

LIFE&WELLBEING HISTORY



Spanish Senate. Anonymous painting, XVII century.



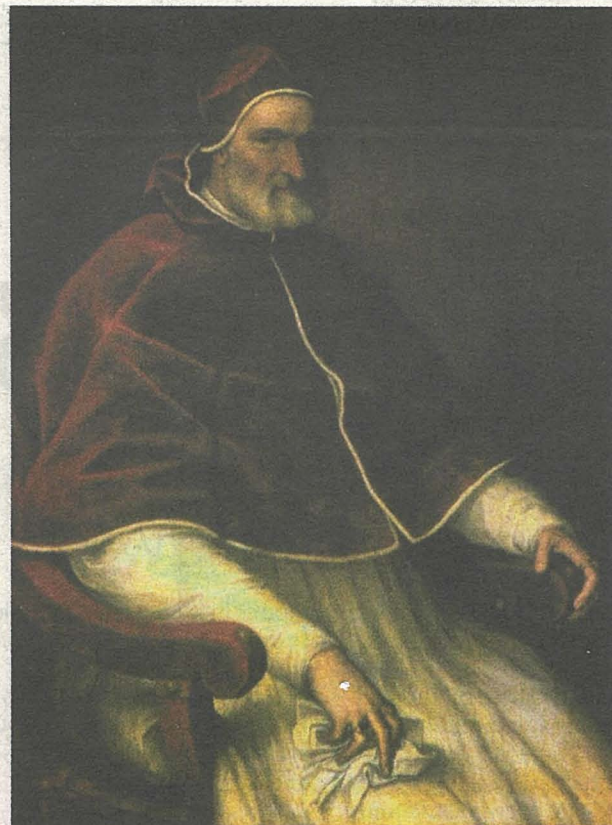
Roxelana, Süleyman's favoured concubine, later to become his wife. Anon., 16th century, Jak Amran Collection, Istanbul.



Süleyman the Magnificent, by Titian. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Gerolamo Priuli, Doge of Venice, by Tintoretto, Odessa Museum of Western and Eastern Art.



Pope Pius IV, Tiziano School (ca. 1560). Cantalupo in Sabina (Rieti), Collezione Camuccini.



Alfonso II d'Este, portrait by Girolamo da Carpi.

Süleyman 1565: Malta as a stepping stone for Sicily, Italy and Europe?



Süleyman the Magnificent's decision to attack Malta was taken in October 1564. By mid-January 1565, Süleyman was busy activating his contacts with all the prospective protagonists of the Malta campaign. At the beginning of February 1565 Süleyman informed Hasan Paşa, the Governor General of Algiers (Cezayir-i Garb) on the real motives behind the attack on Malta.

Basically, the Knights of the Order of St John were proving to be a big thorn in the side of the Ottoman Empire since they were disrupting the trade route between Istanbul, Egypt and consequently, the rest of the Maghreb area.

The island of Malta had become the headquarters of those whom Süleyman described as "infidels", who blocked the route utilised by Muslim pilgrims and merchants in the west Mediterranean, on their way to Egypt.

It also becomes quite evident, from a decree issued to the Khan of Crimea in the third decade of March 1565, that the Malta campaign was to involve so many Ottoman troops that other areas of the empire were to be neglected for lack of human resources.

The Khan of Crimea had written to the Sultan to report on the activities of the Russians in his area and to make a heartfelt plea to the Sultan to be provided with more auxiliary troops and ammunition. Süleyman's answer to this request was quite categorical. He replied, plain and simple, that it was impossible to satisfy this request. The reasons given were: firstly, he had

decided to send an armada to occupy the island of Malta since the infidels there were attacking Muslim pilgrims and merchants frequently. Secondly, at the same time, the Hungarians had rebelled against their Ottoman rulers.

Being involved on different fronts, the Sultan had a very clear idea of where his priorities lay: Malta had to be conquered and he was therefore despatching an impressive armada to the centre of the Mediterranean; the Hungarians had to be subdued too and therefore he was sending the Rumelian army, basically the Ottoman troops stationed in the Balkan peninsula, to quell the rebellion there.

"If Malta were to be lost, things would take a turn for the worse in Sicily and Italy"

In Süleyman's mind, at that point in time, it was preferable to sacrifice Crimea in order to redress the situation in Malta and Hungary.

Francisco Balbi de Correggio, the western contemporary eyewitness who in 1567 provided us with the most extensive account of the 1565 Siege of Malta, gives an overview and detailed account of the main reasons that led the 70-year-old Sultan to act.

