
AN UNPUBLISHED ACCOUNT OF THE
SIEGE OF MDINA (MALTA) IN 1429 BY THE
CONTEMPORARY ARAB CHRONICLER
AL MAQRIZI AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR A
BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE
NARRATIVE OF THE OTTOMAN SIEGE IN 1565

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THE TERM “GREAT SIEGE” has been read and explained in terms of the magnitude of the Turkish assault on Malta in 1565. In recent times, an attempt was made to describe the Turkish raid in 1551 also as a Great Siege¹, while the adjective “Great” is today being questioned². Yet, the term “Great Siege” has another dimension, which till now has not been explored. This is linked to the sixteenth century when the adjective “great” not only referred to magnitude but reflected a historical memory of other sieges that Malta had endured. Most probably, it was used in reference and in comparison with a siege that had taken place at the turn of the fifteenth century. By the time of the 1565 Great Siege, it was still part of the collective historical memory but those who lived through the 1565 Siege believed that their peril was by far greater than that experienced by their ancestors more than two centuries before.³ During this year of commemoration of the Great Siege, the idea was floated that the Siege of Mdina in 1429 was far “greater than the Great Siege in 1565”.⁴

Thanks to the research carried out by Frans X. Cassar, what happened in 1429 can be better understood and compared with the Ottoman manoeuvres of 1565. In fact an Arab writer, so far unknown to the Maltese public, who has written about Malta, is Taqi al-Din Abu al-Abbas Ahmad ibn ‘Ali ib’ ‘Abd al-Qadir ibn

1 <http://aboutmalta.com/gozo/bezzina1.html> (site accessed 1 July 2015).

2 Victor Mallia Milanés, “The Siege of Malta, 1565, Revisited”, in *Storja 2015*, ed. by Manuel Buttigieg, forthcoming.

3 Mark Cauchi, Simon Mercieca, *Vetustior Glorior; Grajjiet l-Irħieb ta’ Santu Wistin fir-Rabat u fl-Imdina c. 1300 – 2000*, (Malta, Horizons Publications, 2015) pp. 31 – 41.

4 <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2015-06-15/local-news/The-Mdina-siege-of-1429-was-greater-than-the-Great-Siege-6736137257> (site accessed 1st July 2015)

Muhammed al Maqrizi (AH 764-845) (AD 1364-1442). Al Maqrizi, for short, was born in Cairo and belonged to the Islam Sunni tradition. He is known primarily for his chronicles about the Mamluks ruling Egypt, a period that stretched from 1250 till 1517. Al Maqrizi showed great interest in the history of the Ismaili Fatimid dynasty and it is here that one comes across an important reference to Malta. The Ismaili Fatimid Dynasty ruled Tunis and Tlemcen, today part of Algeria. Their kingdom extended from Tunisia to part of Algeria an area known then as Africa. This dynasty is the same reigning house that in the 11th century ruled Malta.

For his keen interest in the Ismaili Fatimid dynasty and its role in Egyptian history, Al Maqrizi was and remains, immensely respected and his works are still greatly valued in the West where they are extensively quoted for their precise narratives which historians consider to be factual and true. Nevertheless, this important Arab chronicler has never been studied or associated with Malta. Al Maqrizi wrote that in:

“The year eight hundred thirty three

And on the eighteenth, the lord of Tunis and Africa and Tlemcen, Abu Faris Ghabd al Ghaziz sent a fleet with two hundred horses, fifteen thousand military fighters and volunteers to take the island of Sicily. They descended on the town of Mazara until they took it forcibly. They pushed on to the town of Malta, kept on besieging it until there was nothing left but to take it. One of the emirs, among the infidels, was put to flight and the Muslims chased him to defeat him. The Franks turned back on their heels and fifty of their eminent men lost their lives. They then stood firm and captured the infidel they were about to defeat. They sent him to Abu Fares and Abu Fares furnished them with many armies.”⁵

This reference to Malta is very important and sheds new light on the island’s history because information about this particular Siege is extremely limited. Even Christian documentation is scarce. Al Maqrizi’s description provides a valuable contribution, especially because the siege is seen from the enemy’s side, who Western sources give as the one to have been defeated.

