcing Saladin to come and meet them.²² When, despite their objections, the Crusader army decided to move across the waterless desert to meet Saladin, 250 Knights of the Hospital moved with them and met their deaths.²³ The military prowess of the Hospitallers and Templars was shown when after the battle Saladin, despite being renowned for his mercy, ordered all the Hospitaller and Templar Knights he had captured beheaded. According to Ibn Al-Athir, "He had these particular men killed because they were the fiercest of all the Frankish warriors, and in this way, he rid the Muslim people of them."²⁴

The military importance of the Hospitallers continued throughout the life of Outremer. During the operations of Richard I, during the Third Crusade, it was the Templars and Hospitallers who provided the van and rearguard of the Christian army.²⁵ It was the Hospitallers who carried the fight at the victory of Arsuf in 1191.²⁶ The Hospitallers continued their role until the very destruction of the crusader states. As Roger Crowley states, "The Order of St. John had fought in every significant action in the long wars of the Holy Land until they were cut down, almost to a man, with their backs to the sea at Acre in May 1291."²⁷ After the fall of Acre the Grand Master of the Hospital led the shattered remnants of the order out of Acre and escaped to Cyprus.²⁸

With the fall of Outremer, the Knights Hospitaller had no choice but to recreate themselves in order to carry on their fight against Islam and that is precisely what the Knights of the Hospital accomplished. In 1307 the reconstituted Knights attacked and captured the Greek Christian island of Rhodes off the coast of Asia Minor.²⁹ Experts at the construction of defenses, they fortified the island and, as Crowley states, "reinvented themselves as sea raiders, building and equipping a small squadron of heavily armed galleys, with which they plundered the Ottoman coasts and sea-lanes, taking slaves and booty."³⁰ For the next 200 years the Hospitallers, operating from the island of Rhodes, maintained a crusading presence deep in Islamic territory. They were never more than 500 or so knights at Rhodes at any one time³¹ and their battle flotilla seldom contained more than three or four galleys.³² Despite this fact, the hard-hitting galleys preyed on rich Muslim shipping and terrorized the sea lanes of the Aegean and Mediterranean.

Sultan Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople, attempted to eliminate the Hospitallers at Rhodes 1480. The three-month siege ended in failure. In June 1522 the young Sultan Suleiman I again invested the island home of the Knights of St. John and this time, after a six-month siege, was successful. Running out of powder, with the walls of their fortifications in rubble, and having lost the support of the native population, the outnumbered knights accepted Suleiman's generous terms of surrender. On New Year's Day 1523, the Knights Hospitaller left Rhodes in safety with their honor, all their possessions, riches, and arms, with the exception of their cannon.³³ For the next seven years the Knights of St. John remained homeless until 1530 when the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V offered the Knights the rocky island of Malta as a gift, in return for the nominal annual rent of one falcon.³⁴ The Hospitallers set to work fortifying the two large harbors and soon resumed their vocation of preying upon Muslim shipping in the name of Christendom.

²⁰ W.L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 148.

²¹ Asbridge, 542.

²² Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 37.

²³ Seward, 31-2.

²⁴ Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 124-5.

²⁵ Asbridge, 463.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 471-3.

²⁷ Crowley, 6.

²⁸ Asbridge, 655-6.

²⁹ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 60.

³⁰ Crowley, 6-7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³² Seward, 171.

³³ Crowley, 19-21.

³⁴ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 123.

In 1565 the Grand Master of the Order was 70 year-old Jean Parisot de La Valette . When LaValette became aware of Suleiman's invasion plans, through the spy network that the Order maintained, he immediately began making preparations for the assault.³⁵ La Valette had been a young serving knight at the fall of Rhodes and he knew that this was more than a clash between Christian and Muslim. If the Knights lost Malta, there was no place else to go. The Knights of St. John were not only fighting against their old enemy for the sake of Christendom, they were fighting for their lives, and the very existence of their Order.

