

Sacra Militia



*Journal of the Sacra Militia Foundation
A Foundation for the study of the Military, Naval & Other Aspects of the History
of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta*

A Maltese rural village in the first years of the Order's rule – the case of Mosta (1530-1565)

George Cassar

It was on 23 March 1530 that Emperor Charles V signed the decree by which the Maltese archipelago and the city of Tripoli were handed over to the Order of St John after seven years in which the Knights had wandered around Europe, homeless and rather disoriented. The island of Rhodes which they had lost by the Siege of Rhodes of 1522 was still quite fresh and vivid in their minds and the nostalgia for that lost home had kept their hopes high that at some point they would return. However, at the moment this seemed a far-off dream and thus, after asking for some concessions from the Emperor, they reluctantly accepted the royal donation made to them. On 25 April 1530 the Order thus signed the legal document by which they accepted to take over Malta and make it their home. Though they wished not to include Tripoli, this was not permitted and the package had to be accepted as offered.¹

The reaction of the local population as embodied in the local government of the time – the *Universitas* – was surely not one of euphoria. On the contrary, the prospect being envisaged by the Maltese for their land and liberties was quite gloomy. They feared that their privileges which had been gained by their sweat and hardship would now become a thing of the past, and this is why they tried their utmost to turn this decision back – but it was to no avail. On the other hand the Order's representatives gave their word to the apprehensive population that the privileges and the way of life as had been lived up to that time would not change – indeed the Order and its Grandmaster would be the champion of the people.

After the Order sent its Commission to review the new possession and the report drawn up – which painted quite a drab picture of the island – Grandmaster L'Isle Adam landed on the shores of Malta on 26 October 1530 and took over the town of Birgo (the



The countryside peasants always found refuge in the walled city of Mdina whenever a razzia attack was in progress - no less the villagers of Mosta who lived very close to the capital city

Birgo) with its castle, adopting the church dedicated to St Lawrence as its conventual church.

It may be that some of the people of Mosta, and of the other countryside localities, who may have had some form of education, followed what was happening to Malta, but those in the lower classes – mostly small craftsmen, farmers and agricultural workers – could not really grasp the new situation. Indeed it was beyond them and their restricted, conservative and closed world. After all, national happenings were more or less town affairs. Villages, and small ones at that, could do little accept move with the times as dictated from the urban settlements. They could do nothing else as the big things rarely happened within the village precincts. The Mostin – or rather some of them – may have grabbed the first glimpse of the knights and their leader, Grandmaster L'Isle Adam, on 13 November 1530, at the ceremonial entry into Malta's capital city, Mdina. This event marked the moment when the new ruler of Malta took possession of his new domain. In that year the Maltese local government consisted of

¹ For an general idea about this situation cf. for eg., A.P. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, i (Malta, 1974), 186.



A 16th century map by Camocio showing Malta in the first decades of the Order's stay on the island (the village of Mosta is encircled)

Leonardo Calavà as *Capitano della Verga* and Paolo de Nasis, Lorenzo Baglio, Antonio Rapa and Nicolò Laureri as jurats.²

All the promises given were in fact in vain as no administrator can share power with others who are his subordinates. Thus L'Isle Adam took away the rights which had been enjoyed by the *Universitas* when he divided Malta into two administrative units. The western region consisting of Mdina and the parishes of Naxxar, Birkirkara, Siggiewi and Żebbuġ continued to be administered from Mdina through its *Hakem* or Captain of the Rod. The eastern region which comprised the parishes of Żejtun, Żurrieq, Birmiftuħ (Gudja) and Qormi, on the other hand, were now put under a new *Universitas* based in Birgu, and which was appointed by the grandmaster. Thus Mosta, as one of the villages within the parish of Naxxar continued to be administered from Mdina.