The first reason, Balbi de Correggio declares, is related to the damage that was being caused to various parts of the Ottoman Empire by the Knights of St John, under the command of the 67-year-old Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette, including the capturing of various Ottoman galleys carrying pilgrims to Mecca, important Ottoman dignitaries, not to speak of precious and expensive goods.

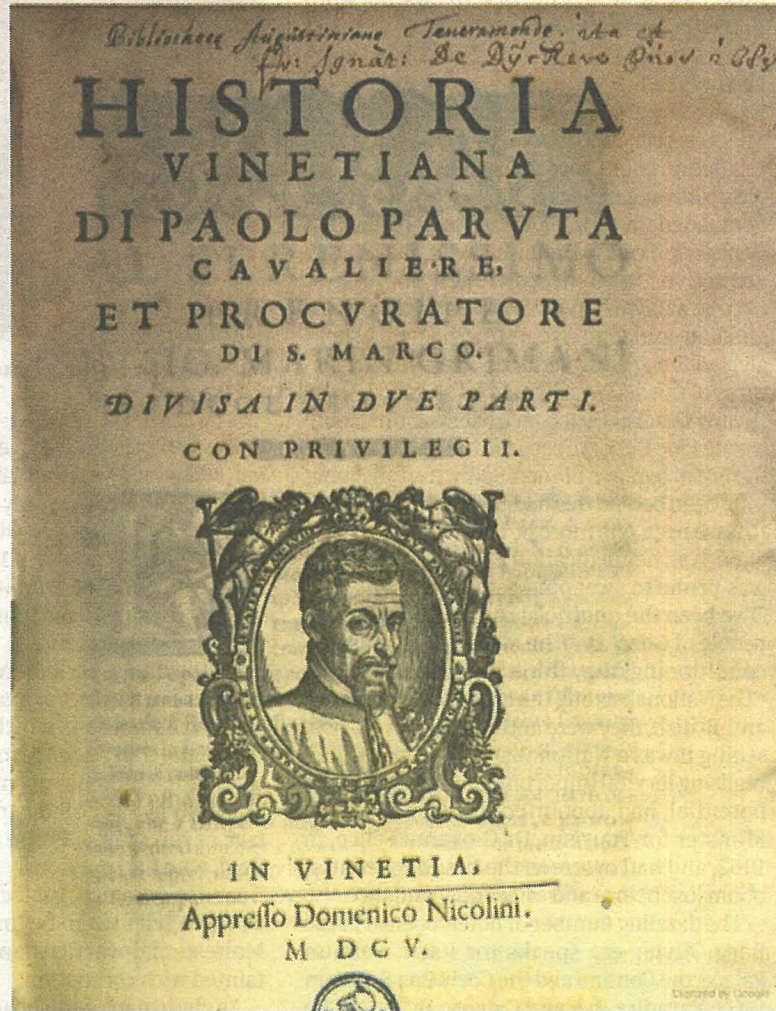
Another reason given by Balbi for the attack on Malta was the strong determination of Roxelana, Süleyman's favoured concubine, later his wife, who was always insisting with her husband that he should destroy the Order of the Knights of St John and raze their Maltese base to the ground.

Roxelana was so resolute in her intent that when she died in 1558 she left a considerable sum of money that was to be utilised in what she considered to be a most holy and pious mission. This mission was to destroy Malta.

Apart from all these motivations of a commercial, religious and prestigious nature, Balbi adds another important reason, which was based on a strategic point of view. According to him, after the conquest of Malta, Süleyman intended taking first Sicily and then proceeding up into central Europe through Italy and Hungary until the existing German empire would fall under Ottoman rule.

As I have shown in my book *The 1565 Great Siege of Malta* and Hipólito Sans's *'La Maltea'*, the expansionist ambition on the part of the Sultan, as revealed by Balbi, is confirmed by Hipólito Sans, a knight from Játiva, near Valencia, who had taken part in the siege and had later, in 1582, published an epic poem entitled *La Maltea*, where he gave an account in verse of what had happened daily in Malta during the Great Siege. Sans confirms that, after taking Malta, Süleyman was determined to conquer Italy and thus extend the confines of his empire.

A good number of scholars disagree on this interpretation, but I believe that one should not ignore these contemporary sources, even more so now that recently published 1565 documents confirm the fear of contemporary Christians that, after taking Malta, Süleyman would proceed towards Rome overland, via Sicily.



