

The Defensive Developments in the Grand Harbour and Their Role in the Great Siege of 1565 (1530-1565)

Karl Mizzi
2201001/1

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Abstract

Author Karl Mizzi		Date 31/01/2025
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<p>This study examines the initial 35 years of the Knights of St. John's presence in Malta, spanning from their arrival in 1530 to the Great Siege of 1565, focusing on the defensive developments within the Grand Harbour during this period. The Grand Harbour served as the main battleground during the Great Siege of 1565. As a result, analysing the fortifications established prior to this event provides a deeper insight into their strategic importance and effectiveness during the Siege. By referencing Balbi's detailed account of the 1565 Siege, this research explains the events, therefore shedding light on the role played by the various defensive structures within the Grand Harbour. The findings indicate that all fortifications had a significant contribution to the successful defense of the island, though each served a distinctive function in the victory. This triumph ensured that the Knights of St. John remained in Malta for an additional 238 years, during which they invested heavily in the defence of the islands, particularly the Grand Harbour – most notably a new city, which they called Valletta.</p>		
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Declaration of Authenticity



Student Name and Surname: Karl Mizzi

Student ITS Number : 2201001/1

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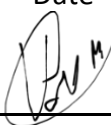
Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Vincent Zammit.

31/01/2025

Date



Student's Signature

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1: Historical context in Europe

Europe in the early 16th century was undergoing several changes, seeing the end of the Medieval era, and paving the way for modernism. This involved political and religious struggles, as well as a cultural movement known as the Renaissance – a rebirth of the classical era which saw a new movement in culture, art and science. This saw the emergence of notable people such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Erasmus and Machiavelli.

Politically, Europe was fragmented – ranging from large monarchies to small states. The Holy Roman Empire, a patchwork of semi-autonomous states, dominated Central Europe under Emperor Charles V. He also controlled the Spanish Empire, which conquered many territories in the Americas since its discovery in 1492. Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire pressed into south-eastern Europe, posing a persistent threat to Christianity.

Although Europe was predominantly Christian, religious tensions were rising as the Protestant Reformation began in 1517 with Martin Luther's 95 Theses – a list of criticisms on the Catholic Church's practices. Luther's ideas spread rapidly, challenging ecclesiastical authority and sparking decades of religious conflict. This created the Christian divide of Catholicism in the south, and Protestantism in the north.

The end of the Middle Ages saw the end of its economic style, with Europe transitioning from feudalism to early capitalism. Trade began to flourish, fuelled by the Age of Exploration. As a result, new goods were introduced to Europe, which included exotic foods such as chocolate and spices. Moreover, port cities started to grow economically, and Malta was no exception to this with the arrival of the Knights of St. John.

1.2: The Order of St. John in Malta and the Ottoman attack

Before the Order's arrival, Malta fell under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies – ruled by Charles V. Although feudalism in Europe was waning, Charles V offered the Maltese Islands and the fortress of Tripoli to the Order of St. John in 1530. Since 1523, the Order was left homeless after they lost their former base in Rhodes to the Ottoman Empire. Following this offer, the Order elected a commission of eight people, each representing the eight langues of the Order. The commission was elected on the 28th of June 1524, and departed from Palermo on the 13th of July. During their visit to Malta it reported on the state of the Islands, describing it as a barren land with little vegetation,

inadequate defences, and poorly built houses. In contrast, it made mention of good harbours, and a promontory on which a new city can be built. The commission did not stay long, having already departed the Islands by August. Unfortunately, this report was lost, however it was mentioned in Bosio's book – which is still available to this day (Vella, 2003). The commission mentions the state of the Maltese Islands

Despite the report, the Order of St. John arrived on the Maltese Islands in October 1530. At the time, Malta had two fortified cities: Mdina, which was the capital city, and the *Castrum Maris* (Castle by the Sea) on the tip of the Birgu peninsula. Although Mdina was the administrative centre of the Island, the Knights decided to settle in Birgu due to its strategic location by the Grand Harbour. This was essential for the Knights, who were a seafaring force.

Although the Knights of St. John were banished from Rhodes seven years prior to their arrival on Malta, the Ottoman threat remained. Therefore, they focused on improving the defences of Malta – most notably in the Grand Harbour area. Between 1530 and 1565, the defences of the Harbour were considerably improved – with new forts, bastions and also a new city being constructed.

The improvements in the defences continued right until the days of the Great Siege of 1565, and this eventual victory would see the Knights and the Maltese successfully repelling the Ottomans.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1: Birgu over Mdina

When the Order of St. John arrived in Malta on the 26th of October 1530, they opted to settle in Birgu rather than Mdina – which was the administrative centre of Malta. This decision was influenced by a number of factors – which would play a role in shaping Malta's urban history. The first, and perhaps the most important difference between Birgu and Mdina is their site and situation factors. Birgu is located in the Grand Harbour, whilst Mdina is located on high ground, and in the centre of the Island. (Hoppen, 1979) These circumstances were not ideal for the Knights.

