

The Order of Malta and Espionage Activity in the Sixteenth-century Mediterranean World

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“Thus it is said that one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement.”²

It has been argued elsewhere that spies have always played a crucial role in the numerous wars that characterized the Baroque age³ and its Napoleonic sequel. Their

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² Yuen, Derek M. C., *Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read 'The Art of War'*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 110–111. In the ancient world, Sun Tzu in Chapter III – *Planning Offensives*, stressed the need to understand yourself and your enemy. In this respect, he identified different espionage roles which included the *secret agent* who provided information about enemy secrets, the *penetration agent* who would have access to the generals of the enemy forces, and the *disinformation agent* who would have fed true – but also false – details to confuse the enemy. The Chinese military theorist also considered the need for systematic organization, and noted the roles of double agents recruited from the ranks of enemy spies, and psychological warfare. Another ancient world personality who was interested in the value of espionage in warfare were Indian Kautilyan, author of the 4th century BC Textbook of Statecraft and Political Economy called *Arthashastra* that provides a detailed account of intelligence collection, processing, consumption, and covert operations, as indispensable means for maintaining and expanding the security and power of the state [see Dany Shoham and Michael Liebig, *The intelligence dimension of Kautilyan statecraft and its implications for the present in Journal of Intelligence History* 15.2 (2016): 119–138]. Ancient Egypt had a thoroughly developed system for the acquisition of intelligence. And, as narrated in the biblical book of Joshua (*Joshua* 2:1–24), Rachab – a prostitute innkeeper who lived in Jericho – assisted the emerging Hebrew state to obtain information about the city to facilitate its capture. Spies were also prevalent in the Greek and Roman worlds when according to the ancient Roman writer Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, Julius Caesar, used cryptography to protect messages of military significance sent by his spies called *speculatores*. While Caesar's was the first recorded use of this scheme, other substitution ciphers are known to have been used earlier, for which see Singh, Simon, *The Code Book*, Anchor, 2000, 289–290. There is also much evidence to reveal that during the 13th and 14th centuries, the Mongols of Ghengis Khan relied heavily on espionage in their conquests and in feudal Japan, *ninjas*, whose duties included espionage, sabotage, infiltration, assassination and guerrilla tactics, were used to gather intelligence since their covert methods of contributing to warfare were deemed to be beneath the honour of the professional *samurai*.

³ For the principal wars of the Baroque age see De Lucca, Denis. *The Baroque Mind*. University of Malta: International Institute for Baroque Studies, 2018, 125 and, by the same author, *Jesuits and Fortifications: The contribution of the Jesuits to Military architecture in the Baroque Age*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012, 388. These were: The French Wars of Religion (1562–98), The Northern Seven Years' War (1563–70), The Eighty Years War (1568–1648), The Ottoman-Venetian War (1570–73), The Russo-Crimean War (1571), The Croatian-Slovenian peasant revolt (1573), The War of the Portuguese Succession (1583), The Ottoman-Portuguese conflicts (1580–89), The Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604), The Long Ottoman War (1593–1606), The Moldavian Magnate Wars (1593–1616), The Nine Years' War (1594–1603), The Polish-Swedish War (1600–11), The Dutch-Portuguese War (1602–63), The Polish-Muscovite War (1605–18), The War of the Jülich Succession

covert activities – aimed at gathering confidential information about the strategies and tactics of the enemy – have throughout history proved to be an invaluable tool for ambitious rulers and their generals. This was perhaps nowhere better revealed than in the energetic espionage initiatives that were put into operation in sixteenth-century England by Queen Elizabeth I’s spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham (1532–90). Driven by an unprecedented Protestant zeal to counter Catholicism, Walsingham’s staff had included the cryptographer and steganographer Thomas Phelippes, who was an expert in deciphering letters and detecting forgery⁴, and Arthur Gregory, who was skilled at breaking and repairing seals without detection.⁵ Catholic exiles, spurred on by the powerful Jesuit Order in Rome, had fought back when Hugh Owen had created a counter-intelligence service that tried to neutralize that of Walsingham⁶. Faced by this vigorous offensive, Sir Francis had cast his net more widely than any of his contemporaries, exploiting the links that he had across the continent as well as in Istanbul, Malta and Algiers, thus providing an iconic example of the usefulness of espionage activity in

(1609–14), The Ingrian War (1610–17), The Kalmar War (1612–13), The Uskok War (1615–18), The Polish-Swedish War (1617–18), The Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), The Polish-Ottoman War (1620–21), The Polish-Swedish War (1626–29), The Peasants’ War in Upper Austria (1626–36), The War of the Mantuan Succession (1628–31), The Smolensk War (1632–34), The Polish-Ottoman War (1633–34), The Franco-Spanish War (1635–59), The Catalan Revolt (1640–59), The Portuguese War of Restoration (1640–68), The First War of Castro (1641–44), The First English Civil War (1642–46), The Torstenson War (1643–45), The War of Candia (Crete) (1645–69), The Second English Civil War (1648–49), The Third English Civil War (1649–51), The Cromwellian conquest of Ireland (1649–53), The Second War of Castro (1649), The First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–54), The Swiss Peasant War (1653), The Russo-Polish War (1654–67), The Anglo-Spanish War (1654–60), The Varaždin Rebellion (1665–66), The Second Northern War (1655–60), The Russo-Swedish War (1656–58), The Dano-Swedish Wars (1657–60), The Austro-Turkish War (1663–64), The Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–67), The War of Devolution (1667–68), The Polish-Ottoman War (1672–76), The Franco-Dutch War (1672–78), The Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–74), The Scanian War (1675–79), The Russo-Turkish War (1676–81), The Great Turkish War (1683–99), The Polish-Ottoman War (1683–99), The War of the Reunions (1683–84), The Morean War (1684–99), The Russo-Turkish War (1686–1700), The Nine Years’ War (1688–97), The Scottish Jacobite Uprising (1689–92), The Great Northern War (1700–21), The War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), The Ottoman-Venetian War (1714–18), The War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718–20), The Anglo-Spanish War (1727–29), The War of the Polish Succession (1733–38), The Spanish – Portuguese War (1735–37) and the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48).