For the first few years of the Order's rule little changed in the life of the common Maltese. Life continued with its rhythm, a slow, day-by-day existence, where each and every man, woman and child continued with their daily chores in a world far away from the hassle and bustle of continental intrigue, war and turmoil. That was, after all, the typical island life where insularity was dictated by geographical separation created its own style of living, its own particular traditions, archaic economy, centuries-old customs, and localised language. Thus was Malta; an island of 20,000 inhabitants with scarce resources, very low prestige and negligible power.³

Corsairs and Turkish marauders

There was however one particular turmoil which had been tormenting Malta from its Medieval years and which did not disappear with the coming of the Order to the island. If one had to be more precise it would have to be said that, in real terms, not only was this problem not eliminated, but, to the contrary, it was augmented. The torment which afflicted Malta was the regular piratical activity which hit the island quite regularly during the annual corsairing season. Most of these corsairs derived from the Muslim Barbary Coast and Turkish lands in the Mediterranean and with the settling of the Knights in Malta their eternal religious enemies made of the island a more emphatic target for their *razzia* attacks. One of the most renowned of these Muslim corsair raids was the one which took place in



A visual representation of the famous corsair Turgut Rais or as is more commonly known Dragut

1526 and which made a special victim of the Mosta community.

Till the Turkish great attack of 1565 the Barbary corsairs had already carried out eight pungent assaults on Malta and Gozo from 1530. Many of these incursions were masterminded and led by the famous corsair Dragut, or as the Turks called him, Turgut Reis.⁴ One of these took place in 1551.

The fateful day of 18 July 1551 brought on the Maltese horizon a Turkish fleet consisting of 145 vessels. A horde of marauding corsairs were disembarked and began, as usual, plundering the countryside taking or breaking all that lay in their route. The Muslim invaders were under the command of the Albanian-born Sinan Pasha and the ever-present Dragut. After having a good look at the new fortifications which the Order had been constructing in the Birgu area, especially the renovated Fort St Angelo, the force moved on to the north of the island towards Mdina. They stayed there for some time roaming the neighbouring area. It is possible that they

2 G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta* (Malta, 1647), 443.

3 V. Mallia-Milanes, 'Introduction to Hospitaller Malta', V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798* (Malta, 1993), 3-4.

4 S. Fiorini, 'The Resettlement of Gozo after 1551', *Melita Historica*, ix/3 (Malta, 1986), 203.



The tomb of Ottoman admiral Sinan Pasha - who had devastated the village of Mosta in 1526 - located at the garden of Mihrimah Sultan Mosque in the Üsküdar district of İstanbul

passed by Mosta as the village lay quite close to the then main town of Malta. The commanders decided to move on and visit the sister island of Gozo which they invaded and devastated nearly to the last man. Lacking real fortifications Gozo was the perfect victim and this was manifested in the corsairs' completely wiping out of the Gozitan population which was taken onto their sailing vessels into bondage and thereafter into captivity as slaves.⁵

Regarding this incursion, one may safely assume that the inhabitants of Malta, and the more so those in the neighbourhood of Mdina, were panic stricken and would have fled frantically towards a safe haven behind the walls of the fortified towns – which at the time consisted only of Mdina and the Borgo. This would have been a natural reaction when one considers the strength of the force that had invaded Malta which reached the 10,000 mark. Malta was not equipped to react effectively against those numbers when it could muster only about 800 men! After all, this was history repeating itself – an attack which was re-evoking those

that had happened before, an event which was quite similar to the numerous *razzia* incursions which the Maltese had by now come to know and dread. The inhabitants of the village of Mosta were for sure among those that went running to the safety of Mdina or sought some form of shelter as far away as possible from the advancing enemy. The land in the environs of Mdina was sacked by the corsairs and nothing that could be taken away was spared.

Describing the passage of these marauders, Sutherland put it thus, “Fire marked their march – not a hamlet, not a corn field, escaped destruction – the whole country was enveloped in the smoke of these wanton conflagrations”.⁶ Behind the walls of the city there took refuge many peasants but the number of knights on the spot was minimal. Among the refugees there were, no doubt, many inhabitants from Mosta, given the proximity of the village to the main fortified town. However, the siege of Mdina was lifted and the danger for the moment had passed.

⁵ Ibid., 204-5.