The situation at Mdina itself was not ideal either. It was a small, neglected, and weakly defended city positioned on unstable rock. This is still true to this day, with Mdina being positioned on the unstable Blue Clay rock layer. Inside the city, the situation was not much different, with many abandoned houses. It is estimated that only twenty houses were able to be restored and used by the Order (De Lucca, 1995). These factors played a vital role in the decision of Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam (1521-1534), the first Grandmaster of the Order in Malta, to settle in the Castrum Maris, rather than Mdina.

2.2: The early years: 1530 – 1551: The Knights' Arrival to the 1551 Attack

The Knights of St. John arrived in Malta in 1530, after being banished from Rhodes in 1523. It was during this time that the system of bastioned fortifications started to take-off in Europe (Hoppen, 1979). At the time of their arrival, the only prominent defensive structure in the Grand Harbour was the Castrum Maris, a Medieval fort located on the tip of the Birgu peninsula. It is unknown when or by whom this castle was built, however it was first documented in 1240 (Zammit, 1982). Another Medieval watchtower was located on St. Elmo point, however by 1530 this was most likely in a derelict state as was not mentioned by the Order's commission in 1524, nor was it documented on any maps dating to this period (Zammit, 1999).

Even though for the time being the Knights saw Malta as a temporary home until they recaptured Rhodes (Hoppen, 1979), they still sought to strengthen the existing fortifications of Birgu. These happened almost immediately during the time of Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam (1521-1534), the first Grandmaster of the Order in Malta. He ordered a wall to be built on the outer area of Birgu to strengthen the Medieval town (Zammit, 1999). In 1532, the Order brought to Malta Piccino – a Florentine engineer, to draw up plans for the new fortifications of Birgu. It is possible that works were carried out in 1533 (Hoppen, 1979), however there is currently no trace of any works (Zammit, 1999). Piccino also proposed the building of a new city on the Sciberras peninsula – however no official plans

were drawn up (Vella Bonavita, 2004) In 1535, the Italian engineer Antonio Ferramolino made his first visit to Malta, who was the first to put forward a plan for a new city on Mount Sciberras (Zammit, 2007). Ferramolino also proposed a number of new additions to fortify the city of Birgu. This involved surrounding the Birgu peninsula with walls from the landward and eastern side of the peninsula overlooking Kalkara creek (Zammit, 1982). This strengthened the city and protected its ever-growing population. The Castrum Maris, which became known as Fort St. Angelo became significantly strengthened in 1536 with the digging of a ditch which was filled with seawater, turning it into a moat (Zammit, 2007) and a new curtain wall called St. Angelo's Battery and a new bastion on the land front called the Homedes Bastion (Balzan, 2015), named after Grandmaster Juan de Homedes (1536-1553). These works were criticised by Ferramolino, who between 1542 and 1547 made new additions to the fort, which involved a cavalier that balanced the fort's weakness to higher ground. This cavalier also acted as a watchtower and as a communication post to Mdina due to its height.

2.3: The 1551 attack and its aftermath: 1552-1557

Although alterations were made to existing fortifications, no large projects were undertaken for the time being. This changed following the 1551 attack by Dragut, who first unsuccessfully attacked Birgu and Mdina. Following this failure, he then turned his attention to Gozo and took most of the population into slavery (Fiorini, 1997). Although previous attacks on Gozo took place in 1540 and 1544 (Zammit, 2007), this was the most devastating, thus alarming the Knights, prompting them to commission two new fortifications.

2.3.1: Fort St. Elmo: 1551

The first to be built was Fort St. Elmo on the tip of the Sciberras Peninsula, on the site of a former Medieval watchtower which existed in 1417, manned by the 'Mahares' – a Medieval maritime watch. In 1488, Malta suffered a Turkish raid, which prompted the Università to appeal to the viceroy of Sicily to fortify the harbour. This appeal was approved, however it never materialised. This is confirmed by the Order's commission of 1524, who mentioned the Castrum Maris as the sole fortification of the Grand Harbour (Spiteri, 2001).

The construction of a new fort in the area was not a new idea to the Order, as this was already proposed by two previous engineers in the prior decades: Piccino and Ferramolino (Vella Bonavita, 2004). The new fort was designed by the Italian engineer Pietro Prato, who drew up plans for a star-shaped fort

with a large internal courtyard (Freller, 2010). Construction began in January 1552, and was completed by July 1552. This fast construction of the project meant that several defects became apparent following its conclusion (Spiteri, 2017). Therefore, it had to be revamped in the following years before the eventual Siege of 1565, which will be discussed in Section 2.3.

2.3.2: Fort St. Michael: 1551

The second fortification to be built in the Grand Harbour following the 1551 attack was Fort St. Michael, at the neck of the Isola Peninsula. Construction for this fort began short after that of St. Elmo, and likewise, was completed hastily in 1552. This fort was built with the objective of stopping any enemies from occupying the peninsula and threatening Birgu and Fort St. Angelo (Vella Bonavita, 2004). These two new structures were built to compliment Fort St Angelo – with Fort St. Elmo defending the seaward side whilst Fort St. Michael defended the landward side (Zammit, 1999). According to a 1572 map of the Grand Harbour shows the new fort was characterised by a tower surrounded by a star-shaped wall (Spiteri, 2001).

