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centuries before the great naval battles at Trafalgar (1805), Jutland (1916), Midway (1942), and Leyte Gulf (1944), a momentous engagement was fought that temporarily united Christendom by ending Turkish domination of the central and western Mediterranean Sea.

Turkey was the dominant maritime power in the Middle East in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Besides marking the high tide of Islam’s second great threat to Christian Europe, the Battle of Lepanto spelled the end of Moslem naval power and ambitions and was a turning point in naval warfare. Fought over a five-mile front in the Gulf of Corinth, just south of the town of Lepanto (now Navpaktos) in Greece, on Sunday, October 7, 1571, the furious, bloody encounter between Pope Pius V’s Holy League fleet and Admiral Ali Pasha’s superior Turkish force was both the world’s first and last great action involving galleys (rowed warships) since the Battle of Actium (September 2, 31 B.C.).

The day of the galley, which had ruled the seas for several centuries, was rapidly declining, and the Christian sailing ships which took part in the battle were the wave of the future. Like the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in the summer of 1588, Lepanto was one of history’s most decisive naval encounters.

Europe at that time was divided by political and religious divisions and an explosion of sects denying the authority of the established Christian Church, which some charged with excessive worldliness. In contrast, the Turkish Ottoman Empire seemed to be strong and unified. Every Ottoman sultan was expected to bring at least one foreign state under Islamic rule during his reign, so, after conquering the remains of the Christian Byzantine Empire, the Turks began pressuring Europe on its Mediterranean and eastern frontiers in the first part of the sixteenth century. After ransacking and subduing much of the Balkans, Hungary, and Romania, the infidels threatened Vienna in 1529.

Turkish galleys freely raided the coasts of Italy, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia. The island of Rhodes was ferociously captured by the Turks in 1522; Sultan Selim the Magnificent seized Budapest in 1526; the strategic island of Malta was besieged in 1565; and Cyprus was invaded in 1570, the immediate pretext for an all-out war on Venice.

The aggressions spread alarm, and a sense of urgency united the Christian powers in the Mediterranean region. After an appeal by the Venetian senate, the vigorous Pope Pius V moved to start organizing resistance to the Islamic empire. He, more than any of his contemporaries, understood the perils of Turkish expansion. A spiritual and physical battle would have to be waged – a clash in which the stakes were nothing less than the survival of the Christian West.

So, on March 7, 1571, Pius sponsored the creation of the Holy League, comprising the Papal states, Venice, and Spain, and ordered its fleet to advance southward into the Gulf of Patras to seek out the Ottoman fleet, reported to be lying at anchor in the fortified harbor of Lepanto. The Turkish force was fresh from its recent victory at Cyprus, where it had seized the port of Famagusta in a preliminary move against other Venetian possessions. Venice and the Turks had been tied by trade agreements. Sultan Selim II, new leader of
the Ottoman Empire, was now assembling men, ships, and materials necessary to sack Rome.

The “Eternal City” was ripe and full of plunder. The Pope feared that if Rome fell, the rest of Europe would follow. Portugal and the Holy Roman Empire (Germany, Italy, Burgundy) shunned the new Christian alliance, and distant England and France had no interest in opposing the Turks. Chronically at odds, Spain and Venice were the two great naval powers in the Mediterranean.

Spain and the Italian states answered the Papal summons and dispatched their fleets. They assembled in the harbor at Messina, Sicily. The commander-in-chief of the Christian armada was twenty-four-year-old Don Juan of Austria, the illegitimate son of Emperor Charles V and Barbara Blomberg of Ratisbon, Austria, and the half-brother of King Philip II of Spain. Don Juan was a popular choice. The Pope had picked the blue-eyed, fair-haired “crownless prince” to lead the often fractious Holy League because he sensed that he was “someone who in council would rise above pettiness and envy, who in battle would lead without flinching.”

The Holy Father blessed Don Juan and told him, “Charles V gave you life. I will give you honor and greatness.” A gallant, seasoned, and successful campaigner on both land and sea, Don Juan had put down a bloody uprising by Moriscos (Christianized Moors) in the Spanish Alpujarras in 1570. He was clear in his mind about the terms on which Islamic aggression must be fought. He had been given the task of fighting a total war against a hostile system of ideas, and the fate of the civilized world was placed in his hands. This concerned all Christendom.