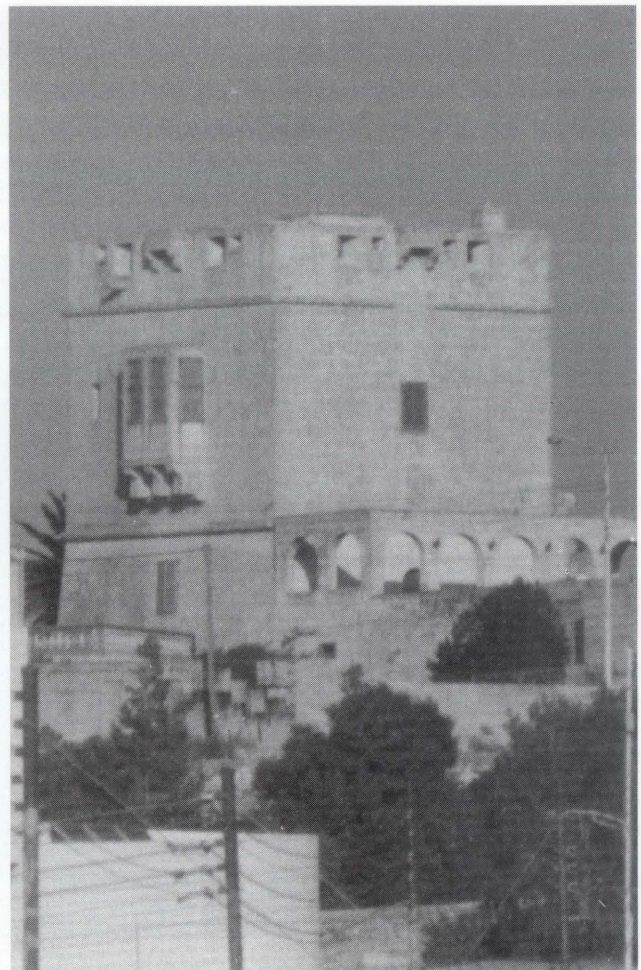
⁶ A. Sutherland, *The Achievements of the Knights of Malta*, ii (Edinburgh, 1830), 145.

The Great Siege

Though the various incursions by the Muslim corsairs were terrifying and a continuous torment to the Maltese population, each *razzia* was by its nature of short duration and quick by execution. The invasion which took place in 1565 was, on the other hand, quite different. This time the force that visited Malta was determined to win over the island. The Ottoman fleet and army, that came in all their force, did not come to steal, sack and take people into captivity but the objective was much higher and incisive. The orders, as willed by the Sultan, Suleiman, were to drive the Order of St John out of Malta as had been done in Rhodes forty-three years before. The Knights were to be annihilated so that the Crescent would at last overpower the Cross. Yet this objective, though not specifically directed at the Maltese, would implicate them in it just the same. After all the island was the home of its native inhabitants and the Catholic religion was the religion of these same people. Thus, the Maltese had no choice but to join the Order in this war of do or die. There was no way out, and the more so for the poorer classes who – unlike those who possessed the essential resources – could not escape from the island, which, by its geographic nature, had fenced them in with no means of escape.

The preparations to ward of a fierce Turkish attack had been under way from many months before. The same 1551 attack had put the Order on alert and the espionage network operating from within the Ottoman territory had been sending news of military activity which led the grandmaster to assume that an imminent Turkish attack on Malta was underway. The fortifications of the island were thus strengthened with the labour provided by the same men, women and children of Malta. Besides, all the able-bodied males were organised into militia companies under the command of Knights of Malta.⁷

The cannon shots which were heard from the direction of Mdina on Friday, 18 May 1565, heralded the bad news of the appearance of the Turkish armada off Malta, news which for the whole Maltese population was like a death toll. Although all the inhabitants were in the same gloomy situation, yet, for some it signified something even more. For the people of Mosta, for example, it evoked a past experience which they had passed through just thirty-nine years before. It was in the year 1526 (just four years before the arrival of



