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Battle of Lepanto: Armada of the Cross

Autumn had come to the Mediterranean, and more than a hint of the blustery winter to come was in the air, as two formidable armadas gathered for battle near Corinth. By far the larger force was the fleet commanded by Ali Pasha, servant of Ottoman Turkey's Sultan Selim II.

From the deck of his fearsome flagship *Sultana*, Ali directed 270 war galleys and a massive collection of lighter craft. The fleet, appropriately, was deployed in a huge crescent stretching from the rocky shores of Albania in the north to the coast of Peloponnesus in the south.



From the *Sultana's* mast flew a green banner into which the name of Allah had been stitched in gold nearly 30,000 times. "The flag was one of the treasures of Mecca," comments British historian Jack Beeching in *The Galleys at Lepanto*. "Over the centuries, when the Moslems had carried its green and gold into battle, they invariably gained the day." Throughout the Turkish fleet, the soldiers of The Prophet, confident of victory, disported themselves by belly-dancing to the music of the tambor and the flute.

Across the straits from the Turks, a smaller but no less resolute force was arrayed, its ships deployed in the shape of the cross. This navy represented the Christian League, an ad-hoc coalition of Catholic monarchies, ducal kingdoms, and Italian republics under the command of 25-year-old Don John of Austria. While the Turks made merry, the League soldiers, with quiet fortitude, grimly prepared for battle. Boarding nets were rigged, arquebuses prepared to fire, and swords were put to the whetstone. Armourers struck the fetters from galley slaves (except for captured Muslim fighters), each of whom was given a sword or pike. As Beeching observes, the impending battle "would be won or lost in the hand-to-hand fighting. What counted that morning above all else was the spirit of the men."

As the time for battle approached, Don John debarked from his flagship *Royal* to tour the fleet. As the youthful commander dressed the line of battle, he sought to rally his men: "My children, we are here to conquer or die," John declared to every ship's company. "In death or in victory, you will win immortality."

Throughout the fleet, soldiers — many of them previously indifferent to matters of the soul — knelt on galley decks to receive Communion and general absolution. On that Sunday morning — October 7, 1571 — each chaplain had offered a sermon on the theme: "No Heaven for Cowards." One chaplain, a Capuchin Monk, concluded his homily by lashing his crucifix to a shiphook and joining the first boarding party. Undoubtedly moved by this brave gesture, Don John chose that moment to raise the Holy League's banner — bearing the sign of the cross — over his flagship, prompting a resounding cheer from across the fleet.

Shortly thereafter, Beeching writes, "the wind that morning turned right around." For propulsion, both



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fleets relied primarily on the muscle power of galley oarsmen — slaves, prisoners, or volunteers. However, the galleys were equipped with small sails to be used when the wind was favorable. The wind shift deflated the Turkish sails, and those of the Christian fleet were "filled as if from a mighty and confident breath," recalls Beeching, leaving few in the League fleet "who doubted that God had intervened."

While Turkish oarsmen hurriedly compensated for the wind loss, a shot suddenly rang out from the Christian fleet. Fired from an arquebus at extreme range, the shot was directed at Ali on the Turkish flagship. It was a personal challenge from Don John, who had ordered the Maltese Knight serving as his sailing master to steer a course for the *Sultana*. From the bridge of his vessel, Ali accepted the challenge. In defiance of well-established conventions of sea warfare, the opposing commanders and their flagships engaged each other.

Ali commanded a fleet representing a power infamous for mass murder, rapine, and plunder in the name of Allah. Don John and his men, who were predominantly Catholic but included Orthodox Christians and some Protestants, knew that the Turks had to be turned back at Lepanto or Christendom may be doomed.

Setting the Stage

"All through their imperial history," writes Beeching, "the Ottoman Turks had used cruelty as an implement of dominion.... Christian armies too could be despicably cruel.... [B]loody deeds done by nominal Christians went contrary to the utterances of the founder of their religion.... The Turks, however, when they emerged from Central Asia to get away from their singularly cruel enemies, the Mongols, became converts to a religion which though admirable in its law-abiding and philanthropic aspects had been based from the start on victory in war and the pleasures of the flesh as a reward in the hereafter."