⁴ Gürkan, Emrah Safa, *Espionage in the 16th century Mediterranean: Secret Diplomacy, Mediterranean Go-Betweens and the Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry* [henceforth Gürkan (2012A)] submitted to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in Washington DC on 11 April 2012, 81–88, gives an impressive explanation of the cryptography and steganography techniques used by sixteenth-century spies in both the Christian and Ottoman worlds, to conceal the text of their written communications. The first involved a wide range of techniques from simple transposition (rearranging the places of letters in the text) to substitution (replacing letters by numbers, symbols, signs, pictograms, musical notes and other letters) while the latter involved the use of a range of invisible inks where the text could only be read under the light of burning coal or by putting the letter under water. In 1563, Juan Agostino Gigli, a Genoese spy of the Habsburgs in Istanbul who, according to E. Sola’s book entitled *Los que van y vienen: Información y fronteras en el Mediterráneo clásico del siglo XVI* published in Alcalá de Henares, 2005, was one of many other salaried spies who included, Aurelio Santa Cruz (Bautista Ferraro), Melchior Stefani (Renato) and Mustafa Genoves (G.B. or Gregorio Barian), wrote that “they (the Ottomans) torment all the letters to the heat of the burning coal and put it in a warming pan (scaldaletto) inside of which the letters would be heated up with diligence in order not to burn them. They do this, because the letter, feeling the heat, had the words written on it appear.” All these methods of deciphering the letters of spies would have required the expertise of specialized government officials such as Walsingham’s Thomas Phelippes (1556–1625) who was a linguist and a graduate of Trinity College in Cambridge.

⁵ Hutchinson, Robert. *Elizabeth’s Spy Master: Francis Walsingham and the Secret War that Saved England*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 2007, 84–121.

⁶ Orofino, Anna Maria, “*Coelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt*”: David Stradling (1537-c.1595) and His Circle of Welsh Catholic Exiles in Continental Europe.” *British Catholic History* 32.2 (2014): 139–158.

early modern Europe.⁷ The enthusiasm and flair of his activity as the head of his queen's secret service which had been set to protect the Protestant Elizabeth I from Catholic dissidents and foreign plots, serves as a good introduction to this paper about espionage in early modern Europe. And in the opening years of the nineteenth century, had not the Napoleonic sequel of the Baroque age continue to provide innumerable examples of the above-mentioned Walsingham style espionage activity? Suffice to mention that according to Adam Zamoyski, in the years leading to the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, the Austrian foreign minister, Klemens von Metternich-Winneburg zu Beilstein (1773–1859):

“employed hundreds of spies and battalions of men who were expert at unsealing letters, copying them and resealing them with the speed necessary to avoid arousing suspicion – the letters might be lifted from a post bag while the horses were being changed or simply removed from a desk in a private house for a few moments. Others would then translate and decrypt the copies. The head of the decryption office once boasted that he had broken eighty-five foreign codes, one of them, used by the Russian diplomatic service, taking him as long as four years to crack. In Order to extend the range of his surveillance, Metternich managed, by offering faster communications and cheaper rates, to divert various international postal routes through Austrian dominions, where interesting-looking letters could be examined.

Adding that:

No matter or item was too humble, or for that matter too grand, for the attention of Metternich's spies. The archives of the State Chancellery are to this day full of copies of intercepted letters, some of them of the utmost banality, others of evident diplomatic or political standing whatsoever, others quite the opposite. Not only was the public and private correspondence of all foreign diplomats and statesmen to and from Vienna intercepted and scrutinised; even intimate letters between members of the imperial family, including those sent and received by Emperor Francis himself, were intercepted and copied like anyone else's.”⁸

The Mediterranean political arena of the sixteenth-century – when the foundations of the Baroque Age were being laid – was marked by the little known fact that information gathering often played a decisive role in the on-going struggle between Christendom and Islam, this because it gave crucial advantage to those states that developed their strategies of conflict based on accurate information provided by reliable spies. Recent research on the subject has suggested that in the constant battle with the logistic difficulties of the time, all those Mediterranean states that were allied to the Habsburgs

⁷ Budiansky, Stephen, *Her Majesty's spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the birth of modern espionage*. 2005 [available online]

⁸ Zamoyski, Adam, *Rites of Peace: The fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna*. London, New York, Toronto and Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2008, 84–85, This work was described by Simon Montefiore as ‘*Outstanding – a delicious triumphant feast of a book.*’

of Austria and Spain or to the ruling Ottomans of Istanbul, tended to invest heavily in forming intelligence networks which elevated espionage to “*what could perhaps be considered to be its first Golden Age*”⁹ The building of these spy networks was linked to the contemporary development of bureaucratic structures and the increasingly effective mechanisms of secret diplomacy of the type that were developed by Walsingham in England. In this context, it is therefore understandable that in the first half of the sixteenth century, a relatively unexplored flurry of espionage activity was that associated with the Ottoman siege of Malta in 1565 and its aftermath, leading to the dramatic Ottoman defeat at Lepanto in 1571.

There is archival evidence to suggest that prior to the arrival of the Ottoman armada sent by Suleyman to oust the Hospitaller Order of St John from Malta, a number of persons would have been interested in obtaining intelligence reports about the long-term objectives and the tactical aspects of a forthcoming campaign which promised to be of great consequence to the long drawn out struggle for Mediterranean supremacy between the Catholic House of Habsburg and the Muslim House of Osman. Foremost among these leaders of men, was Grand Master Jean de Valette, also known as Jean de la Valette (1557–68) (FIG.1) who, as head of the Hospitaller Order of Malta, would have wanted to obtain prior knowledge about the number of enemy combatants and cannon about to attack Malta and the plans of the Ottoman high command in this respect.

