

THE ORDER OF MALTA AND THE DEFENCE OF TRIPOLI 1530 - 1551 *

by

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To appreciate the full meaning of the responsibility of the Order of Malta to defend Tripoli, one must think of the Mediterranean Sea and Mediterranean countries as divided between two major forces or powers, spiritual as well as physical, viz. Islam and Christendom. The dividing line is usually drawn from Northern Italy to Sicily, Malta and Tripoli: the Eastern part belonging to the Turkish Sultan who claimed dominion over Asia Minor and the Arabian peninsula, Egypt and all Northern Africa; and the rest of the Western part claimed by the Spanish Emperor. The two halves of the Mediterranean, in the words of Braudel, were indeed two political zones under different banners.

It was Ferdinand of Aragon who had seized Mersà-el-Kebir or Mazarquivir in 1505, Penon de Velez in 1509 and Bugia in 1510. Algiers surrendered in the same year, and on June 5th 1510, the King of Tlemcen agreed at Oran to a five-year peace and the payment of a yearly tribute to the King of Aragon. The latter's commander in the field, Pedro Navarro (1), then remained free to conquer Tripoli. His fleet stopped in Malta to collect some guides who had a good knowledge of that country; he also embarked the Maltese Giuliano Abela to act as their pilot (2).

* The text printed here is a concise and revised version of my lecture as published in Libya in History: Historical Conference 1968 (Beirut-Lebanon 1969), pp. 349-82.

1. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London, 1972), Vol. I, p. 136 says: "The aim of Ferdinand the Catholic in 1509-11, at the time of the great expeditions of Pedro Navarro, was not merely to put out of action the pirate ports of the Maghreb, or to open the way for a new war of Granada of which Africa would be the prize (Isabella and not he, had foreseen and dreamed of that). It was above all to set up a shipping route with coastal bases from southern Spain to Sicily which was rich in grain." On what grounds Braudel reached this conclusion it is difficult to say. Others see the capture of Tripoli as an open challenge to the Muslims to show them that the Christians could advance further eastward in North Africa.
2. See J. Priego Lopez, *Pedro Navarro y sus empresas africanas* (Madrid, 1933); Martin de los Heros, *Historia del Conde Pedro Navarro* (Madrid, 1854). M. Longhena, "L'impresa di Tripoli nel 1510", *Rivista d'Africa* (1912), p. 4; E. Rossi, "Il dominio dei Cavalieri di Malta a Tripoli", *Archivum Melitense*, Vol. VI, (1924), p. 44.



The City and Castle of Tripoli in the time of the Knights

Moreover five well-armed light Maltese galleys joined the armada (3). Leaving Malta on July 20th, 1510, they arrived in Tripoli on the 24th. The next day they assaulted the city and castle which surrendered after three hours of very heavy fighting in the streets, particularly round the major mosque. We read that about 170 Christian slaves, mostly Sicilians and Maltese, were liberated (4).

There existed since the eleventh century a crusading Order known after its expulsion from Rhodes as the *Order (or Knights) of Malta* (5), on whose members European powers tried to impose various duties which very often were alien to the Order's *raison d'être*. Thus in 1523 Grand Master l'Isle Adam, anticipating such pressure, ordered that the two galleasses of the Order should be dismantled (*facendole disalberare e mettere quasi in carena*) (6) so as not to be used by Hugo Moncada, the Captain General of the Spanish fleet.

It was on 23rd March 1530 that Malta and Tripoli were ceded to this Order of St. John as a noble fief under the sole obligation that every year on the Feast of All Saints on 1st November, a falcon should be presented to the Viceroy of Sicily (7). As to the acceptance of Tripoli, Grand Master l'Isle Adam made it clear that Emperor Charles V should continue to provide all that was necessary for the upkeep and defence of the city and castle. The Knights took possession of Tripoli on 25th July 1530 (8).

The Knights' period of rule at Tripoli, which lasted 21 years (1530-1551), consisted of an uninterrupted series of raids by sea and land, engagements and encounters between the Order and Ottoman navies, excursions and assaults in various parts of the Mediterranean. The Order's navy operated almost always in conjunction with the Imperial,

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3. *Collecció de documentos inéditos para la historia de España* (ed. M. Fernández de Navarrete et al., Madrid, 1842-1931), Vol. XXIV, pp. 90-1. E. Rossi, *Storia di Tripoli e della Tripolitana*, ed. M. Nallino, (Roma 1968), p. 111.
 4. *Id. ibid.*, p. 114; C. Trasselli, "La conquista di Tripoli nel 1510 vista dalla Sicilia" *Melanges en l'honneur de F. Brandel, Histoire économique du Monde Méditerranéen* 1450-1650, (Toulouse 1973) pp. 611-9.
 5. On the origins and growth of the Order, see J. Delaville Le Roulx, *Cartulaire général de l'Ordre des Hospitaliers de Saint Jean de Jérusalem 1100-1310* (Paris, 1894), Vol. I, No. 30, p. 29. J. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St. John in Jerusalem and Cyprus: 1050-1310* (Macmillan, 1967).
 6. G. Bosio, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano* (3rd impression, 1621), Vol. III, p. 23.
 7. The original Bull is in the R[oyal] M[alta] L[ibrary], A[rchives of the] O[rder of] M[alta] 70; *ibid.* MS. 62 contains also the "Donazione dell'Isola di Malta, Gozo e Tripoli fatta dall'Imperatore Carlo V l'anno 1530 colla confermazione di Papa Clemente VII e l'esecuzione del Vicerè e conte del Regno di Sicilia 1530".
 8. *A.O.M.* 6559, f.1. Up to f.70 this MS. deals with the administration and the *secresie* of the city of Tripoli and the castle.

Papal, Genoese or Venetian flotillas. During these years the Knights complained of the enormous task they had undertaken by accepting Tripoli. The Sicilian narrows were the passage by which the powers of the Western and Eastern Mediterranean came into contact and conflict with each other, and in this dangerously exposed position the Knights forces at Tripoli and Malta were divided by 198 miles of sea.