The information about this siege was so scarce that even the exact date of the attack was not precisely known. It was only in the 1930s, thanks to the research carried out by Roberto Valentini, that the particular year of this attack by the Moors – as the Arabs of North Africa were known – was established. It took place in September 1429. Despite having published his work nearly a hundred years ago, Valentini’s contribution is still valid and so far his work is the best source regarding this Siege.⁶

Before Valentini, several authors had commented on this historical event, notably Gio. Francesco Abela⁷. He was followed by Gio. Antonio Ciantar⁸ and in the

5 Appendix 1.

6 Roberto Valentini, 'Ribellione di Malta e spedizione alla Gerba come conseguenze dell'inefficienza della flotta Aragonese nel Mediterraneo', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, viii, 3 (1937), pp. 253-316.

7 Gio. Francesco Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notizie* (Malta, 1647), pp. 423-4.

8 Gio. Antonio Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, libro IV, Not. I (Malta, 1780), p. 350.

nineteenth century, historians of the calibre of Miegé⁹, Gio Antonio Vassallo¹⁰ and Pietro Paolo Castagna¹¹ also referred to it. More recently, this siege was discussed by Charles Dalli.¹²

Abela places this attack as having occurred in 1427.¹³ This incorrect date remained unchanged when Ciantar republished Abela's work and expanded on it. This explains why a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers continued to date this attack by the Moors as 1427. In truth, there were two successive attacks by the Arabs during the 1420s. The first heavy assault occurred in 1423-24. Stanley Fiorini and Mario Buhagiar have stated that this attack "*left in its wake a swath of devastation of farmland, villages and the life in general, numbering among the casualties Bishop Maurus himself who, happening to be on the island, was taken into captivity*".¹⁴ However, as an attack, it still remained within the context of a raid for its intensity and does not seem to have left many casualties or damage.

It is not yet clear whether Abela's incorrect date arose from a miscalculation, since one of the elements used in the Christian calendar at the time was the indiction and the Gregorian calendar only came into use in 1582. According to Abela, the attack by the Moors was as follows:

"About this point, the Island of Malta was very troubled, and nearly destroyed by an army from Barbary, which landed eighteen thousand Moorish fighters, laid a cruel siege against our city, which nonetheless remained glorious and unconquered because the enemy having been driven back by the valour of our men, helped by God through the intercession of our Great Protector the Apostle St. Paul, [the Moors] were forced to depart with great shame and humiliation; this victory cost [the Maltese], as we read in public writings of those times, no little bloodshed, and the lives of many of the towns inhabitants and islanders besides innumerable damages [to buildings] that such calamitous effects of similar disasters were still being felt for some years to come throughout the island."¹⁵

The magnitude of the attack described by Abela can only hold for 1429. But Abela is not alone in confusing the date of this siege. Without doubt, his calculation led Ciantar, Miège, Vassallo and Castagna to repeat this error. A late-nineteenth century lunette in the Sacristy of St Paul's Church in Rabat, portraying St Paul as

9 M. Miège, *Histoire de Malta*, 2 vols (Bruxelles, 1841), II, p. 112.

10 Gio Antonio Vassallo, *Storia di Malta* (Malta, 1890), p. 126.

11 Pietro Paolo Castagna, *Lis Storia ta Malta Bil Gzejjir talha*, 3 vols (Malta, 1890), III, p. 121.

12 Charles Dalli, *Iz-Żmien Nofsani Malti* (Malta: PIN, 2002), p. 159.

13 Abela, p. 423.

14 Buhagiar and Fiorini, II, p. 456.

15 Abela, pp. 423-424: "Intorno à quest'altro l'Isola di Malta fu molto travagliata, e poco men che destrutta da un armata di Barberia, la quale sbarcandovi diciotto mila mori combattenti, pose in curdel assedio la nostra città, che ne resto' non dimeno libera, e gloriosa poche essendo stati i nemici risospinti dal valor de' nostri, aiutati da Dio per intercessione del Gran Apostolo S. Paolo nostro Protettore furono costretti a partirsene con somma loro vergogna, e scorno; costò la vittoria, come leggiamo nelle pubbliche scritture di quei tempi, non poco spargimento di sangue, e la vita di molti nostri cittadini e isolane; oltre innumerabili maserie, che per alcuni anni doppo fecero sentire in tutta l'isola i calamitosi effetti di simili sciagure".

the saviour of the embattled Maltese carries the wrong date of 1470.¹⁶ In fact, it is not clear from where this date originated.