The Order of St John, whose contribution to the Catholic imperial house of the Habsburgs of Austria and Spain was disproportionate to the small size of their island state of Malta that had been given to them by Charles V in 1530, had a vivid history of commissioning espionage activity. Among other things, their galleys and fast spyships had been sailing freely in the Mediterranean from their former base in Rhodes gathering information regarding the whereabouts of Ottoman shipping. As early as 1505, the Grand Master of Rhodes, Emery d’Amboise (1503–12), had, as a precautionary measure against a second attack after the failure of the 1480 siege, appointed two Knights as Commissioners against Ottoman espionage. The second siege of Rhodes by Suleyman in 1522 seems to have again made the Order hypersensitive about enemy spying operations, following the tragic incident of Andrè do Amaral, the Knights’ most distinguished dignitary after Grand Master Philippe de Villiers de L’Isle-Adam (1521–34) who was in the habit of sending spies dressed in Ottoman uniforms, to gather information from the enemy camp.¹⁰

⁹ Garnicer, C. and Marcos, J., *Espías de Felipe II – Los servicios secretos del imperio español*, Madrid, 2005, 13 cited in Emrah Safa Gürkan’s paper on the subject published in *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung.* Volume 65 (1), 1–38 (2012), 2 [Henceforth Gürkan (2012B)]. See also Ágoston, Gabor, *Information, Ideology, and Limits of Imperial Policy: Ottoman Grand Strategy in the context of the Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry* in Aksan, V.H. and Goffman, D. (eds), *Early modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, Cambridge, 2007, 75–103 and Varriales, Gennaro, *¿Si fuera cierto? Espías y agentes en la frontera (siglos XVI-XVII)*, University of Alcalá, 2018, available online on the website <https://unina.academia.edu/gennarovarriale>.

¹⁰ The Portuguese Knight Amaral, the Grand Chancellor of Rhodes, had been perhaps falsely accused by the Grand Master of spying for the Ottomans when one of his servants, called Blas Diez was allegedly caught carrying secret messages to the Ottoman army outside the walls of Rhodes, for which he had been, according to Giacomo Bosio’s *Historia della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gierisolmitano*. (Third edition). Venice: Girolamo Albrizzi, 1694, arrested,

Two years after their expulsion from Rhodes in 1523, the defiant Grand Master, in the hope of convincing Christian Europe to recapture the island from the Ottomans, had kept the intelligence network that had built by the Order in their former home and clandestinely sent the Knight Giacomo Bosio back to Rhodes under a false identity.¹¹ And in 1526, Pope Clement VII, de' Medici (1523–34) wanting to obtain exact information about the annihilation of the Hungarian Christian army at the battle of Mohacs in 1526, had summoned to Rome a distinguished spy of the Hospitaller Order called Raffaello de Sartori who had been in Hungary spying for the Knights in the Ottoman camp. It is also recorded that after the arrival of the Order in Malta in 1530, the Spanish Grand Master Juan de Homedes y Coscon (1536–53), fearful of an Ottoman offensive against the Order's new base in Malta, had paid a princely sum of 60 gold ducats to a native of Rhodes called Giannettino Lobet to keep him informed of any military preparations that would be made by the Ottomans in this respect.¹² And in 1560, Grand Master Jean de Vallette had given orders to the Knight Gil d'Andrada to sail on a mysterious mission to some unidentified deserted shores in the Eastern Mediterranean to "land some spies and take others on board his galley."¹³ This would have now become necessary and urgent since in 1551, messages of military relevance in the Turkish language, allegedly written by an Ottoman slave in Birgu, had been discovered by two Maltese youths, hidden behind a rock outcrop in the vicinity of Mdina.¹⁴ To add insult to injury, in 1557, during the first year of his magistracy, Grand Master de Valette, wary of the possible presence of Ottoman agents on the island, had discovered that two Jewish slaves in collaboration with a Greek called Giovanni di Lorenzo, were secretly informing the Court of Suleyman about the weakness of the fortifications of Malta, insisting that its conquest as "the frontier of Italy and the important gateway to Sicily" would therefore be easy.¹⁵ This attempt of Suleyman was not an isolated event since recent studies have revealed that before any major military expedition, the activity of Ottoman spies tended to intensify since the sultan firmly believed that any information acquired through covert operations constituted an important service to the overall Ottoman war effort.¹⁶ To mention one example, before Suleyman's Hungarian campaign of 1541 which had led to a humiliating five-year treaty with the House of Habsburg, an unidentified Ottoman spy had prepared a detailed plan of conquest, listing strategically-placed Hungarian castles that had to be systematically conquered, even indicating their location, history and

tortured, beheaded and quartered. Sire, H.J.A., *The Knights of Malta*, Yale 1994, 57 says that "the Amaral episode left an insidious paranoia... since if the very chancellor of the Order was a traitor, it was fair to believe that spies were everywhere"

¹¹ Bonello, Giovanni, 'Espionage and the Knights of Malta' in *Histories of Malta: Deceptions and Perceptions* Volume 1. Valletta: Patrimonju Publishing, 2000, 98.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* 97.

¹⁴ Bonello, 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99–100.

¹⁶ See Gürkan (2012A), 68–73. Gürkan says that there are surviving maps and siege plans in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul "that were prepared before the undertaking of major Ottoman military expeditions," based on information obtained by spies in enemy territory.

owners¹⁷. And, closer to the great siege of Malta, in 1561, another unidentified Ottoman spy in Sicily had managed to corrupt a number of Sicilian soldiers in the fortress of la Goleta in North Africa so that, when the Ottoman fleet arrived, the invaders could easily identify and poison the wells, jam the artillery, explode the armoury, torch the barracks and start a revolt among the disgruntled garrison of a Christian outpost that was far away from help and comfort¹⁸. And these were but two instances of Ottoman attempts to correlate intelligence gathered at the last minute and the planning of military campaigns as testified by several plans which still exist in Suleyman's Topkapi Palace in Istanbul.

