

# THE GREAT SIEGE OF MALTA

## FROM A TURKISH POINT OF VIEW

by

Professor JOSEPH GALEA, M.B.E., M.D., D.P.H.

The Great Siege of Malta was one of the few events that influenced the course of history. It saved Italy from Moslem invasion and defended Europe against Turkish hegemony.

The Great Siege was celebrated in prose and verse; innumerable books have been written about it, but almost all of them express the "Christian" point of view, because there is hardly any publication about the Siege originating from Turkish sources. Hence the current view is more or less one-sided, not to say biased.

It is therefore not without interest to read the story of the Siege as related by Richard Knolles in his book on the history of the Turkes.\* The book has now become very rare, but when it was first published it gained some popularity, there were several editions, the fifth (the one available to me) was published by Adam Islip in 1638. The first edition was probably issued in 1610, which means that the author had gathered his information only fifty years after the Great Siege, and it is not unlikely that there might have been persons still living who remembered the event or who had taken part in it.

Mr. Knolles was a well read and much travelled gentleman who collected his information and the material for his book from Christian as well as from Turkish sources. He himself mentions books of references, amongst which Coelius Secundus's "*De Bello Melitensi*" and he also acknowledges information supplied to him by friends and acquaintances amongst whom were: one "Nicholas Nicholay, Ambassador of the French King unto Suleyman", and his "kind friend and cousin, Master Roger Howe who made observation during his late abode in Constantinople". Both Nicholay and Howe had therefore excellent opportunities to learn about the Great Siege from the highest Turkish Authorities and to hear their version of the event.

Knolles description of the Siege of Malta takes 26 pages (from 793 to 819) of the edition published in 1638. It is very comprehensive and informative, mainly it narrates information gleaned from well known histories published after the Siege, but in the course of Knolles's narration, the reader often discovers events, aspects, comments and reflections which are absent from "our" histories.

---

\* "*The General Historie of the Turkes from the first beginning of that Nation to the rising of the Othoman Familie, with all the notable expeditions of the Christian Princes against them. Together with Lives and Conquests of the Othoman Kings and Emperors*" by Richard Knolles, sometimes fellow of Lincol College, Oxford.

A copy is in the library of the Hon. Dr. Louis Galea, C.B.E., Q.C., LL.D., who very kindly allowed me to collect notes from his copy for this article.

and are evidently derived from "enemy" versions and therefore express the Turkish point of view.

We usually read that Suleyman was prompted by the Ladies of his serraglio to attack Malta in retaliation for the loss of much silk and other finery which they had lost at the hands of the Knights. In Knolles's book we find that the chief instigators were Cassanes, son of Barbarossa, King of Algiers and Dragut, Governor of Tripoli, both of whom had their own reasons for dealing a shattering blow to the Knights who were harassing their territories and disrupting their maritime trade.

The venture was not undertaken haphazardly; there were preparations both diplomatic and logistic. The Sultan summoned his Councillors and his Chiefs of Staff at a Divan, when he made what would today amount to a statement of policy which because of its importance and significance, could not be easily forgotten. The following is the Sultan's speech as recorded in Knolles's history; it is certainly not a verbatim report but it expresses the motives of the Turkish campaign against Malta.

"What things I have these forty years always wished, which was to have leisure from other wars, as to pluck out of their nest and utterly to root out these crossed pirates, which vaunt themselves to be 'the bulwark of' Christendom; that fame me-thinks I have by the favour of God and Mahomet His Prophet at this time obtained. For we have so repressed the attempts of the Persians, that they cannot let us. And in Hungary, from whence certain dreadful motions were reported, we ourselves will shortly do those things which shall enforce our enemies to hide their heads in the heart of Germany, and to sue to us for peace. You yourselves daily hear the pitiful complaints of our subjects and merchants, whom these Maltese, I say not soldiers, but pirates, if they but look into those seas,, spoil and make prizes of, whose injuries to revenge, all laws both of God and men do require. Neither can anything happen unto me more pleasing or more honourable, than if I may hope before I die I do accomplish those things, that is, to win Malta, and to leave all cthings in order in Hungary and Poland. Except perhaps some men think it an harder matter for us, to thurst those crossed Companions from the rock of Malta, than for our ancestors to have driven them out of Jerusalem, and so quite out of Syria; and for ourselves to have forced them out of the strong island of Rhodes. But this some will say is nearer unto Italy, from whence aid may easily be sent, and the place defended by a fleet. Believe me, they will never adventure to fight with us at sea, who remember themselves to have been there by us so often overthrown; besides that, so little a place cannot contain any great garrison, neither if it could, could it long feed them. Wherefor, unto this expedition we have determined with the first of the Spring to send a most strong fleet; and even now we have already commanded all our sea Captains and Adventurers which acknowledge our command, to be there present with their ships. The King of Algiers will be there, the garrisons of Alexandria are in readiness, so also is Dragut with his appointed fleet. As for our own, it is by mine own appointment rigged up; unto which fleet I doubt not but that all the strength of the West will give place, Which thing, worthy Captains, we speak trusting upon the help of

Almighty God and Mahomet His great Prophet, with your own known and approved valour. Now remains only that everyone of you think with us, how the war may be best managed and so to refer your devices unto us. Which that you may better do, lo, I here deliver unto you the situation of the whole Island and project of all the fortifications which have been received of most expert and skilful men."