While the Knights of St. John were a Christian remnant of the, bygone crusades fighting for their survival, the Ottomans were an Islamic empire at the peak of their expansionist power. The Ottomans began their rise to power in the early 1300's establishing themselves in north-western Anatolia. They went on to overrun much of the Balkans and by 1453, under Mehmet II , "the Conqueror," had captured Constantinople and extinguished the Byzantine Empire.³⁶ Selim I, "the Grim," conquered the Arab lands of Syria and Egypt and cemented Ottoman domination of the Muslim world.³⁷ Suleiman I, "the Magnificent," subjugated the dominions of Aden, Algiers, Baghdad, Belgrade, Budapest, Nakhichevan, Rhodes, Rivan, Tabriz, and Temesvar.³⁸ He defeated the Kingdom of Hungary and laid siege to Vienna. Under Suleiman I, the Ottoman Empire attained the peak of its glory and, to the Christian world, appeared unstoppable.³⁹

While the Knights Hospitaller had dedicated their lives to fighting the forces of Islam, the forces of the sultan were equally as dedicated to their war against Christendom. The Iayalars represented a corps of religious fanatics whose berserker courage was fueled by hashish.⁴⁰ The elite Janissaries, or new soldiers, were the sons of Christian families living within the Ottoman Empire who, in childhood, were conscripted and forcibly converted to Islam. Slaves of the sultan, they were subjected to a lifetime of the most severe discipline and training and remained the terror of Europe until the mid-17th century.⁴¹

There was a personal level to the circumstances surrounding the Siege of Malta that is not necessarily seen in most battles. Not only was it personal because of the religious aspects of the conflict between Christian and Muslim, but it was also personal because of the relationships between the individuals and the history shared by Suleiman and the Knights of the Hospital of St. John. Grand Master La Valette had not only witnessed, first-hand, the loss of the Order's home in Rhodes, but had himself spent a year chained to an oar as a Turkish galley slave.⁴² Suleiman I had defeated the Knights as a young man at Rhodes, but he was now more than 70 years old and still the Order plagued him. The Hospitallers had proved an even greater menace at Malta than they had been at Rhodes. At least at Rhodes, because of its proximity to Constantinople, the Sultan could more easily anticipate the movement of the Order's galleys through his own extensive spy network. Now every Muslim ship passing through the channel between Sicily, Malta, and North Africa was at the mercy of the Hospitaller galleys.⁴³

Even Suleiman's final decision to assault Malta seems to have a personal flavor. In June of 1564 one of the Order's greatest knights, Chevalier Romegas, led a series of daring and successful raids on Ottoman shipping. In the course of those raids he took a ship and cargo worth 80,000 ducats that had been a major investment of the chief eunuch and the principal ladies of the Sultan's harem.⁴⁴ Romegas also captured the governors of Cairo and Alexandria, as well as a number of high ranking Ottoman officials and other prisoners, including the 107 year-old former nurse of the Sultan's favorite daughter Mihrimah. As Crowley states, "Howls of indignation and rage from Mihrimah and the court echoed in Suleiman's ears...There were loud demands; insults to the Lord of the Two Seas and the Protector of the Faithful could not go unpunished."⁴⁵ It seems as if the old Sultan wanted any peace in his final days, he must deal with the bothersome Knights. The personal insults of the attacks by the Knights and Chevalier Romegas were the last straw and the time had come to wipe the Knights of St. John from the face of the earth.⁴⁶

³⁵Ibid., 143.

³⁶ Richard Holmes, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 927.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 4.

³⁹ Holmes, 927

⁴⁰ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 40.

⁴¹ Holmes, 463.

⁴² Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 18.

⁴³ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁵ Crowley, 86-7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 89.

