

THE STRUGGLE FOR SUPREMACY

The Mediterranean World in 1453 and Beyond

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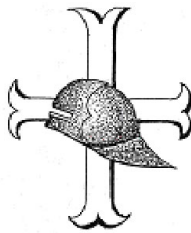
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The Struggle for Supremacy, The Mediterranean World in 1453 and Beyond
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This book is dedicated to

*Robert L. von Dauber
1939-2018*

*Historian
Knight of Grace and Devotion
Grand Cross of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta*

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THE JOURNEY IN THIS BOOK

The Struggle for Supremacy will take the reader on a vast journey throughout the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. In the Braudelian sense of the word, in contrast to a geographical map simply indicating ‘The Mediterranean Sea’, there is not one such sea, but many and with as many identities. Surrounded by many territories, life within this vast expanse of water was subject to all kinds of influences, while lives on those shores and islands touched by the same sea were equally effected. Raiding and trading took place across the divides of religions, cultures and distances, while no one was immune regarding slavery or reversal of fortune.

The Sea was, and remains, unpredictable, winds and currents could come from any corner, either political or climatological. Continuous strife took place by land and on sea or land, resources and fortunes. Within the context of Braudel it could be said that peace in the Mediterranean was only optionally available when there was no money for war, while piracy and corsairing would fill in the gaps of the *interbelli*. Besides contrasts between one side and the other, there were also many aspects which united the peoples living within the region, such as food, languages or cultural values, forming a unity of contrasts.