When Constantinople fell to Mehmed II in 1453, more than a century before Lepanto, the Turks believed themselves to be on the road to universal dominion. The destruction of Christian Byzantium sent tremors of fear through Europe; the terror increased as Belgrade fell in 1521 and Hungary was conquered five years later. Setting their sights on controlling the Mediterranean, the Turks seized Rhodes and laid waste to Italy's southern coast. While the Turks rampaged through the Mediterranean, Corsairs — pirate raiders who pledged their loyalty to the Turkish sultan — ravaged European shipping and captured Christians as slaves.

Religious liberty was extinguished in territories that fell under the Islamic Crescent; Christians and Jews could retain a modicum of freedom by paying the "dhimmi," an extortionate tribute exacted by Islamic authorities. The conquered Christians were also required to pay the "blood tax": Their oldest sons would be taken to Turkey to be trained as *yeni ceri*, or janissaries — "new soldiers" in the Sultan's service. Attractive adolescents — females and those males not taken as soldiers — were often enslaved as prostitutes in Istanbul's pleasure palaces. Some of the sultans "made use of the handsome boys brought every year to Constantinople as a trouble-free parallel harem," notes Beeching.

Under Sulieman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Turks made no secret of their ambitions in the western Mediterranean. As a Turkish fleet carrying 40,000 fighting men set sail for Malta in 1565, the Sultan declared: "We shall see each other again at the Red Apple" — that is, Rome.

Just Cause

Knowing that Malta was to be a staging base for the Turkish assault on Italy, the Knights of Malta,



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under the leadership of their 71-year-old grand master, Jean LaValette, mounted a desperate defense. From their headquarters at the Castle St. Angelo, Valette and his aides watched as the fearsome Turkish force, arrayed in a crescent-shaped formation spanning the horizon, slowly approached. As preparations for battle proceeded, Valette led his force of 700 knights into chapel for prayer and absolution. He then laid out the stakes as plainly as he could:

A formidable army composed of audacious barbarians is descending on this island. These persons, my brothers, are enemies of Jesus Christ. Today it is a question of the defense of our faith — as to whether the Gospels are to be superseded by the Koran. God on this occasion demands of us our lives, already vowed to His service. Happy will be those who first consummate this sacrifice.

The knights departed from the chapel, according to one account, "as men who had received a new birth."

As the Turkish siege of Malta began in August 1565, Christian Europe was riven with religious conflicts of its own, not only between Protestant and Catholic but also within those contending camps. But at least one Protestant ruler understood that Malta's Catholic Knights were fighting on behalf of all Christendom. "If the Turks should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what peril might follow to the rest of Christendom," wrote England's Queen Elizabeth during the siege. Queen Elizabeth "was aware that if the Turks came in victorious, so that the Crescent prevailed against the Cross, then Europe as a recognizable society with its inherited moral values must change for the worse; the world Englishmen had always known would disappear," writes Beeching.

For weeks the Knights of Malta held off wave after wave of Turkish troops. As the Muslim losses mounted, the Turks vented their fury on the Maltese who were captured or fell in battle: Hearts were torn out; crosses were carved into the victims' naked flesh. The bodies of fallen Knights were often crucified, spread-eagled, on planks, and then floated across the harbor. These atrocities steeled the Maltese resistance. Assessing the cost of the siege, which was to be a step toward conquering Italy, the Turkish commander exclaimed: "If so small a son has cost us so dear, what shall we pay for the father?"

Thirty-one days after it began, the siege of Malta was lifted. The Turks lost more than three-fourths of their entire force. Incredibly, only 250 of Valette's Knights had perished, although nearly all of the survivors were left with crippling wounds — including the venerable Valette himself, who had commanded from the front, sword in hand.

By September 12th, the last Turkish sail had retreated over the eastern horizon. For weeks thereafter, celebrations and prayers of thanks resounded across Europe — even in Puritan England, where church bells joyfully rang, and thanksgiving services were conducted thrice weekly for six weeks.

