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THE TRAGIC END OF DARGHUT PASHA  
AT THE SIEGE OF MALTA AS RECOUNTED  
BY THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ARAB  
HISTORIAN IBN GHALBOUN

*SIMON MERCIECA AND FRANS X. CASSAR*

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THE HISTORY OF THE GREAT SIEGE of Malta has always been recounted from a Western point of view. The historical sources are primarily, if not exclusively, of Western origin. The lack of knowledge of Arabic and other Ottoman languages are perhaps the real reason for this historical bias. This could be the reason why works from scholars from the former Ottoman countries feature less in the Western narratives about the Great Siege. However, Arab and Ottoman scholars have been working on their history's involvement in this major sixteenth-century Mediterranean event. Perhaps, their historical canons are not the same as those operated by the West, however, the empirical story retold by Arab and Ottoman texts is by no means unreliable. Facts are facts, and Arab history can be a source of revelation not only for the period when Malta was under Aghlabid and Arab rule, between 870 and 1091, but also for other eras of our history in particular, the sixteenth-century Mediterranean conflict characterized by the clash between the Ottoman Empire on one side and the Spanish Empire and its satellite countries on the other.

**Ibn Ghalboun**

Muhammad Bin Khalil, Bin Ahmad, Bin Ghabd Al Rahman, Bin Ghalboun, better known as Ibn Ghalboun, is a Libyan historian. However in Islam, history was not considered (and still is) a self-contained discipline. Arab historians tended to be labelled intellectuals and protectors of the Muslim faith. In return, they earned the title of Sheikh. When one considers that Ibn Ghalboun was writing in the eighteenth

century, such appellatives are not far-removed from what historians and writers, writing in the Christian West, were expected to uphold.

Ibn Ghalboun was born in the city of Misrata in present-day Libya. His date of birth is uncertain, but his biographers particularly Sheikh Al Tahir Al Zawy agree that he was born in the twelfth century of the Hegira; our late seventeenth century. From an early age he studied the Quran and was taught by the Al Sheikhs of Misrata. Later, he left for Tripoli where he studied under several learned men such as Al Sheikh Abi Muhammad Ghabd Allah Bin Jahya Al Sousy Al Hayhy. Ibn Ghalboun proceeded to Egypt to study at Al Azhar University in Cairo under Al Sheikh Ghabd Al Raouf Al Bashbishy, Al Sheikh Ghabd Allah Al Sousy and others. In the year 1133 AH, ibn Ghalboun returned to Misrata and founded a religious institution where he taught interpretation of the Quran, jurisprudence and Hadith. His school of thought is still active in matters of theology to this present day.

Ibn Ghalboun's account follows mainstream Western scholarship or what has come to be known in theory of history as the eighteenth-century "higher criticism". The historical chronicle had to be free from the influence of traditional interpretation. By such method, he took to task followers of Sufism, whose methods of writing were strongly prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa during his time. In other words, his history was to serve as a debate, at the end of which, the interlocutor was expected to accept the historian's arguments. Thus, his history book is a collection of facts, which vary from historical chronology to arguments related to religious beliefs and prohibitions.

At this time, an Arab-Muslim author was expected to write about his life experiences, and his efforts in defence of Islam and Sharia law. This is what Ibn Ghalboun did in the book entitled '*Mention of those who ruled Tripoli and who did well in it*' [التذكّار فيمن ملك طرابلس وما كان بها من الأختيار]. He discussed his efforts to eradicate the production of alcohol that was taking place in Misrata in the seventeenth century, when alcohol was being produced from dates. He expressed the difficulties he faced to achieve this aim. It cost him much financial burden, and the only solution was for him to buy the factory and the entire production to prevent the alcohol ending up on the market.