At Tripoli, immediate steps were taken to build up the fortifications since during the twenty years of Spanish occupation nothing had been done except the patching of the castle (9) which was collapsing, while the city was inadequately defended and weakly furnished with armaments. To the Knights' credit we must say that Tripoli was far from being a sponge from which they squeezed money. The income from Tripoli, according to the Commissioners' report, consisted only of a 10% tax on merchandise and two ducats per head on the selling of slaves. Hence the need for funds was urgent and in order to build fortresses in Malta and Tripoli the Knights had to sell, not without great difficulties (10), some of their immovable property. Accordingly they informed Charles V of what Tripoli was costing them, and threatened that unless subsidies were forthcoming they would abandon the castle and the city of Tripoli.

It is well known that Charles V's policy in Northern Africa was to take possession of the coastlines while leaving the interior to look after itself, under allied or vassal rulers. In line with this policy the first appointed Governor of Tripoli by the Order, Gaspare de Sangüessa, intended to be as friendly as possible with the local chieftains of Zanzur, Lmaia and az-Zawijah; but Tagiura, 12 kilometres to the east of Tripoli, remained implacably hostile — in part, no doubt, because those who fought against Count Navarro had fled there in 1510, and continued to support any leader who would restore them to Tripoli. Moreover, although Sangüessa trained a strong garrison, including those local inhabitants who were faithful to the Order, the threat from Tagiura became more serious as the Turks became involved in the dynastic problems of the Hafsid kingdom of Tunis, of which Tagiura, like Tripoli itself, was reckoned to form a part.

The King of Tunis, Mulei Muhammed, is believed to have been poisoned by one of his wives, Leleti Gesia by name, in order to put her

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9. The stones with which the Spaniards repaired the castle were carried from the fortifications which encircled the city.
 10. The Grand Master felt the need to send the Captain of the Galleys to Genoa to explain the reasons why the Order was compelled to alienate its property, namely the dire needs due to the new commitments undertaken in the newly-acquired possessions of Tripoli and Malta. See Bosio, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

son Hafsid Hassan in his place. At any rate, when Hassan assumed the reins of the kingdom, he had all his brothers put to death, the sole survivor, Rashid, escaping to Algiers, where he sought the help of Kheyr-ud-Din, the Turkish governor-general. To aid Rashid, Kheyr-ud-Din, sent to Tagiura his *Kialya* (lieutenant), who was also his namesake, Kheyr-ud-Din, known to Christians as Cacciadiabolo, and who was regarded by the Knights as having made himself rais of Tagiura (11). Cacciadiabolo's fame spread to Zanzur, whose sheikh broke friendly relations with the Knights and soon Hinsicir, Tgibiin, Ulad-bu-Dabùs, Zuaga and Homs followed suit in acclaiming Cacciadiabolo as their leader (12). This new situation alarmed Governor Sangüessa, who immediately sent one of the two brigantines stationed in the castle to inform the Council at Malta. The Order thereupon ordered Knight Bernard Salviati to Tripoli with four galleys, plus two others owned by the Genoese James Grimaldo, all of them carrying munitions, reinforcements and provisions.

Meanwhile, Hafsid Mulei Hassan, witnessing the ominous coalition of Rashid and Kheyr-ud-Din, also looked for outside help, and naturally the nearest neighbour was the Order. The Knights welcomed a delegation from Tunis asking for co-operation in ousting Cacciadiabolo; Hassan's envoys were allowed to proceed to Malta in one of the Order's vessels (13) and the case was submitted to the Council. Hassan's proposal was accepted and a contingent of the Order's fleet set sail for Tripoli under the command of Aurelio Bottigella.

Kheyr-ud-Din's secret agents sent him word in Algiers of Mulei Hassan's manoeuvres, and the great sea-rover came personally with his galleys to consolidate Cacciadiabolo in his place. On the return voyage he attempted to capture Tripoli, but was repulsed. Subsequently news reached Malta that Kheyr-ud-Din had been called to Constantinople, and the Order's vessels were recalled from Tripoli, where Bottigella was left as Governor. In the following year, 1532, the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria, in the Spanish-Imperial service, was taking advantage of Kheyr-ud-Din's absence from the Western Mediterranean and of Suleyman's war in Hungary. The Order's navy took part in Doria's raids on Modon, Coron and Patras in Greece (14), carrying their booty to Malta (15).

11. Bosio, p. 109. Sometimes Cacciadiabolo appears as Cairadino Agl or Arráez.

12. For the geography and population of these places, see Ismail Ghemali, *Gli abitanti della Tripolitania* (Tripoli, 1916), p. 35.

13. Bosio, p. 110.

14. Bosio, pp. 115-116; Abbé de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta* (London, 1728), Vol. II, pp. 54-56; see also J. Salvá, *Le Orden de Malta y los acciones navales españolas contra Turcos y Barberiscos en los siglos XVI y XVII*, Instituto Histórico de Marina, Madrid 1904. Ch. V. "Conquista de Coron", pp. 91-101.

15. Cr. Merriman, *The Rise of the Spanish Empire* (New York 1963), Vol. III, p. 299.

A longer respite from external pressures then came to the Order, for Suleyman made peace with Charles V in order to be free to act against Persia (16), and a General Chapter of the Order was convoked in 1533; but, although the Grand Master at the outset exhorted them to be united like brothers, the French, Italian and Spanish Knights squabbled brutally among themselves (17).

Nevertheless, Governor Aurelio Bottigella, having been elevated to the rank of Prior of Pisa, peacefully vacated his post at Tripoli, to be succeeded by García Cortés. The new Governor left for Tripoli with the galleon and two brigantines (18), under strict instructions to pay salaries regularly every four months in order to avoid any mutiny, and to debar non Christians from entering the fortress without disarming themselves and leaving their horses outside the gates. The fortifications were to be taken in hand according to the designs prepared by the Florentine engineer Piccino (19).

Piccino made plans for a fortress in front of the harbour, for the Knights were alarmed by the news that Suleyman II had appointed Kheyr-ud-Din Pasha and Grand Admiral of the Turkish navy. Twice the fleet of the Order sailed to Tripoli with munitions and provisions to be ready in case of a siege.

Kheyr-ud-Din's designs were however, directed not against Tripoli but against Tunis, where he intended to establish Rashid as nominal King. In August 1534 he landed his janissaries at Bizerta and occupied Tunis without opposition, while Hafsid Mulei Hassan fled with his mother, son and treasures. Thus the greatest Muslim city on the Western Mediterranean fell under the effective control of the Turks and, as far as the Knights were concerned, Tripoli was surrounded on all sides by enemies.