2.3.3: Senglea: A new city (1553-1565)

In September 1553, Claude de La Sengle became the Grandmaster of Malta, succeeding Juan de Homedes (Scerri, 1993). The new Grandmaster decided to enclose Fort St. Michael and the southern flank of the peninsula, which was known as ‘Monte del Mulino’ (Mount of Windmills) or St. Julian’s Hill, named after a 14th century church built on the site (Spiteri, 2001). This work was designed by the Italian engineer Nicolo Bellavanti (Zammit, 1982). The new city took the name of ‘Senglea’ – after its founder Grandmaster Claude de la Senglea who gave it the title of ‘Citta Nuova’, meaning ‘new city’ (Scerri, 1993).

The construction of a new city not only gave Birgu an extra layer of defence, but also reduced the ever-growing pressure on the city’s population density. The works involved an extension of the walls on both sides of Fort St. Michael, thus forming the land front defences of the city. A bastioned wall on the western side of the peninsula overlooking Santa Margherita Hill was also built, therefore enclosing Senglea by bastioned walls until the tip of the peninsula (Zammit, 1982). However, these were not completed by 1565, being described by Balbi as ‘very low, lacking parapets and traverses.’ The tip of the peninsula, known as ‘The Spur’, was also very weak. These were fortified during the Siege by the commander of ‘The Spur’ – Francesco de Sanoguera, who constructed a parapet and a fighting

platform (Spiteri, 2001). No bastions were built on the front facing Birgu, as the fortifications of Senglea and Birgu were meant to be one fortification.

Senglea's construction made it the first planned city in Malta (Vella Bonavita, 2004).



Figure 2.1: Senglea during the Great Siege on 1565 as depicted by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio
Painting found in the Grandmaster's Palace.

Source: Author

2.4: The Modifications to the Fortifications (1552-1565)

Claude de La Sengle's term in office only lasted four years, and although his main project involved the building of Senglea, a number of modifications to Fort St. Elmo were made. Grandmaster de La Sengle was succeeded by Jean de Valette in August 1557 (Scerri, 1993), and although he is remembered for his role in the 1565 Siege, the years leading up to the Siege were characterised with a continuation of his predecessors' works of defending the Grand Harbour. During this time, the idea of a new city on Mount Sciberras was still going strong, and in June 1558 the Order's Council approved a plan drawn up by Bartolomeo Genga, an Italian military engineer. Grandmaster La Valette had faith in Genga, however he died just a month later and the project was halted for the time being. It was brought up once again in 1562 with another Italian engineer – Baldassare Lanci, who drew up two plans for a new city in his brief stay in Malta (Zammit, 2007). This ambitious plan of a new city did not materialise before the Great Siege.

2.4.1: Fort St. Elmo

Although Fort St. Elmo was completed, it was apparent that it had a number of defects (Spiteri, 2017). Therefore, improvements were made to the fortification until the days of the Siege in 1565. The first improvements of the fort were carried out before 1554, involving an internal redoubt. In 1554, this redoubt was replaced by a large cavalier (Spiteri, 2001). Also in 1554 – year following de La Sengle's election, Nicolo Bellavanti was brought to Malta in order to further strengthen the fortifications of the Grand Harbour region, with one of his first contributions being to construct a spur-cavalier situated in behind the walls of the fort. (Vella Bonavita, 2004). This was due to St. Elmo's position on lower ground when compared to the rest of the Sciberras Peninsula behind St. Elmo. This was completed by 1556. In the same year, a ravelin was built on the Grand Harbour side of the fort, in order to protect the sally port known as the 'Porta del Soccorso' (Spiteri, 2001). Spiteri, 2001 also makes mention of Giacomo Bosio's account which stated that a new ravelin was constructed on the Marxemxett side of the fort. According to Francesco Balbi, this new ravelin was equipped with embrasures and linked to the fort by a bridge.

Fort St. Elmo in 1565 is depicted in Figure 2.2.