Yet, the most important contribution was Ibn Ghalboun's defence of Libya's history, after the harsh criticism levelled against Tripoli of the West - طرابلس الغرب - together with its people by the Moroccan Ambassador, Al Jaylani Al Ishaqi Al Sharqi who visited Tripoli during his Hajj in the year AH 1143 [AD 1731]. Once back at home. Al Jaylani wrote a book wherein he described his voyage and endeavours in Libya.<sup>1</sup> The Moroccan Ambassador referred to Tripoli of the West to distinguish it from another city by the name of Tripoli in Lebanon.

In reaction to this, Sheikh Ahmad Bin Ghabd Al Daim wrote a poem in defence of Tripoli. Later, Ahmad Basha Al Qaramanly asked Bin Ghalboun to write a history of Tripoli as a background explanation to this poem.

1 Ahmed Bek An-Na:ib Al-Ansari, *Nafahat An-Nisrin wa Rihan fi Min Kan fi Tarobulus fi Ajan, Dar il Fargani* (Tripoli, 1994), p. 208.

Ibn Ghalboun wrote the history of events in the form of a chronicle revolving round the rulers of Tripolitania supported by biographies of 34 scientific and literary personalities. It begins with the history of the Islamic conquest of Libya by Imru Bin Al Ghas and ends around the 1730s with the times of Ahmad Basha Al Qaramanly. In the Arab world, this book is still considered a reference work of major importance.<sup>2</sup>

### **Darghut Pasha's Maritime Enterprises**

What, by far, is less known is the fact that Ibn Ghalboun's work is of particular interest to the history of Malta. One of the rulers of Libya was Darghut Pasha, or as he is better known in our history annals as 'Dragut'. Ibn Ghalboun goes into the details of Darghut's rise to power in the background of the sixteenth-century conflict between the Spanish and the Ottoman Empires.

Both the Christian debacle at Djerba in 1552, during which a number of Maltese sailors lost their lives, and the Great Siege in 1565, were given prominence in Ibn Ghalboun's narrative. The 1552 debacle came after Darghut's successful attack on Malta and Gozo and the definitive capture of Tripoli in 1551 by the Knights of Saint John, which occurred as part of the overall siege strategy. From Ibn Ghalboun's account, one understands that up to 1551 the Ottomans had no interest to capture Malta. As explained in another study,<sup>3</sup> the Ottomans were only interested in effecting raids. They only attacked the islands of Malta and Gozo in 1551 in order to neutralize the islands, for their real target was Tripoli.

As a result, the Knights of Saint John were left powerless and without any resources to send aid to their besieged brethren at the Tripoli castle. More importantly, Ibn Ghalboun's writings show how the Muslims of North Africa viewed the people of the islands of Malta. In the eighteenth century, they were still being addressed as Rum by Arab chroniclers, which was a generic term used at different times in Turkey and the Muslim world to refer to ethno-cultural minorities including Christians who belonged to the Greek world or were part of the Greek or Byzantine religion. Such a semantic meaning of the word was further reinforced in North Africa under Ottoman rule. Nevertheless, the epistemology of such a term shows that despite the fact that the Maltese had been completely Latinized by 1565, North Africa continued to identify them with Eastern Christianity.

Thus, according to Ibn Ghalboun, the Ottomans were not at odds with the inhabitants of these islands nor were they interested to take over the land of the Rums, but their target was and remained the Knights of Malta. The Knights' corsairing activity was a great nuisance to the Ottoman Empire. Yet, Ottoman and

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2 Mukhar Al Hadi Bin Younes, *Ulama: Al Galabina wa Atharhim Al Ilmiya*, (Tripoli, 1991).

3 Simon Mercieca, "I corsari e le loro vittime: l'emergere nel Mediterraneo di un'industria fatta di schiavitù durante la seconda metà del cinquecento", in *Traffici commerciali, sicurezza marittima, guerra di corsa, Il Mediterraneo e l'Ordine di Santo Stefano*, ed. by Marco Cini, *Studi dell'Istituzione dei Cavalieri di Santo Stefano*, 1, (Edizioni ETS, 2011), pp. 21-49.

Arab historians have the same perception as Western rulers regarding the reason for the Christian victory in 1565.