These Ottoman victories stirred the Western powers. At the beginning of 1535 Knight Diego Briceno arrived in Malta carrying letters from Charles V urging the Order to send a contingent with his allied forces in a great campaign against Tunis and Halq al-Wadi or La Goletta which was to be led by himself. The Pope also dispatched a brief informing the Grand Master that he was sending 12 galleys and that the French King had consented to offer 20 galleys for the expedition. The Viceroy of

16. Ch. Petrie, *Philip II of Spain* (London, 1963), p. 117.

17. Bosio, pp. 121-122.

18. On vessels, arms and armaments see Ch. Petrie, *Don John of Austria* (London, 1966), pp. 60-82. And for particulars of the Order's fleet, see R.M.L., A.O.M.287, ff. 78, 84. Bosio on p. 150 gives a detailed description of the Order's galleon; and John Francis Guilmartin Jr., *Gunpowder and Galleys. Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History; Cambridge University Press, 1974.

19. See the instructions given to Cortés published in E. Rossi, "Il Domino degli Spagnoli e dei Cavalieri di Malta a Tripoli"; *Archivum Melitense*, Vol. VI p. 60-1.

Sicily supplied 14 galleys, whilst various countries had recruited soldiers and sailors all ready for embarkation (20). In fact France did not take part, and Venice also remained neutral; but the Order refitted and fully equipped the four large galleys, which were placed under the overall command of Bottigella with the 200 best Knights available. La Valette, Gerone and Aspramont were placed in command of three of the vessels, and the galleon was to sail under the command of Francis Touchebeuf Cleremont with 70 more Knights and a contingent of soldiers under Bailiff Anthony Passim (21).

Mulei Hassan, secretly informed of what was going on through agents in Tripoli, sent a Moorish *sherif* as his envoy to the Grand Master, who let him sail in one of the Order's vessels to Cagliari in Sardinia, where the Emperor had collected all the naval and land forces (22). Charles V was pleased to hear of Mulei Hassan's loyalty to him and promised to restore him to his throne.

The Imperial troops landed safely between Carthage and Halq-al-Wadi. The latter fortress was attacked and partly wrecked by the Knights of Malta. Here the Emperor left a garrison of 4,000 Spaniards. When the march was resumed towards Tunis it was a Knight of Malta who led a rising of Christian prisoners inside the city, burst into the arsenal and captured it (23). Tunis fell on 21st July 1535, and Hafsid Mulei Hassan was once again received by the Moors of the city as their King (24).

During the Tunisian campaign the Order had sent the Grand Bailiff of Germany, George Schilingh, to Tripoli, first as Visitor and then as Governor, and together with Governor Cortés he had attempted various inroads into the neighbouring villages, thus helping Hafsid Mulei Hassan in reducing them to obedience. When victory was achieved, Hafsid Mulei Hassan, as we learn from letters of Charles V written in August 1535, was warned not to grant any licence for privateering; to keep strict friendship and alliance with the city and castle of Tripoli; and to surrender to the Order all his rights and pretensions in Tripoli (25).

20. Bosio, pp. 140-141; J. Salvá, pp. 111.

21. *Id. ibid.* The galleasse Alexandria was kept at Malta in reserve to supply Tripoli with whatever was needed. Letters of thanks were sent to Grand Master Pierino del Ponte for the help supplied by the Order during these campaigns. See *A.O.M.* 59, ff. 53-4.

22. Merriman, *op. cit.*, pp. 316-317; J. Salvá, pp. 115-123.

23. Bosio, p. 146. The Infant of Portugal, Don Luis, was at the side of Charles V when the Emperor, it is referred to have told him. "These are, Sir, your brothers, if we can have many like them, surely victory will be ours."

24. See J. A. de Vera et Figueroa, *Histoire de l'Empereur Charles V* (Bruxelles, 1663), pp. 209-217; and H. Keniston, *Francisco de los Cobos: Secretary of Charles V* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1960), pp. 167-172.

25. *A.O.M.* 59, ff. 52-54. Bosio, p. 155.

Although the Spanish Emperor had planned to follow up his Tunisian victory by attacking Algiers the following year, he was diverted by European affairs, and in 1536 Cacciadiabolo was as strong as ever at Tagiura, where he was building up a formidable fighting force of Turkish corsairs, Moors and Arabs. A tower known as el-Cadi overlooking Tripoli and less than a mile away from the city was fortified, and on it were placed guns which could easily reach the castle. Then one night Cacciadiabolo concentrated all his forces gathered from Tagiura, Zanzur and Almaia in order to deliver the decisive assault. But, notwithstanding all his efforts not to disclose his plans, the Tripolitaniens stationed at the castle received word of the imminent attack and informed Governor Schilingh. The Knights took the offensive, and Cacciadiabolo's name disappeared from the Order's records; in his place at Tagiura appears in 1539 Murad Agà whose name was Italianized as Mortaga (26).

In all this, it must be remembered, the power of Spain in northern Africa was not great. Hafsîd Mulei Hassan of Tunis was the vassal of Charles V; but the native rulers and their henchmen had little moral or material influence since they had acknowledged Charles as their overlord for no other reason than to keep their thrones.

Then again, Spanish garrisons had been more or less permanently established at Oran and Mersà-el-Kebir, at Bugia and at Halq al-Wadi and from time to time at other places as well. But Africa formed only one, and perhaps on the whole the least important, of the vast number of problems that simultaneously claimed the attention of Charles V. He had all the cares of government in Spain, Italy and Flanders; the problems of Germany and the Lutheran upheaval; his wars with France and the dreaded French-Turkish alliance; the Ottoman menace in Hungary; and last, but not least, the development of the newly-discovered territories of the New World. Indeed the Mediterranean became of secondary importance, and in such circumstances the North African strongpoints were practically abandoned to look after themselves. Numerous letters extant in the Archives of Simancas show the commanders of these garrisons constantly complaining of the precarious conditions in which the soldiers were living in those regions (27).

If the Spanish *presidios* were in great straits, worse still were the Knights in Tripoli.

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26. Murad who was a renegade Christian, was recognised by Nicholas de Nicolay at the siege of Tripoli in 1551. (See Nicolas de Nicolai, *Le navigationi et viaggi nella Turchia* (Anversa 1576), p. 47. According to Nicolay he was "a eunuch from Ragusa, very expert in the art of war". On Murad Agà, see R. Bartoncini, "La Moschea di Murad Agà in Tagiura", in *Architettura e Arti decorative*, Vol. III, 1924 (1930), pp. 853-872.
27. See Ernest Mercier, *Histoire de l'Afrique septentrionale* (Paris, 1891), Vol. III, pp. 47-48.