This attack took place a year after the islands of Malta and Gozo were integrated with the dominium of Alfonso V and therefore became part and parcel of the Crown of Aragon in 1428. This political passage strengthens the dating of the historical narrative, as Christian sources link this siege with the Aragonese domination. Thanks to the Arab chronicler Al Maqrizi, we know the precise year and month of the attack, which took place on the 18th day in the year of the Hegira 833. This year coincides exactly with the Christian year of 1429, and in that year, the Arab year began in September, corresponding with the date and month given by Christian sources. This means that the Arabs of Abu Fares attacked Mazara and Malta late in the sailing season, when usually sea operations draw to a close. Since Abu Fares had his base in Tunisia, he could take advantage of the short distances separating his realm from Southern Sicily and Malta to launch an attack so late in the year.

According to Al Maqrizi, the army attacking Mazara consisted of 200 knights or soldiers on horseback together with 15 thousand warriors. It should be pointed out that Al Maqrizi uses the word “*fares*”, which in Classic Arabic means horses or mares but this word entered Maltese as referring to a knight, that is, “*fieres*”. Al Maqrizi does not go into the details of the Arab casualties at the siege of Mazara but says only that after the city was seized, the fleet sailed on to Malta. Christian sources speak in terms of a fleet made up of 70 vessels, 50 of which were galleys. The army was under the command of Qaid Ridwán.¹⁷

According to the maritime historian, Joseph Muscat, engaging such a large number of horsemen meant that Abu Fares had to build special vessels for transporting horses. Such a large number could not be transported on the usual sea vessels, in particular galleys. These and similar ships were not suitable to carry such a huge number of horses.¹⁸ This element seems to have been missing in the Ottoman Great Siege, for while horses were brought over by the Turks, they were not engaged in battles but were simply used by the Ottoman commanders for reconnoitering purposes. In fact, siege chronicles account for the presence of “*caramusalî*” or Turkish cargo vessels,¹⁹ which must have been engaged in the transport of horses.²⁰ This explains why the cavalry stationed at Imdina, during the Siege of 1565, took advantage of the lack of a proper cavalry within the Turkish army to launch a rapid attack on the Turkish camp in Marsa on 7 August, when Mustapha’s Ottoman army

16 Mario Buhagiar and Stanley Fiorini, *Mdina: The Cathedral City of Malta*, 2 vols (Malta, 1996), II, p. 459.

17 Dalli, p. 159.

18 Joseph Muscat, “Mid-Dlam ghad-Dawl”, *Il-Festa Taghna 2008*, ghad nru 32, p. 33. As from Phoenician times, special vessels were built, known as hippos. The Romans named them *hippago* and in early modern times, they were known in the west as *passacavallo*, while the Turks used the *caramusalî* for horse transportation. These special vessels continued to be used until Napoleon's time and their construction did not change much over the centuries.

19 Giacomo Bosio, *Historia della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, 3 vols (Rome, 1621), III, p. 512.

20 Muscat, p. 33.

was about to overtake Birgu. The rash Turkish reaction would, according to Stephen O'Shea, cost them the eventual loss of the Siege.²¹

Such vessels could have two or three decks and the horses were kept in special stalls built below deck, positioned in the middle of the hull. Each stall had a number of compartments and each horse had its own stable. These special vessels varied in the number of compartments. Each ship was normally custom-built and had compartments according to the number of horses that were going to be engaged in battle.

These compartments were situated below sea level and the horses were tied firmly in the stalls. The compartment was not made from solid wood for weight reasons. But the hull and the whole area that was destined to be underwater were built from very strong timber. These vessels had wide openings at the stern to allow the embarkation of horses.²²

In this context, one really wonders whether Abu Fares Ghabd al Ghaziz was really interested in taking the island or whether he just wanted to raid it for booty.

