



The Great Siege of Malta: The Epic Battle between the Ottoman Empire and the Knights of St. John by Bruce Ware Allen.

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Although the 1570 naval battle at Lepanto, fought by Spain and its allies against the Ottoman fleet, gets more attention from historians, independent scholar Bruce Ware Allen argues convincingly that it was the 1565 siege of Malta that broke Turkish westward momentum. In this, his first book, he has made a perceptive, highly readable foray into the complex world of sixteenth-century Mediterranean military history. *The Great Siege of Malta* describes the defense of Malta by the Knights of St. John, a chivalric order that went back to the Crusader-era Knights Hospitaller; it is a gripping military and naval history intended for a popular audience but will interest many specialists in the period or related fields of early modern history and the Mediterranean region in general.

Allen carefully details the preliminary skirmishes between Ottomans and the Knights of St. John and other Christian powers, including the fall of Rhodes (1521), the Knights' previous home base. His discussions of naval warfare clarify how the brevity of the annual fighting season and the limitations of the galley as a warship for many years allowed only modest shifts in the balance between Islamic and Christian powers in the region. Both Christians and Ottomans were driven by religious fervor and had competent captains, but were thwarted by the technological limitations of the guns and ships of the era.

Two vessels charged each other and fired ... after which the stronger boarded the weaker and the fight played out over a blood-soaked deck. The crucial question was always who fired first. The time it took to reload the guns made one shot the only shot, thus making the galley joust into a primitive game of chicken. Fire first and you were then at the mercy of your surviving opponent's remaining strength. Fire second, preferably at the moment of engagement, and you had the momentum of your shot to carry your men onto the enemy ship. (115)

The author vividly recreates the geography, built environment, personalities, material culture, and combat operations of the siege of Malta. His colorful narrative, full of dramatic and sometimes cataclysmic events, steers clear of hagiography; indeed, he often highlights the character flaws, tactical errors, betrayals, and hubris of key figures, as well as conflicts within both the Ottoman and Christian camps. French collusion with the Ottomans, Spanish diversions to North Africa and the Americas, and court politics and material challenges within the Sublime Porte impeded the efforts of the belligerents to bring their forces to battle in and around Malta and elsewhere around the Mediterranean.

Allen also recounts the horrific struggle between ground forces for the terrain of Malta itself. Unlike many popularizers of military history, he rarely projects his own feelings onto the combatants, instead quoting the primary sources in which they expressed them. His book's overarching argument is that the victory of the Knights of St. John and their allies at Malta secured southern Catholic Europe from the Ottoman onslaught, diverting the sultans to North Africa and Orthodox southeastern Europe for generations to come. He provides strong evidence that, apart from raids and corsair attacks, the Italian and Iberian peninsulas faced no major Ottoman incursions; the West's victory at Lepanto and the Ottomans' in the same year at Cyprus effectively created a stalemate.

Unfortunately, Allen's sources, though extensive, are exclusively Western—French, Italian, Spanish, Maltese, English, even German. But, admittedly, even Turkish historians have difficulty construing Ottoman Turkish. A structural flaw of the book is the devotion of disproportionate space—over a third of the book—to the context and preliminaries of the siege.

The Great Siege of Malta belongs in all major research libraries and in the hands of anyone interested in naval, military, and Mediterranean history in the sixteenth century. Bruce Ware Allen makes a persuasive case that a tiny island in a large and consequential sea was the fulcrum of a momentous shift in imperial power: a medieval order that had lost its bases in Jerusalem, Cyprus, and Rhodes, held off history's most powerful Muslim empire at the height of its strength.