

## LIFE &amp; WELLBEING HISTORY

# Süleyman the Magnificent and other Ottoman Great Siege protagonists... after Malta

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It is said that Süleyman the Magnificent was extremely angry at the outcome of the Malta campaign in 1565. Defeat was something he had never taken into consideration. He had not taken into account the fact that Mustafa and his supposedly mighty troops could be resisted and defeated by the relatively small garrison of the Knights of St John based on the Mediterranean island.

There were other issues that contributed to worsen the Sultan's mood. According to the English chronicler Richard Knolles, his anger was compounded by the fact that the Governor of the island of Sakız (Greek, Chios) had not only revealed some of the Ottoman plans to the Grand Master of the Order of St John, Jean de Valette, but had also withheld payment of the 10,000 ducat yearly tribute, for over two years.

Süleyman could not tolerate such affront. He therefore ordered his admiral Piyale Paşa to sail to Chios at the command of 80 galleys and to take over the island. Piyale Paşa, who had been Mustafa Paşa's right-hand man at the Malta siege not more than eight months earlier, duly obliged, arrived in Chios on April 15, 1566, and duly took it over without much ado.

**"Just like Mustafa and Piyale at Fort St Elmo in Malta, Süleyman also believed he would conquer the fortress of Szigeth in a few days"**

While Süleyman was engrossed in his post-defeat 'depression', on March 28, 1566, Grand Master Jean de Valette was instead busy laying the foundation stone of the new city in Malta which was to take his name. The Provençal Grand Master was indeed on a high, having been acclaimed a hero by the gotha of European leaders for having successfully defended the Maltese island and the whole of Christianity from the wrath of the Ottoman invader.

In order to revive his empire's prestige, the Ottoman sultan decided to personally lead his army in a war against Hungary. He was optimistic that he could conquer the town of Szigeth, and indeed this did eventually happen, but unfortunately for the Sultan he died in his tent of natural causes while the town was being besieged, on September 4, 1566, a few days before the fall of the fortress to the Ottoman troops. September certainly seems to have been the Sultan's bogus month.

When news of the Sultan's intentions to attack Hungary reached the European Christian leaders, they sent various forces to the defence of Hungary in aid of Emperor



Prof. Norbert Pap at Turbek Hill, Szigeth, the possible burial place of Süleyman.



Ottoman attack on the river fortress of Szigetvár (1566).

Maximilian. The Knights of Malta also sent several noblemen who came from different parts of Europe to serve the Emperor in the war against the mighty Sultan. The cause was such a noble one that the expenses involved in the expedition were totally borne by the Order itself.

The Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem were not the only allies who rushed to the help of the Hungarians in their defence against the Ottomans. Other European forces that joined in this collective defence included four legions of German footmen and over 20,000 horsemen, together with 400 light mounted soldiers, who were despatched to the aid of the Hungarians by the Duke of Savoy.

On the other hand, the Ottoman army was made up of about 90-100,000 soldiers of all types and ranks, which included the Sultan's Janissary infantry and the Sipahi cavalry. The Ottoman forces basically comprised men from all over the empire: Anatolians, Karamans, Van, Karahamid, Erzurum, Tatars from Crimea, Arabs, Egyptians and Africans, just to name a few.

Süleyman himself went to war on May 1, 1566. As per tradition, when he left Istanbul in great pomp, he was accompanied by his various ministers on his journey. According to the historian Ibrahim Peçevi, these were the Grand Vizier Mehmed Paşa, the second vizier Pertev Paşa, the third vizier Ferhad Paşa, the fourth vizier Ahmed Paşa, the fifth vizier Kizil Ahmed Hamid Effendi and various other dignitaries and leaders.

On the other hand, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall writes that the high ranking officials accompanying Süleyman were the Grand Vizier Mehmed Sokolović as commander-in-chief and then the third, fourth and fifth viziers, Ferhat, Ahmet and Mustafa, the unfortunate besieger of Malta. If what Hammer writes is correct, this would mean that the leader of the Malta campaign, Mustafa Paşa, had been demoted to fifth vizier. Was this his punishment for having failed in the Malta campaign?