In the years preceding the 1565 Siege of Malta, the second person who would have been interested in obtaining intelligence reports about the long-term objectives and the tactical aspects of the forthcoming Ottoman campaign, would have been Don García Álvarez de Toledo y Osorio (1514–77) (FIG. 2). Married to Donna Vittoria Colonna, Don García was the Spanish viceroy of Sicily from 1564–66.¹⁹ In order to fulfil his onerous responsibilities towards his master, *Su sacra Real Católica Majestad*, King Philip II of Spain, (FIG 3) he would have wanted to obtain prior information on the principal target of the Ottoman enterprise – Was it to be Malta? Was it to be Sicily? Or was it to be Calabria? Or, was it to be Spain itself where, according to intelligence reports that had been received, rumours of an uprising of disgruntled *Moriscos* in the area of Valencia were rife²⁰. Convinced of the difficulties that were then being met by Christian merchants to travel freely in the Ottoman realm because of new fortifications and border patrols that were making it impossible for foreigners without documents to enter Ottoman territory, Don García would have been desperate to lay his hands on this crucial information in order to decide on how to best distribute his limited human, artillery and naval resources over the large territory under the responsibility of the Spanish Habsburgs – more so after having received specific orders from King Philip to preserve, at all costs, the royal Spanish Mediterranean armada of warships. In his 27 July 1565 final instructions

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ A former viceroy of Catalonia between 1558 and 1564 and a former Colonel General of the *Tercios* of the Kingdom of Naples, Don García Álvarez de Toledo y Osorio was directly responsible to the king of Spain. Holding the exalted title of Marquis of Villafranca del Bierzo and related to the House of Alba, he had become famous in 1544 for his courage in defying the Ottoman admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa when he had been appointed as Captain General of a dangerous expedition to Greece. His track record included several victories at La Goletta, Tunis, Algiers, Sfax, and Calabria y Mebredia.

²⁰ The *Moriscos* were former [Muslims](#) and their descendants who were pressured heavily by the Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown under the threat of death to convert to Christianity after Spain outlawed the open practice of Islam by its sizeable Muslim population in the early 16th century. The Spanish government distrusted these 'New Christians' and began systematic expulsions from Spain's various kingdoms between 1609 and 1614, the most severe occurring in the eastern towns of Cartagena and Valencia. According to Phillip Williams, *Empire and Holy War in the Mediterranean: The Galley and Maritime Conflict between The Habsburgs and Ottomans*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2016, 164, in August 1596, after having received reports from spies in Istanbul that the poorly fortified port town of Cartagena was the most secure harbour to accommodate a very large Ottoman fleet, the viceroy of Valencia, the Marquis of Denia, reported to his king that the *Moriscos* of Valencia would immediately rebel following the arrival of an Ottoman armada from the East. This justified earlier reports that King Philip II had been receiving since 1564. It will later be mentioned that in that year, the Grand Master of Malta, Jean de Valette had informed King Philip II that his salaried spies in Istanbul had alerted him about a plot that was then already being hatched by the ruler of Algiers – in collusion with other Barbary Coast corsair captains and Suleyman's Ottoman government, to provide armed support for an uprising of the *Moriscos* of Spain.

concerning the planned expedition to relieve Malta, it is significant that the King had specifically instructed his viceroy that under no circumstances whatsoever was he to engage the Ottomans at sea since in the perspective of Madrid's Mediterranean defensive policy, the conservation of the fleet was more important than any relief mission.²¹ In this context, Williams²² informs us that Philip II devised his Mediterranean policy on two premises: firstly, that his galleys were practically irreplaceable since they had required years of careful husbandry and, secondly, that the galley squadrons of the king, berthed in different Christian ports such as Naples, Palermo and Messina, served to link Spain with Italy thus making the Habsburg Mediterranean military system of defence against the Ottoman Empire – comprising fortresses, soldiers and guns – a cohesive reality. All this would have implied that a decisive defeat in a sea battle would have had catastrophic dimensions not only for the Spanish fleet of well-armed warships but also for the entire military administration system, leading to the subsequent isolation of all Spanish *plazas de armas* in Italy from each other and from Spain.²³ In the eyes of Philip II and his advisors, the relationship of galleys and fortified positions in Spain's Mediterranean possessions, could be compared to the two mutually supportive bastions of a contemporary *trace Italienne*. This would explain why Don García Álvarez de Toledo, who had been keeping a close eye on Ottoman operations during the great siege of Malta, took so long to choose the right moment when to intervene and break the siege. If his relief force had arrived prematurely, his troops would have had to face a numerically superior Ottoman army led by an experienced general while, on the other hand, if he took too long to arrive, the island might have fallen. It was thanks to his intelligence network that had kept him continuously informed of the situation in Malta (including the death of his son in the fighting) and the growing demoralisation of the besiegers, that his *gran soccorso* had arrived just at the right moment, instilling panic in the Ottoman forces who rapidly retreated in a state of confusion.

The third person who would have been interested in obtaining information about Ottoman plans would have been Pope Pius IV de' Medici (1559–65) (FIG.4), based in Rome. Conscious of the skilful expansionist strategy adopted by the Ottomans in Eastern Europe after the disastrous battle of Mohacs in 1526, this pope would have wanted to know more about the long term Mediterranean plans of Suleyman in the then-considered likely event of the fall of Malta. Pius would have been worried about both the growing threat to the Christian faith but also about the security of the Christian states of Europe, in particular of his papal states in Italy. His worries about the first would surely have been shared by the crowned heads of all the countries of Western Europe, who, after the first attack on Vienna in 1529, would have felt uncomfortable at having an Ottoman stronghold on their doorstep, irrespective of their adherence to the Catholic or Protestant persuasions.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 44–46.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 156.

