

St. Elmo's Pay

by Michael J. Ard

Empires of the Sea: The Siege of Malta, the Battle of Lepanto, and the Contest for the Center of the World

by Roger Crowley
New York: Random House;
368 pp., \$30.00



When news of Lepanto arrived in Rome, the Pope exclaimed, "Now Lord, you can take your servant, for my eyes have seen your salvation." The battle's outcome gratified the pontiff, but it may not have surprised him. Legend holds that, at the moment the Turkish admiral was slain on his quarterdeck, Pius V had sensed, perhaps through divine inspiration, that his fleet was victorious.

The Pope deserved a share of the credit. It was he who had cajoled the shortsighted Christian naval powers into a Holy League to check the Turkish threat. The gigantic sea battle that resulted in 1571—the last great clash of galley fleets—turned the tables on the Ottomans, who'd had things their way in the Mediterranean for over a century. The battle's results were celebrated throughout Christian Europe, and its date—October 7—remains a feast on the Catholic calendar.

In *Empires of the Sea*, Roger Crowley narrates the 50-year struggle between the Ottoman Empire and the Christian powers dominated by Spain. The book centers on two battles: the thrilling siege of Malta (1565) and the great clash at Lepanto. Along the way, Crowley relates the many reverses for Christian arms during the period, including the losses of Rhodes and Cyprus to the sultan's armies. Crowley, an amateur historian, achieves his purpose of restoring these battles to their proper place in the ongoing clash of civilizations.

At the dawn of its golden age, the Spanish Empire was conquering the New World but under assault in the old. Muslim corsairs plundered its unguard-

ed coasts. The great pirate Barbarossa carried off into slavery thousands of Charles V's subjects from Habsburg lands in Italy and Spain. These daring raiders worked directly for the Ottoman sultan, whose power extended from the Bosphorus to the Straits of Gibraltar.

When the Muslim corsairs started venturing into the Atlantic, the Spanish decided to act. But catastrophic setbacks along the Barbary Coast debilitated their naval might. The Ottomans appeared to have nothing in their way—nothing except some scattered outposts in the central and eastern Mediterranean, which still remained in Christian hands. When the Knights Hospitaller, based out of the sandstone island of Malta, captured a large merchantman owned by the sultan's chief eunuch, the decision in Istanbul was made: The Hospitallers must be destroyed.

Suleiman the Magnificent, like other Ottoman sultans, regarded himself as a new caesar. Conquest drove his rule. To legitimize his reign—all sultans lived in fear of palace revolts led by their kin—he had to capture new territory. And so he sent a great armada to Malta, whose capture would lay open Sicily, and even Rome, to be taken for the Dar-al-Islam.

Five hundred knights fortified tiny Malta and stood in Suleiman's way. The Hospitallers were granted a home on Malta by Charles V after a young Suleiman had forcibly evicted them from Rhodes. There they established a naval base and, with their sleek galleys, assaulted Ottoman shipping. Now in 1566, an older but wiser Suleiman would eliminate these Christian corsairs for good.

The Knights Hospitaller were throwbacks to the days of Richard the Lionhearted—crusaders in an age when chivalry had all but expired. (Cervantes fought with them at Lepanto.) Of noble birth, they came from all parts of Western Europe to take monastic vows and dedicate their lives to fighting Muslims. Their grand master was Jean Parisot de la Valette, a devout warrior who fought at Rhodes and had once been a galley slave. He had re-

stored their moral discipline and prepared them for the inevitable clash with Suleiman.

Contemporary witnesses estimate that 40,000 soldiers and sailors of the Ottoman Empire with siege artillery landed on Malta to face the knights and some 7,000 Spanish, Italian, and Maltese troops. Their main challenge was to level the Hospitallers' three main fortifications guarding the great harbor. Needing a safe haven for the sultan's expensive fleet, the Turk commanders decided to reduce the smallest fort, St. Elmo, which their spies estimated would fall in a few days.

Valette made a fateful decision: He would defend St. Elmo rather than withdraw his precious forces into the more powerful fortresses across the bay. He would make the Turks pay for every foot of Maltese soil.

And pay they did. Even though the fort was reduced to rubble by Turkish cannon, and its outer works taken, the small garrison of knights and troops held on. Turkish losses piled up, even from the sultan's beloved Janissary corps. The struggle mixed the medieval and the modern: The combatants fought with swords and pikes, cannon and incendiaries, even using primitive flamethrowers. Nightly, Valette ferried more volunteers and supplies across the bay.

After holding out for weeks, St. Elmo's garrison, nearly all of them wounded, finally fell. The Hospitaller commanders, too weak to stand, accepted the assault seated in chairs, broadswords in hand. The enraged Ottomans slaughtered nearly all survivors, even crucifying some of the knights' corpses. After witnessing this atrocity, Valette executed his Muslim captives and cannonaded the Turkish camp with their severed heads.