On March 2nd 1539 a Chapter General of the Order was convoked in Fort St. Angelo at Malta and the condition of Tripoli's stronghold was discussed. As this was found unsatisfactory it was determined to levy taxes for more fortifications, and visitors were appointed to various priories of the Order on the Continent to collect the annual taxes. The Knight Paul Simeoni was commissioned to visit Tripoli with the four galleys of the Order and report to the Council (28). On his return in June he reported that every day skirmishes occurred between the Order's forces and those of Tagiura but he had scarcely reported when urgent letters were received from the Emperor asking the Order once again to send their galleys for the defence of Castelnuovo which had already been attacked by Kheyr-ud-Din in January, but fortunately for Charles without success. Within four days Simeoni refitted his ships and sailed for Castelnuovo. In July Kheyr-ud-Din reappeared with a strong fleet and after heavy fighting landed eighty-four of his heaviest guns and bombarded Castelnuovo. On 10th August Don Francesco Sarmiento surrendered (29), but the galleys of the Order all arrived safely back in Malta.

Kheyr-ud-Din returned afterwards to Constantinople ravaging various parts of Italy on his way. The Order was spared, notwithstanding that Murad Agà of Tagiura had entreated him to assault Tripoli.

Command was again changed at Tripoli since Governor Bottigella (30) had asked to be released and Hernando de Bracamonte was appointed to take his place.

Expenditure on Tripoli had exceeded twice that originally allocated because of the extraordinary expenses on fortifications and maintenance, and to meet this outlay the Order had incurred many debts; but the new Governor was far from satisfied. In his opinion, the castle was too weak to resist not only a heavy attack but even a minor one. Not to suffer the humiliation of losing that fortress, the Council, after hearing Bottigella's complaints about Tripoli, accepted Bracamonte's remonstrances, and it was decided to send Knight John of Bozmedano to Spain to explain the whole situation to the Emperor in plain language. But nothing could be done, since an insurrection had taken place at Gand in Flanders and Charles had to go there. After restoring order, moreover, the Emperor went to France at the invitation of the French King. The Knights' Council therefore sent Bailiff Peter Passim to Marseilles in one of the Order's galleys, with instructions first to convince the Emperor of the strategic importance of Tripoli and then to ask him to grant subsidies to enable

28. Bosio, pp.184-185.

29. S. Lane-Poole, *The Barbary Corsairs*, (London 1890), p.105.

30. This was the second term of Bottigella's governorship (1537-1539).

the Knights to encircle the whole city with bastions and ditches. If no help was possible, he was to propose to the Emperor that the castle should be blown up with mines, the whole city razed to the ground, and the harbour rendered useless to the enemy by blocking it with sunk barges full of stones and sand.

Charles V rejected the proposal to demolish the city and castle and ruin the harbour, and advised the Knights instead to intensify their efforts in fortifying and defending the castle. Along these lines he wrote to the Grand Master, and to the Viceroy of Sicily and Naples, strongly commending to them the defence of Tripoli and promising help (31).

It was at this stage, in 1541, that the Emperor at last found time to mount the campaign against Algiers which had been deferred after the Tunisian war. Once again he led the expedition in person, and once again the Order of St. John took part, contributing three galleys. But when Charles reached Algiers in October 1541 he was disappointed in his hope that Hassan Agà, the Turkish military commander in the city, would surrender without a fight; and on 28th October, the marines' dread day of the so-called 'bad star' of Saints Simon and Jude, a storm arose and shattered the Christian fleet. The coast of Algiers was littered all the way to Cherchell with corpses of men and of horses, with masts and timbers from the wrecked vessels (32). The three galleys of the Order escaped and, after sheltering for a while in Tunis, returned safely to Malta on 8th December (33).

Now came the turn of Tunis. Hafsîd Mulei Hassan, expecting the Turks to attack his kingdom at any time and realising that it would be impossible for him to resist such an attack with the forces at his disposal, travelled personally to Italy to meet his protector, Charles V, and ask his help. But during Hassan's absence his son Ahmed seized the kingship with the aid of Tunisian notabilities who could no longer stand Hassan's atrocities and despotic government. Informed of this rebellion, Hassan sailed immediately from Naples with a force of two thousand Italian mercenaries under the command of Gio. Battista Lofredi; but Lofredi was killed as soon as he landed, and Hassan was blinded and imprisoned by his own son (34). The dethroned King was later taken to Palermo; there, although he was received and treated with full regal

31. Bosio, pp. 188-189.

32. Vertot, *The history of the Knights of Malta*, (London 1728), Vol. II pp. 87-88, gives the relation sent to the Pope by the Papal legate on the eventful siege of Algiers.

33. Merriman, *op.cit.*, p. 338, says that "the heroism and devotion of a small detachment of the Knights of St. John served to check the retreat before it became a rout, and ultimately drove the assailants back within the walls."

34. Bosio, pp. 222-3.

honours by Charles V's orders (35), he died due to a great melancholy (36).

The defeat at Algiers and the Emperor's inability thereafter to give effective help to his subjects convinced the Knights that they could not hope for much from Charles. Indeed, as no aid was forthcoming from any quarter, on April 26th, 1543, Bailiff Schilingh, returning to Tripoli together with Governor Bracamonte, drafted a petition which was unanimously agreed to by the Treasurer Francis de Ribadeneira, Peter Felizes, Jean de la Valette and other Knights stationed in Tripoli, and forwarded to the Council of the Order. They complained that they could no longer be deluded by the Emperor, and proposed that he should be asked to exonerate the Order from the burden of keeping Tripoli, though as a sign of good will they had taken in hand the construction of a tower at the end of the rock projecting from the mainland: this would be Piccino's fortification, probably situated where the harbour light-house now stands (37). The Council, meeting in Malta on May 24th, decided to send the Knight Diego de Guzman (38) to present their remonstrances to the Emperor. Claiming that Tripoli in the hands of the enemy would be a nest of corsairs far more dangerous than Algiers, they asked him to let them destroy the castle and city and sink barges at the harbour to make it unoperable. Charles V rejected their demands altogether, promising only that in case of an imminent attack he would succour them and would take the necessary steps to defend Tripoli (39).