Fares reigned between 1394-1434 and was the second Hafsids Caliph of Ifriqiya carrying that name. During his time, he sought to consolidate his kingdom, which he inherited from his father Abu al-Abbas Ahmad II. Perhaps, he was dreaming of re-establishing the extent of the Aghlabids' Empire but was also interested in undertaking a strong maritime campaign against Christian shipping, which he considered as harmful to Islam. The attack on Malta may have easily fallen under this strategy as the island of Malta and the ports of Mazara may have been perceived as naval bases for attacks against Muslims ships. Suleiman the Magnificent brought similar reasons for besieging Malta in 1565.²³

According to al Maqrizi, after the Moors had taken the city of Mazara, they proceeded against the city of Malta without leaving any garrison behind in the conquered city. This confirms that the Moors had no interest in retaining the island of Malta. They were only on a punitive mission and in search of booty. Above all, in the same period there were a series of Muslim raids on the west coast of Sicily and even on Calabria.

The armies arriving in Malta were slightly smaller in size due to the casualties suffered in Sicily. But at the end of his narrative, Al Maqrizi states that following a skirmish that took place outside the walls of Mdina, when a garrison of the "Franks" turned back to save one of their leaders, fifty of the best people on the island died while one of their leaders was caught and sent to Abu Fares. On hearing the news, Abu Fares sent more men, implying that the siege may have been prolonged. Thus, the number given by Abela of 18,000 could easily be correct because Al Maqrizi only

21 Stephen O'Shea, *Sea of Faith, Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), p. 305.

22 Joseph Muscat, *Sails Round Malta: Types of Sea Vessels 1600 BC-1900 AD* (Malta: PIN, 2008), p. 485.

23 Simon Mercieca, "Celio Secondo Curione and his Narrative History of the Siege of Malta in 1565", in *Quaderni Stefaniani*, ed. by Danilo Marrara, forthcoming.

figured the number of soldiers at the start of the operations. He did not take into account the details of those involved in the Siege of Malta. Nonetheless, the number given by Al Maqrizi does not differ much from the figure mentioned in Latin sources.

This military figure given by Al Maqrizi offers an interesting reading if one links it to the other reference about the killing of "fifty of the best people". In other words the Arabs had two hundred horsemen for fifteen thousand warriors, or 75 soldiers per knight warrior. This was not a very good ratio for the time. In medieval wars, the ratio amongst the Christian army was higher and ranged from 4 to 5 knights for every 75 soldiers. Above all, it was a time when the notables in Malta had a leadership role which was not just political but was also military. Therefore, the claim that Malta had lost fifty of its best soldiers shows the extent of the number of deaths on the Christians side. Keeping the ratio of 4 to 75 soldiers, the number of casualties among the Maltese soldiers amounted to about 900. Normally, the death of the commander was followed by the slaughter of his soldiers. Therefore, in demographic terms, this attack was tragic for the island's leaders, as well as for the Maltese population. An entire ruling class was wiped out. Around 900 of Malta's best soldiers perished and according to Charles Dalli, "*3500 of the inhabitants were taken into slavery, but in the first week of October, the news reached Venice, that a thousand more had been enslaved*".²⁴ The Arabs left behind them an almost deserted island.

Vassallo considered that at this time, Malta's population varied between 22,000 and 24,000, with Gozo's amounted to between 7,000 and 8,000 inhabitants.²⁵ According to Godfrey Wettinger, the population of Malta around 1420 was in the region of 12,000 souls.²⁶ This figure was obtained by multiplying each individual mentioned in the militia list by 6 and then making allowance for the localities that did not participate in this roster. However, if one uses a lower multiplier, the population of Malta would go even lower than 10,000. If this population forecast is correct, then nearly a half of the island's inhabitants was taken into slavery.

Charles Dalli stressed that "*with a loss of one third of the population, this was nothing more than a disaster: more so when one takes into consideration that the inhabitants were on their knees due to food shortages and the previous raids, together with the uprising against Monroy [1425] and the repayment of 25 000 florins out of which half went directly into the coffers of the [Aragonese] king.*"²⁷ At least, such a downsizing in population must have allowed the indigenous people to live on their own produce without having to depend on imports.