The Siege's failure was mainly due to the lack of proper coordination within the Ottoman Army. Ibn Ghalboun explains that Darghut was not part of the commanding team, despite being extremely respected by the Ottoman rulers. He was only asked to join the siege machine after the Ottoman fleet reached Malta and besieged the Island. This explains Darghut's late arrival on the scene of war. This is also partly confirmed by Giacomo Bosio in his *Historia*, wherein he states that Darghut had prepared his fleet well ahead of the battle so that it would join the Ottoman Armada on time.<sup>4</sup> Thus, such a delay in arrival can only be attributed to lack of proper coordination. What Ibn Ghalboun has done is to absolve Darghut from the responsibility of arriving late on the battle scene; an accusation that was levelled against him by Bosio, who affirms that both Piali Pasha and Mustafa Pasha, the leaders of the Siege, had to await Darghut's arrival.<sup>5</sup>

### Shedding New Light on Darghut Pasha's Death

There was more than one version of Darghut's untimely end and Ibn Ghalboun sought to record them for posterity. This is perhaps the most revealing aspect of this account of the Siege, since Darghut's death was always rapt in mystery. Bosio refers to the controversy surrounding Darghut's death. It was never clear whether Darghut was killed by friendly fire, as claimed by the Siege-witness Francesco Balbi di Correggio<sup>6</sup> or by enemy action. Both Balbi di Correggio and Bosio share the same view on the cause of his death. Darghut died from an internal haemorrhage after being hit by a splinter from a cannon ball hitting the rocks close to where he was standing. The stone splinter entered Darghut's head; his turban proved ineffective to protect him. Balbi di Correggio claims that this splinter was caused by a low canon shot fired by Darghut's forces on his express orders. On the other hand, Bosio claimed that this canon shot came from Fort St. Angelo.<sup>7</sup>

4 Giacomo Bosio, *Dell'istoria della sacra Religione, dell'illustrissima milizia di Santo Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, 3 vols (Rome, 1621), III, p. 497.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 532.

6 Francesco Balbi di Correggio, *Diario Dell'Assedio di Malta 18 Maggio – 8 Settembre 1565*, (Rome: Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1965), p. 56. “*Dragut è morto così. Mentre stava nella controscarpa in una doppia trincea, poichè I Turchi costruiscono le trincee doppie per paura di incamiciate, egli si accorse che i suoi cannonieri puntavano troppo in alto, ed ordinò di abbassare la mira; ma come essa risultava ancora troppo alta, insistette nell'ordine. Mentre, in piedi, voltata la ainaveva abbassato il tiro, raggiunse la trincea a lui davanti ed una scheggia di roccia lo colpì alla testa. Il turbante non bastò a proteggerlo dal colpo mortale, che uccise anche il Maestro di Campo delle forze turche, Soli Aga.*”

7 Bosio, Vol. 3, p. 566. *Una Cannonata opportunament sparata dal Cavaliere del Castello San'Angelo, e non dale proprie batterie Turchesche, come alcuni vogliono (non essendo verisimile, che l'artiglieria loro sparasse all'hora, con tanto rischio de' principali Capi dell'Essercito) affronto' la palla a percuorere nella Trincea, che dietro a' loro stava: e feces altar diverse pietre, una delle quali, per salute di Malta, e per liberare le marine Christiane dal piu infest, e dannolo Corsale infedele, che mai sia stato; percosse Dragut Rais Bascia di Tripoli di Barbaria, nel capo, verso la destra orecchia: e non fu' il suo gran Turbante bastuculo a' difenderlo si, che la percossa non fosse subito giudicata mortale; sputando egli sangue: e havendo incontanente perduta la parola. Et avenga che Mostafa Bascia, al Padiglione suo, subito coperto portare lo facesse: commandando che 'l male suo fosse tenuto secreto; fu' nondimeno da gli Rinegati, quasi ordinariamente per I Jouri, avisar solevano a' nostri con parole coperte, quasi tutti i successi del campo.*



Fig. 1: Anonymous drawing showing the death of Darghut (Islamic Museum, Tripoli, Libya). It should be noted that this death scene follows Ghalboun's narrative that Darghut died from wounds in his abdomen.