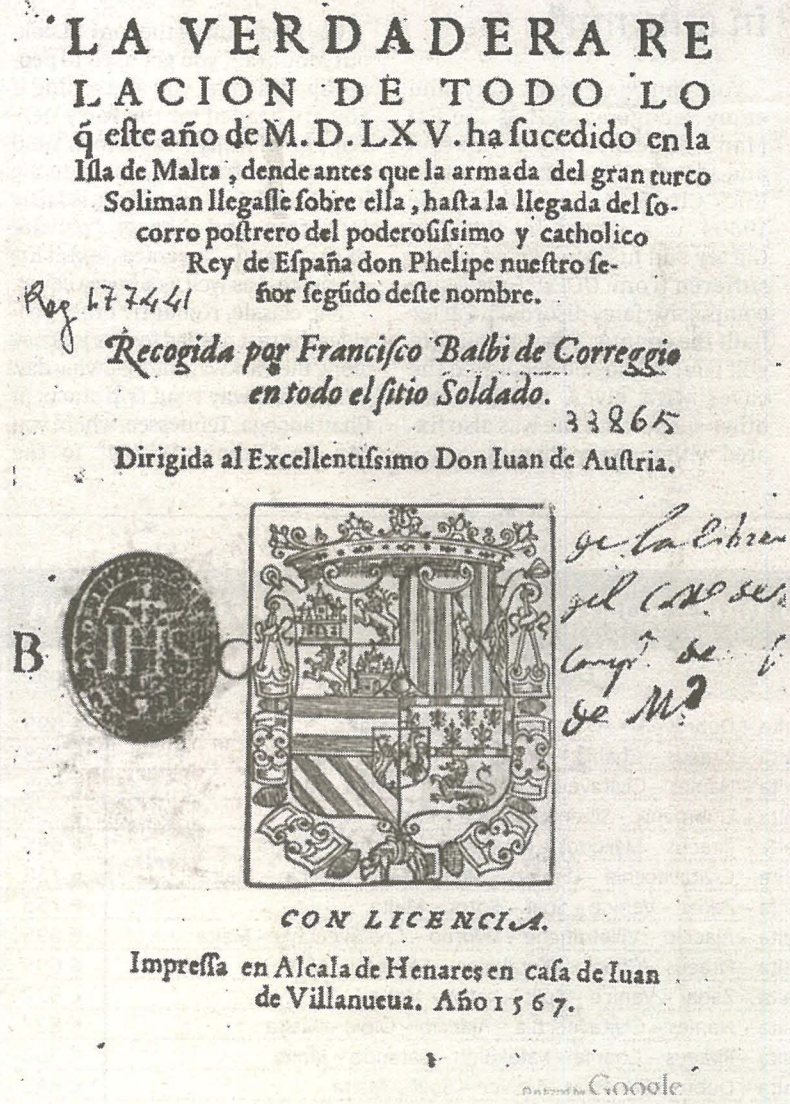
Paolo Paruta, Angelo Dolfin's interlocutor.

In his recently published work entitled *La Repubblica di Venezia e l'Assedio di Malta. Una 'causa' veneziana fra Paolo Paruta e Angelo Dolfin* (1565), Marco Giani reproduces a dialogue between two Venetians, Paruta and Dolfin, discussing whether the Venetian authorities – who had signed a pact of non-belligerence with the Ottomans – should intervene against the latter, since they had requisitioned two ships belonging to Venice in Constantinople with the intention of sending them to Malta, laden with

provisions for the invading Ottoman forces.

This dialogue is dated October 24, 1565, therefore, about six weeks after the end of the Malta siege. While Paolo Paruta argued against taking any action in order not to raise the ire of the Sultan, Angelo Dolfin deemed that it was necessary not to let Süleyman get away freely with breaking the pact of non-belligerence signed by the two naval powers.

Among the various reasons given by Dolfin for having to act firmly



Francisco Balbi's *Verdadera Relacion*, first edition, 1567.