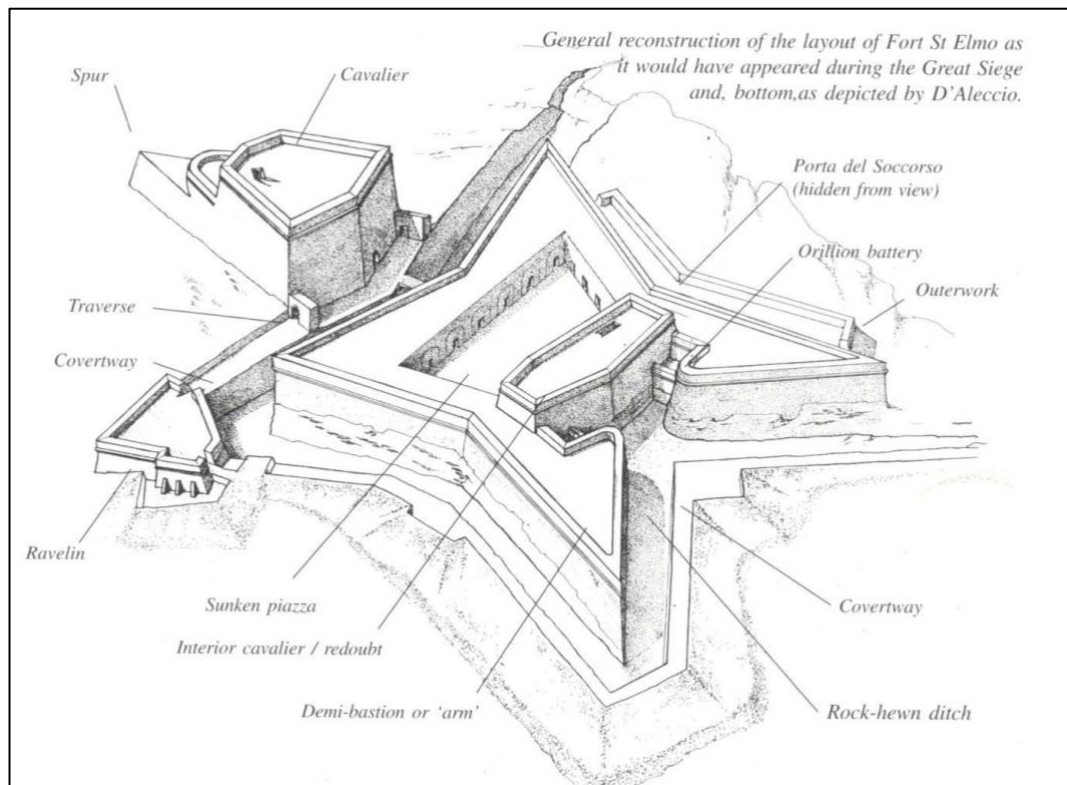


Figure 2.2: Fort St. Elmo by 1565

Source: Stephen Spiteri, *Fortresses of the Knights*. 2001. Book Distributors Limited

2.4.2: Birgu, Fort St. Angelo and Fort St. Michael

The fortifications of Birgu were considerably strengthened - most notably with the deepening and widening of the land-front ditch in November 1558. A year later, La Valette ordered the strengthening of Fort St. Michael (Zammit, 1999). In 1562, Baldassare Lanci was brought to Malta to strengthen the fortifications of Birgu overlooking the San Salvatore Hill – which could be an easy place for enemy batteries to be placed (Spiteri, 2001). Towards the months before the Siege of 1565, de Valette ordered that Fort St. Michael should be strengthened, and ‘nearly all the slaves, as well as Maltese inhabitants of Birgu, the villagers and servants of the Knights, the soldiers of the galleys, and the officers of Birgu worked incessantly to strengthen them’ (Balbi, 2003). Balbi also states that the Grandmaster ordered the destruction of the houses outside the city walls. This was to not give the enemy cover from gunfire.

A new sea-level battery was constructed on the foot of Fort St. Angelo in 1558, called the ‘De Guiral Battery’ (Spiteri, 2010), which was responsible from defending Galley Creek from a possible enemy landing (Balzan, 2015). Until 1565, no major projects were undertaken in the Grand Harbour, however

works continued to improve the defences in preparation for an envisaged siege (Balbi, 2003), such as the replacement of the chain boom between Senglea and Birgu in 1564 (Spiteri, 2010).

These additions are shown in an engraving by Anton Francesco Lucini (1610-c.1661) in Figure 2.3.