Oddly enough in 1544 a Knight of Malta, Leone Strozzi, was appointed to the embassy that was going to Constantinople by the French King. Strozzi explained to the Grand Master that he could not refuse such an honour and that he would be of great help to the Order as in this capacity he would do all his best to stop the Turks from attacking the Order's possessions (40).

In this same year Christofano Solis Farfan replaced Bracamonte as Governor of Tripoli. During his tenure of office (1544-46) the danger of losing Tripoli receded, as Suleyman had concluded a truce with Charles V. The Knights took advantage of this armistice, and Farfan determined to bring under his yoke the neighbouring zones of Alma'a, Zanzur and Zegua. He sent native Tripolitani as his envoys. But the Almajans not

35. S. Lane-Poole, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

36. J. Salvá, *op.cit.*, p.280.

37. After digging and removing the sand, they filled the craters, the tower was constructed mainly of solid timbers from a galleon which had recently been captured by the Knight Schilingh. Bosio, p. 220.

38. Bosio, pp. 219-220.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 222, 230.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

only refused to submit to the payment of tribute to the Order but even sold the envoys to the Turks. The enraged Farfan attacked Almaja furiously and captured over 425 persons (41).

Murad Agà founding the overlordship of the Order insufferable, begged the help of Dragut. Two new personalities now appeared on the scene in Tripoli and its seas; the forementioned Dragut and La Valette. These two great soldiers both noted for their orderly conduct of war, proved a bastion to their respective faiths, one being labelled "The terror of Asia and Africa and the shield of Europe", and the other "The drawn Sword of Islam". Both were considered by their opponents as great pirates, and as such both had been captured and ransomed. According to the well-known anecdote, when one day La Valette, who had himself rowed on the galleys of Kheyr ud-Din, saw Dragut rowing on a Genoese galley (42), he said to him: "Mr. Dragut, it is the custom of war". To which the prisoner, remembering his visitor's former apprenticeship, cheerfully replied: "It is a change of luck".

La Valette was determined to keep Tripoli at all costs. He kept in the castle and city only faithful and hard-working persons, not only from among the ranks of his own Order, but also Tripolitarians and even mercenaries who all had to take the oath of allegiance to him. He abolished abuses and enforced a moral Christian life. He reformed the government and began the scientific remodelling of the fortifications, which he found antiquated and some of them crumbling. Once and for all he desired to annihilate Murad Agà by driving him out of his post and then swooping upon the other neighbouring villages. However La Valette, realizing the impossibility of his project, proposed another solution, namely that the Order shou'd keep in Malta just a small garrison and transfer its Headquarters and all the Knights to Tripoli. A full debate followed in Council in which the Knights discussed the *pros* and *cons* of this vital project (43). Finally, a compromise was reached and it was decided to increase the existing *presidio* with fifty more Knights every year. The Tripolitanian Governor would be of the rank of Grand Cross, with some of the powers of a Grand Master, and wou'd be commissioned to provide Auberges for the different Langues of the Order. The Knights

41. Bosio, p. 240.

42. Dragut had spent four years before he was ransomed in 1544 by Kheyr-ud-Din from the Lomellini of Genoa. E. Rossi, "Il dominio dei Cavalieri, *op.cit.*, pp. 57-9, transcribed the ordinances passed in the General Chapter. *Storia di Tripoli e della Tripolitania*, p. 136. See also Merriman, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 329-30; Lane-Poole, *op.cit.*,

43. A.O.M., 287, ff. 65.
pp. 112-27.

would then be able to judge how far the move to Tripoli was expedient (44).

It is to be noted that in La Valette's mind was the plan that the whole region of Tripoli would fall into the hands of the Knights and thus free the whole Order from all kind of subjection to the Emperor and to his Viceroy in Sicily, on whom the Order was dependent for foodstuffs. Certainly Tripolitania could be more intensively and more fruitfully cultivated than Malta.

After obtaining the consent of the Pope, the Emperor and the King of France regarding the transfer of the Order from Malta to Tripoli, the Grand Master sent to Marseilles the swiftest galley at his disposal, *La Catarinetta*. Unfortunately on her return she was captured by Dragut, with a load of seven thousand scudi destined for the fortifications of Tripoli (45). The crew of *Catarinetta* was conducted to Gerba and for their ransom the Order paid three hundred scudi per head. Thus vanished all La Valette's plans; he returned to Malta, to be succeeded by Peter Nunez Herrera who was fortunate in that, although during his Governorship (1549-1551) there was serious threat of an attack on Tripoli, the only military activity was the peaceful occupation of Monastir and El-Mehedia in Tunisia by Dragut in the spring of 1550. These two fortresses had alienated themselves from the kingdom of Tunis and were in an anarchic state (46). Dragut succeeded in bribing one of their chief magistrates, Ibrahim Barat by name, and took possession of the strongholds under Ibrahim's command (47). In attempting their redemption in September of the same year, the allied Christian fleets and armies, including a strong squadron of Knights and a battalion of four hundred men under the command of Bailiff Claude de la Sengle, suffered tremendous losses (48). Dragut with his fleet escaped to the island of Gerba. Although the inlet in which he sheltered was well blockaded, during the night Dragut dragged all his ships overland on greased ways to the other side of the island and escaped to Constantinople. Indeed the Christians thought they had trapped him, while in reality he was ravaging the Sicilian coasts on his way home (49). On arriving at the Sultan's Court, Dragut was

44. A.O.M. 287, f. 45 "Ordinationi sopra Tripoli" "Che in questo primo anno si mandino in detto luogo 50 cavallieri et un governatore... la seguente annata si potranno mandar et accrescer fino al numero di 100 cavallieri, et consequentemente da anno in anno, mandarne di più 50 fino che tutta la religione fusse in detto luogo". See also A.O.M. 6559, f. 413, Bosio, pp. 255-257.

45. Bosio p. 257.

46. S. Lane-Poole, *Barbary Corsairs*, pp. 133-134.

47. Vertot, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-108; J. Salvá, pp. 177-183.

48. Bosio, pp. 272-7.

49. E. Armstrong, *The Emperor Charles V* (Macmillan, 1910), Vol. II, p. 238.

appointed commander of the Turkish fleet in appreciation of valorous service to the Ottoman Empire far above and beyond the call of duty of a private corsair (50). Dragut definitely reported to the Sultan on the intrepidity of the Knights of Malta in each combat he had in the Western Mediterranean and proposed their total elimination from their possessions, as they prevented the Turks from controlling the seas. Murad Agà had probably also heard and informed Suleyman of La Valette's plan to transfer the Order's headquarters to Tripoli since now both Monastir and el-Mehedia were in the hands of the Christians (51).