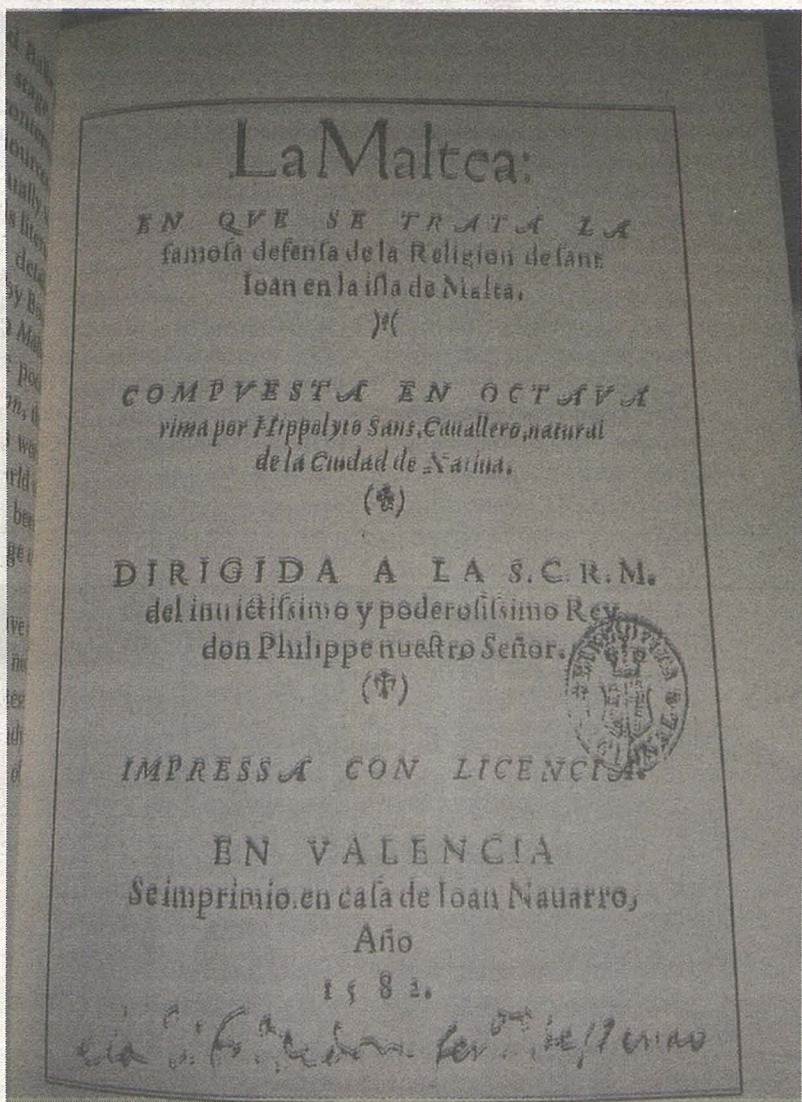
against the Sultan, one finds the following: "Your Excellencies should well know what great damage it will be to Christianity if Malta were to be lost; if the Turkish Sultan's armada were installed in Malta it would cause great damage to Christian shipping; it would be extremely dangerous and I firmly believe that it could one day conquer Sicily and consequently then obtain unhindered passage into Italy. The thought of all this really makes me tremble."

The danger of Malta being just a first stepping stone for the Ottomans' entry into Sicily and then into Italy is clearly highlighted by Dolfin, who insists that if the two Venetian ships were to sail unhindered to Malta, this would bring about the fall of the island and this would basically imply an enormous threat to

the whole of Christianity. According to Dolfin, the only way of preventing such tragedy from happening was to protest with Constantinople and demand the immediate return of the two vessels.

Thus, following the already known Balbi 1567 and Sans's 1582 attestations, Dolfin's October 1565 testimony becomes a third source that points towards a clear political motivation on Süleyman's part in invading Malta, that of getting nearer to Sicily in view of a possible landing on the Italian mainland.

These three post-siege evaluations of the real political intention behind Süleyman's intervention in Malta had in reality already been foreseen by Pope Pius IV on the day that the Ottoman Armada arrived in Malta, May 18, 1565, when the said Pope



Frontispiece of Hipólito Sans's *La Maltea*.

addressed the Consistory in Rome in the following way: "The island of Malta is in great danger [...] and His Holiness the Pope is most willing to send the necessary help and reinforcements to the Viceroy of Sicily because if Malta were to be lost, things would take a turn for the worse in Sicily and Italy."

The Pope was so convinced that Malta's resistance was of paramount importance for the whole of Christianity, that he repeated this concept in a letter to Alfonso II d'Este barely three weeks later, on June 7, 1565, when the battle of St Elmo was in full swing. In fact, the Pope wrote to the Duke of Ferrara that he could sense the danger that Sicily and Italy were facing if Malta were to fall into the enemy's hands. Francisco de Correggio and Hipólito

Sans's post-siege conviction that Süleyman's 1565 intervention in Malta was not only dictated by commercial, religious and prestige motivations but was also the result of a precise political design for further expansion into Sicily, Italy and Europe has not convinced the majority of scholars, till now.

Now that Dolfin's dialogue, basically coeval to the end of the Great Siege, has been made available to academics by Giani, and Pope Pius IV's pre-siege declaration and thoughts are available thanks to the work of Kenneth Meyer Setton, are scholars of the Great Siege of Malta more inclined to accept the idea that Süleyman's 1565 attack on Malta was part of a much bigger plan, which was to mature with the taking of Sicily and Italy too?