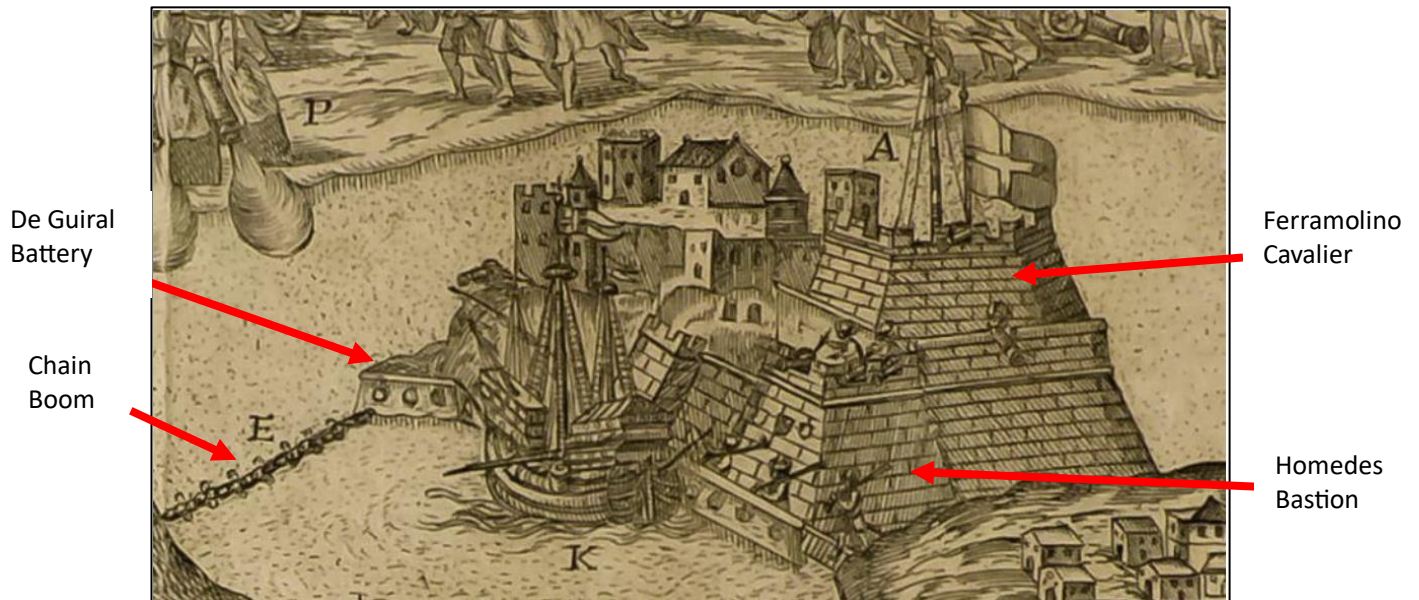


Figure 2.3: Engraving of Fort St. Angelo during the Great Siege of 1565 made by Anton Francesco Lucini. The engraving shows the improvements undertaken between 1530 and 1565, such as the Homedes Bastion, De Guiral Battery, Ferramolino Cavalier and the iron chain boom.

Source: Balzan, 2015 via Heritage Malta

By 1565, the Grand Harbour was fortified with 3 prominent forts – Fort St. Elmo on the Sciberras Peninsula, and Forts St. Angelo and St. Michael in Birgu and Senglea respectively. These are shown in Figure 2.4 below. Figure 2.4 also shows the location of the Ottoman camp in Marsa, as well as their location of bombardments on the fortifications. Figure 2.5 shows a modern satellite map of the same location. One can see the vast developments which have taken place in the Grand Harbour, most notably the building of Valletta. Fort St. Elmo and Fort St. Angelo have undergone developments, most notably during the Knights period following the Siege. Unfortunately, Fort St. Michael no longer stands, as it was demolished in 1921.



Figure 2.4: Map of the Grand Harbour in 1565
Source: Cock, 1565 via Ganada & Schiro, 2016



Figure 2.5: Satellite view of the Grand Harbour
Source: Google Maps

2.5: The Main Events of the Siege as accounted by Francesco Balbi

The Great Siege was documented from the side of the Christians by Francesco Balbi, a soldier part of the Spanish corps who was born in the province of Correggio in Italy in 1505 (Bradford, 2003). Although very little is known about him, he left a very important mark on Maltese history. During the Siege, Francesco Balbi kept a diary of the events that unfolded – and to date is the only known detailed account of the historic event.

The Ottomans landed in Malta on the 18th of May 1565, with the first attack on St. Elmo taking place around a week later – on the 27th of May. It was envisaged by the Turks that St. Elmo would fall in just a few days, however it was not until the 23rd of June that St. Elmo fell to the invaders. After the Ottomans captured St. Elmo, they sought to simultaneously attack Senglea and Birgu, with major assaults on the cities on the 16th of July, 7th of August and the 20th and 21st of August. By this time, the Ottomans had suffered heavy losses and were running low on supplies. The arrival of Christian the relief force in September prompted the Ottomans to retreat, with Balbi stating that by the 12th of September, “the Turks had now left”.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1: Aims and objectives

The aim of this long essay is to investigate the defensive developments that were undertaken by the Knights of St. John in the Grand Harbour between 1530 and 1565, whilst looking at the use of these defences during the Great Siege of 1565.

3.2: Research Questions

Central Research Question:

What were the defensive developments that were undertaken by the Knights of St. John in the Grand Harbour between 1530 and 1565?

Upon the arrival of the Order in 1530, the Grand Harbour was very weakly fortified, with the only defensive structure being the Castrum Maris. Between 1530 and 1565, the Order of St. John invested in improving the fortifications of the Grand Harbour. This research will examine these developments.

Sub Research Questions:

1. Why did the Knights choose the Grand Harbour over Mdina?

When arriving in Malta, the Knights chose to settle in Birgu rather than Mdina – which was the capital city of the Island. This research aims to present this reason.

2. What role did these developments play in the Siege of 1565?

During the Great Siege of 1565, the battles were centred around the Harbour – therefore what role did these defences play in the Siege?

3.3: Data Collection

To answer the three research questions set out above, secondary data was collected from the following:

Books:

Scholarly books on the subject were consulted. This included books on fortifications and about the Knights of St. John. The source evaluation on the books consulted will be discussed in Section 3.4.

Academic journals and research papers:

Relevant information was also available academic journals and research papers. The journals consulted were relevant to the topic – which were filtered through the University of Malta open access database.