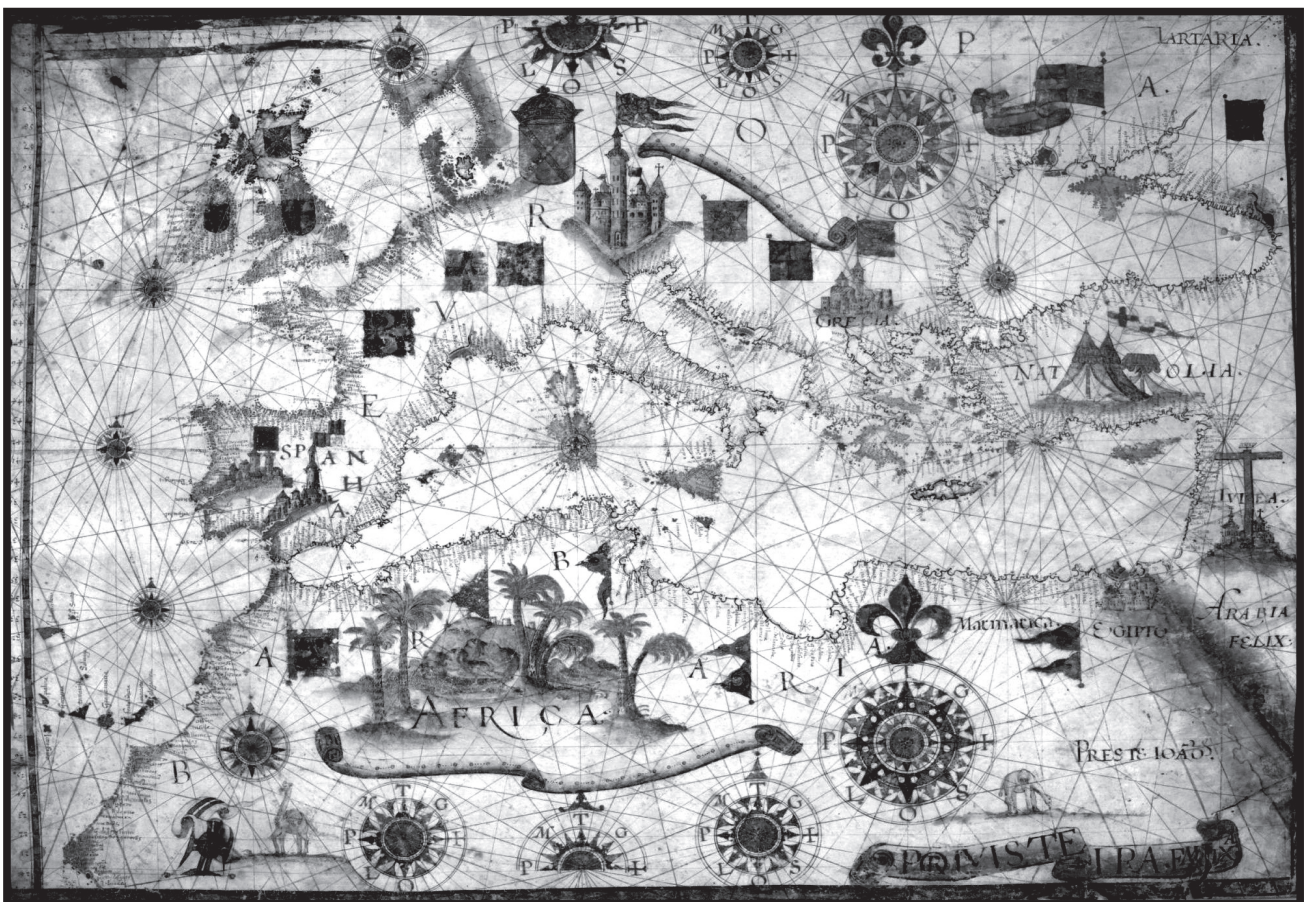


Fig. i: Antique map of the Mediterranean c. 1600 (Source: WikiCommons)



Fig. ii: Antique map of Jerusalem, *Destructio Iherosolime*, woodcut by Hartmann Schedel, Nuremberg 1493 (Source: WikiCommons)

Jerusalem, once seen as the centre of the world, is still a Holy City. It is one of those cities which was coveted by many. It was conquered numerous times although its strategic value was much more religious than military. Its value was in its *memoria* and its identity. Notwithstanding its turbulent and often violent past, it remains the only city in the world where the three Abrahamic religions always converge and sometimes clash. As Simon Sebag Montefiore describes it in his *Jerusalem, the Biography*, 'Jerusalem is the house of one God, capital of two peoples and temple of three religions.' Besides that, it has been constructed and destroyed a number of times. It is the only city to exist also eternally in Heaven, St Augustine's *Heavenly City of Jerusalem*: even after the world will have come to an end on the prophesied Day of Judgment. In Jerusalem, one can follow in the footsteps of Abraham, David, Jesus, Mary, St Paul, St John the Baptist and Mohammed. One may even virtually follow their traces into Heaven.

Jerusalem was the place where the first Amalfitan initiative had been taken to set up a hospice for the care of pilgrims, about 50 years before the First Crusade arrived in 1099. This hospice, and the service of hospitality, would become the backbone of the later Hospitaller Order of St John. Jerusalem was also the destination of the founder of the Order, the Blessed Gerard, who seemingly after his arrival in the second half of the eleventh century, never left the city again. To serve the Jerusalem-bound Christian pilgrims, Gerard had devised

a web of hospices and resting places akin to the routes leading to Santiago de Compostela. As a forward looking person, Gerard had also decided to achieve independence from the Amalfitans and their Benedictine monastery, a closed institution. He had understood that, to serve the pilgrims and the needy, they should not be waiting for the pilgrims to arrive. Especially after the arrival of the First Crusade, the hospital gained much more freedom in its operations. Changing over to a convent, per definition an open institution whereby its members go out into the world to serve, proved to be a very successful approach. It also made the hospice a place for cure rather than for simple care. Protection of pilgrims was taken a step further by the introduction of armed escorts to accompany the pilgrims along the treacherous roads leading to Jerusalem. This was a first step on a long journey, leading to the full militarisation of the hospital. Crusaders came and went, according to their vows, always leaving the defence of the Holy land in the hands of those staying behind or living there. Under the leadership of Raymond du Puy, the Hospitallers became a religious military order during the twelfth century, following the example of the Knights Templars. Both orders, and later on also the Teutonic Order, developed into the standing armies of the Latin Kingdom of Palestine without factually being crusaders. In this role, they learned how to maintain and build fortifications. Income was created through donations of money and landed properties, by thankful pilgrims.