St. Elmo would be the Turks' only gain. They battered the knights' chief strongholds with cannon but failed to overwhelm the depleted garrison. Finally, in the siege's fifth month, a long-promised relief force from Sicily arrived and routed the demoralized Turkish army. Against long odds, Valette and his few troops had prevailed in one of the greatest sieges in history.

Remarkably, Suleiman recovered from this setback and planned another invasion. He would not live to see it. It was left to his successor, Selim, to continue the fight against the Christian presence in the Mediterranean. Selim's troops attacked the nearby island of Cyprus and tortured to death the gallant Venetian commander who defended the town of Famagusta. News of Cyprus' fall shook Southern Europe and aided the Pope in forming the Holy League to counter the threat.

With foresight, Philip II of Spain chose his half-brother Don Juan of Austria to command the combined fleet of Spain, Venice, and the Papal States. A man of ability and ambition, Don Juan had just suppressed a Muslim revolt in Spain. Although no naval commander, he knew how to fight. Like a Renaissance Eisenhower, he successfully marshaled jealous commanders of several nations into an effective fighting force.

Understanding that inactivity would kill the coalition, Don Juan moved his fleet of 200 galleys and larger ships known as galleasses into Greek waters to meet the Turkish fleet. The vast fleets met off the Greek coast not far from where Octavius, nearly 1,500 years before, defeated the galleys of Antony and Cleopatra and decided the fate of the ancient world. Don Juan moved his galleasses into a skirmish line ahead of his galleys, so they could break up the Turkish fleet with broadsides—a tactical innovation that presaged the age of fighting sail. The Christian cannons shattered Turkish galleys and broke up their attacking front. Then the galley fleets closed, Don Juan aiming his galley directly at that of the Turkish pasha.

Lepanto may have been the most costly sea battle in history. Nearly 40,000 men were slain or drowned. The Christians broke the Turkish fleet, and a soldier brought Don Juan the pasha's head in a dish.

Voltaire once said that nothing is more well known than the siege of Malta, but today Malta and Lepanto are all but unknown. Crowley, noting that these events have been down-

played by mainstream historians, sets the story straight. Aficionados of the Malta siege will appreciate his new research on the fortifications, which greatly aids understanding of the battle. Crowley's revisionist instincts fail him only in his cursory treatment of the Christian commanders, who, like Sun Tzu's ideal general, respected and cultivated the moral law, and adhered to proper methods and discipline. Had the Turk leaders understood these two formidable men, they might have heeded the Chinese philosopher's implied advice: Do not fight such leaders!

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What God Has Joined

by Fr. Michael P. Orsi

Descartes' Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict Between Faith and Reason

by Russell Shorto
New York: Doubleday;
253 pp., \$26.00



Seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) believed that God moderates reason. That is to say, faith prevents man from falling deeply into error. Yet the writing of this brilliant man of faith—in particular, his *Discourse on Method* (1637)—has encouraged a separation of faith and reason that has tended to divide human beings from the very God on Whose protection they depend. It has also separated us from our fellow man, and, in a very real sense, created a certain psychological division within ourselves that is characteristic of modern life. Russell Shorto, a writer for the *New York Times*, realizes that faith

and reason are both essential components of healthy human existence. In *Descartes' Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict Between Faith and Reason*, he takes on the challenging task of reversing this Cartesian dualism.

The motif that runs throughout the book is that of the relocation of the philosopher's mortal remains. Shorto uses this peregrination to demonstrate the effect of Descartes' thoughts throughout the centuries. It is most effective in showing how his famous "*Cogito, ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am") effectively moved the traditional locus of reality and truth from outside of man (that is, from the transcendent Other), to within man himself. Shorto relates how this new outlook threatened the sacramental system of the Church and reduced the influence of theology, causing the Church to lose Her hegemony over society.

Ample credit is given to the importance of Descartes' inductive method in laying the foundation of modern scholarship, especially in the areas of medicine, technology, and even political science. But Shorto is aware of the moral alienation that has resulted from the scientific determinism inherent in Descartes' thinking. It found political expression in the French Revolution; propagated a procession of pseudosciences, including the 19th-century craze for phrenology, which held that the size of a skull and its protuberances could determine intelligence and predict criminality; and provides the basis for the materialist philosophy prevalent today.

Shorto attempts nothing less than the reconnection of man to the metaphysical aspects of his being, relating Descartes' bones to the idea of relics, usually bone fragments or other objects associated with saints, which help us to keep in touch with those holy men and women who have gone before. Yet the veneration of relics reflects a porous view of reality whereby heaven and earth are in constant communication. Shorto's adaptation of the practice reflects a very different perspective, one that is essentially earthbound. The "relics" of Descartes speak of a more insular mystery—that