And finally there would have been the all-powerful Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (1520–66) (FIG. 5) who, sitting on the other side of the fence, would have wanted to obtain detailed information about the strengths and weaknesses of Christian Europe and, in particular, about that troublesome new base of his arch-enemy, the Hospitaller Knights situated in the heart of the Mediterranean sea. Following an old tradition of the House of Osman of using the covert activities of spies to obtain information about the enemy, it is not surprising that the sultan would need to know more about the fortifications of Malta, the number of its defenders and the topography of the island that he was about to attack. Had not Suleyman in 1538 defined his pretensions as follows:

“I am Allah’s slave and sultan of this world. By the will of Allah, I am head of Mohammed’s community. The might of Allah and the miracles of Mohammed are my companions. I am Suleyman, in whose name the hutha is read in Mecca and Medina. In Baghdad I am the shah, in Byzantine realms, the Caesar and in Egypt, the sultan who sends fleets to the seas of Europe, the Maghreb, and India. I am he who took the crown and throne of Hungary and granted them to a humble slave. The vojvoda Petru raised his head in revolt but the hoofs of my horse, ground him to the dust and I conquered the land of Moravia.”²⁴

Regretful of the clemency that he had shown towards Grand Master Philippe de Villiers de l’Isle Adam (1464–1534) and his knights after the fall of Rhodes in 1522 and conscious of a solemn promise that he had made to his beloved wife Roxelana before her demise in April 1558, the great Suleyman, the man who had never missed an opportunity to vaunt his achievements as the champion of the House of Osman and the Muslim faith, was now further angered by the capture by de Valette’s right hand man – the Knight Mathurin d’Aux de Lescout, better known as Romegas – off the coast of the Ionian island of Kefalonia, of a large Ottoman galleon. The date was June 1564. The owner of this ship, which had 200 Jannissari guards aboard, was the Kapu Ağası, the head of the white eunuchs of the Sultan’s Seraglio, and the merchandise it carried, valued at about 80,000 ducats, belonged to prominent members of the sultan’s *harem* and to his favourite daughter. To add insult to injury, the prisoners taken by Romegas included the governor of Cairo, the governor of Alexandria, and the former nurse of the sultan’s daughter²⁵. Despite the fact that a former Grand Master of Malta, Juan

²⁴ *Ibid.* 56. citing Inalcik, Halil, *The Ottoman Empire. The Classical Age 1300–1600*, London, 1973, 41.

²⁵ For further information about the incident of the capture of this Ottoman galleon, see Malcolm, Noel, *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 81–82. Sir Noel Robert Malcolm, Ph.D. (Cambridge), FRSL, FBA is an English political journalist, historian and academic. A King’s Scholar at Eton College, Malcolm read history at Peterhouse, Cambridge and received his Doctorate in History from Trinity College, Cambridge. After serving as a Fellow and College Lecturer of Gonville and Caius College in Cambridge, he became a political and foreign affairs journalist with *The Spectator* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In 1995, he moved away from journalism to become a writer and academic, being appointed as a visiting fellow of St Antony’s College, Oxford. He became a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (FRSL) in 1997, and a fellow of the British Academy (FBA) in 2001. Since 2002, he has been a senior research fellow of All Souls College, Oxford and was knighted in the 2014 New Year Honours List for outstanding services to scholarship, journalism, and European history. See also Testa, Carmel, *Romegas*, Valletta: Midsea

d'Homedes, had in 1536 told one of his Knights that *'our profession is to fight infidels and to drive all corsairs away from the coasts and seas of Christians,*²⁶ in Suleyman's eyes, the Order of Malta had now become a 'den of pirates,' intent on blocking the sea routes used by Muslim pilgrims and merchants travelling to Egypt. To his mind, was now no other way but that of eradicating this troublesome Order of Christian Knights from the face of the earth. It was therefore by no accident that by the Summer of 1564, the implication of a rapidly escalating confrontation, was that the offensive and defensive military operations that were already being planned by all the parties concerned, would have to be supported by covert operations involving spies on both sides of the great divide between the Christian Bible and the Muslim Koran.

It was in the years preceding the above-mentioned Romegas incident and the 1565 siege of Malta, a person called Giovanni Barelli whose spy network would have perhaps included the unidentified spies that had been landed by Knight Gil d'Andrada in Ottoman territory, emerges from the shadows of time as Grand Master Jean de Valette's most trusted spymaster.²⁷ Also referred to as Giovanni Bareli (or Vareli) in some sources²⁸, Giovanni Barelli was described by Bosio, – who calls him *Giovanni Barelli Greco* – as follows:

*"a resident of the city of Constantinople (Istanbul), a man who was very fluent in different languages, sent by the Grand Master to discover the plans of Suleyman, (for which) he was handsomely remunerated and greatly honoured by Grand Master Valletta who conferred upon him a knighthood in the Langue of Italy, together with the faculty of passage (to the Order)"*²⁹

It is revealed in the text of Bosio's work³⁰ that soon after a great storm that had caused havoc in the Grand Harbour and countryside of Malta, a worried Grand Master de Valette had sent the shrewd Barelli – described in Bosio's text as *molto astuto*³¹ – to

Books, 2002. According to Alessandro Barbero, *Lepanto – La battaglia dei tre imperi*, Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2010, 417, in the later battle of Lepanto of 1571, the Knight Romegas, together with Ascanio della Cornia and Gabrio Serbelloni, was given the privilege of serving on the Papal flagship under the command of admiral Marcantonio Colonna. He was the superintendent of the papal galleys. As he had done during the Great Siege of 1565, he here again fought with distinction and after the battle was invited by Colonna to join him in Rome to celebrate the victory.

²⁶ Malcolm, 79.