The magnitude of the attack is again confirmed by the so-called Christian legends that started to imbue popular imagination. The attack was so massive

24 Ibid.

25 G. Vassallo, *Storia di Malta* (Malta, 1890), p. 130.

26 Godfrey Wettinger, 'The Militia List of 1419-20: a new starting point for the study of Malta's population', *Melita Historica*, vol. 5 no. 2, 1969, pp.80-85, (p. 83)

27 Dalli, p. 159: "Telf ta' iżjed minn terz tal-popolazzjoni kollha kien xejn inqas minn dizastru; iktar u iktar meta tqis li gie waqt li l-abitanti kienu jinsabu gharkubtejhom bl-iskarezzi u l-hbit ta' qabel, kif ukoll bil-qawmien kontra Monroy u l-hlas tal-ghoxrin elf f'jorin li minnhom nofshom marru ghand is-Sultan.

that the inhabitants lost hope that they could win. This explains the need for Abela to emphasize the story with a miraculous intervention. When all was lost, the story goes, Saints Paul, George and Agatha appeared on the bastions and fought alongside the Maltese securing for them a convincing victory over the Moors.²⁸ Thus, this victory over the Muslim enemy started to be attributed to divine intervention. Gerold Gerber recalled a similar situation with the Great Siege as ‘*annually on 8 September, called “Victory day” or “Our Lady of Victories”, the Maltese remember the day when the attacking Muslims, were finally defeated by the Knights and the Maltese, apparently with the divine help of the Virgin Mary, thereby saving Europe and Christendom in its entirety*’.²⁹

The narration of Al Maqrizi confirms the significance of this attack, which was embedded in the collective memory of the Maltese for a number of decades to come. The number of Arab soldiers was larger than the size of the Maltese population. Al Maqrizi gave a figure of 15,000 men and his count concerned only adult fighting men! In simple terms, this army could have been as big as the Maltese population, which consisted not only of men, but women and children. If one takes an optimist’s view of the local population, as Vassallo did, then the army was the same size as the entire male population of Malta.

On the other hand, this element of divine intervention, in particular, the figure of St Agatha confirms the presence of a number of Sicilians in Malta, in particular individuals from Catania and its environs, as St Agatha is the patron of the Cathedral of Catania. Thus, one can safely speak of the presence of Sicilians in the skirmish, who Al-Maqrizi refers to as “Franks”. Therefore, Al Maqrizi is ascertaining that Alfonso V left a garrison in Malta. Latin sources describe these Aragonese garrisons as composed of Catalan, Sicilian and Maltese soldiers.

During the attack, the suburb of Mdina, namely Rabat, was razed to the ground. By the words “*kept on besieging it until there was nothing left but to take it*”, Al Maqrizi is indicating specifically that Mdina was about to fall and that its suburb was so extensively damaged that there was nothing left standing. Other existing sources attest to the devastation suffered all around Rabat. Historical documents kept by the Augustinian friars describe how these religious lost their convent which was situated outside Mdina.³⁰ In this context, one can rightly argue that the Augustinian Friars’ loss of their priory is a historical foreboding of the extensive damage on private property and public buildings in Rabat.

It is interesting to note that by the nineteenth century, the historical narrative is reversed and instead of the Great Siege being compared to this attack, this attack started to be compared with the Great Siege of 1565. Castagna himself speaks in terms of a Turkish attack in 1429, when in reality it was staged by the Moors of

28 Castagna, p. 122.

29 Gerold Gerber, ‘Doing Christianity and Europe: An Inquiry into Memory, Boundary and Truth Practices in Malta’, in *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other*, ed. by Bo Strath, (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 240.

