

## The Order of St. Lazarus in the Battle of Lepanto, October 1571

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The Battle of Lepanto<sup>1</sup> was fought between the Holy League coalition and the Ottoman Empire. The Holy League was made up of the maritime forces of the Papal States, the Spanish Empire, the Republic of Venice, the Republic of Genoa, the Duchy of Savoy, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, the Duchy of Urbino, and the Order of Saint John of Malta. A painting by Antonello Riccio entitled "*Madonna della Flotta*" held at the Malta Maritime Museum at Vittoriosa, Malta depicts a series of galleys with their standards which had participated during this fateful battle. One galley is depicted flying the green cross standard of the Order of St. Lazarus. The participation of the Order during this battle is not surprising, but was probably restricted to resources furnished by the Capuan section of the Order. No specific mention is made of the participation of galleys from the Order of St. Lazarus. However, two galleys known to have belonged to the Order have been recorded as having participated in the battle. These were registered as Savoyard since they were most likely under the jurisdiction of the Capuan section then led by Duke Emmanuel Philibeto of Savoy.<sup>2</sup> These two vessels were the galleys "*Piedmontesa*" and "*Margherita*".

The battle was the result of the progressive aggression of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean thus threatening the Christian world. On the 27 June 1570, the Ottoman Turks set out with some 350–400 ships and 80,000–150,000 men to conquer Cyprus. They quickly

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<sup>1</sup> A good description of the Battle of Lepanto can be found in: Angus Konstam. *Lepanto 1571. The greatest naval battle of the Renaissance*. Osprey Publishing Ltd., Oxford, 2003

<sup>2</sup> On the 13<sup>th</sup> June 1571, the Papally-appointed Grand Master of the Order of Saint Lazarus in Capua, Giannotto Castiglione, renounced his grand mastership in favour of Duke Emmanuel Philibeto of Savoy. Vide: *Regi Magisteriali provvedimenti relativi all'Ordine dei Santi Maurizio e Lazzaro preceduti da breve storia dello stesso Ordine pubblicati in seguito a facoltà ottenutane dal Grand Magistero*. G. Marzorato, Turin, 1867, p.157

besieged and destroyed the capital Nicosia and other Venetian fortifications. On the 15 September 1570, the Ottoman Cavalry appeared before Famagusta, the last Venetian stronghold in Cyprus. Famagusta surrendered on the 1 August 1571, and the Ottoman commander Lala Kara Mustafa Pasha renegaded on surrender terms and imprisoned the Venetians and executed the Venetian commanders – Astorre Baglioni, Alvise Martinengo and Gianantonio Querini.



**Ex-voto painting: “Madonna della Flotta” by Antonello Riccio showing the arms of grandmaster Verdala c.1581-1595**

Depicts Our Lady of the Rosary, St. John, and St. Lucia overseeing the battle. Two battle lines of ships: the Christian ships being pushed and assisted by angels; the Ottoman ships by devils. Christian ships show the various standards of the participating forces

Shocked with the fall of Cyprus and the unchivalric action of Mustafa Pasha, Pope Pius V promoted the organization of a Christian coalition to rescue the Venetian colony of Famagusta. The Pope sent a blessed banner for the fleet, this reaching the Kingdom of Naples on 14 August 1571 to be solemnly consigned to John of Austria in the Basilica of Santa Chiara. On the 6 October 1571, the Holy League's fleet reached the port of Sami in Cephalonia sailing toward the Gulf of Patras the next day. There the coalition fleet encountered the Ottoman fleet.

The coalition fleet under the overall command of Don Juan of Austria consisted of 206 galleys and 6 galleasses, carrying 28,500 soldiers and 40,000 sailors and oarsmen. The Holy League's fleet carried 1815 guns. The Ottoman fleet under the overall command of Müezzinzade Ali Pasha was made up of about 210 galleys, 45 galliots and some smaller vessels. These carried 31,490 soldiers and 50,000 sailors and oarsmen, and had a total of 750 guns. Overall, the Holy League galleys were larger and boasted more firepower but were slower than their Ottoman counterparts.

Don Juan's battle plan was to attack the Ottoman fleet from the centre using the lethal heavy fire-powered galleasses and 62 galleys.<sup>3</sup> These were to sail ahead and thin out the enemy's ranks under the command of Don Juan himself, along with Sabastiano Vernier and Marcantonio Colonna. This central force was to be protected from outflanking by two divisions of 53 galleys and two galleasses on each side – the right under the command of Agostino Barbarigo, with Querini and Canale; the left under Álvaro de Bazán. A fourth division of 30 galleys behind the Centre and 4 galleys behind each wing was kept in reserve under the command of Gian Andrea Doria.

The Ottoman's battle plan was aimed at preserving a strong centre under the command of Ali Pasha made up of three divisions of about 95 galleys, while the wings were deployed to attack and defeat the enemy. The right division under the command of Mehmed Scirocco was made

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<sup>3</sup> Galleasses carried about 40 guns each; Galleys about 5 guns each

up of 54 galleys and two galliots; the left division under the command of Uluch Ali was made up of about 63 galleys and 30 galliots. A small force of 8 galleys, 22 galliots and 64 fustas was placed in reserve.