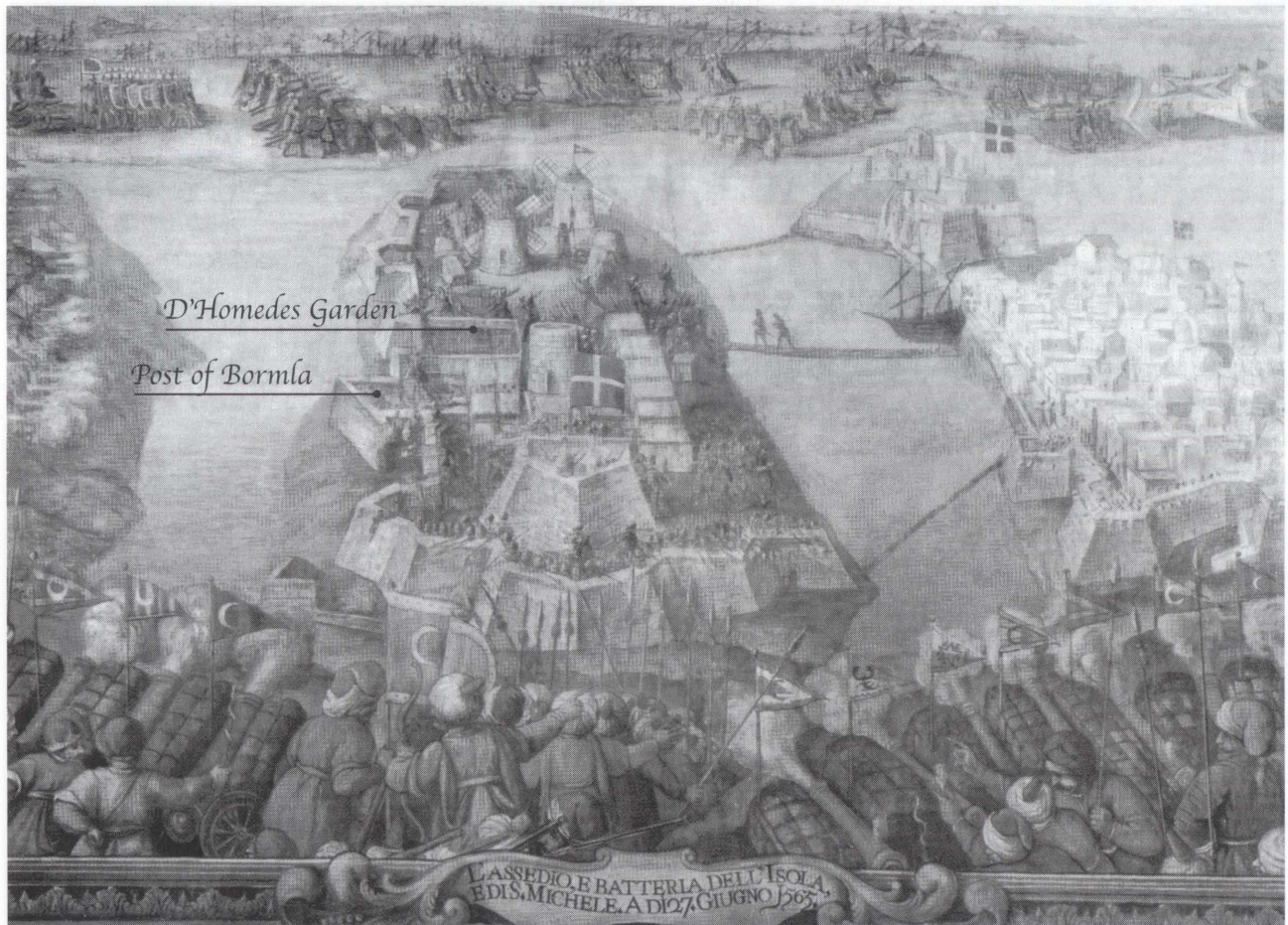
The Naxxar regimental headquarters which hosted the captain of that *cappella* of which Mosta formed part - known as the Captain's Tower

the Order in Malta) that Mosta had been attacked by a marauding force under Sinan Reis. The village was attacked and practically its whole population of 400 inhabitants was taken into captivity, besides those others that fell defending their families and homes.⁸ This bad experience was, undoubtedly, still quite fresh in the minds of the families and friends of these villagers and surely brought back memories of the terrible attack and the ensuing hardship to pay the ransoms for their beloved to bring them back to Malta. After that date it seems the village went into financial ruin.

Thus, with the warning shots announcing the arrival of the Turkish fleet, now the whole island went into alert mode. All the men from Mosta who had been enrolled into the armed forces took up their arms and joined the Naxxar Regiment. The other inhabitants of the village fled to the safety of Mdina. One may empathise with the panic stricken mothers dragging

⁷ G. Cassar, 'The role of the Maltese inhabitants during the Great Siege', G. Cassar (ed.), *The Great Siege 1565 Separating fact from fiction* (Malta, 2005), 90.

⁸ Abela, 442.