By 1291, the whole episode of the Latin Kingdom was over and everything which had been built up, had collapsed under the weight of the inadequacy of the local Christian rulers. The Teutonic Order moved first to Venice and then to the northern territories, to engage in a state-building exercise, among others, in Prussia, Poland and Lithuania. Both the Hospitaller Order and Templars moved to the Kingdom of Cyprus, where they were unwelcome guests. The Hospitaller Order had escaped narrowly, with only a handful of knights surviving. At Cyprus, the Hospitallers had time to regroup and to consider their future outside the Holy land. Attempts were made to fuse the two orders by the papacy, but that initiative was met with stiff resistance by both orders. Their arguments were that the orders had a near-identical structure, and by a fusion, people would lose their position and would make the resulting order a very weak and divided product. The next threat, carried out by the French King Philippe le Beau, and directed at the Templars, was more

profound and successful. On Friday 13 October 1307, many of the Templars in France were arrested on charges of, among others, sodomy and blasphemy. It led to the dissolution of the Templars and as a consequence, the drive of the Hospitallers to look for an independent home, far away from the meddling European sovereigns but close enough to serve Christendom. In Cyprus, the Hospitallers continued to build hospitals, strongholds and utilitarian constructions. After deliberation, they had given up on the idea ever to retake Jerusalem again, the task was beyond anyone's means. Instead, they made a changeover from an army to a navy, to react to a new threat, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, intended to conquer Europe and the Mediterranean. By means of a fleet, enlarged by engaging local corsairs, a continuous guerrilla warfare at sea was started, an endless series of pinpricks against a much larger Ottoman enemy. In the meantime, the Hospitallers were working on their independence, eying the island of Rhodes as their future home.