At Messina, the Christian fleet made ready during the summer of 1571. It mustered 206 galleys — long, slim, flat-bottomed craft each mounting an eighteen-foot spur above the waterline. The larger vessels carried guns in their bows. Venice furnished 108 galleys, Naples 29, Genoa 14, Spain 13, the Pope 12, and the Maltese Knights of Saint John three. The Venetians also provided six big, sluggish floating fortresses known as galleasses. Impregnably high, 160 feet long, and powered by fifty oars (with as many as six men to an oar), they each mounted twenty to thirty cannon on bow and stern platforms, and a large crew of musketeers. Seventy-six smaller vessels were manned by Venetian, Spanish, Genoese, Portuguese, and Papal crews.

Don Juan had about 80,000 men under his command, including an estimated 44,000 seamen and rowers and 28,000 soldiers, of whom two-thirds were Spanish. The soldiers wore light armor and were each equipped with a bow and arrows or a harquebus, the precursor of the musket. They also were provided with swords for the hand-to-hand fighting which invariably ended a naval battle. The fleet’s rowers comprised mercenaries, captured Moslems, and convicted criminals who were promised their freedom after victory.

The Ottoman fleet consisted of about 250 galleys and fifty to sixty swift galeots (small oared vessels) manned by 50,000 seamen and 25,000 soldiers. Ali Pasha’s force included ninety-three galleys and galeots commanded by Uluch Ali, a weatherbeaten Algerian corsair in his 70s. About 14,000 of the Turkish fleet’s galley oarsmen were Christians who had been captured at sea or during shore raids. They faced the risk of death or the chance of freedom.

The Turkish force also included a contingent of plumed, booted slave soldiers, known as Janissaries. Hand-picked as boys from among Christian prisoners of war, they were colorful, brutal warriors armed with bows and scimitars. Formed as a bodyguard in the fourteenth century, the Janissaries were an elite corps and the first regular infantry ever maintained in constant employment by any European ruler.

By mid-September 1571, the Holy League armada was ready to depart from the Messina harbor. Pius V sent a legate and a blue banner depicting the crucified Jesus Christ to be hoisted on Don Juan’s flagship, the Real. The Spanish ships bore the coats of arms of Aragon and Castile, and the Venetian craft each displayed a winged lion, the symbol of Saint Mark, patron Saint of Venice. The Pope also had assigned to the fleet’s Papal galleys thirty cross-bearing Capuchin friars. The perceptive Pontiff believed that the seamen and soldiers would fight bravely if they had worthy chaplains beside them. The Capuchins were led by Father Anselm of Pietramolara, a spirited, adventurous former cavalryman. The other fleet chaplains included six Jesuits on the Spanish vessels, and a few Observants and Dominicans.

At dawn on September 16, 1571, the Christian fleet weighed anchor and eased out of the Messina harbor, with Don Juan’s flagship leading the way. Standing on the end of the jetty, the Papal legate blessed each ship as it passed and headed out to sea. By mid-morning, the Strait of Messina was filled with billowing sails and fluttering pennants as the fleet headed for the Italian coast. Three days later, while the armada sheltered from a storm in the lee of Cape Colonne at the entrance to the Gulf of Taranto, its commanders received some disquieting news. It seemed that the Turkish fleet they sought was reportedly dispersing and might never confront them. But that night, a brilliant meteor flashed across the sky, lighting up the sea. To the watchful Christian fleet, it seemed to portend a momentous event.

On September 24, after rounding Cape Santa Maria on
the heel of Italy, Don Juan’s armada steered eastward for Greece across the stormy mouth of the Adriatic Sea. New reports came to Don Juan and his admirals that the Turkish fleet had, in fact, not dispersed, but had raided the Greek island of Corfu two weeks before and was now making its way southward for the Gulf of Lepanto. Stormy weather forced the Christian fleet to take shelter amid the reefs and islands off northwestern Greece. When the skies cleared, Don Juan’s ships sailed into the Corfu harbor.