3.4: Filtering of information

The credibility of the sources consulted was taken into account during the research. This was filtered through the following criteria:

- Authorship: the credibility of the author was assessed by their reputation and qualifications on the subject
- Relevance: Only research directly related to the topic of this long essay was considered
- Diversity: Where possible, different authors writing on the same subject were consulted. This was done in effort to get as many different perspectives as possible.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

4.1: The start of the Siege

The Great Siege began on the 18th of May 1565, with the arrival of the Ottomans, as is shown in Figure 4.1. The Ottomans, who were led by Mustapha Pasha and Piali Pasha, landed in Marsaxlokk Bay and set up their camp in Marsa. The two Ottoman leaders quarrelled regarding the strategy of the invasion. Mustapha proposed that Piali should attack Mdina, whilst he took Birgu and Fort St. Michael – these two separate attacks would happen simultaneously. Piali argued that their invasion should start at St. Elmo, as he wanted to berth his ships in the Marsamxett Harbour. He believed that St. Elmo would fall in a matter of days. At the end, Piali's plan went through. This was accounted by Balbi, who learned of this quarrel from an Ottoman renegade.

Balbi states that had Mustapha's plan went through, Malta would have fallen easily.



Figure 4.1: The arrival of the Ottomans on the 18th of May 1565, as depicted by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio – found in the Grandmaster's Palace

Source: Author

4.2: The attack on Fort St. Elmo and its role in the Great Siege

Although Fort St. Elmo was the only defence to fall to the Ottomans, it still played a significant role in the Siege. Fort St. Elmo was never meant to withstand an entire siege, but only to slow down the enemy and buy the defendants time. A day before the attack began, it was reported to the Grandmaster that it would be impossible to defend St. Elmo due to its weakness (Balbi, 1568). The Ottomans began their assault on Fort St. Elmo on the 27th of May, who believed that it would be in their hands in between 10-12 days. By the 3rd of June, the Ottomans captured the ravelin of Fort St. Elmo, which was mentioned by Spiteri (2001) in Chapter 2. This operation took them around a week, which was much more than they had anticipated.

After the Ottomans seized the ravelin, the bombardment persisted. According to Balbi, by June 4th it was widely understood that the fort would inevitably fall. In response, La Valette sought to appoint one of his captains as the fort's governor, though the captain declined, stating that 'he did not want to take charge of a hopeless task, and be remembered as the person who lost the fort. By 8th June the situation in the fort was a desperate one stating that "the Knights in the garrison wrote to the Grand Master that it was certain death to remain in St. Elmo", and they proposed storming out of the fort to fight in the open. Despite the continuous bombardment, which involved a general assault on the 11th of June, St. Elmo fell to the invaders on the 23rd of June. This is shown in Figure 4.2.

Even though Fort St. Elmo was built with numerous defects, it played an integral part in the Great Siege of 1565, costing the Ottomans heavy losses both for ammunition as well as human life. Balbi recalls the attack on St. Elmo cost them 180,000 rounds of cannon and basilisk shots as well as the loss of around 6,000 men – including Dragut, one of their greatest leaders. Fort St. Elmo's reluctance to fall to the invaders was bought priceless time for the Knights, who had the time to invest in last-minute alterations to the fortifications of Senglea and Birgu. The importance of the modifications (mentioned in Chapter 2) that were undertaken to St. Elmo between 1552 and 1565 cannot be understated, however it was also due to the Ottomans' tactical errors. Balbi mentions several times in his account that St. Elmo was constantly being relieved with fresh troops from Birgu (which was not besieged at the time), as well as the wounded being transported to the city. The failure to isolate St. Elmo and stop this link to Birgu prolonged the Siege of St. Elmo unnecessarily.



Figure 4.2: The fall of Fort St. Elmo on the 23rd of June 1565, as depicted by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio – found in the Grandmaster's Palace

Source: Author

4.3: The assaults on Birgu and Senglea

Following the Ottomans' costly victory over Fort St. Elmo, it became clear that their next target would be Senglea and Fort St. Michael. This was because a gun emplacement on the Sciberras Peninsula remained positioned to target the tip of Senglea. On the 30th of June, the invaders began to surround Senglea with gun positions. It was during this time that a small relief force arrived on Malta – called the 'Piccolo Soccorso' (small help). Balbi describes that these were around 700 strong and arrived in Mdina – later making their way to Birgu without being noticed by the Ottomans. The Knights learned that a general assault on Senglea was imminent, and therefore the Grandmaster took all necessary precautions, namely ordering a set of wooden piles a few metres driven into the seabed, which were connected by cross-bound iron and a chain. These were laid along the bastioned front of Senglea, designed to stop any landings by boat, as well as to force the invaders to jump in the sea before landing – thus slowing them down and damaging their guns.

The awaited general assault on Senglea arrived on the 15th of July, with troops arriving in Senglea from Rinella and Gallow's Point (Kalkara). These would join the attack on St. Michael, whilst simultaneously the bastions overlooking Corradino would be attacked by troops arriving on boats. Balbi records that

10 boats tried to enter Galley Creek, however this failed due to close-range fire from De Guiral's Battery, who sunk 9 ships carrying some of the best Ottoman troops. Balbi also records that these were unable to swim, and thus drowned. This scene is shown in Figure 4.3.



