

MALTA IN 1565: SOME RECONSIDERATIONS

By B.W. BLOUET

THE four hundredth centenary year of the Great Siege is possibly a good time to reconsider certain aspects of the story of events in the summer of 1565. It has long been commented that we know very little of the Moslem side of the story. This is, of course, hardly surprizing for Turkish sources are not easily available to Western European writers and there is a not inconsiderable language problem. But even allowing for this gap in our knowledge, and Turkish official sources may not prove to be very rich, we still lack a carefully documented and analytical account of the Siege based upon Western European source material. This short paper is not an effort to provide such an account but it is an attempt to ask whether certain assumptions made about the Siege have a reasoned and documented basis.

The story of the Siege, as it has come down to us, has been written by Western Europeans glorifying their own military prowess and there is something of the flavour of a morality play in the accepted account of events. The Turks are usually represented as a vast, brutal, barbarian horde impervious to fear and innately evil. Against this force for evil stands a small band of Christian Knights led by a man who epitomises the Knightly virtues of courage, chivalry and devotion. And of course, in the end, the courage and devotion of a few well-led, intelligent Christian Knights overcomes the bestial Moslem horde which is portrayed as being ill-led and lacking in chivalry.

The story has become stylized and few have questioned it because firstly, it makes such a good story and secondly because the Knights of St. John had a vested interest in appearing to be the saviours of Christendom. The story of the Siege increased their renown and raised their status in European affairs.

In short the chroniclers, by and large, have been more interested in telling a good tale rather than in giving a reasoned analytical account of events. This is not a criticism of them, for the majority are story-tellers rather than historians and, to adapt Prescott's comment on Vertot, 'their appetite for the marvellous sometimes carries them into the miraculous'. Care must be taken when reading the statements of omnipotent chroniclers who, for instance, without any reservation confidently give us detailed accounts of conversations amongst the Turkish commanders as they con-

duct their campaign against the forces of the Order. Certainly renegades from the Turkish army brought some information, but the majority of such deserters were men of lowly position who probably brought no more than camp gossip. This biased attitude of the early writers has led to the distortion of certain aspects of the story which have been incorporated in nineteenth and twentieth century accounts of the siege.

There has been considerable criticism of the way in which the Turkish commanders conducted their campaign in Malta during 1565. Probably the most heroic episode of the Siege was the defence of St. Elmo. However it has been maintained by many that the Turks had no reason to attack this position at all for once the Birgu-Senglea positions fell St. Elmo would fall very quickly. The chroniclers usually give the following reason for the decision of the Turks to attack St. Elmo. The Turkish admiral Piali was jealous of the power placed in Mustapha as general commander of the expedition and did his best to make the Malta campaign difficult. Accordingly, when Mustapha suggested an immediate attack on the Birgu-Senglea defences, Piali insisted that St. Elmo was captured first in order that the Marsamxett could be made available to his fleet. As Piali was the son-in-law of Solyman, Mustapha was forced to acquiesce. Well, this may be so, although it might be asked 'why if Piali was so powerful, did he not gain command of the whole expedition in the first place?' In fact the decision to attack St. Elmo can be justified on tactical grounds without suggesting disensions amongst the Turkish commanders as the reason. Firstly, whilst Marsaxlokk, where the Turks anchored initially, is an adequate harbour from the point of view of weather during the summer, in the event of a Christian fleet coming to relieve Malta it was a very bad one. The entrance was too wide to give any real protection and the Turkish fleet might have been penned up in the horseshoe bay without any room to manoeuvre. The Turks were obviously worried by this fear as they seem to have manned seaward facing artillery positions at Marsaxlokk to give some protection. Secondly, supply and command problems would clearly be eased if the Turkish army, which established its main camp in the Marsa area, and the fleet were in close proximity. Thirdly and crucially, the most efficient way of attacking the Birgu-Senglea positions may have been by getting control of the Sceberras peninsula which was a good gun platform from which to bombard the major positions. The Order's military engineers had been pointing out since 1530 that the major weakness in the Birgu defences was the fact that they could be commanded by artillery deployed upon Sceberras. From the peninsula artillery could hamper movement within the town and fire onto the defenders' side of the fortifications. Artillery positions on Sceberras would not only significantly

increase the all round coverage of an attackers' fire power but it would be especially efficacious in demoralizing the defenders.

