

Malta and the Celebration of Victory over the Turks in the Siege of Vienna of 1683

Carmel Cassar



Fig. 1
August Querfurt (1696-1761),
The Turkish siege of Vienna,
1750s, oil on canvas,
95.2 x 127.6cm

In his book *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922* published in 2000, Donald Quataert explains how in the summer of 1983, while in Vienna, he was struck by ...*lines of schoolchildren [who] wound their way through the sidewalks of the Austrian capital.*

These children were lining up for an exhibition to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the victory over the Turks in the second siege of Vienna of 1683. The Ottoman Turks were literally the terror of their enemies,¹ and it was precisely this factor that the author claims induced him to write his book.

Celebrations of victories over the Turks are still very much felt especially in the Mediterranean and the Balkan states. This is undoubtedly ground in traumatic historical experiences resulting from centuries-old antagonisms based on religious and cultural values and considerations that over the centuries have impeded a proper evaluation and assessment of the role played by the Turks in the Mediterranean, in the Balkans and elsewhere. As often happens in many societies, many rites associated with war are staged by a single side, identifying the enemy, recounting their moral inferiority while glorifying the celebrant's own community. Such rites keep political antagonisms alive, without necessarily exacerbating them to the point of physical hostilities. In Malta, for example, among the most important occasions for public festivals is the celebration of victory over the Turks in the Siege of Malta of 1565, connected to the feast of Our Lady of Victory. Through this kind of celebration, the Order of St John in Malta regularly defined the Turks as their enemies. The aim was to associate the Turks with a variety of derogatory symbols, while trumpeting the virtues of their own polity.²

Elaborate festivities staged at the time reflected the social ideology propagated by the authorities. The distinction between Turk and Christian emphasized boundaries which symbolically made all those falling within them feel that they respectively shared common bonds. Various potent symbols were manipulated in the rituals, like the Crusaders' red flag with a white cross of the Order, especially so after the Christian victory in the 1565 Ottoman Turkish siege of Malta, when somewhat to the astonishment of both sides the Turkish forces besieging Malta were catastrophically repelled, an event that left a permanent mark on Maltese identity.³

Festivities in which the masses participated actively often included military parades in which the Grand Master and other dignitaries of the Order took part. These celebrations helped to mirror important hierarchical distinctions in society, and also brought together people from all walks of life while presenting them with potent symbols of social identity, besides nourishing a sense of ethnic belonging and also of the legitimacy of the Order's presence in Malta. It was an occasion for much pomp and festivity, but it would be wrong to assume that such celebrations were over-exaggerated. In a study on Shakespeare's *Othello*, Daniel J. Vitkus argues that despite feeling 'safely removed from any direct Islamic threat early modern English authors frequently refer to the menace of the Turkish conquerors in terms that express a sense of immediacy'.⁴ By way of example Vitkus refers to the series of common prayers for delivery from Turkish

attack by the Protestant ecclesiastical authorities in Elizabethan England. The first of these refers to a common prayer recited in one English diocese, which asked God:

to repress the rage and violence of Infidels, who by all tyranny and cruelty labour utterly to root out not only true Religion, but also the very name and memory of Christ our only Saviour, and all Christianity; and if they should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom.⁵

When news of the lifting of the siege reached England, the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered another form of prayer to be read 'through the whole Realm' every Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. The prayer expresses thanks to God for delivering Malta from 'that wicked monster and damned soul Mahumet and our sworn and most deadly enemies the Turks, Infidels, and Miscreants', but warns of catastrophic consequences should the Turks succeed in Hungary.⁶

Thus, it would be misleading to assume that Malta was in any way unique. In his book *Arabs and Medieval Europe*, Norman Daniel concludes that:

...the moral identity of Europe was preserved by a fiercely determined orthodoxy which wanted nothing to do with any least deviation in the whole field of religion, [such that] religion itself became the expression of that same sense of identity.⁷

By claiming religion to be an expression of identity Daniel may be criticized of having taken the matter too far. However, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that over the centuries religion has served as a major constituent of ethnic identity. It would likewise be wrong to assume that a cultural association with religion in Europe can only be met in peripheral societies like Mediterranean islands, the Balkans or Ireland.

Precisely like the Viennese and other Europeans, for the people of Malta the term 'Turks' meant a most complex reality. 'Turks' actually referred to fighting forces, who may or may not have been ethnically Turkish, but who all belonged to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire. This designation made some sense since the Ottoman dynasty was ethnically Turkish in origin, as were some of its subjects. But it may be argued that the use of the term 'Turks' had changed over the centuries, since the Ottoman dynasty had through inter-marriage with other ethnic groups lost its original Turkish quality. In fact from the fifteenth century onwards, state power relied on a heterogeneous mix of people some of whom were renegade Christians, or the sons of renegades to Islam.