²⁷ In the sixteenth century the job of a spymaster – on both sides of the Habsburg-Ottoman divide – was to assume responsibility for the operational efficiency of a specific intelligence network that would have been set up by him by choosing spies and informants. As such he would assume responsibility for checking and transmitting any news that he received and delivering wages. According to Gürkan (2012A), 123, the spymaster also sought to consolidate his network by securing financial support and the good-will of the authorities concerned, keeping alternative secret channels of communication open, detecting double agents, establishing social and political circles essential for obtaining reliable information and also devising clandestine operations such as bribery, sabotage, defection and even assassination, if necessary. As such, in the years preceding this incident and the 1565 siege of Malta, all negotiations between the spies of the Order of Malta in Istanbul and Grand Master de Valette, would have passed through Barelli's hands.

²⁸ See De Caro, Gaspare, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani Treccani*: volume 6 (1964): BARELLI, Giovanni.

²⁹ Bosio, the Italian text in the index of this work reads: *"Giovanni Battista Greco, della Città di Costantinopoli, Uomo di diverse lingue praticissimo, mandato dal Gran Maestro, per scoprire I disegni di Solimano. Rinumerato e honorato molto dal Gran Maestro, il quale lo fece ricevere in grado di Cavaliere nella Lingua d'Italia, con donativo del Passaggio"*

³⁰ Bosio, 458.

³¹ *Ibid.*

the city of Istanbul on the false pretext of negotiating the ransom of some of his Ottoman slaves. At that time, slave freeing would have constituted a commonly-used way of also conducting espionage.³² According to Malcolm, “Because the ransoming of captives was universally recognized as a necessary and important matter, it was easy for people engaged in such a task to obtain safe-conducts” so that, thus equipped, spy like Barelli, “could travel quite openly to the heart of the enemy’s state and spend a long time there, meeting both public officials and private individuals. This was the perfect ‘cover’ for an intelligence mission – less restrictive than diplomacy, and less time-consuming (and less hard to fake) than commerce.”³³

But Barelli’s real mission, according to the Order’s historian Bosio, was to pay stipends and give some presents to the members of his spy network in the court of the sultan, also to try to obtain prior information about the real plans of Suleyman. The worries of the Grand Master were justified since, according to his calculations, the time for an Ottoman attack on Malta was ripe. In October 1564, a large Spanish fleet of some thirty warships including its admiral Don Juan de Mendoza together with several captains and soldiers of the *Tercio* forces³⁴ of Flanders, had been tragically lost off the coast of Malaga. And to complicate matters even further, Suleyman had now concluded an eight-year truce with the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I (1503–64), much needed to liberate the sultan from his taxing military commitments in Hungary so as to now focus his attention on the Mediterranean war theatre.

While Giovanni Barelli the spy was collecting classified information in Istanbul in 1564–65, Suleyman seems to have been leaving no stone unturned to ensure the success of his planned invasion of Malta for which his deceased wife Roxelana, known as *La Rossa*, had left a considerable sum of money. She had thought that this pious donation would serve as an act of forgiveness for her many sins provoked by her beauty and seductive skills.³⁵ As had happened on in his already-mentioned Hungarian campaign of 1541 and in other military expeditions, Suleyman’s efforts would have very much depended on obtaining accurate information about Malta. For this purpose, two Ottoman spies who were skilled in surveying and military engineering were sent out by his Court in early 1565 to survey the topography of the island and the defences that had been built and gradually improved by the Order since its arrival in Malta in 1530. Bosio

³² Malcolm, 214.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The *tercio español*, also known as the Spanish *Terzo* (which is the name given to it by Bosio, in his text on page 458), was a powerful Spanish infantry division deployed throughout Habsburg dominions including the Spanish Netherlands (Flanders) for its victories on European battlefields in the early modern period. These powerful infantry formations were also much used by the Habsburg Armies of the Holy Roman Empire. Each *tercio* was composed of 3,000 soldiers, subdivided originally into 10, later 12 companies or *compañías*, made up of pikemen, swordsmen and arquebusiers. The companies were deployed in battle and were further subdivided into units of 30 soldiers. These smaller units could be deployed individually or brought together to form what were sometimes called Spanish squares.

³⁵ Bosio, Index reference: “*Rossa, moglie favorita di Solimano, morendo lasciò, come per legato pio, una gran somma di denari, perché si spendessero nell’impresa di Malta*” For the further details given in the text of this contribution, see also Bosio, 490 and 493.

gives us information about these spies.³⁶ They arrived here under the guise of fishermen eager to sell their fish, this providing the excuse for them to enter all the fortresses of the Grand Harbour of Malta with their tall fishing rods which were in reality measuring instruments to record the “heights of the bastions and the ramparts, the thicknesses of the walls and the depth of the ditches”³⁷. They then carried with them to Istanbul the actual measurements and the sketch plans of the fortresses of St Elmo, St Angelo and St Michael, and of the walled Medieval settlements of Birgu, Mdina and Gozo. They must have been very thorough in their undercover investigations, since according to Bosio these Ottoman military engineers also managed to compile detailed notes about the most suitable places to position siege cannon batteries, as well as the size and location of the bays and ports of Malta that could serve as potential landing places to launch the assault on the Grand Harbour installations of the Knights. We are informed that on their return to Istanbul all the collected information was translated into a large model, now lost, which was presented to Suleyman, as was customary in those times for the better planning of military campaigns.³⁸

These Ottoman spies seem to have done their job well. According to Bosio,³⁹ Suleyman and his advisers now possessed first-hand information that the island of Malta was small and narrow, meaning that it was therefore very easy to besiege the whole island; that all the fortresses were exposed and overlooked by the presence of high ground; that there was no spring water so that rainwater had to be collected in cisterns which were excavated in a soft rock having fissures which therefore would have to be coated with bitumen (*bitumate*); that it was the opinion of several military experts, that the above-mentioned cisterns would be rendered useless by any earth shock caused by cannon bombardment; that the water in them would then be dispersed and lost, thus depriving the defenders of drinking water; that the resulting situation would surely force the Knights to either surrender or, in desperation, to come out of their fortresses to either be voluntarily captured or massacred, as their pride would probably dictate, this rendering them unworthy and undeserving of any mercy. As would have happened on other similar occasions, the deliberations of Suleyman and his advisers on formulating a workable invasion strategy would have been facilitated by the presence of the above-mentioned large model showing the topography and the nature and resistance potential of the sixteenth-century defences of Malta.