At the beginning of the Great Siege the militia contingent from Mosta was stationed in the stretch of wall between the Post of Bormla and D'Homedes Garden in Isola (as indicated in this painting by Matteo Perez D'Aleccio)

their small children and the old panting as they hurried along the uphill route to the fortified city. It was surely a scene which evoked the dire reality of the fear of an imminent catastrophe. Each took whatever could be carried. Those who had animals brought them along and the village was left as bare as possible of anything which the enemy could utilise.

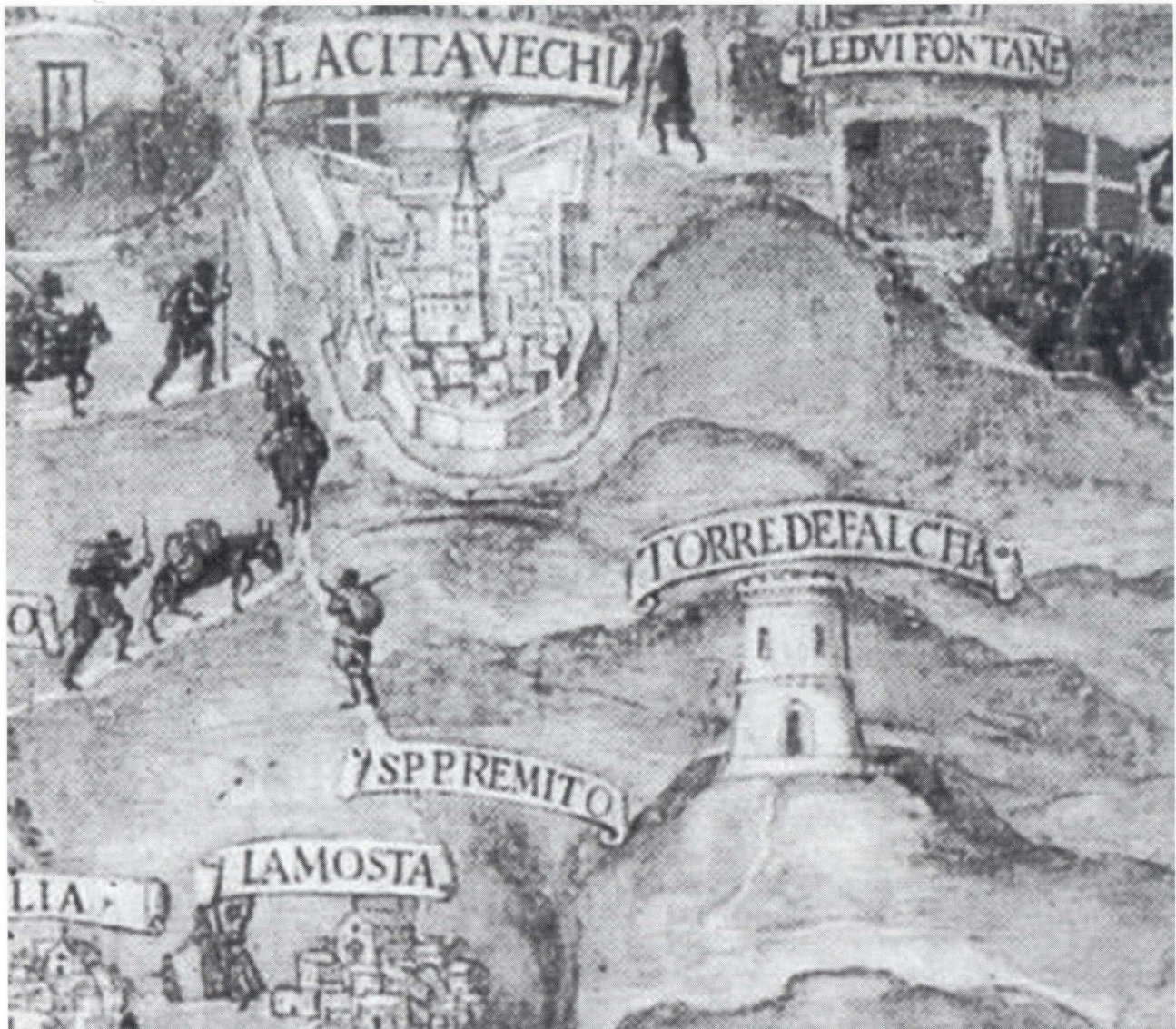
The Naxxar militia company was formed of men from Naxxar, Mosta, Ġhargħur, Mġarr and Mellieħa. This regiment had a complement of 590 men including the cavalry component. Its captain was Frà Jean de Lugny, from the Langue of Auvergne.⁹ From among the military companies from the different *cappelle* that of Naxxar was the third largest in the number of soldiers and was surpassed only by those of Mdina (which comprised also the men of Rabat and Żebbuġ) and Birkirkara (which included also the men from Qormi). In 1565 the Maltese militia had been reorganised into seven principal regiments, which were those of Mdina, Birkirkara, Naxxar, Żejtun (known as Santa Caterina),