Christian soldiers went ashore to forage for food and water and found that the Moslem raiders had bypassed Corfu’s fort but had gutted the villages and desecrated every church. At Corfu, the Holy League fleet commanders gathered in formal council for the last time, and on September 29, about 4,000 troops from the island garrison were embarked and trained for two days. Don Juan reviewed their gunnery exercises.

Eventually, the Christian armada weighed anchor again and steered southward against strong headwinds toward the Gulf of Lepanto, where the Turkish fleet had mobilized. Continued winds and fog then forced Don Juan’s ships to take refuge in the harbor at Viscanto, off the Greek coast. On the evening of October 5, a Turkish renegade – probably a double agent – reported to the Christian admirals that the strength of the Ottoman fleet had been reduced to 100 galleys and that a plague was afflicting its men. The Christians were anxious that the Turks not evade them, but, in fact, during the night of October 6, the confident Ottoman fleet set sail westward for Lepanto in search of battle.

Don Juan’s fleet weighed anchor at 2 a.m. on Sunday, October 7, 1571, and approached the Gulf of Lepanto between the islets and ragged shoals of western Greece. The sea was choppy, and a southeasterly wind blew in the faces of the Christian seamen. As dawn broke and the allied vanguard butted into the mouth of the gulf, Don Juan asked that Mass be celebrated throughout the fleet. Almost simultaneously, observers in the flagship’s maintop sighted two sails in the distance. Soon, they shouted that there were four sails, and the advantage had shifted. The Christians were anxious that the Turks not evade them, but, in fact, during the night of October 6, the confident Ottoman fleet set sail westward from Lepanto in search of battle.

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Holding a large crucifix aloft, Don Juan clambered into a small fregata and rowed across the line of the sixty-two galleys in his center squadron to encourage the seamen and soldiers. He called out in a clear, almost boyish voice, “My children, you have come to fight the battle of the Cross, to conquer or to die. But whether you die or conquer, do your duty this day, and you will secure a glorious immortality!” Then he returned to the Real, which was powered by sixty oars and manned by 300 rowers and 400 fighting men, and was positioned in the center of the battle line. Don Juan knelt at the bow, raised his eyes, and prayed humbly that Almighty God bless his fleet with victory. On the other ships, officers and men followed his example and dropped to their knees.

Aboard the dozen Papal galleys, the Capuchin friars moved quietly among the tense oarsmen and soldiers. The chaplains announced to each man a plenary indulgence from Pope Pius for all who, having made confession, would fight for the Faith, and reminded them of God’s promise of eternal life to all who trust in Him. Each Christian had been given a Rosary before the fleet sailed from Messina.

The Turkish battle line was 1,000 meters longer than the Christians’ and blocked the entrance to the gulf. Don Juan’s force was facing a disadvantage as it struggled through early-morning mist and stiff headwinds. From the Turkish fleet came the sound of defiant yells, random shots, clashing gongs and cymbals, and blaring conches. The uproar was meant to shake the Christians’ nerves, but the Holy League ships held their fire. An ominous prolonged silence followed as the two armadas maneuvered closer together.

Father Anselm was alarmed, realizing that if the Christians were to rely on physical strength alone against the formidable enemy fleet, there was a real danger of defeat. So, clutching his crucifix tightly, he prayed fervently to the Blessed Mother, beseeching her to intercede. The wind then suddenly shifted in the Christians’ favor. The advantage had shifted.

As the Moslem fleet lost momentum, its galley slaves were whipped into action. Chained to their stinking benches, they faced certain death if the galleys went down. In contrast, throughout the Christian fleet, thousands of slaves and convicts were unshackled and handed swords or half-pikes. All along Don Juan’s battle line, the lateen sails were shaken out and filled. As they heard the insistent voices of the chaplains, there were few men in the Holy League fleet who doubted that God was watching over them.