During his prestigious 45-year reign, Süleyman had already personally led his victorious army for 12 times, namely in the Belgrade, Rhodes, Mohács, Vienna, Guns, Baghdad,



Nikola Šubić Zrinski preparing for the final battle.

Corfu, Suceava, Buda, Gran, Tabriz and Nakhchivan campaigns. The Szigeth campaign was to be his 13th victorious one, but destiny had decreed it was also going to be his last.

Another protagonist of the Malta campaign, Ali Portuk Bey, the Bey of Rhodes, found his death in Szigeth, probably on August 26, 1566. According to the Hungarian historian Miklós Istvánffy, Süleyman was extremely sad at the death of Ali Portuk. The latter had been abducted from his Portuguese homeland by sea pirates, and had been offered to Hajreddin Barbarossa as a gift. He had received his military training at Barbarossa's military school, which was renowned for its excellence.

Ali Portuk Bey, who had been a colleague of and had shared his tent with the Governor of Trablus (Tripoli, in today's Libya), Turgut Reis (Dragut), was a prime warrior, renowned for his great physical and mental strength. Ironically, Ali Portuk Bey was to suffer the same fate in Szigeth as Dragut had suffered a year earlier in the assault on Fort St Elmo in Malta. In fact, both died after being hit by lethal cannon balls. While Dragut was



Nikola Šubić Zrinski's Charge from the Fortress of Szigetvár, by Johann Peter Krafft (1780-1856).

hit on the head, Ali Portuk was hit in his face and chin, and eventually bled to death.

There are quite some parallels between what happened in Malta and Szigeth. Just like Mustafa and Piyale at Fort St Elmo in Malta, Süleyman also believed he would conquer the fortress of Szigeth in a few days, but after three weeks there was no sign of surrender on the part of the defenders. Matija Mesić writes that food provisions started to be scarce in the Ottoman encampment and, to add insult to injury, dysentery struck the troops while they were still marching towards Szigeth and then spread further as time passed by. Such episodes are very reminiscent of what happened in the Marsa encampment during the siege of Malta.

## Süleyman's death

According to the 1567 account by Ferenc Črnko, the Ottoman Sultan succumbed to his wounds on September 4 in the Szigeth vineyards, about three-and-a-half kilometres away from the town. The news of his death would have dampened the morale of his troops and so it was kept secret from them. For this reason one does not know which of the following causes actually provoked Süleyman's death: old age, dysentery, a heart attack or apoplexy.

The Sultan's Grand Vizier Mehmed Paşa, along with several other viziers, kept the Sultan's death secret from the lower paşas, beys, Janissaries and other soldiers. To ensure that the news of his death did not become public and in order to make it seem business as usual, the daily routine was not disrupted. The mehter takımı (the band of musicians) continued to play its trumpets and drums, as it normally did, while food was prepared and delivered to the Sultan's tent, as on any other day. Basically for the fighting troops, it was business as usual.

According to historian Vjekoslav Klaić, the Sultan's dead body was propped up on a chair

by the aperture of his tent for all to see in order to make it appear that the Sultan was still alive and watching his brave troops, before leading the charge on September 5. On this day, the Ottomans fiercely attacked the fortress and suffered enormous casualties.

Despite all the boodshed, historian Rudolf Horvat states that the Ottomans celebrated their notable advance by hoisting their military ensigns and standards all over the blood-covered ramparts of the fortress. These were visible to all their troops who were thus boosted in their morale and fought on with renewed vigour for the following three days.

**"There are quite some parallels between what happened in Malta and Szigeth"**

September 8, 1566, exactly one year to the day after the Malta debacle, marked the fall of the Szigeth citadel. A few days later the rout of Emperor Maximilian's encampment in Győr was completed too, and the defeat of the Hungarians was complete.

Yet, Süleyman, whose death had been kept secret from one and all until now, was no longer there to enjoy the fruits of this suffered victory. After 45 years during which he had earned himself the respect and fear of friend and foe alike, The Magnificent had departed to pastures new, in a world possibly free from the bloody battles in which he had so often taken part.

## Acknowledgement

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Sabre and helmet of Nikola Šubić Zrinski at an exhibition in Medimurje County Museum (2016).