On his throne in Istanbul, Sulieman perceived the defeat as a failure of his subordinates, rather than an act of divine will. "I see it is only in my own hand that my sword is invincible!" exclaimed the tyrant when informed of the Turkish defeat at Malta. Lusting to avenge this injury to his own vanity, Sulieman organized an army of 200,000 men to invade Hungary, and set out on an ominously large program to build galleys — the fearful naval symbol of Ottoman power. Six years later, with Selim in the Sultan's seat, that fleet would once again menace Europe.

They Strike Again



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Vicious and cruel as he was, Sulieman would honor terms reached with a foe. Selim, however, was bound by no such scruples, and neither were his subordinates.

Forty-two when he became Sultan, Selim was an arrogant, cunning man given to dissipation and indulgence. Most days found him lounging on his throne surrounded by a bizarre bodyguard of 100 scimitar-wielding dwarves. Though he had little strength of character, Selim inherited a huge and growing military from his predecessor, Sulieman. He also inherited a vast and efficient spy network that brought detailed intelligence from throughout Europe. The Sultan's spies confidently reported that the Christian powers were too busy contending with each other to defend themselves.

On March 15, 1570, the Turkish Sultan dispatched an ambassador to Venice carrying an ultimatum: Surrender Cyprus, or face war with the Turks. At the time, Venice — although a potentially formidable sea power — was more interested in commerce, including profitable trade with Turkey, than in defending Christendom from Turkish encroachment. But the Venetians, who proudly described themselves as "slaves to our laws," would not countenance the Sultan's lawless aggression against their republic's territory. Prior to the Turkish envoy's arrival, the Venetian senate had approved, by a 220-199 vote, a measure declaring: "The Republic could and would defend itself against attack, trusting in the justice of God, and would defend Cyprus, its lawful possession, by force of arms."

Venice quickly found allies among its Catholic neighbors. Savoy offered to provide ships, and Florence and Urbino made troops available for defending Cyprus. Sicily's noted galley squadron, which had been withheld from Malta's defense, was sent to fight alongside the Venetians. At the pope's urging, King Philip II of Spain overcame his deep-seated mistrust of the Venetians and sold them grain and other provisions. And the pope promised he would defray the costs of outfitting a dozen galleys if Venice's renowned shipwrights would provide the hulls.

In July of that year, "the Turks landed on Cyprus with a huge army of more than 60,000," records historian Warren Carroll in *The Cleaving of Christendom*. "Two months later the greatly outnumbered defenders of the Cypriote capital of Nicosia capitulated on terms, which the Turks promptly broke, killing thousands of Christians — both soldiers and civilians — and selling most of the women into slavery." Among the victims was Amalda de Rocas, one of 800 Cypriote women packed onto a ship bound for Istanbul, where they were to be sold as sex slaves. Desperate to avoid this fate, Amalda somehow slipped into the ship's powder magazine, which she detonated, killing everyone onboard.

As the Turks rampaged across the island, only the city of Famagusta resisted. From April to August 1571, the city's defenders, led by Venetian senator Marcantonio Bragadino, held off a Turkish army that had swollen to 100,000 troops. Finally, after gallantly repelling four enormous assaults and depleting their powder and provisions, the defenders of Famagusta surrendered on terms to the Turks. Once again, the victorious Turks would prove themselves utterly without honor.

As he accepted Senator Bragadino's surrender, Lala Mustafa, the Turkish commander, relentlessly baited the defeated Christian commander, trying to provoke him. Mustafa accused the Cypriotes of massacring prisoners; he arbitrarily changed the terms of the truce. Leering at Bragadino's handsome young page, Mustafa announced that he would take the young man as a hostage. Still, the senator refused to be provoked. Tiring of the pretense, Mustafa ordered his men to seize Bragadino and his men for torture.