The last Governor of Tripoli, the old French Knight, Gaspard Vallies, had got the information from some Turks whom he had captured near Misurata on his way from Malta to Tripoli (52) in May 1551, that several squadrons and a mighty army were being prepared at Constantinople. The same news reached Malta from Knight George de St. Jean who had just returned on the Island from the Morea, and also from Knight Nicholas Durand de Villegagnon who submitted orally to the Council the special instructions sent purposely to the Grand Master from De Montmorency, the first Minister of France (53), telling them that Tripoli and Malta would soon be attacked. Scipio Strozzi, informed by Monsieur D'Aramont, ambassador of the French King at the Porte, corroborated these statements, namely that Suleyman was determined to dislodge the Order from its strongholds (54). But Grand Master Jean D'Homedes together with the Spanish Langues and many Italian Knights (53) — following the policy of the viceroys of Naples and Sicily, who had received similar news that Suleyman was to attack them — suspected that what was being divulged was nothing but rumour and they judged that the Sultan's designs were in concert with the King of France and that the Ottoman fleet was to sail to Toulon since hostilities had broken out between France and Spain and not against the Order (56). Some precautions were taken, though they were very inadequate (57) since the captain of the galleys was ordered to proceed to Messina and with the Viceroy's approval he recruited a mock contingent of less than two hundred Calabrians, mostly shepherds mixed with some vagabonds and

50. Dragut flew on the mast a red and white flag with a blue crescent on it.

51. Bosio, p. 279.

52. Bosio, p. 287.

53. Vertot, p. 112.

54. Bosio, p. 288.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

57. Vertot blames Grand Master D'Homedes right through his account of the fall of Tripoli, accusing him of treachery, *ibid.*, pp. 113-128. Claire-Eliane Engel, *L'Ordre de Malte en Méditerranée* (Monaco, 1957) p. 30, summarises Villegagnon's accusations against the Grand Master: "Souttise? Entêtement? Trahison? Avarice? Tout à la fois, peut-être."

convicts who had never been on the battlefield. These were shipped to Malta, and on 7th July they were forced to go to Tripoli on the galleys of the Order. Vallies, the Governor, was instructed to treat them well, to provide them with whatever they needed and to pay them regularly every 29 days; moreover, to keep them united and, as an incentive to satisfy their greediness, to let them dispose of slaves they had captured.

The galleys of the Order returned to Malta on July 13th bringing women, children and the invalids from Tripoli as instructed by the Malta Council a week before (58). On this very day the Turkish Armada, composed of well over one hundred ships, ten thousand soldiers and numerous siege guns, and commanded by Sinan Pasha, Dragut and Salih Pasha, the Beglerbeg (Governor-General) of Algiers (59), appeared in front of Messina's lighthouse. The Pasha asked the Viceroy to surrender el Mehediya and hand it back to the Turk; but he received a negative answer, and so he proceeded to Augusta and burnt the whole harbour. On the 18th the fleet appeared off Malta and attempted to lay siege to Birgu, Fort St. Angelo and Mdina (60).

The Turkish leaders found a strong resistance in Malta (61) and rumours had reached them that Admiral Andrea Doria was sending a relief force to the island; moreover, being afraid that the siege would not be over before September, they re-embarked their troops. But Dragut, knowing of the defenceless state of Gozo, swooped upon the sister island, seizing town, village and hamlet. The Governor of Gozo, Knight Galatian de Sesse, seeing the plight of his subjects and considering that the gunners and ammunition sent to him from Malta had all been captured by the enemy before reaching him, surrendered the citadel on July 26th, 1551 (62). The whole population numbering over five thousand, was carried away into slavery (with the exception of forty decrepits *poveracci vecchi decrepiti, stroppiati e quasi del tutto inutili*) (63). Only those Gozitans

58. *A.O.M.* 6559, f.587. E. Rossi, *Storia di Tripoli*, p. 138.

59. *Id. ibid.*

60. The Knight Villegagnon distinguished himself for the stout resistance he put up at the old capital of Mdina. See Bosio, p. 302.

61. According to Vertot, pp. 121, Sinan Pasha had express orders from Suleyman that if he found too much difficulty in the execution of that enterprise (the capture of the Maltese archipelago) he should keep only to that of Tripoli. To besiege Tripoli, he had express orders. Historians rightly remark that nowhere can such information be confirmed.

62. Bosio, p. 304.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

who ran away to hide themselves in caves and valleys, escaped (64).

Immediately after the devastation of Gozo, there arrived in Malta the French Ambassador to Constantinople, Gabriel Francis D'Aramont, accompanied by his secretary Nicholas de Nicholay. His coming was regarded as a godsend. The Knights entreated him to proceed to Tripoli on one of the Order's brigantines and there to try to divert Sinan's and Dragut's plans of besieging that fortress. Accordingly, on 2nd August he sailed for Tripoli, ordering the two galleys that had brought him to Malta to proceed with him, and when he arrived there he found that the Turks were already in Tagiura. As he flew the French flag he was saluted by the artillery of the ships (65) and was allowed to land. But Pasha's determination could not be shaken. A message was sent to Governor Vallies telling him either to capitulate or else suffer total extermination. The reply was that Tripoli had been submitted to his charge and that he would defend it until death (66). Vallies had at his disposal 200 Knights and about 500 soldiers. The castle by the sea was impregnable, but the Turkish army, reinforced by the native population of Tagiura, attacked by land from the rear. It was 8th August. The Turkish army would have been held longer if it were not for betrayal by a renegade soldier of Provence who was guarding the city-gate of Xercia which faced towards Tagiura. This opened to the Turks a way to the fort of St. Barbara which was the weakest point and behind which was stationed the Governor's house and the ammunition magazine (67). In addition, there was the ill-conduct of Calabrian soldiers who mutinied and constantly vexed the Governor with petitions for a surrender in order to return home