Since their arrival on Malta the Order had anticipated that they would someday endure a siege. They had enlarged the defenses of Fort St. Angelo, which commanded the water from the southern side of Grand Harbor and protected the village of Birgu.⁴⁷ Another star-shaped fort was built deeper on the Senglea peninsula and was named Fort St. Michael. A smaller fortification, Fort St. Elmo, was erected in 1552 to command the entrance to the Grand Harbor, as well as the entrance to Marsamuscetto Harbor. The weakness of Fort St. Elmo was that it was located at the very tip of the peninsula and could be dominated by artillery from the slopes of Mount Sciberras.⁴⁸ In addition to these defensive improvements, the citadel at Gozo was reinforced and the walls of the inland city of Mdina were strengthened. Shortly before the battle began La Valette had most of the Order's small contingent of horses and cavalymen sent to Mdina.⁴⁹ La Valette had huge quantities of water transported to Birgu and Senglea. Ships were dispatched to Italy to buy food, siege materials, armaments, and other provisions.⁵⁰ The Grand Master issued a call to the Knights of the Order to report to the island and about 500 arrived before the siege began. A trickle of soldiers, mercenaries, and volunteer brigades arrived and La Valette wrote the Pope and the King of Spain requesting they send reinforcements.⁵¹ It is important to note that while much of the Muslim world was generally united under the Sultan, the same cannot be said for the Christian world. By the year 1565 the Christian world was embroiled in the Protestant Reformation and Christian Europe was no longer universally united under Catholic leadership. The Reformation had sapped the strength of the Order. The Hospitallers had lost many of its German commanderies and King Henry VIII's decision to separate the Church of England from Rome had resulted in the loss of the Order's English langues.⁵²

Unfortunately for the Ottomans, the Muslim forces were not united in their tactical leadership. Suleiman had entrusted command of his army to his brother-in-law, General Mustapha Pasha. Mustapha was close to 70 years old and had fought against the Knights at Rhodes. Command of the fleet was given to Admiral Piali Pasha, the 35-year-old hero of Djerba, and the son-in-law of Suleiman's son Selim II. Additionally, Suleiman had given instructions that both Mustapha and Piali should follow the counsel of the 80 year-old corsair Dragut, who would be arriving at Malta soon after the siege began.⁵³ Both Mustapha and Piali were powerful political figures in the Ottoman court and they both desired glory and feared defeat. They were united, however, in their jealousy of Dragut.⁵⁴ Such a division of power would prove problematic for the Ottoman forces.

On Sunday May 20th, the main Turkish force landed at Marsha Xlokk near Marsasciracco Bay.⁵⁵ According to Balbi, Mustapha and Piali were in some disagreement as to where to focus their attack. Mustapha wished to simultaneously bombard Mdina, Birgu, where Fort St. Angelo was located, and Fort St. Michael. Piali, concerned about the safety of the fleet, wished to shelter in the safety of Marsamuscetto Harbor which would require that Fort St. Elmo be taken first.⁵⁶ Some historians believe that Balbi is mistaken and that the plan to initially assault Fort St. Elmo had been developed months before in Istanbul.⁵⁷ Regardless of which is true, it was believed that the tiny Fort St. Elmo could be reduced in a matter of days.

Fort St. Elmo was a small, four-pointed, star shaped fortress, with a hastily completed ravelin, which was in fact little more than a stone-faced earthwork. St. Elmo had low parapets and no embrasures to protect the defenders. It lacked sally ports and the angle of the stars were too sharp, leaving dead ground beneath the ramparts where the defenders were unable to fire.⁵⁸ But the decision to attack St. Elmo worked heavily in the Knight's favor. La Valette now had additional time to continue improving the defenses at St. Angelo and St. Michael. Additionally, the decision not to attack the lightly defended Mdina left open lines of communication between La Valette and Sicily and the Order's cavalry could sally forth from Mdina to harass and disrupt Turkish operations.

⁴⁷ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 25.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, *The Great Siege*, 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, *The Great Siege*, 42.

⁵⁰ Crowley, 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 100-1.

⁵² Seward, 205-6.

⁵³ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 37-8.

⁵⁴ Crowley, 115.

⁵⁵ Balbi, 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 52-3.

⁵⁷ Crowley, 115.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-8.

According to Balbi about 800 fighting men defended St. Elmo.⁵⁹ On the morning of May 24th, two 60-pound culverins, ten 80-pounders and a huge basilisk firing solid 160 pound shot began pummeling the tiny fort.⁶⁰ By Saturday May 26th, the Ottoman entrenchments were only 600 paces away from the ditch surrounding the fort.⁶¹ The Janissaries, with their long-barreled harquebuses, waited to fire on any defender who raised his head over the parapet. In a single day they shot no less than thirty defenders.⁶² On May 31st, the Ottoman gunners being bombarding St. Elmo on an even larger scale with 24 cannon firing on the fort continuously through the day and night.⁶³ As Fort St. Elmo was slowly demolished La Valette replenished the battered garrison by ferrying fresh troops across from St. Michael and St. Angelo and having the wounded evacuated. It was only this nightly transfusion of men that allowed St. Elmo to hold.⁶⁴