The Venetian admiral, quiet-spoken and popular Agostino Barbarigo, took position on the northern end of his squadron while the fifty-three galleys formed a line abreast, heading eastward. The Papal admiral, courageous but inexperienced Marco Antonio Colonna, was on Don Juan’s right, while seventy-five-year-old Venetian Admiral Sebastian Veniero, a scarred warrior and the most experienced officer in the fleet, was on his left. Two of the thirty-eight galleys of the reserve
squadron led by the Marquis de Santa Cruz of Spain were directly astern. As at the Battle of Actium, which had been fought only a few miles north of Lepanto on September 2, 31 B.C., the opposing fleets were in three squadrons abreast, with the ships of each squadron also in line abreast. Each with an additional reserve squadron at the rear, the Christian and Turkish forces drew together.

Although naval convention precluded flagships from engaging an enemy, the flagships of Don Juan and Ali Pasha headed directly toward each other, as if set on a duel. While still several miles away, Ali Pasha’s Sultana fired a gun, breaking the silence. A gun aboard Don Juan’s Real answered at long range. Then a second Turkish shot echoed, and another Christian cannon replied. Around 11 a.m., the opposing battle lines slowly rowed together until they were about 500 yards apart and then burst forward to engage. So began the last great battle to be fought between galleys.

At that very hour, far away in the Vatican, Pope Pius was conferring with his advisers. Suddenly, the Pontiff stopped, opened a window, and stared at the sky. “This is no time for business,” he told his interlocutors. “Go and give thanks to God, for our fleet is about to meet the Turks, and God will give us the victory!” Then the Pope knelt in prayer before a crucifix.

Meanwhile, in the Gulf of Lepanto, as the two armadas closed for their great clash, the standard tactics of galley warfare were simple, but with planned variations. The Christians hoped to shatter the Ottoman formation in one stroke with their big forward galleasses, while the Turks, fearing that their light galleys would be mauled in a head-on confrontation, planned to outflank the Christian right and left lines. They would then fall upon Don Juan’s fleet from the rear.

The four Venetian galleasses, bristling with guns but too sluggish to maneuver swiftly, had been towed by galleys to a position 1,000 yards in front of the battle line. But the other two floating bastions on the left of the battle line could not be deployed in time for action.

However, when the advancing Turks were forced to maneuver around the forward galleasses, they took severe losses from the broadside guns. The galleasses broke the enemy line, but this was not decisive.

On the far right of the Christian line, a squadron of sixty-four galleys commanded by cautious Admiral Andrea Doria of Genoa came under heavy attack. But his vessels were able to deliver devastating cannon fire at the waterline of the enemy galleys, sinking some of them with a single volley. A series of fierce clashes erupted that morning as the opposing fleets, each stretched out for five miles, swung together.

Galley bow guns boomed, and the air was filled with smoke, flame, and the shouts, curses, and screams of men fighting and dying. The battle soon became a general melee as galleys rammed each other and boarding parties struggled with crews on bloodied decks. By noon that fateful day, the main bodies of the Christian and Turkish armadas were fully engaged. The confused, furious battle raged on.

The Christian ships poured in cannon shot at point-blank range, and the fire of their musketeers and harquebusiers was so terrible that it often cleared the enemy’s fighting decks before a man had boarded. The churning sea was now filled with sinking galleys and dead and wounded men. Thousands of galley slaves, helplessly chained to their oars, drowned unmourned.

The hottest fighting raged between the opposing flagships as Ali Pasha’s Sultana, flying a white flag embroidered with verses from the Koran and carrying 100 archers and 300 musketeers, bore down on the Real. Point-blank cannon fire crashed into the Christian ship, and Turkish soldiers scrambled aboard her twice. They were driven back when Admiral Colonna maneuvered to ram the Sultana, and Santa Cruz arrived at the crucial moment with 200 additional soldiers.

Then, a Christian galley moved alongside the Turkish flagship and raked her deck with harquebus volleys. Italians and Spaniards, including Don Juan himself, jumped aboard the Sultana and captured her. Ali Pasha was struck in the forehead by a harquebus round. A convict who had been freed and armed by Don Juan swiftly severed Ali Pasha’s head and hoisted it on a pike. The Christian boarders killed the remaining Sultana crewmen.