Before the above-mentioned discussions about the attack on Malta were in progress in Suleyman’s Court, it would seem that an alarmed Grand Master de Valette had been busy exchanging correspondence with King Philip II of Spain concerning the sultan’s plans for Mediterranean dominance that had been brewing since 1560. As previous

³⁶ Bosio, 490.

³⁷ Spiteri, Stephen. *The Great Siege: Anatomy of a Hospitaller Victory*. Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2005, 26.

³⁸ See an article by Tony Rothman entitled *Clash of Religions at Malta* that can be consulted online in the 23 October 2018 Warfare History Network: <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/category/daily/military-history/>

³⁹ Bosio, 493.

grand masters – who were conscious of the fact that their survival very much depended on the alertness of the Habsburgs to the Ottoman threat – had done before him, de Valette was not hiding any covert information that he had received from Giovanni Barelli's spies in Istanbul, from the Habsburgs. Since the Christian-Ottoman conflict had now clearly shifted from Central Europe to the Mediterranean, one finds de Valette repeatedly alerting Philip about various matters of serious concern after having been secretly informed about them by several letters in cipher that he had received from a network of spies whom he kept in Istanbul on regular salaries. It seems that these paid agents were then keeping the grand master of Malta continuously informed about all naval movements of the Ottomans and their Barbary Coast corsair allies in all parts of the Mediterranean sea. It is significant in this context that on one specific occasion in 1564, de Valette's spies had managed to acquire classified knowledge about a plot that was being hatched between the ruler of Algiers in collusion with other Barbary Coast corsair captains and Suleyman's Ottoman government, to provide the necessary military support to help large numbers of *Moriscos* in Spain, to rebel against *Su sacra Real Católica Majestad*.⁴⁰ Needless to say, de Valette had immediately transmitted this valuable information to Madrid. And on another occasion, also in 1564, de Valette had been informed by his spies that the Grand Mufti of Istanbul (described by them as 'the pope of the Turks') had issued a ruling that those who died in the forthcoming campaign against that '*den of pirates*' in Malta or within ten years of returning from it, would be considered by Allah to have been martyrs⁴¹. In this complex pre-Great Siege scenario, the Order's historian Bosio recorded that the sensational scoop of Giovanni Barelli as the head of the Order's spy network in Istanbul, had been to hand over to de Valette military documents that "were so accurate, so detailed and so all-embracing" so as to merit a handsome reward.⁴² One wonders whether such pre-siege information would have provided the grand master with vital information about the misguided intentions of the enemy to prioritize the attack on St Elmo by mounting batteries on Sceberras hill or to position a powerful basilisk that was about to be ferried to Malta opposite to the Birgu landfront, which would explain why de Vallette would have asked his military engineer Evangelista della Menga da Brindisi to reinforce this sector of the fortifications prior to the Ottoman onslaught in May 1565⁴³. Barelli is also described by Sir Noel Malcolm as a "*Venetian subject from a noble family of Corfu, members of which were active in the grain trade and prominent in the Greek community in Venice.*" On page 96 of Malcolm's book *Agents*

⁴⁰ Noel 98.

⁴¹ A number of sources for this ruling of the Grand Mufti are cited by Williams, 332, note 25. One cannot help commenting that the Grand Mufti's directive reflects one of those often repeated situations in history-writing where, according to the Christian mind-set of the times, (here symbolized by de Valette), all Muslims were considered to be the bad guys – infidels and ferocious predators of Christian territory, but according to the Muslim mind-set, (here symbolized by the Grand Mufti of Istanbul), it was the Christians who were the bad guys – infidels and the predators of Ottoman pilgrim and commercial shipping.

⁴² Bosio, 493

⁴³ See Maiorano, Lucio, *Evangelista Menga dal castello di Copertino al Grande Assedio di Malta*, Copertino: Lupo Edizioni, 2000, 75–81.

of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World, confirms that after completing his job Barelli was handsomely rewarded and made a 'Cavaliere di Grazia' by Grand Master de Valette,⁴⁴ also participating in a heroic manner in the defence of Malta in the Summer of 1565.

As had happened in Rhodes, the Great siege of Malta in 1565 revealed a number of espionage activities commissioned by Grand Master de Valette in St Angelo and by the Ottoman high command in Marsa. At an early stage during this siege, the Grand Master sent an unnamed Calabrian renegade – a Christian-turned-Muslim-turned Christian from Salerno called the '*rinnegato Salernitano*' to infiltrate the Ottoman camp in Marsa and obtain information about the plans of the besieging army. This spy mission was a success as the renegade returned '*informatissimo di ogni particolare*,' for which service this '*huomo da farne molta stima*' was recommended to receive remuneration from the viceroy of Sicily.⁴⁵ There was also a case of Ottoman espionage in Mdina when another Calabrian renegade who had arrived with the Ottoman army, had deceitfully fled the Ottoman camp claiming that he wanted to revert to Christianity. Kept under observation, he was caught passing on to an African slave, a letter about a weak point in the defences of Mdina to the Ottoman general Kızıl Ahmedli Mustafa Pasha, so as to enable him to better plan his attack on the city. Arrested and tortured, he was hanged by one foot and the children of Mdina were urged to finish him off by torching him, piercing him with pointed sticks and stoning him.⁴⁶ It was also from Mdina that, according to Bosio, a certain Stefano from Castro Lombardo who later joined the Christian cavalry wing, informed de Valette that a young fife-player in the Maltese militia was an Ottoman spy for which the youth was first tortured and then tied to the tail of a horse and ignominiously stoned to death. Together with him, a captured Christian-turned Muslim renegade from Messina, was also slowly burnt to death.⁴⁷ There was then the case of a Spaniard called Francesco de Aguilar, 'a skilful man and a good soldier' in the elite relief force known as the *piccolo soccorso* of the Colonel Don Melchior de Robles, a Knight of the Order of Santiago, that had arrived from Sicily in June 1565. Francesco had married a beautiful Gozitan girl, described as '*bellissima*' but he had been afterwards '*seduced by the devil*' to switch sides and become an instrument of Ottoman intelligence. Having collected confidential information by surveying the fortifications and eavesdropping the regular meetings of de Valette's high command in St Angelo, he started feeding the Ottoman commanders with detailed information about the coded messages which were being sent on a daily basis by means of fire signals, smoke signals and gun salvos to