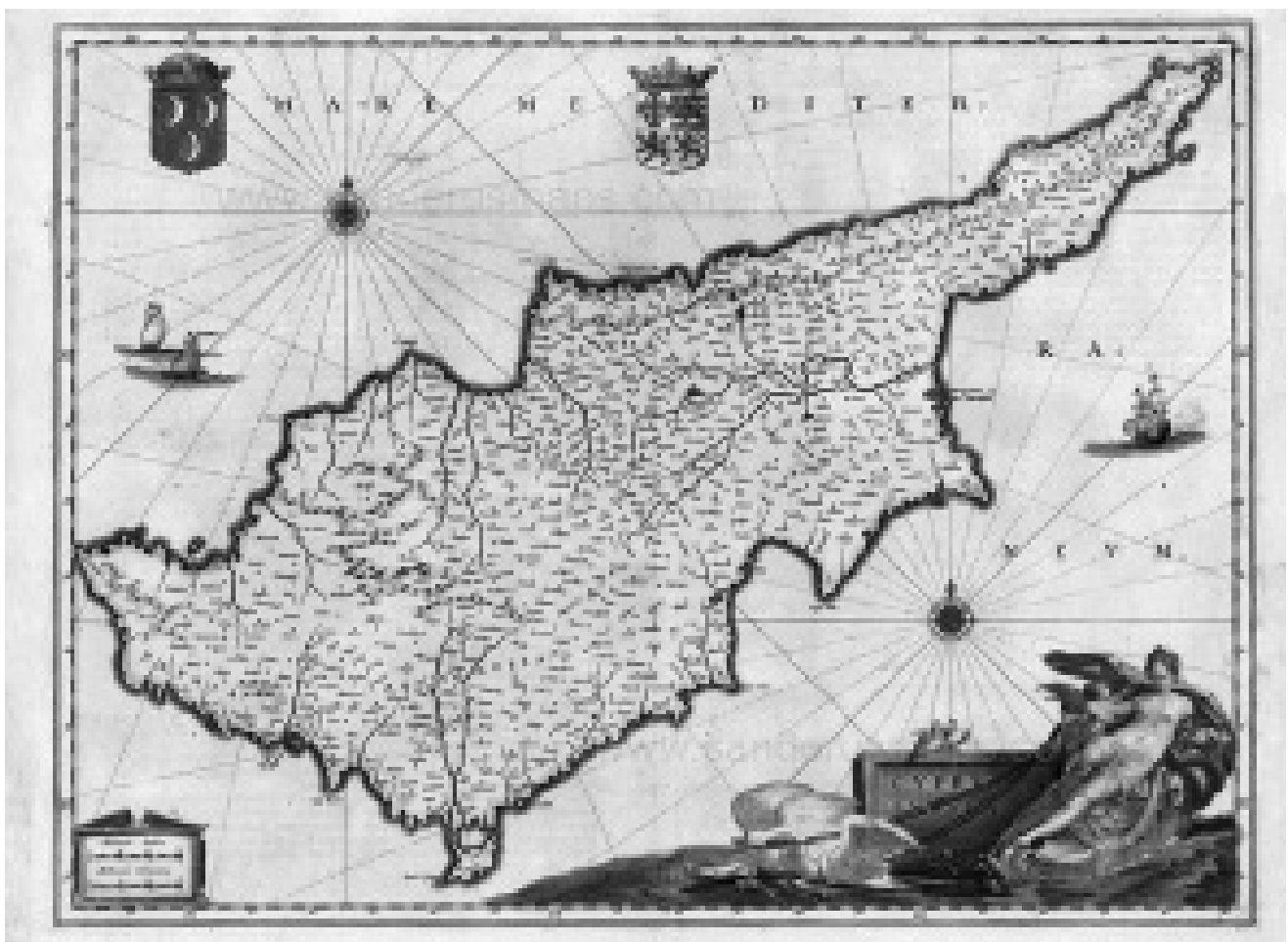


Fig. iii: Antique map of Cyprus, *Cyprus Insula* by Willem Janszoon Blaeu, Amsterdam, c. 1640 (Source: WikiCommons)