The speech is significant in more senses than one. It repeats the usual platitudes as regards peaceful intentions of the invader but at the same time it seeks to justify an act of war because of the perfidy of the enemy. It stirs hatred against the Knights, and stimulates national pride. The speech also reveals a lurking fear of the obstacles and resistance to be encountered. e.g. the distance of Malta from Constantinople, its proximity to friendly nations, but all these obstructions are brushed aside "with the help of Almighty God and Mahomet His great Prophet and the known and approved valour" of the Turkish Captains.

Following the Divan, an ukase was sent to the Heads of all the tributary States of North Africa to cooperate in the campaign which was planned for spring.

The expedition sailed from Constantinople on the 22nd of March. It set course for Peloponesus and so came to Methone where all the forces were mustered for inspection by Mustapha, one of the greatest Captains of Turkey who had been appointed General Officer commanding.

The invasion army was lined as follows:-

- 7000 Spahis, crack horsemen of Turkey.
- 1200 fast riders from Thrace and Peloponesus.
- 4500 Janissaries, the flower of the Turkish Army.
- 500 levies from Cilicia.
- 400 o'her levies from Metylene.
- 3500 volunteers from countries under the Sultan's rule.
- 13000 fanatics "who had all at Constantinople vowed their lives for their superstition".

The fleet was also reviewed by the Commander in Chief, Admiral Piali Bascia. It was made of:-

- 130 gallies
- 22 "ships of burden".
- 10 gallies from Rhodes commanded by Halypart, an old sea-wolf 70 years of age.
- 2 gallies of Metylene.
- 17 galliots and other small pirate ships.

An ill omen happened soon after the fleet sailed from Methone for Malta: one of the "ships of burden" went aground and was wrecked on the rocks, with the loss of 400 spahis, 6000 barrels of powder and 1300 "great shots".

Then follows a description of Malta based principally on material found

in contemporary books on the Island, but there are also aspects evidently expressing Turkish points of view such as the following information about the inhabitants and their dwelling: "The inhabitants are so burnt of the sun that they differ little in colour from the Ethiopians. The building, except in the city (which lies in the midst of the Island) and in suburbs, are long and low like unto the moors, covered with turf or reed."

The landing of the Turks at Marsaxlokk follows the pattern recorded in standard accounts of the Siege, but there are one or two different details. For instance, it is not stated that elements of the invading army overrun the countryside skirmishing with Maltese defenders, but it is recorded that a large force of 20,000 men with their ordnance, landed at Marsaxlokk and entrenched out of range of St. Michael's guns waiting for further orders.

The heroic resistance of Fort St. Elmo is fully described but no mention is made of the fact that Dragut had disapproved of the plan to occupy St. Elmo before St. Angelo and Borgo, the Headquarters of the Knights, were reduced. Indeed no mention is made of the rivalry between the Turkish Commanders of the Army and Navy, their frequent disputes and bickerings.

A five hours battle for St. Elmo is described, with the loss of 200 Christians, of the Turks "a great number" perished.

Dragut is admired for his courage and prowess, he is extolled over the other Commanders and praised for his wise counsels and unselfish behaviour. His plan was to tire the defenders of St. Elmo by harassing them day and night and in so doing he gave himself no rest, "he himself performed the duty of a General and a most valiant soldier". His death caused not a little consternation; his body was carried to Tripoli, his domain, where it was honourably buried. He was succeeded as Governor of Tripoli by Ochalli Bascia, one of the Chiefs of the Invasion Army, who was despatched from Malta presumably to ensure the continued flow of supplies from that country.

The Turkish artillery is described as terrible, it "had beaten down all the walls unto the very rock where the castle (St. Elmo) stood."

The appeal of the Knights to the Vice-Roy of Sicily for help and reinforcement is given prominence, but a version is given which is not mentioned in "Christian" books: Whilst the Vice-Roy was considering the request, he received a dispatch from the King of Spain which evidently carried some confidential instructions which were not made known to the emissaries of the Grand Master, and because of such dispatch the Vice-Roy gave a "cold answer" to the Knights: he was not prepared to endanger his fleet, if they wanted to carry troops and munitions to Malta they had to do so in their own galleys. This notwithstanding, a small contingent of 80 Knights and 600 mercenaries embarked on the galleys of the Knights and sailed for Malta. The expedition was favoured by a "foggy mist so thick that a man could hardly see for it".