Fig 2: Giuseppe Cali, *The Death of Dragut* (Oil on canvas, inv. no. 5963-4, Heritage Malta Collection). Cali follows the Western narrative and presents Darghut dying from head injuries. Apart from this important detail, the similarity between the two images is striking.

Ibn Ghalboun backs this main line of thought, even though he adds all the gruesome details of Darghut's demise while refuting the possibility that Darghut Pasha died from friendly fire, an assertion which was accepted by the sixteenth-century Ottoman Historian Gelibolulu Mustafâ Ali, – the Mustafa Ali from Gallipoli.<sup>8</sup> For the Ottomans, it made no difference at the time if a Muslim died from friendly fire or by the enemy. In both cases, he was considered a *Shahîd*, i.e. martyr of the Muslim faith. In two hundred years, there was a change in the Muslim world, derived most probably, from the fact that cannon technology had by then improved and stating that a general was killed by friendly fire started to carry grave and negative implications, both of military incompetence as well as conspiracy theories. This explains why Ibn Ghalboun maintains that Darghut could have either been killed by a stone splinter or from the blast of a cannon ball, as it passed next to his head.

According to the Ottoman sources, discovered by Frans X. Cassar, with reference to the news of the death of Darghut, a writ was issued in which “*Knowledge is demanded about the inheritance left by Turghud Pasha, Emir Umara of Tripoli who died recently*”.<sup>9</sup> Darghut's

8 In 1591, Gelibolulu Mustafâ Ali wrote a lengthy chronicle of the Ottoman Empire wherein he describes the Siege of Malta. The title of this manuscript (which was eventually published) is *Kühû'l-Ahbar*.

9 ‘Documents about the Ottoman Maghreb during the Great Siege of Malta, 1565’. Document number two dated ‘Saturday 15 Di El Higga year 972 [14 July 1565]. English translation by FX. Cassar published in the ‘Malta Independent’ [June - July 1994].

death is taken to have fallen on 23 June 1565;<sup>10</sup> a few days after the reported accident, which according to Balbi di Correggio took place on 18 June.<sup>11</sup>

However, Ibn Ghalboun's description excludes the possibility that Darghut could have survived for five days. While Ibn Ghalboun does not enter into the detail about the date of his demise, he states that Darghut must have died in a short time after being hit by the splinter or the blast created by the cannon ball. His death prompted "Ali the admiral of the fleet" to send his remains to Tripoli. Such a statement raises more historical questions, as Ghalboun was mixing up two personalities. The admiral of the fleet was Piali Pasha while Uluç Ali was a corsair captain of a number of galleys. The riddle here is about who of the two took the initiative to send the corpse of Darghut to Tripoli, Piali or Uluç Ali? At least, the Western sources attribute this initiative to Uluç Ali, son-in-law of Darghut. He ordered his son Mahmud Bey to transport the corpse to Tripoli where it was given a proper burial.<sup>12</sup> This is corroborated by the date on the mausoleum of Darghut in Tripoli. The plaque set up on his tomb in the Mosque at 'Bab al Bahar' Tripoli states that he died on 17 June 1565.<sup>13</sup>

Ettore Rossi gives the date of Darghut's death as being the 23 June, "*outside the trenches while leading a new fierce attack, he was hit by a stray stone splinter on his head from a cannonball shot from Fort San Angelo. He was left between life and death until 23 June when he died, on the same day that the Turks managed to break the last defence barricade and entered Fort St Elmo. His corpse was carried to Tripoli and was buried close to the mosque he had built.*"<sup>14</sup>

The twentieth-century Turkish historian, Aziz Saami<sup>15</sup> does not enter into the merits of whether Darghut was killed by friendly fire or not. He gives his end as the following: "*as he was leading the attack platoon on the St Michael's fortress [17th June] his head was hit by a bomb shrapnel exploding on a rock injuring him ushering blood out of his mouth and nose. He lived after that some days unconscious and then he died on the 23 June on the day the fort mentioned was taken*".<sup>16</sup>

The eighteenth-century '*Histoire Abreege De Tripoli De Barberie*'<sup>17</sup> says that Darghut suffered wounds in his abdomen, which were to cause his death. It is popularly believed though, from other sources and also in the plaque found in his mausoleum in Tripoli, that he was wounded in the head.