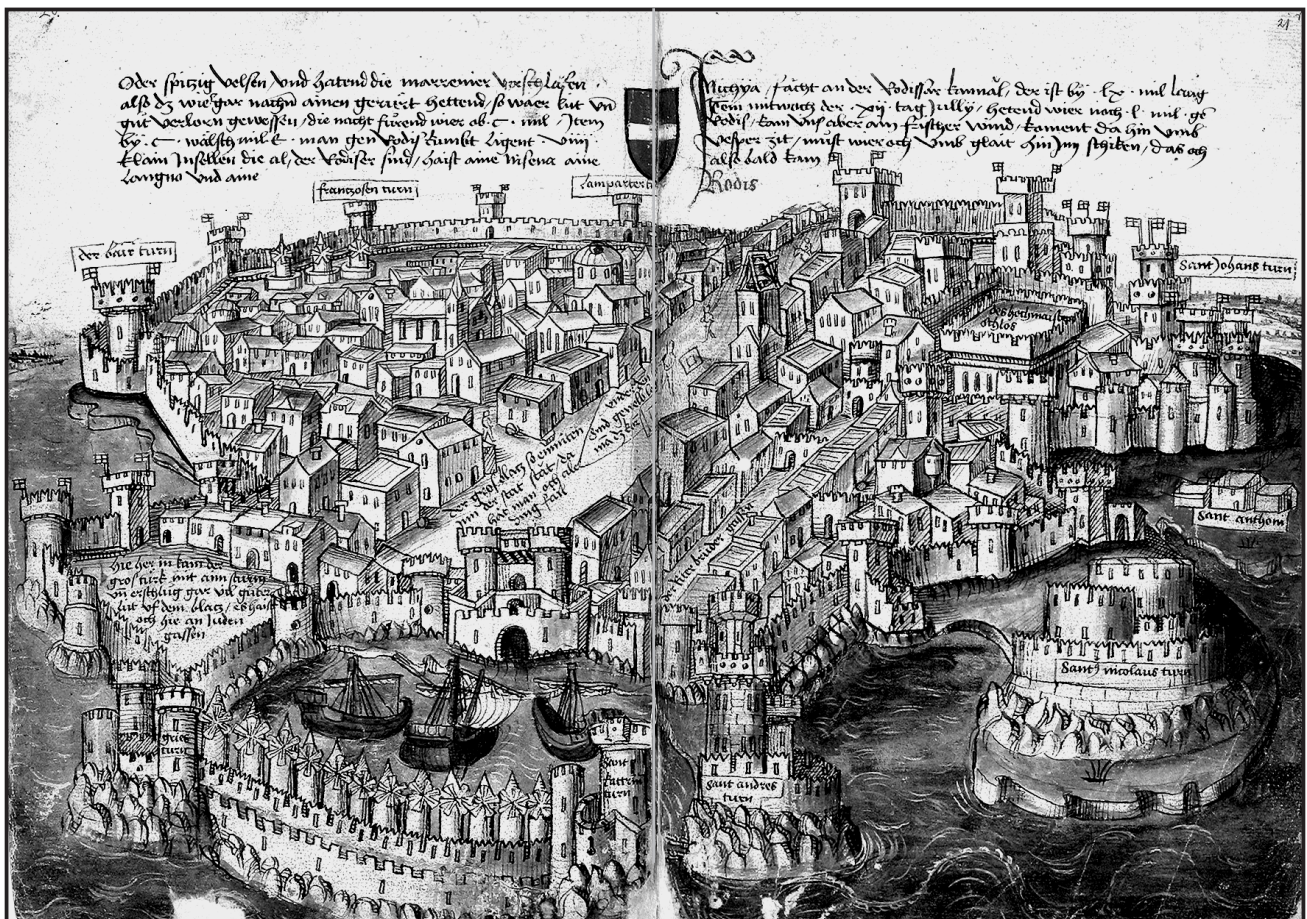


Fig. iv: Antique map of Rhodes (Source: WikiCommons)

The acquisition of Rhodes became a fact in 1310. Part of the funding had come from the Templar money, which was allocated to them by the papacy. Other funds had been borrowed, a burden which took a very long time to pay off. Once at Rhodes, the Order had some lucky breaks with the Ottomans and their threat was strongly reduced for about one hundred years, until Mehmed II took Constantinople in 1453. Fighting the Turk at sea never ceased, but the temporary lull in the strength of their opponent, gave the Hospitallers chance to regroup, rethink and rebuild. Rhodes formed the basis for the formation of the Hospitaller *Ordensstaat*, a true state with its own, extended Rule, laws, by-laws, a political apparatus and an ambassadorial body to maintain their relationships with the European sovereigns, their neighbours in the Mediterranean, and, of course, the Ottomans. In Rhodes, the Order flourished, both on a state as well as on a personal level. Finance came in through *responsions*, the income generated from their overseas landed properties and their financial services. In their spare time, the knights hunted, rode horseback and enjoyed the lush nature of

Rhodes. Fortification building was taken up, but not on a massive scale. The Order was lured into a false sense of security, thinking it had the Ottomans under control via its sea powers. A rude awakening came after 1453, when the Ottomans re-entered the Mediterranean arena with renewed vigor, resulting in the failed siege of 1480. In consequence of this new threat, fortification building commenced into a new direction and vast sums were spent. Part of the *Ordensstaat* was also to keep the public aware of the achievements of the Order. This was stepped up after 1480, after the Order mastered the printing press and the distribution of their writings. In the mean time, the Ottomans had arrived on the fringes of Christendom in eastern and central Europe. If the Ottomans could take Rhodes, a thorn in their side, they could simultaneously attack Europe by sea. The famous Siege of Rhodes followed in 1522, whereby Sultan Süleyman the Great magnanimously let the Order leave Rhodes with everything they could carry with them, on 1st January 1523. The Order, reduced to beggars, embarked on a seven-year long journey until Charles V had a purpose for them.