**©Fernando Bertelli, *The Battle of Lepanto*,  
Venedig 1572, Museo Storico Navale**

The battle started on the left flank where Barbarigo's galleasses pulverized Mehmet Suluk's galleys and disrupted their formation. Mehmet Suluk responded by sending the galleys on his extreme right to round the inshore flank of Barbarigo's galleys, knowing the Holy League

captains were less accustomed to the area and more fearful of running ashore. Mehmet Suluk continued to punish the Holy League left wing until its other half swung around to engage in battle and Bazan sent reinforcements from the reserve force of the Holy League. The Holy League's leadership of the left flank changed as a result of the death of the commanders Barbarigo and Contarini with command being assumed by Nani. On the Ottoman side, Mehmet Suluk was killed and the Ottoman galleys found themselves trapped against the shore. Trapped against the shore and without a leader, the Ottoman right wing was in the process of annihilation; while the remainder of the Ottoman right wing ran aground and the crews abandoned their galleys for land.

In the centre, Don Juan sent his galleasses to decimate the Ottoman galleys with a murderous fire before entering into close combat. Holy League ships thus inflicted heavy losses on the Ottoman fleet while a duel between the two flagships developed. To ensure steady pressure against the Ottoman flagship, Bazan sent reinforcements from the Holy League's reserve force. The Ottoman centre continued to suffer grievous losses but remained intact until Muezzinzade Pasha was finally killed and his flagship overrun.

On the right flank, Uluj Ali deployed his surplus of ships in line, forcing Doria to stretch his own line to match the length of the Ottoman line. This created a gap in the Holy League's right flank and caused Doria's ships to drift dangerously from the centre. At this stage, seeing the ongoing battle in the centre, fifteen of Doria's captains broke formation to join the central fray thus creating a sizeable gap in the Holy League's right wing. Seeing his opportunity, Uluj Ali charged in the gap, destroying most of the wandering galleys on the way. Don Juan's right flank was suddenly threatened but the gap was filled by Bazan who sent the last of the reserve to try and contain the gap. Doria meanwhile rushed to engage the rest of his division but was not fully successful. At this point, Uluj Ali realized that the situation was futile and escaped westward with thirty galleys. The remaining Ottoman galleys escaped in small contingents. The 5-hour battle was a crushing defeat for the

Ottomans, who had not lost a major naval battle since the fifteenth century. To half of Christendom, this event encouraged hope for the downfall of "the Turk", whom they regarded as the "Sempiternal Enemy of the Christian".



**Ship bearing standard of the Order of Saint Lazarus [center]  
Detail of the "Madonna della Flotta" by Antonello Riccio**

The two ships attributed to the Order of Saint Lazarus participated on the right wing of the order of battle under the overall direction of the Genoese admiral Gian Andrea Doria. The two ships were among the group that had been lured away from the right wing to join the fray in the centre. The *Piedmontesa* was under the captainship of Ottavio Moretto who was killed in the battle. The ship separated from the main fleet and was attacked and sunk with all hands by Uluch Ali. The *Margherita*, under the captainship of Battaglino suffered a similar fate. The ship separated from the main fleet and was attacked by seven Turkish galleys who managed to sink it.

The Turkish fleet suffered the loss of about 210 ships – of which 117 galleys, 10 galliots and three fustas were captured and in good enough condition for the Christians to keep. On the Christian side 20 galleys were destroyed and 30 were damaged so seriously that they had to be scuttled. One Venetian galley was the only one kept by the Turks. All others were abandoned by them and recaptured. The two lost galleys of the Order of St. Lazarus were replaced from those captured. They were refitted and eventually taken over by the Order of St. Lazarus and St. Maurice when this was created by Pope Gregory XIII on the 13<sup>th</sup> November 1572 under the hereditary Grand Mastership of the Duke of Savoy.

While the engagement resulted in a defeat for the Ottomans, the Grand Vizier Mehmed Sokullu, argued to the Venetian emissary MarcAntonio Barbaro that the Christian triumph at Lepanto caused no lasting harm to the Ottoman Empire, while the capture of Cyprus by the Ottomans in the same year was a significant blow, saying that: “You come to see how we bear our misfortune. But I would have you know the difference between your loss and ours. In wresting Cyprus from you, we deprived you of an arm; in defeating our fleet, you have only shaved our beard. An arm when cut off cannot grow again; but a shorn beard will grow all the better for the razor.” By 1572, about six months after the defeat, more than 150 galleys and 8 galleasses, in total 250 ships had been built, including eight of the largest capital ships ever

seen in the Mediterranean. With this new fleet the Ottoman Empire was able to reassert its supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. By 1576, the Ottomans had established suzerainty over the entire southern coast of the Mediterranean from the Straits of Gibraltar to Greece. The 1571 Battle of Lepanto, after the 1565 Siege of Malta, however served to increase the western world's confidence that Turks, previously unstoppable, could be beaten.