The Christian friars were in the thick of the fighting—holding their indulgenced crucifixes high to encourage the soldiers, comforting the wounded, and reciting prayers for the dying. One chaplain clung to the pinnacle of a topmast shouting, “Vittoria, Vittoria!” When Father Anselm spotted a group of fierce Turks scrambling aboard his galley, he sprang into action. He grabbed a scimitar from a fallen Turk, and started swinging. By the time he realized what he had done, seven Moslem soldiers lay at his feet. Inspired by his action, the Christians drove the rest of the Turks off the galley.

One of many heroes that day was a twenty-four-year-old Spanish common soldier who would later write one of the most beloved books in world literature, Don Quixote. Miguel Cervantes de Saavedra served aboard the Marquesa, which was engaged in the thick of the action. Although ill with fever, he gallantly wielded his sword and was the first to leap on to one of the Turkish galleys. He received three gunshot wounds,
one of which permanently maimed his left hand. This was, he said, “to the greater glory of the right.” Cervantes marveled later at the selfless heroism of the Christian soldiers: “Scarce-ly had one fallen, never to rise again, when another takes his place; and if he, too, falls into the sea, another and yet another succeed him with no time at all between their deaths.”

Another Spanish hero of the battle turned out to be a woman disguised as a harquebusier aboard the flagship Real. She was Maria la Bailadora (the Dancer), there because she did not want to be parted from the soldier she loved. When grappling irons held the two opposing flagships fast and a boarding party scrambled on to the Sultana, the young woman leapt nimbly on to the enemy deck and killed a Turk with a single sword thrust. She was later rewarded by being allowed to stay in her regiment.

Incredible valor and endurance was displayed at Lepanto, with seamen, soldiers, and their commanders fighting shoulder to shoulder on the bloodied galley decks. Standing beneath the Holy League banner, Don Juan was a conspicuous target, and his aides begged him to go below deck. He refused. Beside the Real, Admiral Venier’s ship was locked in combat with the galley of the Turkish army commander. There was so much noise and confusion that orders were useless, so the venerable Venetian, his eyes flashing fire, stood at his prow and fired into the Ottoman ranks with a blunderbuss. A servant kept his weapon reloaded with half a dozen balls at a time. “A soldier all white-haired and at the extreme of old age, Venier performed the feats of arms of a young man,” reported a contemporary chronicler.

By 2 p.m. on that day of fury, with the Turkish admiral dead and his flagship seized and gutted, the battle had turned against the Ottoman fleet. Don Juan took a moment to wipe the blood and sweat from his eyes. In the hold of the Turkish flagship, the Christians discovered a great treasure which they kept for themselves. Ali Pasha had brought with him his personal fortune – 150,000 gold sequins – rather than leave it behind in Constantinople. He had feared that it would be confiscated if he displeased Sultan Selim.

Eventually, the skill of the more experienced Christian seamen and the superior firepower of their soldiers prevailed. The Turks were put to flight, and those trapped by the ships on the Christian left line were put to death by the thousands. A few Ottoman galleys still resisting in the center were swiftly overwhelmed. After running out of shot and arrows, their exhausted crewmen picked up oranges and lemons, and pelted the Christians with them. The Christians retaliated and tossed them back, laughing. When the battle ended by 4 p.m. that fateful Sunday, with the Christian ships on the left and center lines mopping up feeble Turkish resistance and looting abandoned Ottoman galleys, the Gulf of Lepanto was tinted blood-red and strewn with broken masts and spars, drowned men, barrels, and Turkish turbans. As daylight faded, Don Juan’s fleet regrouped in stunned jubilation.

A Christian seaman reported, “There was great booty because of the abundance of gold and silver and rich ornaments in the Turkish galleys, especially those of the pashas.” That night, the Holy League armada retired to a safe anchorage just outside the gulf as a few burning hulks flared on the darkened sea.

On both sides, the casualties had been terrible. Ouloudj Ali, the Bey of Algiers and the best of the Moslem commanders, had disengaged and escaped with forty-seven of his ninety-five vessels, plus a captured Venetian galley. But these were the only Turkish survivors of the battle. Sixty other enemy galleys had gone aground, fifty-three had been sunk, and 117 had been captured. Between 15,000 and 20,000 Turks were killed or drowned. The Christians lost thirteen galleys, 7,566 dead, and almost 8,000 wounded. Twelve thousand Christian slaves manning the Moslem ships were freed.