Figure 4.3: The attack on Senglea on the 15th of July 1565 – failing due to a counterattack from De Guiral's Battery - as depicted by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio – found in the Grandmaster's Palace

Source: Author

The 22nd of July marked the beginning of bombardment on Birgu from San Salvatore Hill. It was an intense attack, with Balbi stating that “there was not a single safe place anywhere in Birgu or St. Michael.” The next days were characterised by bombardments that sometimes lasted hours, as well as short and indecisive assaults.

The next general assault on the two cities arrived on the 7th of August, Balbi describing that “8,000 attacked St. Michael and 4,000 attacked the Post of Castile”. This attack saw Birgu almost falling to the invaders, with La Valette reportedly saying “Come, my Knights, let us all go and die there! This is the day!”. Victory seemed imminent when the Ottomans had breached the walls of the Post of Castile, with La Valette himself being wounded in battle. However, the Ottomans unexpectedly retreated. The defendants in Senglea and Birgu later learned that the calvary of Mdina took advantage of the invaders' focus on their assault. This meant that the Mdina calvary managed to arrive in Marsa unchallenged – slaughtering the sick and wounded in the camp. This confused the Ottomans who mistook them for a relief force and retreated.

Bombardment continued throughout the next weeks, with the final general assault being carried out on Birgu and Senglea on the 20th of August. In total there were four attacks: two on each city, which eventually failed. The bombardment continued a day later, but this was also unsuccessful. During these attacks, the invaders tried building a bastion made from wool and cotton at the land front of Senglea, high enough to dominate the defences. This was destroyed by the defendants who sallied out during the night of the 24th of August.

By September, the Ottomans started losing heart – especially with the approaching winter. Although bombardment continued until the first few days of the month, they were not as fierce as the previous ones. On the 7th of September, a large relief force which was promised by Don Garcia, the viceroy of Sicily, arrived in Malta. By then, Malta was free from the Ottomans – with the exception of the Sciberras Peninsula. The Ottomans tried one last attack on Mdina, however this failed due to the ‘Gran Soccorso’ countering them. By the 12th of September 1565, Malta was free from the Ottomans.

4.3.1: The role of Senglea and Fort St. Michael in the Great Siege

Senglea and Fort St. Michael played a vital role in the Great Siege of 1565, remaining unconquered. Although the original defences of the city were enhanced by the wooden piles mentioned in the previous section, they were still strong enough to withstand the attacks. These defences were continuously tested in the months of July and August, most notably during the general assaults of July and August mentioned in the previous sections. Balbi states that during these days, the Ottomans suffered many casualties – which reaped no reward.

One of the main aims of Fort St. Michael was to compliment Fort St. Angelo (Zammit, 1999), with the city of Senglea being constructed to stop any invaders from occupying the Isola Peninsula and threatening Birgu and St. Angelo (Vella Bonavita, 2004). Although the land front of Birgu was attacked, the invaders did not test the defences of St. Angelo, and therefore one can say that the city of Senglea achieved its goal during the Great Siege of 1565.

After the victory of the Great Siege of 1565, Senglea was given the title of ‘Citta Invicta’ – meaning the ‘Unconquered’ or ‘Invincible City’.

4.3.2: The role of Birgu and Fort St. Angelo in the Great Siege

The situation at Birgu's land front contrasted to that of St. Angelo. As mentioned, Birgu and Senglea were attacked simultaneously during the general assaults of the 7th of August and the 20th of August, with smaller scale attacks still going on during the other days.

Fort St. Angelo was not directly attacked throughout the Siege due to its position by the sea, as well as the presence of Senglea and Birgu. This was ideal for the Knights, who had their headquarters set up in the fort. St Angelo and Birgu had a very important role during the Siege of Fort St. Elmo, as wounded troops from the Sciberras Peninsula were constantly being traded for fresh ones. This prolonged the Siege, causing notable casualties to the Ottomans. Its most notable offensive came on the 15th of July, when 10 boats attempted to enter Galley Creek. Fortunately for the Knights, they came in close-fire range to De Guiral's Battery, who fired on the boats. Nine from ten boats were sunk, which were carrying some of the Ottomans best troops. This sea-level battery saved the day for the defendants – an act which was the only major offensive from Fort St. Angelo.

The 22nd of July saw the beginning of Birgu's bombardment from its land front. In all, Birgu suffered two general assaults: on the 7th and 20th of August. Although the Post of Castille – part of the land front fortifications almost fell to the Ottomans on the 7th of August, the city was unconquered.

After the victory of the Great Siege of 1565, Birgu was given the title of 'Citta Vittoriosa – meaning the 'Victorious City'.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1: The Order of St. John after the Great Siege

The victory of the Siege marked the beginning of Early Modern Malta, transforming it from a barren rock into a baroque jewel at the heart of the Mediterranean. The Knights of St. John invested heavily in Malta's defense, focusing primarily on the Grand Harbour but extending their efforts beyond it. This included the construction of large fortifications, such as Fort Ricasoli, Fort Manoel, and Fort St. Lucian, as well as a network of coastal watchtowers that still dot the Maltese coastline.