Irrespective of the original ethnic meaning of 'Turk', in the Western European Christian mind the term came to mean 'Muslim'. Thus to turn 'Turk' basically meant converting to 'Islam'. This comes out very clearly in the report sent to Rome by the Inquisitor of Malta Innicio Caracciolo (1683-86). At face value the report appears to be a straightforward description of events. However, the terms used by Caracciolo give a feeling of the way the knights and inhabitants

of Malta, as indeed most of the people of Christian Europe, perceived the Ottoman Empire at the end of the seventeenth century.

News and Celebrations

In August 1683, Inquisitor Caracciolo reported to the Secretary of State of the Holy See that an English vessel which had just arrived in Malta from Cyprus had brought news of continuous movements of Turkish troops in Hungary, where all the top echelons of the Sultan's court had joined for war.⁸ By mid-September Caracciolo was able to provide more details thanks to the information brought by a French *tartana*, which confirmed that war was being waged between the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Grand Turk, and that the latter was being beaten. The Inquisitor had learned that Vienna, the capital city of the Empire, had been besieged by a multitude of soldiers gathered from all parts of the Ottoman Empire, and that in Malta the bells were rung every evening to implore divine mercy against the 'common enemy'.⁹

The same Inquisitor Caracciolo was informed in a letter from Rome dated the 27th October that the Turks had lost at the Siege of Vienna. On the 3rd November the Inquisitor reported that as soon as the news reached Valletta, spontaneous public joy spread like wildfire throughout the Island for the liberation, expressed through continuous artillery volleys, fires and lights. The people kept thanking God with numerous processions from churches all over the island. These were accompanied by musicians and were held for three consecutive days.¹⁰ On the 16th November the same Inquisitor reported that the official jubilation and festivities for the victory at Vienna had been formally inaugurated with the celebration of solemn Masses and processions with the participation of the population.¹¹

Inquisitor Caracciolo attached a detailed report of the festivities held in Malta on the occasion. He informed the Holy See that news of the Christian victory at Vienna arrived on the vigil of the feasts of Saints Simon and Jude, and on that same day all the churches of the Island held funeral services for the death of the faithful who died at war. Many Masses for the dead held privately and by the Order of St John were said for the souls of the dead of the Siege of Vienna. No less than 3000 Masses were held in the days that followed.

On the day of the Holy Apostles, Pontifical mass was held at St John's Conventual Church followed by a procession with the reliquary containing the hand of the Baptist, which hand had touched the head of Jesus Christ at baptism. When the procession arrived at the Church of Our Lady of Victory many artillery shots were fired from the nearby fort [St James Cavalier ?], to which there was a response of 150 cannon shots.

On the following Sunday, High Mass was celebrated by the Vicar of the Cathedral Chapter (*vicario capitolare*). After lunch another procession, in which both the regular and secular clergy left the Greek parish of Our Lady of Damascus in Valletta, reached the Capuchin Church above the Floriani

fortifications (Floriana), about a mile from the city, carrying in procession the miraculous Icon of the Most Holy Virgin of Damascus. The Vicar could be seen carrying a silver cross encrusted with many holy relics. On arrival at the Capuchin Church, the Prior of the Dominicans gave a sermon about the great mercy of God in defence of His Church when most in need.

The following Thursday His Eminence the Grand Master Gregorio Carafa (1680-1690) held a lavish banquet for the Grand Crosses (top-ranking knights) and all the Piliers (heads of the Langues), for which the Apostolic Visitor (and Inquisitor) could not attend due to his indisposition, which forced him to stay at home and follow a strict regimen.

On sunset of that day, many lights were lit all over the city. All houses were lit and not even the window or balcony of the poorest citizen was left in the dark. Great fires were also lit in the streets as a sign of jubilation.

The galleys berthed at the harbour could be distinguished by their distinctive banners and flags. They had been newly painted and dressed with flags for the occasion, and offered a spectacular view to those who climbed the road from the port to the city of Valletta. At night-time the flags were removed and fireworks were fixed to the top of the galley masts. The galleys were then moved away from land and stationed at the opening of the harbour. Then many firearms were fired, followed by three artillery shots, and the shots of many muskets. One could also hear the shouting of the people and the shots fired from the small vessels in the harbour, all of which mingled with the shouts of people who went to see the spectacle from the shores. The fireworks were then lit.

At the end of the spectacle the galleys were taken to their usual berthing site in that part of the harbour between Senglea and Vittoriosa, but which despite the darkness of night could be distinguished due to the presence of numerous lights. At the same time other fireworks had been prepared in Valletta. The main attraction of the Valletta fireworks was one which depicted the Ottoman Moon held underneath the talons of the Imperial Eagle. An ugly image of a Pasha represented the humiliation suffered by the Grand Turk, who was shown under the eagle's claw. Many other new and creative fireworks were lit and continued to burn for a long time against the continuous explosions of small mortars, which could be heard throughout most of the night.