64. The late Mr. J. Manara, a Maltese whose family for generations lived in Tripoli, sustained an argument — corroborated, he claimed, by Muslims from Tarhuna — that Sinan Pasha had landed all his prisoners far to the west of Tripoli and marched them to that place. Before and even during the Second World War there were still certain inhabitants who claimed to be of Maltese descent. One of them confessed that his grandfather used to say: *Siamo Maltesi della vendetta di Dragut* (we are Maltese of Dragut's revenge). This assertion is of no small value. Of course not all the 5000 Gozitans remained there: some paid for their own ransom; others were ransomed by money collected by the Bishop of Malta, Dominic Cubelles. It was on October 10th, 1551, that Pope Julius III granted an indulgence to all those who contributed money, silver and gold for the ransom of the Gozitans. For this aim, as it appears from the Acts of Brandano Caxaro (20/4/1552) a copy of which is extant in the Archives of the Cathedral, Malta (Vol. IV, p. 339 old numeration, ff. 173-4 new enumeration), the local bishop had appointed a commission composed of the Vicar General J. Manduca, the Rector of the Church of Zurrieq, N. Xara and the layman Simon Barthalum, to make a collection in all the parishes.

65. Vertot, *op.cit.*, p. 125.

66. Vertot, pp. 123-124.

67. When the attack started all ammunition was transferred into the Church, Nicolay, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

safely. Vallies and his council, realizing that there was no prospect of a relieving force, decided on August 13th to start negotiations. What they demanded was an honourable surrender, like that granted to the Knights by Suleyman in the siege of Rhodes. Accordingly, two Spanish Knights, as French Knights were not trusted (they suspected that through the mediation of the French Ambassador all Frenchmen would be freed whilst the rest would be massacred), conveyed the message to Sinan. The Pashà agreed that he would let them all go unharmed provided they paid all the expenses incurred in that siege (68). This could not possibly be accepted as in Tripoli they hardly had funds enough for their own sustenance: the messengers left without committing themselves. Murad Agà, however, was anxious to occupy Tripoli and he asked Sinan to ease the terms. The messengers were recalled and a decision was taken that, if the Knights capitulated, the Turk would allow 300 of the garrison to go free. This created chaos as soon as it was communicated to the besieged (69). Tripoli fell on August 14th. The two hundred Moors who were found in the service of the Knights in this campaign were cut to pieces (70). Its capitulation, signed without the previous consent of the Grand Master and his Council, was the cause of great division in the Order itself, since the Spaniards accused the French Ambassador, D'Aramont, of treason. When on August 23rd, the latter together with his secretary Nicholas de Nicholay returned to Malta, they were very coldly received (71).

Henry III of France, informed of the accusation against his ambassador, who was labelled by the Knights as an impostor (72), sent an envoy to the Grand Master asking him to submit a report to him. D'Homedes communicated to his Council the French King's letter. After discussion of the matter and the reading of the correspondence which passed between France and Malta, the Grand Master felt in duty bound not only not to blame D'Aramont but to thank him for his good services. Indeed, in Tripoli the Order lost a fortress which could hardly be properly defended since, as we have seen, the

68. Nicolay, pp. 51-2.

69. In fact only one hundred Frenchmen, including Governor G. de Sesse, were allowed to return to Malta and this through D'Aramont. Later the French Ambassador succeeded in ransoming some others "with his own money". (Vertot, p. 133). Of the Maltese only the serving brothers, Des Roches by name, with his little company of no more than 30 (we do not know of what nationality) succeeded to escape (*Ibid*, pp. 132-3). It is said that La Valette in order to placate the Maltese, instituted a Commission with local lawyer Vassallo to try a case on the officials of Tripoli.

70. Nicolai, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

71. Bosio, *ibid.*, Vertot, p. 134.

72. *A.O.M.* 6559, fol. 605.

role of the Knights in Northern Africa could only be fulfilled in collaboration with the Spanish forces. But whereas the Knights helped in all the expeditions to save other Spanish presidios, when their own stronghold was attacked, they were left to themselves.

When the news of the capture of Tripoli reached the ears of Julius III, he sent a Brief to the Grand Master on September 11th, 1551, telling him how alarmed he was at past and recent victories achieved by the Ottomans. The Pope exhorted him, lest he and the members of his Order fell in the hands of the Turks and since there was time to leave Malta, to transfer the Order's Headquarters either to Syracuse or Messina, leaving in the island only young and courageous Knights. In the meantime, the Pope continued, he was writing to the Viceroy of Naples and Sicily asking them to replace with their own soldiers those who departed from Malta (73).

The Knights, however, far from contemplating the transfer of their Headquarters from Malta to Sicily, as they were exhorted to do by the Pope, started making plans for the recapture of Tripoli. An expeditionary raid was made in 1552 with the intent not only of capturing slaves for their ships (74), but also to keep alive among the Tripolitarians the memory of the power of the Order. But the fear of an attack on Malta compelled them to stop further offensives and instead to give priority to the seat of their Headquarters. After a while, discovering that Dragut, after reappearing off Messina on July 6th, had proceeded to France, they again felt secure enough to pursue a forward policy. Reinforced by three more galleys owned by Bailiff Leone Strozzi (75) and in concert with La Valette and Bernard Guimeran, the Order's navy attacked Zuara (76). Having landed by mistake miles away from the target, they returned to Malta after sustaining enormous losses. The Grand Master, hearing

73. Sebast. Pauli, *Codice Diplomatico del Sacro Militar Ordine Gerosolimitano oggi di Malta* (Lucca 1737), pp. 208-209. We failed to find this Brief and the reactions to it in the registers of the Archives of the Order. Probably the Grand Master did not communicate it to the Council as it was addressed personally to him.

74. The Knights engaged for their galleys paid rowers, the so-called *remolari*, but lack of money and volunteers made it incumbent on them to hunt for slaves in order to keep their navy going.

75. Strozzi undertook this expedition in the understanding that the captured booty would be divided between him and the Order, since on 3rd August 1552 he had petitioned for and obtained permission from the Council to devote himself to privateering, independently of the Order. *A.O.M.* 88, f. 117: "audita petitione Rev. Prioris Capuae Leonis Strozzi...cum scrutinio ballatorum, nemine discrepante...dederunt eidem licentiam discedendi de conventu et quo sibi melius placuerit eundi."

76. Bosio, p. 327. Ettore Rossi, "Tentativi per la riconquista di Tripoli", *Arch. Melit.*, Vol. VI, pp. 52, 66-7.

of the catastrophe, exclaimed: "This is the greatest defeat the Order has suffered since that of Rhodes" (77).