On the day of the battle, the Rosary Confraternity of Rome was meeting in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, headquarters of the Dominican Order, to recite the Rosary for the special intention of victory for Christian arms. When news of the triumph at Lepanto arrived, it was attributed to the direct intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Pope Pius V burst into tears of joy on hearing of the victory. His prestige grew immensely, though he declined any credit for the success. The Pontiff placed the whole Christian world in Don Juan’s debt, declaring, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.”

Meanwhile, the Christian fleet sailed to Rome, where Admiral Colonna reported to the Pope that “the Capuchins bore themselves splendidly.” For the first time in memory, the Turks had been decisively beaten and had proved, as Colonna wrote, to be “no more than other men.” A wave of relief and confidence surged across Christian Europe.

Lepanto was a moral victory as well as a military one. For decades, the Ottoman Turks had terrified much of Europe, but the resounding defeat in the gulf dramatically exemplified the deterioration of the infidels’ empire. Christians breathed more freely. In Venice, a delirium of celebration greeted the victory. Church bells pealed, bonfires blazed, and music and light enlivened the Rialto. Ninety-nine poets churned out verse, special coins were struck, and artists recorded the Battle of Lepanto on the walls and ceilings of the doge’s palace. To commemorate the naval triumph, Pope Pius V instituted a Marian feast, Our Lady of Victory, on the first Sunday in October. The feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Holy Rosary was already being
celebrated by some Rosary confraternities, and Pius V’s solemnization of the Victory at Lepanto resulted in wider diffusion.

Lepanto was the last but one of the more successful efforts by Christendom to thwart the aggressiveness of Islam, and Pius V, with his insight and total commitment to prayer and fasting, was largely responsible. A former shepherd, Dominican friar, and zealous inquisitor, he was kind to the poor and sick and instituted many reforms targeting brigandry, bull-fighting, and prostitution. He was less successful, however, in his attempts to reform the Church in England. Pius V died at the age of sixty-eight on May 1, 1572, and was canonized in 1712. His feast day is April 30.

Don Juan, the victor of Lepanto, fought on against the Moors and captured the North African port of Tunis in 1573. He was then sent to Milan, and in 1576 he became the Spanish viceroy to the Spanish Netherlands, a hotbed of religious differences and armed dissent. Don Juan struggled to restore control in the face of both mutinous Spanish troops and the Dutch army. He reportedly sought to marry England’s Mary, Queen of Scots, but died of typhoid at Namur on October 1, 1578.

Lepanto, the last battle of the last crusade, was both decisive and indecisive. The Christians won the moral ascendancy and ended Turkish domination of the Mediterranean, but the Holy League soon disintegrated and the Christians failed to follow up their naval success with a coordinated intervention on land. The political potential that could have resulted from the Christian victory never came about. The Turks held on to Cyprus, armed Moslem vessels continued to maraud in the region, and the Barbary pirates of North Africa preyed on the Christian powers for many years.

Lepanto marked the last major appearance of naval warfare as an extension of ground warfare, with soldiers fighting on the high seas. The sailing ships deployed in the gulf had more speed in the long haul than the galleys, had more offensive capacity, and proved more seaworthy. Combat at sea would never be the same. Cannon and sail were replacing sword and oarsmen, as seen just over fifteen years later in the Royal Navy’s defeat of the Spanish Armada.

More than three centuries later, the Battle of Lepanto was immortalized in a stirring lyric poem by the prominent British Roman Catholic journalist and author, Gilbert Keith Chesterton. His Lepanto, first published on October 12, 1911, is one of the finest poems in the English language – an intricate tapestry of images, an evocative telling of history, and a masterwork of rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration. Poet Hilaire Belloc, another outstanding English Catholic, called it the greatest poem of his generation.

Michael D. Hull is a military historian and retired journalist who lives in Enfield, Connecticut.