The Langue of Germany organised the singing of the *Te Deum* at the Victory Church, where solemn Mass was held, and on the following Sunday they held a banquet inside the Auberge, superbly decked for the occasion both on the inside and outside, with paintings and other decorations, including a fountain with flowing wine – the activity went on for many hours.¹²

In the sixteen years of continuous war that followed the failure at Vienna, the Ottoman Empire suffered defeat both on land and at sea. In the Treaty of Karlowitz of 1699, the Sultan ceded Hungary to the Austrians and parts of the Dalmatian coast, Athens and the Morea (modern

Peloponnese) to Venice. In the end the Ottomans recovered their lost territories in Greece, but they never regained Hungary from Austria. After Karlowitz the Austrians and the newly arisen Russia of Peter the Great were also able to make further considerable inroads into the European part of the Ottoman Empire, which, for a time, appeared on the brink of dissolution.

The detailed description of the festivities held in Malta on the occasion of the Christian victory at Vienna, confirms that crusading and perpetual war against the Ottoman Empire remained at the top of the list of preoccupations for the Order of St John in the late seventeenth century. It also shows that the Holy See still perceived Malta as the bulwark of Christianity in the Mediterranean, and the Inquisitor as Apostolic Visitor was duty-bound to report in detail on all activities that took place in Malta to Rome. Finally, the celebrations of 1683 suggest that the centuries-old Christian culture, consolidated by the active presence of the Order of St John and its position as guarantor against the Muslim threat, had already become an essential element in Maltese ethnic awareness.

Professor Carmel Cassar is a cultural historian who has received several Research Fellowships, including ones from the Universities of Durham, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Jesuit Historical Institute in Rome. He was responsible for the development of an Ethnography Section and particularly the rehabilitation of the Inquisitor's Palace, Vittoriosa, within the Malta Museums Department. Cassar presently chairs the Programme for Mediterranean Culinary Culture at the University of Malta, and serves as Rector's delegate on the Valletta 2018 European City of Culture Foundation, besides forming part of the Research Committee of said Foundation. His books include: 'A Concise History of Malta'; 'Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta'; 'Eating Through Time: The Culture of Food in the Mediterranean'; 'Sex, Magic and the Periwinkle'; 'Honour and Shame in the Mediterranean' (translated into five languages); 'Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition'; 'Fenkata. An Emblem of Maltese Peasant Resistance?' Cassar has also contributed to a large number of publications including book chapters, papers in learned journals and book reviews in Europe and the USA.

Notes

- 1 Daniel Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (Cambridge, 2000), 1-2.
- 2 A similar attitude was likewise adopted in Renaissance Venice. Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, 1981), 212-213.
- 3 In 1885, the *otto settembre* (the day marking the victory over the Ottomans in 1565) became Malta's national day. Carmel Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* (Malta: Mireva, 2000), 283.
- 4 Daniel J. Vitkus, 'Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor', in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 48 No. 2 (Summer 1997), 147.
- 5 From 'A Form to be used in common prayer ... to excite all godly people to pray unto God for the delivery of those Christians that are now invaded by the Turk', reprinted in William Keatinge Clay (ed.), *Liturgical Services of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth: Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer Set Forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (Cambridge: University Press, 1847), 519-523, especially page 519. This is quoted by Vitkus, op. cit., 148.
- 6 '... if the Infidels ... should prevail wholly against [the kingdom of Hungary] (which God forbid) all the rest of Christendom should lie as it were naked and open to the incursions and invasions of the said savage and most cruel enemies the Turks, to the most dreadful danger of whole Christendom...' This is again quoted from 'A Form to be used in common prayer... To excite and stir all godly people to pray unto God for the preservation of those Christians and their Countries, that are now invaded by the Turk in Hungary, or elsewhere', reprinted in Clay (ed.), op. cit., 527-535, especially page 527, and discussed by Vitkus, op. cit., 148.
- 7 Norman Daniel, *Arabs and Medieval Europe* (London, 1975), 303.
- 8 A[rchivio] S[egreto] V[aticano] S[egreteria di] S[tato] Malta, Vol. 34, f.128v.: 10 August 1683.
- 9 ASV SS Malta, Vol. 34, f.151: 16 September 1683.
- 10 ASV SS Malta, Vol. 34, f.173: 3 November 1683.
- 11 ASV SS Malta, Vol. 34, f.189: 16 November 1683.
- 12 ASV SS Malta, Vol. 34, ff.171-172: 3 November 1683.