On June 2nd, Dragut arrived to join the Turkish forces with thirteen galleys, two galleots, thirty additional ships, and about 2,500 men.⁶⁵ Dragut took direct control of the assault on St. Elmo and, after mounting more cannon, the fort was soon under attack from three sides. Shortly after Dragut's arrival the ravelin at St. Elmo was captured by the Turks. In a fierce battle lasting more than five hours the defenders were forced back in hand-to-hand combat. The Ottomans lost some 2,000 men,⁶⁶ 500 of them elite Janissaries, in the bitter fighting. The defenders lost some sixty soldiers and twenty knights in the struggle⁶⁷

After the loss of the ravelin, Fort St. Elmo was living on borrowed time. The Ottomans used earth-packed goatskins to raise the platform level with the wall of the fort. Now they occupied an offensive position mere yards from the fort and could bombard directly into its interior and they began the construction of scaffolding bridges.⁶⁸ On June 7th and 8th, intense artillery bombardments preceded massive attacks on St. Elmo. In both instances the defenders drove back their attackers with hails of bullets and incendiary weapons, wildfire pots, and fire hoops.⁶⁹ La Valette continued to renew the fort's strength with fresh infusions of knights and men under the cover of darkness. Dragut realized what was happening and ordered the Grand Harbor to be thronged by Turkish patrol boats at night and effectively cut-off the nightly transfusion of troops to St. Elmo.⁷⁰

St. Elmo endured the constant cannonade and repeated attacks until June 23rd, when it was finally overrun. By this time there were no more than 100 defenders left in the fort. Knights who were too wounded to stand had themselves placed in chairs in the breach where they died gripping their great two-handed broadswords.⁷¹ The defenders of Fort St. Elmo had held the Ottomans at bay for a month. Fifteen hundred defenders, including eighty-nine knights, died in its defense, but the Turks had lost six to eight thousand men, and over half of their Janissaries, in reducing the fort.⁷² Additionally the great corsair Dragut died in the assault when he was hit in the head by a splinter of rock from a cannonball ricochet.⁷³ Looking from the ruins of St. Elmo across at the bulk of Fort St. Angelo, Mustapha Pasha is reported to have said, "Allah! If so small a son has cost us so dear, what price shall we have to pay for so large a father?"⁷⁴ The rage and religious discord between the two cultures was shown after the fall of St. Elmo. The Janissaries had shown particular zeal in killing all of the defenders and taking no prisoners. A few wounded knights had been captured by the corsairs. Mustapha Pasha bought them from the corsairs and had them beheaded in front of his army. He then had the heads of the fort's commanders placed on lances. When Piali accused Mustapha of cruelty, he replied that the sultan had ordered him to "take no grown man alive."⁷⁵

⁵⁹Correggio, 55.

⁶⁰ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 59-60.

⁶¹Balbi, 56.

⁶² Crowley, 119.

⁶³Balbi, 62-3.

⁶⁴ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 152.

⁶⁵Balbi, 63.

⁶⁶ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 87.

⁶⁷Balbi, 65-6.

⁶⁸ Crowley, 125-6.

⁶⁹ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 92.

⁷⁰ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 153.

⁷¹ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 121.

⁷²Balbi, 91.

⁷³ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 112.

⁷⁴Balbi, 91.

⁷⁵Balbi, 93.