The decision to attack St. Elmo, then, may have been taken as a result of sound tactical reasoning. The Turkish command may have under-estimated the difficulties of capturing St. Elmo and they certainly conducted operations against it in an uneconomical manner. However the chroniclers usually represent St. Elmo as a small weak fortress containing only a few inadequately supplied men. This is not an accurate picture. St. Elmo had been completed about twelve years before the Siege and had been designed by a competent military engineer. The fort had been specially built to deny an aggressor unhampered use of Sceberras, it was modern, with outworks and a cavalier, well supplied with artillery positions on the landward front and, once the Siege started, about eight hundred men were put into it. Eight hundred determined men, stiffened with a strong cadre of the finest fighters in Europe, in a modern, if small, fort surrounded on three sides by the sea could pose a number of problems to an attacker for, however powerful the aggressor, he could only bring a small part of his strength against the fort at one time. It was true that St. Elmo lay on the lowest part of the peninsula and was overlooked by higher ground but even so attacking the compact fort involved considerable difficulties. Any troops deployed along the Grand Harbour side of the peninsula were exposed to the fire of the artillery mounted in St. Angelo. And whilst an attack could be launched downhill, just before the fort was reached there was a shallow col and 300 yards of open ground which the St. Angelo artillery commanded. By controlling this ground the St. Angelo guns protected St. Elmo from complete Turkish investment and allowed the fort to be supplied by sea with fresh men and materials. Finally the fort was on a knoll of higher ground at the tip of the peninsula and was built into the solid rock. This last fact is most important as it made difficult the use of mining techniques by which fortresses were frequently made untenable. As far as is known no serious attempt was made to mine St. Elmo.

In the present state of our knowledge it is impossible to say whether the Turkish commanders undertook the attack on St. Elmo for internal political reasons or as a result of hard tactical reasoning. What is certain though is that a good case could be made for attacking St. Elmo first. Sceberras peninsula was the greatest weakness in the Birgu-Senglea defences as the Order well knew and it is reasonable to suppose that in attempting to take St. Elmo the Turks were attempting to exploit this weakness and at the same time supply themselves with a safe and convenient anchorage for the fleet.

It is possible, indeed probable, that dissensions developed amongst

the Turkish commanders once the campaign started to go against them, but this is a different matter altogether. Dragut, in his criticisms of the decision to attack St. Elmo is being wise after the event – if he did in fact make the statements attributed to him.

The defence of the Turkish command on this matter cannot be extended to cover all aspects of policy for it appears to have made a number of costly mistakes. However, it is true to say that the Turkish commanders have been rather more harshly treated than they deserve and not only in this matter. Piali, the Turkish admiral has been criticised for his failure to intercept Don Garcia's relief force before it reached Malta. Yet it would have been impossible, for the fleet to maintain station in the appropriate area with a northerly wind blowing. A northerly wind is usual in Malta when the Mediterranean summer high pressure system breaks up. There seems little doubt that the break up had taken place as Don Garcia's relief fleet suffered heavy storm damage and was forced to turn back to Sicily on its first attempt to reach Malta.

Of the major characters on the Christian side only one is persistently represented as a man who is unequal to the events taking place around him; Don Garcia de Toledo, the viceroy of Sicily. The impression which has been created of a vacillating, pusillanimous and incompetent commander is unfair. It is not that the viceroy was unequal to events but that the military resources he had at his disposal were completely inadequate for the several tasks he had to perform. There could be no question of his risking the meagre forces he had for the defence of Sicily in a quixotic attempt to relieve Malta. The Knights never appreciated the point but the viceroy had to regard Malta in just the way Valette had regarded St. Elmo – the small fortress bloodily sacrificed to give the main positions time. Malta was simply an outlying fortress in the empire of Philip II and no viceroy could be justified in committing the greatest part of the Sicilian forces to the Order's aid.

Above this, Don Garcia, in the viceregal system operated by Philip II, had very little freedom to make decisions. All important matters were referred back to the emperor and viceroys were dependent on direct orders from Spain. This situation can be examined in the large quantities of viceregal correspondence which have been preserved and at least partially published.