Birmiftuħ (later on known as Luqa), Żurrieq, and Siġġiewi. Each regiment was under the command of a captain who resided in the same locality which he commanded. The captain of the Naxxar regiment (of which Mosta formed part) had his residence in the Captain's Tower (located in present-day San Pawl t-Tarġa) which had been built during the grandmastership of Jean de Valette exactly for this purpose.¹⁰ The tower was thus the regimental H.Q. from where orders were imparted to the various contingents of the regiment.

The parish militias were deployed for the defence of Mdina and Isola (Fort St Michael), as the other two main forts – St Elmo and St Angelo – were defended by the knights themselves. Thus, the militias of the *cappelle* of Naxxar, Bormla and Siġġiewi were at once sent to defend Fort St Michael, joining the Italian and Spanish soldiers which garrisoned the fort. The commanding officer was the Italian Admiral Del Monte. The men from the Mosta contingent took responsibility of the section of the wall facing Corradino which stretched

⁹ C. Sanminiati Zabarella, *Lo Assedio Di Malta 18 Maggio - 8 Settembre 1565* (Torino, 1902), 165.

¹⁰ S.C. Spiteri, *The Great Siege Knights vs Turks mdlxv* (Malta, 2005), 105.



An illustration of the area in the environs of Mosta which was the scene of the last fighting in the Great Siege - the three main features are the village of Mosta (La Mosta), the fortified city of Mdina (La Cita Vechia) and Falca Tower (Torre de Falcha)

from the Post of Bormla to D'Homedes Garden.¹¹ This was part of the fortifications which at once saw fierce and intense fighting.

Fighting in the vicinity of Mosta

As Mosta was situated in the vicinity of Mdina where the Maltese cavalry was stationed, this hamlet was easily reached and covered by the Order's equestrian troops. With the enemy foraging and roaming along the countryside, a number of skirmishes took place in the environs of this rural locality involving the local cavalry. This does not mean that the Mostin were directly involved in the fighting for, as indicated before,

the men were engaged in the militia elsewhere and the non-combatants had taken refuge in the walled city of Mdina. Yet the village itself was hit hard and the immovable property the Mostin left behind, such as their houses and fields, were pillaged, burnt, ravaged and destroyed during the various clashes along the three months of the Great Siege. This reality comes to us through the description jotted down by Giovanni Antonio Viperano, a contemporary of the Siege. He writes that when the Maltese peasants returned to their villages they found their fields in disarray, the dry walls were in ruins and the villages sacked and ravaged.¹²

In one of the skirmishes with the Turkish troops,

¹¹ Sanminiatielli Zabarella, 168.

¹² This observation is found in I.A. Viperano, *De Bello Melitensi Historia* (Perugia, 1567), 8, as quoted by B. Bouet. 'The Changing Landscape of Malta during the Rule of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem 1530-1798' (an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1963), 53, in Mallia-Milanes, 87.



A scene from the last battle of the Great Siege fought in the vicinity of the hamlet of Mosta



An aerial view of modern day Mosta (2008) showing the area of the 1565 battlefield

a company of 60 horsemen from Mdina under the command of Captain Guaras (d'Eguaras or Eguaras), along with some harquebusiers, attacked the enemy while this was searching for food in the hamlet of Mosta. The Maltese side managed to win the day by capturing and killing a number of Turkish soldiers.¹³