Mustapha then had the bodies of dead knights, some beheaded, others disemboweled or otherwise mutilated, secured to pieces of wood, in mockery of the crucifixion, and thrown into the sea where the current would float them past the defenders at Birgu.⁷⁶ In retaliation La Valette had all of the Turkish prisoners in his control beheaded and their heads fired at the Ottoman position from the large cannon of Fort St. Angelo.⁷⁷ Additionally from this day on a Turkish prisoner was hanged each morning from the ramparts of Mdina.⁷⁸ At this time a small relief force of forty-two knights and about 1,000 men managed to make it into St. Angelo. Surprisingly enough at this point Mustapha offered La Valette the same terms of surrender that had been offered at Rhodes, safe passage for the Order and their followers, with all the honors of war.⁷⁹ La Valette replied, "Tell your master that this is the only territory that I will give him" He pointed to the ditch. "There lies the land which he may have for his own--provided only that he fills it with the bodies of his Janissaries."⁸⁰

At this point Mustapha redoubled his efforts to seal off the two forts. He launched a small fleet of galleys into the Grand Harbor to control the bay and during the first week in July a heavy crossfire of cannon was opened on both forts.⁸¹ On July 15th, a massive combined land and seaborne attack was launched against Senglea. Despite the Ottomans reaching the parapets and a part of the wall being accidentally destroyed by an exploding powder magazine, the attack was beaten off in heavy fighting.⁸² La Valette was able to reinforce Senglea from Birgu by way of a floating bridge that had been constructed that connected the two peninsulas. Additionally, nine boatloads of Janissaries, numbering 800 men, were destroyed in the attack by a concealed sea-level five-gun battery at the base of Fort St. Angelo.⁸³

After the failed attack Mustapha proceeded with more caution and attempted to reduce the walls of the forts to rubble by incessant bombardment, ready to throw his forces in at the first breach. No less than fifty major artillery pieces directed their fire against the two forts and the sound of cannon-fire could be heard as far away as Syracuse and Catania.⁸⁴ Another major attack was beaten back from the walls of Birgu and Senglea on August 2nd after a six-hour battle. According to Balbi, the Turks lost some 600 men compared to 40 men lost among the defenders.⁸⁵

Over the next five days the bombardment continued and on August 7th, another large-scale attack was launched against the two positions. Mustapha commanded the attack on Senglea with 8,000 men and Piali oversaw the attack on the Post of Castile at Birgu with 4,000 men.⁸⁶ The battle continued for nine hours with the Turks sending in fresh troops more than a dozen times.⁸⁷ At Birgu the Turks were able to breach the main wall and poured through only to find themselves caught in a murderous crossfire from the inner defensive walls.⁸⁸ Despite the terrible casualties the weight of the Ottoman forces began to tell.

Mustapha was even more successful in his attack on St. Michael where he breached the wall and gained a footing in the citadel. Troops could not be sent to reinforce Senglea from Birgu since they were both under heavy attack. The attack on Birgu became so severe that La Valette himself grabbed a pike and led reserves into the fray.⁸⁹ It appeared, as the garrison at St. Michael's was forced back, that victory for Mustapha was imminent. At this point an astonishing event occurred. The signal to retreat was sounded and the Turks, on the brink of victory, began to withdrawal. Mustapha had received word that a large Christian force had fallen upon his encampment and was slaughtering everyone there. Mustapha assumed it was a relief force from Sicily and broke off his attack to meet this new threat. As it turned out there was no relief force, but rather the Order's small cavalry force, stationed at Mdina and numbering no more than a hundred men, had attacked the Turkish base camp and, having overwhelmed the sentries, set out to kill everyone in it.⁹⁰

⁷⁶Ibid., 93.

⁷⁷ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 127.

⁷⁸ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 157.

⁷⁹Ibid., 157-8.

⁸⁰ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 133.

⁸¹ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 158.

⁸² Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 140-5.

⁸³Balbi, 115.

⁸⁴ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 160.

⁸⁵Balbi, 136.

⁸⁶ Crowley, 166.

⁸⁷Balbi, 145.

⁸⁸ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 160.

⁸⁹Balbi, 144.

⁹⁰ Crowley, 168.