30 Mark Cauchi and Simon Mercieca, *Vetustior Glorior*, cit. pp. 33-34.

North Africa and Malta had to wait at least 59 years, when in 1488 there occurred the first recorded raid by the Ottoman fleet.³¹

Most importantly, Al Maqrizi's account exposes the Muslim perception of the Christian world, which would not be very different from the one held by the Ottoman Turks towards the Knights of St John or that of the Christian West towards Islam. The Western reader had been used to a historical narrative of the past where the Muslims were branded as infidels. The tables are now turned. A Muslim chronicler is applying the same terminology to the Maltese. Perhaps, this is the first time that the inhabitants of Malta are being called infidels by an Arab chronicler. This is a clear indication that by 1429, all traces of Islam in the Maltese Islands had been eradicated. If there were still any traces, this siege must have routed them out. Abu Fares is mostly recorded for being a sort of a fundamentalist who sought to make his acquired territories to follow the teachings of the Qur'an *ad litteram*. Therefore, the manner in which he conducted this siege confirms the absence of Muslims in Malta.

More importantly, this account re-visits the western concepts of victor and loser. Perhaps out of pride or because of factual reality, Al Maqrizi does not see the forces of Abu Fares as the losers in this siege. He presents them as the victors. At least, in the eyes of this Arab chronicler, the Muslims succeeded in their mission of raiding two Aragonese towns, Mdina and Mazara, and looting all along the way besides taking slaves. Ottoman Chronicles tried to impart the same impression after the Fleet returned to Constantinople in 1565.

Thus, in 1429, Malta was subjected to a proper and fully-fledged siege. It was not a simple raid, since Al Maqrizi confirms that the Moors requested reinforcements that were duly sent to them by Abu Fares. The siege was protracted till the beginning of October³² during which, one can rightly surmise that 20% of the adult male population in Malta had perished. But one can rightly conclude that this was the last time that the Moors embarked on a great military campaign against Malta. The rise of Ottoman Empire would eclipse the last remnants of Arab power in North Africa. Malta, together with the rest of Christian Europe, would start to experience the military might of Islam under a different form.

31 Charles Dalli, "In *Frontiera Barbarorum*: Waiting for the Turks on late Medieval Malta", *Proceedings of History Week 1994* (Malta: The Malta Historical Society, 1996), 115-126: Abela, pp.432-434.

32 Dalli, p. 159: According to Dalli, the news of Maltese inhabitants had subjected into slavery reached Venice in October. Given that Venice was an important maritime city with good connections at the time, such news could have reached Venice within a week or two from the time that the event had occurred.

Appendix 1

AL MAQRIZI Page 1332 [السلوك لمعرفة دول الملوك]

The year eight hundred thirty-threeⁱ
And on the eighteenth the lord of Tunis and Africa and Tilimsân,ⁱⁱ Abu Fâris Ghabd Al Ghaziz, sent a fleet with two hundred horses, fifteen thousand military fighters and volunteers to take the island of Sicily. They descended on the town of Mâzar until they took it forcibly. They pushed on to the town of **Malta**, kept on besieging it until there was nothing left but to take it. One of the emirs, among the infidels, was put to flight and the Muslims chased him to defeat him. The Franks turned back on their heels and fifty of their eminent men lost their lives. They then stood firm and captured the infidel that they were about to defeat. They sent him to Abu Fâres, and the latter furnished them with many armies.

سنة ثلاث وثلاثين وثمانمائة...
وفي ثامن عشره: بعث صاحب تونس وإفريقية وتلمسان -أبو فارس عبد العزيز- أسطولاً فيه مائتا فرس، وخمسة عشر ألف مقاتل من العسكرية والمطوعة، لأخذ جزيرة صقلية، فنزلوا مدينة مارز حتى أخذوها عنوة، ومضوا إلى مدينة مالطة. وحصروها حتى لم يبق إلا أخذها فانهزم من جملتهم أحد الأمراء من العلوج، فانهزم المسلمون لهزيمة، فركب الفرنج أقيمتهم، فاستشهد منهم في الهزيمة خمسون رجلاً من الأعيان، ثم إنهم ثبتوا وقبضوا على العليج الذي كادهم بهزيمة، وبعثوا به إلى أبي فارس، فأمدهم بجيوش كثيرة.

ⁱ 1st Muharram AH 833 fell on 30th September AD 1439.

ⁱⁱ Tlemsen is a city in north-west Algeria.