The last major expedition against Tripoli was undertaken in 1559 when the Grand Master of Malta was Jean de la Valette.

La Valette's plan to make Tripoli the Headquarters of the Order with Malta as a secondary fortress still lingered in his mind. Of course, it was now more difficult than when he had been Governor of Tripoli, not only because that stronghold was then in the hands of the Knights but because since Dragut himself had become Governor of this place he had constructed several bastions and made it one of the strongest fortresses of Africa. The entrance to the port was secured by great towers well provided with artillery, so that it served for a secure retreat to the vessels (78).

In the summer of 1559 the Order sent precious treasures to the Duke of Medina-Celi to encourage him to recover Tripoli for the Knights of Malta. A very strong fleet, eleven of whose ships were supplied by the Order, was gathered from Spain, Genoa, Florence, the Pope and Monaco, and assembled at Messina in October. But it was not before February 10th, 1560 that the armada left for Tripoli under the supreme command of Medina-Celi (79) with Captain General Charles Tessières in command of the Order's galleys. As bad winds, fevers, scurvy and dysentery ravaged the crews (80), the storming of Tripoli became an impossibility and Medina-Celi had to content himself with the capture of Gerba. Although the supreme commander still hoped to attack Tripoli, La Valette, seeing complete failure, sent express orders for the withdrawal of the three Maltese galleys. The *S. Giovanni Battista*, the *S. Filippo* and the *Santa Fede* reached the island safely, but many of the valiant Knights and the poor Maltese who took part in this raid lost their lives (81). In fact the Turkish fleet fell on Gerba on 12th May, and at once destroyed

77. Bosio, p. 332.

78. Vertot, p. 174.

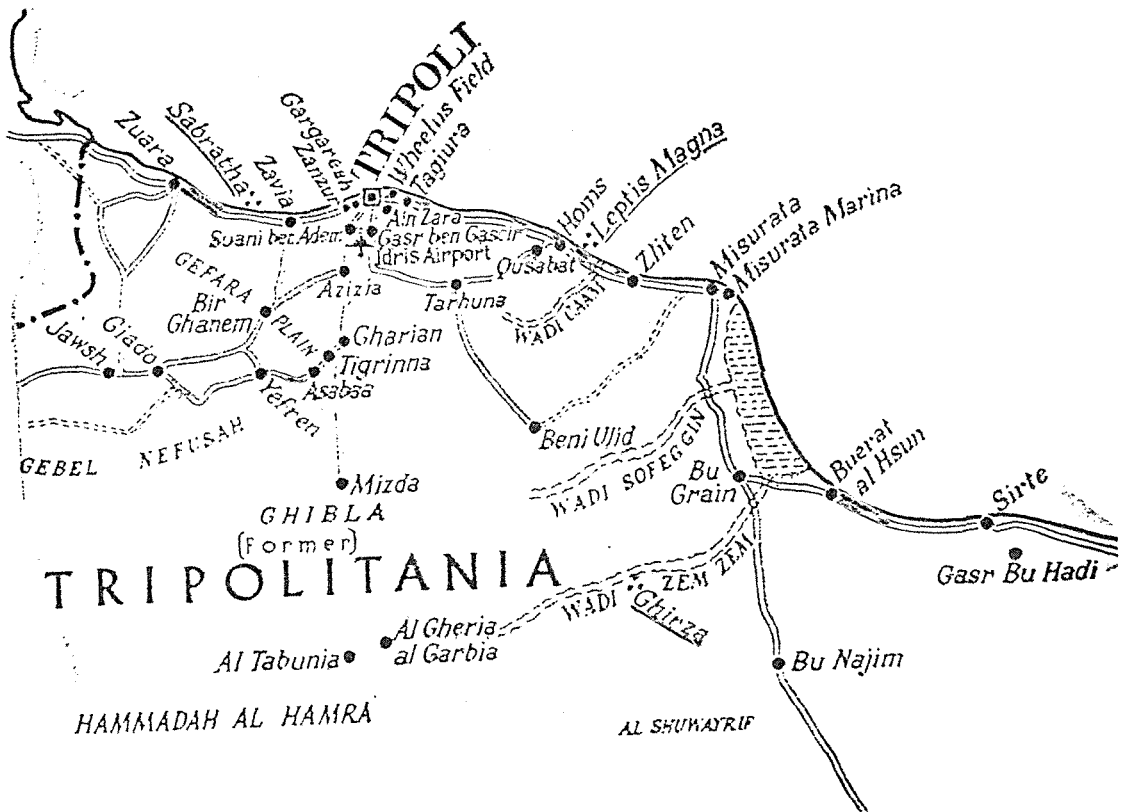
79. Ch. Petrie, *Philip II of Spain*, p. 126, says: "A worse choice for the command could not have been made, for the Viceroy's inexperience of naval strategy by itself might have passed without comment in an age when men moved indifferently from service ashore to service afloat, but with the exception of personal courage the Duke seems to have possessed none of the qualities requisite in a commander whether by land or by sea."

80. S. Lane-Poole, *Barbary Corsairs*, p. 139.

81. F. Braudel, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, p.977 quoting the opinion of Emperor Maximilian as sent to the Doge from Vienna on February 3rd, 1560, blames the Christians for the disaster, since that "expedition has been noised abroad so far ahead that the Turks have been provided both with motive and the time to mount a fleet [250] of this size"

a large part of the Christian armada (82), though Medina-Celi himself and Gianandrea Doria escaped, leaving on the island a large Spanish garrison, which eventually capitulated to Piali Pasha and Dragut on July 31st 1560 (83).

Thus Tripoli, like Rhodes, was lost for ever to the Order of St. John, and La Valette's plan to make Tripoli the Order's Headquarters remained a dream.



Modern Tripolitania

82. The small Christian garrison was annihilated, the bones being piled in a pyramid in the "tower of skulls" (*burj al-rus*).

83. Bosio, pp. 413-32; J. Salvà, *Le Orden de Malta*, pp. 190-2; S. Zarb, "A contemporary letter describing the occupation of Gerba in 1560 by the Christians", *Scientia* (Malta, 1955), Vol. XXI, pp. 54-70. R.C. Anderson, *Naval Wars in the Levant, 1559-1853* (Liverpool, 1952), pp. 8-14, gives a very good account of the Jerbah expedition.