La Valette received word from Don Garcia, the viceroy of Sicily, that he could expect him to arrive with a relief force before the end of August, but the Grand Master did not believe he could rely upon such promises. The two forts were in dire straits. Most every defender bore wounds of some sort and while water, food, and ammunition were still adequate the walls of the defenses were near a state of complete ruin. Refusing to abandon either fort, La Valette had the bridge between them destroyed.⁹¹ The defenders were determined to die in battle. La Valette reminded the defenders that Pope Pius IV had promulgated a bull granting plenary indulgence to all who fell in the war against the Muslims.⁹²

The Turks were beginning to drive mines beneath the defenses and the constant bombardment continued. On August 18th, another major assault was made on St. Michael. A mined section of the wall was blown away and La Valette once again personally led a counterattack into the breach and the defenses held.⁹³ Other assaults were hurled back as the days of August continued. But serious problems were developing for the Ottoman forces as well. The Turkish losses had been severe, and the morale of the army was flagging. The army was plagued with dysentery and disease. The remaining Janissaries were filled with sullen dissent and refused to leave their trenches unless Mustapha himself led them. Mustapha was forced to siphon off the fleet's gunpowder to continue the bombardment and winter and bad weather were fast approaching. Mustapha wished to winter in Malta and continue the siege but Piali flatly refused. He was nearly 1,000 miles from home and would not risk his fleet. After one or two more attacks they would have to head back to Istanbul.⁹⁴

The Turks again increased their efforts against the defenders. They used mines, petards, and siege towers filled with arquebusiers, but the defenders grimly held on. Finally, on September 6th, Don Garcia's fleet and relief force reached the north-east end of the island. Although Don Garcia only had about 8,000 men, while the Turks had a least 20,000 troops, the arrival of the relief force was enough to cause Mustapha and Piali to abandon the siege and the Turkish forces began their withdrawal.⁹⁵

The Knights of the Hospital of St. John and their allies had held out for nearly four months against overwhelming odds. The cities of Birgu and Senglea lay in ruins, but the Order still held the island of Malta. It is estimated that the Turkish losses during the siege were 25,000-30,000 men and this does not include the Algerian or Barbary corsairs who participated in the attack.⁹⁶ At the end of the siege no more than 600 defenders were still capable of bearing arms. The Order lost 250 knights and of those who lived, most were severely wounded or crippled for life. Out of the Spanish and foreign soldiers and Maltese inhabitants 7,000 had died in defense of Malta.⁹⁷

Suleiman, who would die within the year, was uncharacteristically magnanimous with his unsuccessful forces. Mustapha and Piali both kept their heads and the surviving Janissaries were all promoted. The defeat at Malta was airbrushed from the imperial record. *Malta yok* (Malta does not exist) was the Turkish saying. The next season Ottoman imperial ambitions turned away from the Mediterranean and instead focused again on Hungary.⁹⁸

The successful defense by the tiny force at Malta resounded through Christendom. From Rome, across Italy to Paris, and even in London, bells rang from churches and cathedrals, rejoicing at the victory over the forces of Islam. The Knights of St. John, long thought by many to an outmoded relic of the crusading era, received world-wide fame and Malta became known as the "Island of heroes" and the "Bulwark of the faith."⁹⁹ These sobriquets were quite appropriate. The difficulties of the Muslim forces in maintaining a siege almost 1,000 miles away from their home base, the divided command of the Muslim forces, the impending winter weather, and the relief force from Sicily, all played a role in the defeat of the Ottoman forces. But it was the tenacious defense of their island home by the Knights of St. John and their allies that ultimately allowed them to survive the siege.

Considering the hundreds of years, the Knights of St. John had spent fighting the forces of Islam, their position in the loss of Outremer, and their defeat and exodus from Rhodes, their dogged defense of Malta is understandable. They, of all the forces of Christendom, were still dedicated to the crusading values that had inspired earlier generations. Their

⁹¹ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 179.

⁹² Ibid., 160-1.

⁹³ Ibid., 168-9.

⁹⁴ Crowley, 172.

⁹⁵ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 164-5.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁹⁷ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 206.

⁹⁸ Crowley, 186.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

obdurate defense of Malta is evocative of their cultural status as warrior-monks, no less fanatic than the opposing Janissaries or Iayalars.

The very survival of the Order and their reason for existence was tied to the defense of their tiny, rocky island and their unyielding defense of their home was ultimately successful. Their epic struggle was celebrated in verses, histories, drawings, maps, and broadsheets throughout Europe.¹⁰⁰As Voltaire would later write, "Nothing is better known than the siege of Malta."¹⁰¹

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¹⁰⁰ Bradford, *The Great Siege*, 212.

¹⁰¹ Bradford, *Knights of the Order*, 145.