Captain Frà Melchior Guaras engaged daily in minor scuffles with the Turkish enemy in the period between May and the first days of June. The cavalry used to descend from Mdina and moved around along the country tracks sometimes even going as far as Marsa. In one such military patrol, that of 30 May 1565, the cavalry intervened following reports that the Turkish soldiers had managed to take hold of a flock of sheep and a herd of cattle. Guaras was to attack the enemy and at the same time protect a group of peasants who had come out of Mdina to harvest some products from the fields. A scuffle ensued in the vicinity of Mosta and the Turks had to abandon their prize and retreated to their lines. The cavalry, with the help of the foot harquebusiers, killed, wounded or captured a number of enemy troops. The Maltese forces also suffered some casualties in dead or wounded, including the same Captain Guaras. In this contrast three Maltese cavalymen are especially mentioned – Luca Briffa, Carlo D'Avola and Ceilo Tonna.¹⁴

Much detail is given about this clash by Bosio, the historian of the Order. He recounts that the Maltese side had to fight a force of about 400 enemy troops and they had to strive to keep their ground till about 80 harquebusiers under the command of Captain Frà Giovanni Vagnone came to their support. These reinforcements took cover in the hamlet of Mosta entering the village from one side while the enemy was advancing towards the village from the other side. Guaras feigned a retreat as he knew that he now had help under cover in Mosta. The Turkish forces fell for this tactic and chased Guaras to the other side of the village where the Vagnone force snapped an ambush and opened fire on the enemy, putting the Muslims in disarray. This encouraged the Maltese cavalry to attack and the fight escalated to a fully-fledged action with the Christian side fighting it out pushing the enemy towards the coast. At one moment 80 Muslim sailing vessels were noted approaching the zone and fearing that these were going to disembark more troops, the Maltese

forces retired with the animals they had recuperated and leaving 200 Muslim casualties. The Maltese also managed to capture an enemy standard and also took some prisoners. They lost eight men and a number of horses in this fight.¹⁵

The last action of the campaign

On 7 September 1565 the news spread in the Turkish camp that a force had reached Malta to help the Order and the Maltese. It was therefore decided to lift the siege and embark the troops. But the Turkish force did not leave the island. The *Gran Soccorso* had arrived and set up camp around Mdina. They were anxious to engage in battle. The Turkish commander Mustapha Pasha was, on the other hand, not willing to give up on this long-drawn siege which had been militarily fruitless and decided to try a last card in the hope of saving this campaign.

On the other hand La Valette realised that were he to loose this battle, no more help would be forthcoming from Sicily and the Turks would thus be able to camp in Malta for the winter without fear of being attacked and would be able to blockade the Maltese and starve them out till these would have to surrender.¹⁶

The Turkish force now advanced towards Mdina where the reinforcements just arrived from Sicily were waiting for them. The last battle of the Great Siege was thus engaged in the vicinity of Mosta. G.F. Abela identified the battlefield to be in the Andar il-Blat area. Here, he states, was set up the Turkish standard which marked the last post of the enemy retreat and the final surge towards the fleet waiting off the coast close by.¹⁷

Bosio¹⁸ recounts that Mustapha aimed at luring the Christian force away from its position and for this purpose detached a small force and sent it towards the enemy while ordering the bulk of his troops to take cover in the area around Mosta. Though it was a good plan it did not work out as one renegade Genoese soldier who had defected to the enemy and who now defected back to the Christian side, went to the grandmaster and reported what the Turkish commanders were up to as he had overheard the plan. The Mdina force was thus advised about the enemy's scheme.

13 Spiteri, 183.

14 Ibid., 183-4; A. Ganado & M. Agius-Vadalà, *A Study in depth of 143 Maps representing the Great Siege of Malta of 1565*, ii (Malta, 1995), 18-19, 23.

15 I. Bosio, *Dell' Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.^{ma} Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, Parte iii, Lib. 25 (Roma, 1602), 533.

16 Spiteri, 504, 508.

17 Abela, 84.

18 Bosio, 699-702.



The defeated general, Lala Mustapha Pasha depicted in this illustration during better times - while giving a banquet for the famous Jannissaries in Izmit in 1578 (found at the Topkapi Palace Museum Library)

The enemy was observed to be advancing towards the Christian side. It burnt down the hamlet of Attard and marched past Mosta. Impatience began to take over the Christian troops who were itching to engage the enemy. As the Turks were advancing towards Falca Tower, Don Alvaro de Sande decided to go for the tower

and thus occupy it before the enemy but he did not arrive in time with the high ground being occupied by the Muslim forces. Yet the latter soon relinquished this position as they saw the Christians coming from Mdina closing in on them. More reinforcements joined in the advance and the Turks were also forced to abandon a windmill which they had occupied and moved towards the Ta' Mlit plain with the Maltese side, now reaching more than 7,000 troops, in full pursuit, firing and picking off the enemy.