10 Arnold Cassola, *The 1565 Ottoman Malta Campaign Register, with the collaboration of Idris Bostan and Thomas Scheben*, (Malta, 1998), p. 177.

11 Balbi di Correggio (1965), p. 56.

12 Ferdinando Giglio, *Il Memorabile Assedio Di Malta del 1565* (1853), p. 99. At the time of the Siege, Uluç Ali held the position of Beylerbey of Alexandria. He was only promoted to Pasha of Algiers in 1568.

13 Frans. X. Cassar, 'Darghut, the Villain', *Malta Independent on Sunday*, 29 October 1995, p. 18, and 'A warrior until the end', *Malta Independent on Sunday*, 5 November 1995, p. 26.

14 Ettore Rossi was translated into Arabic. '*Arabic translation of Storia di Tripoli e della Tripolitania dalla conquistata Araba al 1911*', Arabic translation, p. 230.

15 Aziz Saami [1877 – 1948] was a Turkish military engineer specialised in railway tracks. He also served as political advisor and held several political positions. Among his written works we find 'الأترک العثمانيون في أفريقيا الشمالية' '*The Ottoman Turks in North Africa*' [Arabic translation by Ghab Al Salaam Adham, 1969].

16 Ibid. pp. 79 – 80.

17 N[ational] L[ibrary of] M[alta], Libr. MS 113, «Histoire Abregée de Tripoli de Barberie, f. 3: trans. "a cannon ball hit Mohammad Pasha Darghut in his abdomen".



However, the most important fact that proved to be the catalyst of historical change was caused by the death of Suleiman the Magnificent or as he was known in the Western part of the Ottoman Empire, Suleiman bin Selim, Caliph of Islam. According to Ibn Ghalboun, his death brought a change of policy in the Ottoman Empire. And this is the reason why the Ottoman Turks did not strike again after their defeat in 1565. Therefore, the Knights' fear was well founded and justified for had Suleiman not died he would have carried out another attack on Malta.

Finally, we have a historian, sitting on the other side of the great Mediterranean divide, confirming that Suleiman the Magnificent was not ready to accept this humiliating defeat and the only reason for aborting all plans to stage another siege against Malta was linked to his death.

This documentation is therefore, another important source, which recounts what had happened in the Siege of Malta in 1565, with the difference that this time, the narrative comes from the flank that lost the battle.

### Translation of Ibn Ghalboun's section about Darghut Rais<sup>18</sup>

ولم يزل طرغود باشا والياً بها ومراد آغا بتاجوراه محبوساً مكفوف اليد عن  
التصرف الى سنة سبع وستين وتسعمائة فتوفي مراد ، وفي مدة طرغود اشتغل  
بغزو أرض الروم وعمارة السواني<sup>(1)</sup> وجلب الناس من أطراف البلاد لهارة  
المدينة فعمرت

وقصدته أسطول النصارى سنة ست وستين ليفتك البلد فرجع خائباً ، ولم  
يزل منصوراً مؤيداً في حروبه فانظراً للرعبة بالعدل لم يفرض عليهم خراجاً ولم  
يطلبهم بشيء الى أن دخلت سنة اثنتين وسبعين وتسعمائة . فوجه السلطان سليمان  
أسطولاً كبيراً لأخذ جزيرة مالطة لأنه بعد أخذه جزيرة رودس استأنه أهلها ،  
فأمهم ، وخرجوا منها وعمروا جزيرة مالطة وطلق المسلمين منهم أذى كثير إلى  
وقتنا هذا ملكها الله للإسلام آمين