The Order became the beggar of Europe. Its public image had fallen to the lowest point. None of the sovereigns who had supported the Order before had been willing to introduce a foreign army into its own territory. It was only in 1530 that Charles V of Spain had a use for the Hospitaller navy and to employ their skills. By offering Malta he could place the Order between Spain and the Ottoman Empire, hoping that the Order's navy could do what they had done for a long time: slowing down the expansion of the Ottomans into the Western Mediterranean. The perspective of picking up the thread again must have enticed the Order, but for many French knights of the Order the idea of working for the interests of Spain was nothing else than an affront. However, the Rule of the Order was very clear about the vow of obedience and ultimately resisting the Grand Master's decision was reconsidered. In Rhodes, the Hospitallers had created their own *Ordensstaat*, a true independent sovereignty on its own territory, recognised by the powers in Europe. The cost of building and losing that sovereignty had been enormous, and the cost of making Malta fit for their purpose was going to cost even more. Fortifications were non-existent, besides some old strongholds in the Grand Harbour - the old *castrum maris* in Birgu and the tower of St Elmo at the tip of the peninsula Xeberras - the place where later the new capital of Malta, Valletta, would arise after the Great Siege of 1565. Malta was not even their property, but was given to them as an eternal fief by Charles V, as Malta had been acquired by Spain in the thirteenth century. Malta's Spanish and Hispanic nobility saw itself robbed from its ruling position, as the mastery of the island was now transferred to the Order. There were mixed emotions also among the members of the Order, as Malta was no comparison to Rhodes, where they had developed a passion for horse-riding, hunting and leisure in nature. Instead, hard realities of a bare island without much resources, besides a very resilient population who had defended the island in a similar way as the Order had policed the Mediterranean before. Through means of piracy the Maltese had defended the island as

good as they could against pirates of the North African coast, Ottoman marauders and other assorted pirates and freebooters from the West. Maltese piracy was first and foremost a system of preventing strikes, taking out the enemy before they could do harm. In such a way, harvesting the Mediterranean became a lucrative economic activity too, complimenting the islanders' income, as depending on the soil was at times less than a subsistence economy. Catholicism seems to have been a very strong mutual bond, as the patron saint of Malta, St Paul, and the patron saint of the Order, St John, went together in good harmony. Furthermore, the economic impulse the Order gave to Malta and its population was significant. This can be seen from the population statistics. In 1530, there were hardly 20,000 Maltese, in 1798 there were about 100,000, indicating that the Order had managed to keep control over the three usual population checkers, famine, war and disease.



Fig. v: *St John and St Paul*, School of Mattia Preti. At the Archbishop's Curia, Floriana, Malta. Photo: Dane Munro

The Hospitaller journey in search for a new home and operational base had come to rest in Malta for 268 years. Turbulent times lay ahead, inherent to the dual Hospitaller task of *obsequium pauperum et tuitio fidei*, care for the sick and the poor and the fight against the enemy of the Religion. How disproportionately large these tasks were can be judged from the maps below. It is not enough just to bring into perspective the size of Malta compared to the Ottoman Empire, but also the vast logistical distances between Constantinople and Malta for the Ottomans on the one hand and similar distances for Hospitaller Malta to Europe and Spain.

This is where the quality of the galleys for instance played a crucial role, and not necessarily the quantity. It has been observed that the seven or eight Hospitaller galleys were by far superior to any ship of the Ottomans or the North Africans.



Fig. vi: Antique map of Malta, *Malta Insula* by Willem Janszoon Blaeu, Amsterdam, c. 1640 (Source: WikiCommons). For comparison purposes, Malta is already displayed disproportionately large on the map below, showing the entire Ottoman Empire around 1640.



Fig. vii: Antique map of the Ottoman Empire, *Turcicum Imperium* by Willem Janszoon Blaeu, Amsterdam, c. 1640 (Source: WikiCommons)