Mustapha thought of engaging the pursuing Christian force on the Ta' Mlit plain but he gave up on this plan when he realised that a large contingent was advancing in full order towards his forces. The Ottoman commander therefore decided on an ordered retreat towards St Paul's Bay so that his troops could embark on the waiting vessels. This plan also failed as Don Alvaro de Sande continued to press the enemy while Ascanio della Corgna assaulted the Turkish troops which had been taking refuge in Mosta and flushed them out. These at once retired towards the Salini coast but many were picked off by the troops of della Corgna who began to fire on the enemy from high ground.¹⁹

According to Bosio the Turks were now weary and disheartened and seeing the Christians closing in they fell back in disorder, abandoning their standards and arms. Mustapha was now in difficulty and seeing this complete break up of his troops he too galloped towards St Paul's Bay with his horse falling from under him twice. Had it not been for his retinue he would have remained dead or would have fallen into Christian hands.²⁰

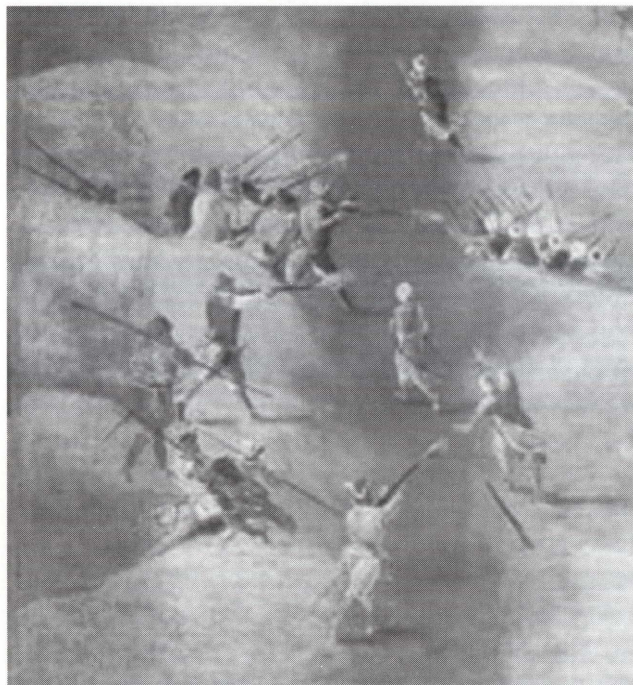
The pursuit started by de Sande and della Corgna and their troops was sustained with the Maltese following the Muslim troops up to the coast. The annihilation would have been complete had not the viceroy of Algiers come to the rescue with his troops who had been concealed among the rocks. These troops managed to hold back the Christian onslaught and his action managed to capture a number of knights during this last clash.²¹

It is calculated that this last day of fighting cost the Turkish forces about 3,000 dead. The Christians, it is said, lost 14 men with another 15 being taken prisoners. These statistics seem to be unrealistic as the difference in casualties between the Muslim and Christian sides

19 Sanminiatielli Zabarella, 599, 600.

20 For another account of this battle cf., Sutherland, 225-6.

21 Besides Bosio, one may consult also Abbe de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta*, ii (London, 1728), Book xiii, 37.



**The victors of the Great Siege -
Maltese troops from the militia companies
played an important part in the final victory**

looks exaggerated.²² What is certain is that this was truly the last battle and the Ottoman forces now embarked once and for all on their sailing vessels never to return on another similar military campaign.

The Mosta residents along with all the other peasants in all the other towns and villages of Malta now tried to pick up their lives after three months of suffering. Life would not be easy as the ravages of war would need time to mend and the human morale would need to be strong to return to the daily life which was disrupted on that fateful day of 18 May 1565. The villagers of Mosta found a devastated environment which was not easy to reconstruct and only time could heal the wound of war. Yet peasants are used to the hardships of life and nature, and they somehow always seem to weather the storm. This was no exception and with time life returned to its usual, regular rhythm in Mosta as much as it did in the whole of Malta.

The author

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²² Spiteri, 514.