Several of Bragadino's aides were hewn to pieces in front of him. The younger men were taken away as hostages. Bragadino himself had his head repeatedly placed on an executioner's block, but rather than



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beheading him, his captors cut off his nose and ears. On the following Friday — the Muslim Sabbath — Famagusta's commander was publicly flayed alive. His empty skin was then stuffed with straw and paraded through the streets. As this act of desecration was carried out, Mustafa's troops put most of the city's inhabitants to the sword.

As news of the Turkish conquest of Cyprus spread, "terror reigned on the Mediterranean, and it seemed that Islam was arranging the same fate for all the Christians of Europe that it had inflicted on the Christians of Cyprus," notes historian Robert de Mattei of the University of Monte Cassino. News of the atrocities at Famagusta reached the Christian League fleet literally hours before they were to engage the Turks at Lepanto.

Although young, Don John had been tested in battle: His half-brother, King Philip II of Spain, had enlisted his help to put down a revolt by the "Moriscos" — Muslims of northern African origin encouraged by both Turkey and Algiers to revolt.

Commanding 10,000 men, John broke a stalemate in the Morisco war, often placing himself in the thick of battle.

John's insane courage — produced, in part, by a desire to overcome the taint of his illegitimate descent from King Charles V — earned a reproof from Philip, who urged his half-brother to "remember how important your life is." John also proved himself compassionate in victory: Ordered by Philip to destroy utterly the Morisco stronghold at Galera, John did raze the city flat — but only after allowing 4,200 non-combatants to leave in peace.

It was this combination of youth, courage, martial skill, and Christian compassion that prompted Pope Pius V to appoint John the commander of the Christian League, assembled to arrest the relentless Muslim advance in the Mediterranean. The League was formally created on May 27th; Don John was put in command on June 16th. While it was too late to save Cyprus, Don John and his troops were determined to hold back the Turkish fleet. "Defeat would render every Christian city on or near the Mediterranean Sea vulnerable to the fate of Nicosia and Famagusta," writes Carroll.

The Battle of Lepanto

The battle began around noon on October 7th. At the front of the Christian formation were found two heavily armed warships — galleasses — commanded by brothers of the slain Venetian commander Bragadino. As Don John's flagship dashed toward the *Sultana*, the galleasses opened fire; the entire column followed suit as soon as it was close enough to see the enemy's faces. The Turks replied in kind, but their aim was off. While the League's gunners battered the Turkish ships below the waterline, most of the Turkish fire flew into sail and spar, doing little damage.

As the two flagships collided, the charge was led — however improbably — by a woman, Maria "La Bailadora" (The Dancer), disguised as a man and "burning to avenge the contempt for womanhood" displayed by the Turks, observes Carroll. Another unlikely combatant, 75-year-old Sebastian Veniero, strode the decks clad in slippers, calmly dispatching Turks with his antique crossbow. For two hours Don John and his troops battled the Turks on the deck of Ali's flagship. John took a wound in his leg, but continued to fight. Finally, a bullet fired from an arquebus found Ali's forehead. With their commander dead, the Turks aboard the flagship lost the will to fight. The green flag from Mecca was hauled down, and a Christian flag was raised over the *Sultana*.

Elsewhere, the battle's outcome was still very much in doubt. The Turks had managed to turn the League's left flank, despite the heroic efforts of Venetian Admiral Agostino Barbarigo, who continued to



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fight despite taking an arrow to his eye. After Barbarigo finally collapsed, the fiercely individualistic Venetians — inspired by the memory of Cyprus — continued the struggle, holding out for a miracle.

That miracle was percolating among the Christian slaves aboard the Turkish galleys. While the Venetians fought on out of doomed courage, "a mass of Christian galley slaves, having filed away at their fetters in readiness, broke free at a signal from the leaders of their conspiracy," recounts Beeching. Many of the slaves were Greeks and Italians recently captured in Turkish raids. Eager for freedom "they joined the fray, swinging broken chains, leaping on the Turks from behind to grab their weapons, taking their oppressors by the throat." This rebellion tipped the balance. Caught between the intransigent Venetians and the insurgent slaves, the Turkish right flank collapsed — and the day was won for the Cross.

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