The Christians were fortunate on that occasion because but for a stroke of bad luck, intelligence would have reached the Turkish Commander in time to prevent the reinforcement to reach its destination. A boy looking out of the window of his home in Mdina, saw a dark man leaving the city stealthily and proceeding towards the Turkish camp. He reported the matter to the Knights who pursued that man and caught him. Under torture he confessed being himself an informer who was on his way to the Turkish Commander

with the news of the arrival of the fresh troops so that they would be intercepted.

The arrival of the King of Algiers with his troops and galleys infused new courage in the heart of the Turks. The King was a tactician with daring and imagination. He planned an attack on Fort St. Michael by a combined force by land and sea. He reckoned that the defenders though ready to guard the approaches from the countryside, would be unprepared for a surprise attack from the sea. In pursuance of his plan he caused 90 small vessels to be carried overland from Marsamxett to "Aqua Martia" (inner reaches of Marsa basin).

In Knolles's narrative Fort St. Michael figures more prominently than that of St. Angelo or the other fortifications of Birgu, where the Grand Master had his headquarters.

The Turkish version lays stress on the shady intrigues by fugitives, renegades and informers from both sides. For instance; it is stated that a Christian fugitive revealed to Mustapha the existence of a chain guarding the entrance to the creek between Birgu and Senglea, and moreover that Christian traitor himself organized a demolition party to destroy that chain.

Another Christian renegade one Franciscus Aquilates, persuaded the Turkish Commander to launch a fresh assault against Fort St. Michael, which cost the defenders much loss in men and material.

It appears that after the failure of that assault some doubts were raised as regards the final outcome of the whole venture. Mustapha the Turkish Commander "sent a galliot in haste with letters to Suleyman, wherein he shewed him the state of the fleet, with what difficulties the army was distressed what small hope there was of winning the places besieged, how well the Christians were provided, with many other such things".

At the same time public opinion in Europe was being roused, and Christian Princes were becoming concerned about the fate of Malta. A Spanish Captain named Salazar was dispatched by the Vice-Roy of Sicily to report on the situation in Malta. He arrived accompanied by one Petrus Paccius (Peter Pace?). They eluded the vigilance of the enemy and entered the Turkish camp where they collected useful information about the state of the invading army. The two informers reported their observations to the Vice-Roy, but a copy of their report reached back to the Turkish Commander by means of a Christian renegade.

Robles is mentioned as the Governor of Fort St Michael, which according to this Turkish version bore the brunt of the fiercest attacks, to that redoubtable Knight is accorded honour and admiration and he is considered as a Captain "most useful to the Knights". According to the Turks, Robles met his fate under similar circumstances as their indomitable Dragut: "whilst reviewing by night the ruins of the walls, he was struck on the head with a small shot and slain."

About that time the situation became serious enough to warrant the resort to propaganda tactics. An attempt was made to excite treason and subversion amongst the defenders and to undermine the loyalty of the people to the Knights. Mustapha made a spirited appeal to the mercenaries as well as to

the Maltese "who had hitherto valiantly behaved themselves and done more than any man could have hoped."

Mustapha's appeal however had no effect at all, and his position became more and more critical. In desperation he planned yet another fierce attack on Fort St. Michael; "if successful he would carry on with the siege, if not he would raise the siege and sail away. To encourage his men he promised five talents of gold to the engine bearers, that should first advance the engines upon the walls, as for the rest he would reward everyone of them according to the deserts either with money or preferment." But Mustapha's plan was thwarted by the escape of a Christian captain who revealed the whole plan to the Grand Master: the usual excuse for justification of failure!

Even the great battle fought at the plain of Burmarrad on the last day of hostilities, between the relieving forces from Sicily and the Turks, was lost according to Turkish version because of the betrayal by a Genoese fugitive from the Turkish camp.

Contrary to what is stated in the usual narratives of the Siege, the Turkish fleet did not sail hurriedly away after the debacle at Burmarrad. It rode defiantly at St. Paul's Bay where it stood the next day and the following night, and then "at sunrise upon shooting of a great piece", all ships hoist sail for Greece "leaving the Island of Malta impoverished and wasted". That last shot was like a parting salute from a defeated army to a gallant foe!

In any disadvantage someone is always held to blame for the failure. The scapegoat for the disastrous defeat of the Turks in Malta was the Governor of the Island of Chios. He was accused of having had intelligence with the Grand Master during the Siege of Malta and of having revealed to the Knights many of the Turkish plans and designs. Suleyman was furious, he wanted to inflict a punishment so severe as to deter future traitors. He gave instructions to Piali Bascia to destroy the Island of Chios with fire and sword. Admiral Piali who had lead the Turkish fleet to Malta, was thus rehabilitated, but Mustapha Bascia who had commanded the invasion army, fell in disgrace and he was never mentioned again.

---

All members of the Society are kindly requested to forward a copy of their publications to the Hon. Secretary.

The Italian Archaeological team, headed by Proffs. Sabatino Moseati and M. Cagiano de Azevedo has completed the third phase of their work at tas-Silġ and St. Paul Milqgħi. Capt. C. Zammit, Director of the Museum, represented the Government of Malta.