فلما بلغه ذلك ندب على تركهم وأمانهم ووجه اليهم الاسطول سنة اثنتين وسبعين.  
وتسعمائة فلما حاصروها أرسلوا الى طرغود يطلبون مدداً فنرج اليهم في اثني  
عشر شيئاً<sup>(2)</sup> فلما حاصروا بعض قلاعها أصابته رحمة الله كورة<sup>(3)</sup> قيل لم يصيبه  
جسمها وإنما أصابه حرها . فنزل من حلقه دم كثير حتى استفرغ فمات ، وقيل  
أصاب جسمها جوفة فتقطعت أمعاه فدفنت هناك ، وصبر علي قائد الاسطول  
باقيه وأرسله الى طرابلس ، فدفن بها ، وقبره الآن مشهور بقربة من البحر بازاء  
مسجده الذي ابتناه بها بنكباة شرقها والشمال . ولما أرسلوه وقع بين أهل الاسطول

خلف أدى الى انكسارهم فأقلعوا عنها ولم ينالوا المراد منها  
ولما بلغ الخليفة سليمان ابن سليم الخبر أغمم لذلك ، وعزم على تجهيز جيش  
هرمزم لها ليريح المسلمين منها فعاجله داهي الموت

18 This text was translated from Arabic into English by Frans X. Cassar.

*Darghut Pasha remained as Wali<sup>19</sup> of Tripoli while Murad Agha was imprisoned at Ta Jura<sup>20</sup> with his hands shackled unable to govern until Murad died in the year nine hundred and sixty seven.<sup>21</sup> For a period of time, Darghut was busy assaulting the land of Al Rum, and the inhabited areas of Al Suani.<sup>22</sup> He attracted people from all over the realm to settle in the city and to populate the town.*

*Christian galleys<sup>23</sup> moved against him in the year [nine hundred and] sixty-six to regain the country but returned defeated and he remained victorious, secure in his wars, governing the inhabitants with justice, without imposing taxes on them or demanding anything until the year nine hundred and seventy two. The Sultan Suleiman sent a huge fleet to take the island of Malta because, after he had taken the island of Rhodes, its people sought indemnity and he gave them protection. The Knights left and settled in the island of Malta. Muslims suffered a lot of harm from them up to our time. Allah gave it to Islam Amen.*

*When he learnt about all this, he repented for letting them go and giving them protection. He sent an armada against them in the year nine hundred and seventy two. As they were besieging Malta, they sent a message to Darghut asking for support. Darghut sailed out towards them with twelve galleys.<sup>24</sup> After having besieged some fortresses, he was hit by a cannon ball, Allah had mercy on him. Some said it did not hit his body but was injured by its blasting heat. A lot of blood ran out of his mouth until he bled to death. Others said it struck him in his belly, cut his entrails and was buried there. Ali, the head of the armada, embalmed his remains and sent them to Tripoli where he was interred. His grave, now famous, is near the sea, side by side to his mosque, which he had built on the north-eastern side of the city. After he was sent for burial, divergences fell among the people of the armada leading to unrest with the result that they sailed away from Malta without achieving their goal.*

*When news reached Caliph Suleiman Bin Salim, he became perturbed and was determined to prepare a huge army to relieve Muslims from it but no sooner, he died.<sup>25</sup>*

19 Wali stands for an administrator or governor.

20 Ta Jura is a district in Tripoli.

21 AH 967 started on 3 October 1559.

22 Al Suani which means the gardens is an area in the vicinity of Tripoli.

23 Al Ghalboun called the Darghut galleys "xwieni", that is, he used the same word that is used in Maltese for galleys.

24 Bosio, vol. 3, p. 532. Bosio claims that Targhut arrived with "tredici Galere e due Galeotte conducendo seco da 1500 Huomini da combattere".

25 Ibn Ghalboun, *Tarikh Taraboulus Al Gharb*, (Tripoli: Maktaba al Nour, 1967), pp 98 -99