The Knights also revitalized existing cities like Birgu, Mdina, and the Citadel in Gozo, enhancing them with the Baroque charm that continues to captivate visitors today. Their most ambitious project emerged just months after the Siege: the development of Valletta. The new city became the cosmopolitan capital city – a title it holds to this day.

The Knights of St. John would remain in Malta until 1798, when they would be banished from the Islands by the French army led by Napoleon Bonaparte. This would bring an end to the 268-year history of their stay in Malta.

5.2: Limitations

Perhaps the biggest limitation to this research is the word count. Although efforts were made for the research to be as extensive and informative as possible, the information had to be concise with very little room for elaboration. One notable example of this approach can be observed in the analysis of the Siege, where the discussion does not delve into the day-to-day events. Instead, the emphasis is placed on elaborating the key moments and main attacks that occurred during the Siege.

Another limitation was the fact that the events of the Siege were only looked at from the defendants' point of view. This was mainly due to two reasons: the word count, as well as the scarcity of information available on the account of the Siege from an Ottoman perspective.

5.3: Recommendations

The Great Siege of 1565 is arguably one of the most epic and historic battles in the history of Malta. Although the event is kept alive through tradition and numerous publications, I feel like it is not exhibited given its importance to visitors. On a global scale, the 'Great' Siege might not have been so

important, however on a local level it shaped the future of Malta. If Malta had fallen to the Ottomans, the history of Malta would be much different to that of today.

Personally, I think that the Great Siege should have its own museum in Malta, showing the events leading to the Siege, as well as the events during this fierce and bloody battle. Such a museum would highlight the significance of the Great Siege in Maltese history and enhance its importance for future generations.

5.4: Concluding remarks

The Great Siege of 1565 marked the last major invasion of Malta, during which the island's fortifications played a crucial role in the battles. Although the French invaded Malta in 1798, the Knights surrendered without resistance, leaving historians to debate the true strength of the fortifications. Malta would once again be attacked during the Second World War, particularly between 1940 and 1943. However, by this time, the fortifications were rendered obsolete for defense, as the primary threat came from aerial bombardment.

It is unfortunate (or fortunate!) that we never truly saw the strength of the fortifications by the time the Knights of St. John left the Maltese Islands in 1798.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: Long Essay Tour Itinerary: 4-hour

The tour is aimed at showing the developments which were undertaken in the Grand Harbour between 1530 and 1565 – the years of arrival of the Knights of St. John in Malta and the Great Siege of Malta respectively.

STOP 1: Introduction to the Knights at Fort St. Elmo:

This stop would involve an introduction to the Knights, explaining the years before their arrival in Malta. Their arrival in Malta will also be elaborated on, including the commission, which was sent in 1524, as well as their early years on the Islands.

STOP 2: Fort St. Elmo:

An explanation of Fort St. Elmo would be given in the context of the Knights' reaction resulting from the 1551 attacks, outlining the 'necessary evil' of this attack in context of the Great Siege in 1565 – which played a role in the defences which were built until 1565.

STOP 3: The Spur of Senglea – opposite Fort St. Angelo:

The visitors would travel to the tip of Senglea (known as the spur), and the tour would continue in this location. An explanation of the defensive developments in Fort St. Angelo would be made during this stop, highlighting the Homedes Bastion, the Ferramolino Cavalier and the 'De Guiral Battery.'

STOP 4: The Senglea promenade opposite the city of Birgu:

This stop is located opposite St. Lawrence's Church in Birgu (on the Senglea promenade). From here, the situation in Birgu during the years prior to the Siege would be discussed, most notably the dense population of the city.

STOP 5: Fort St. Michael:

The 1551 attack would once again be mentioned, this time given in the context of Fort St. Michael, which was another 'necessary evil' for its construction before the Great Siege of 1565. The construction of the city of Senglea during the time of Grandmaster de la Sengle would also be mentioned in this stop.

STOP 6: The entrance to Birgu

The tour would continue at the entrance to Birgu, where one could see the walls of the city, as well as a clear view of Galley Creek from above. From here, the preparations of the Siege undertaken by Grandmaster Jean de Valette would be discussed, as well as the arrival of the Ottoman army. The events of the Siege would be discussed – most notably the Siege of St. Elmo and the Siege of Senglea.

STOP 7: Is-Suq tal-Kurdari (Birgu)

During this stop, the land-front defences of Birgu (including St. James and St. John's Cavalier) would be discussed in the context of the attacks on Birgu during the Great Siege of 1565.

STOP 8: The Post of Castile (Birgu)

During this stop, the breach in the walls of the Post of Castile will be discussed. It was in this spot that Grandmaster Jean de Valette was wounded in the Siege, which would be the highlight of this stop.

STOP 9: The Belvedere of Birgu

During this stop, the final days of the Siege would be discussed, highlighting the victory of the Knights and the Maltese over the Ottomans. This spot boasts fantastic views of the Grand Harbour, making it the ideal spot to discuss the importance of the Great Siege of 1565 from both a European and also a local perspective.