⁴⁴ Malcolm, 98. Gürkan, citing [A]rchivo [G]eneral de [S]imancas: fondo Estado, leg.1132, f.194, gives a date of 12 November for the granting of an *encomienda* to Giovanni Barelli in connexion with this honorary knighthood adding on page 162, that this was not the first time that such a religious reward happened in the Habsburg world of which Malta formed a part; others included the admission into the Order of St James to another spy called Martin de Acuña and the award of a bishopric to a Turkish spy who had offered to go to Istanbul for talks about a truce in 1543.

⁴⁵ Bosio, 537 and 636, cited by Bonello, 100

⁴⁶ Bosio, 627, cited by Bonello, 100

⁴⁷ Bosio, 682, cited by Bonello, 101

communicate with Mdina and to guide the expected massive relief force that had been promised by the Viceroy of Sicily. It is recorded that in view of its implications on the morale of the defenders, this particular case of Ottoman espionage caused great distress to the beleaguered Grand Master.⁴⁸ The Maltese seemed to have been more loyal to the Christian cause. The treachery of the Spaniard had been revealed to the Grand Master by the legendary Toni Bajjada. And it was another Maltese called Michele Vella who informed de Valette about the low morale and limitations of food and munitions in the Ottoman camp⁴⁹. Nardu Camilleri was engaged to carry letters from the Mdina garrison to that of the Gozo citadel and vice-versa⁵⁰ and, also to the detriment of the Ottoman forces, a Christian-turned Muslim man of noble Greek origins called Filippo Lascaris, an esteemed horseman in the Ottoman army who knew about a daring plan for a surprise attack on Fort St Michael, deserted his paymasters and, although fifty-five years of age, swam towards St Angelo to see the Grand Master who, impressed by his daring and revelations rewarded him with a life pension and obtained for him an additional 300 scudi per annum which, after the siege, enabled him to spend the rest of his life living comfortably in Naples.⁵¹

Giovanni Barelli would have had good reason to hate the Ottomans. As a Venetian Corfiot, he would have been witness to the barbarities of Ottoman incursions on that Ionian Island. Since 1401, when Corfu had officially passed under Venetian rule and remained so until 1797, the island had become another bulwark of Catholic Europe against the Ottoman Empire. Like Malta, it had gradually become one of the most fortified places in Europe having powerful artillery fortifications '*a la moderna*' which were repeatedly used by capable Venetian military engineers to defend the islanders from three sieges, all part of a persistent Ottoman policy of penetrating the Adriatic and disrupt Venetian trade.

Attempts by the Ottomans to take the island had already begun in 1386 when Ottoman troops under Ali Bey had landed on the island and unsuccessfully tried to capture the Mediaeval city castle of Byzantine origins. The first Great Siege of Corfu took place in 1537 soon after Suleyman had ordered an army under his star admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa (c.1478–1546) to invade Corfu. On the 28 August of that year this army had been stiffened by an even larger force of 25,000 men commanded by the veteran of the Battle of Mohács (1526) and the Siege of Vienna (1529), general Ayas Mehmed Pasha (1483–1539), but again it had failed to capture the castle, afterwards wreaking vengeance on the inhabitants by pillaging and destroying many countryside villages and, according to the contemporary historian Marco Guazzo, enslaving 15–16,000 Corfiots⁵². Despite

⁴⁸ Bosio, 626–627, cited by Bonello, 101–102.

⁴⁹ Bosio, 682 cited by Bonello, 102.

⁵⁰ Bosio, 531 cited by Bonello, 102.

⁵¹ Bosio, 708, cited by Bonello, 102.

⁵² Stamatopoulos, Nondas, *Old Corfu: History and Culture*. Second Edition. Athens: C. Michalas, 1978, 30–32. In this work, Stamatopoulos gives on 265–271, an extensive bibliography of books and articles on Corfu. See also Guazzo, Marco, *Historie*,

the destruction wrought on the countryside of Corfu, however, the city castle had held out in spite of repeated attempts over a twelve day period to take it, partly because of poor logistics and partly because of a virulent epidemic that had caused havoc in the Ottoman ranks, as had happened in Malta during the Great Siege.

Thirty-four years later, in August 1571, a strong Ottoman force of 8000 men under the command of Pertan Pasha again attempted to conquer the island, which in the meantime was being fitted with new bastioned defences encircling the city⁵³ Having seized Parga and Mourtos from their base on the Greek mainland side, the Ottoman army then attacked the Paxi islands and subsequently landed on Corfu's south-east shore where they seem to have established a large beachhead all the way from the southern tip of the island at Lefkimi to Ipsos. These areas were thoroughly pillaged but the stiffened city castle again stood firm, a tribute to Corfiot-Venetian steadfastness as well as to the Venetian military engineering skills that had been pioneered by the great Michele Sanmicheli (1484–1559). The success of the Christian inhabitants of Corfu was also due to the invincibility of the castle of Angelokastro, located on particularly steep and rocky terrain on the northwest coast near Palaeokastritsa. These setbacks in the east and the west of the island proved decisive, and the Ottomans subsequently had abandoned their siege and departed. Two years later, however, they had decided to repeat their attempt. Coming from North Africa after a victorious campaign, they had landed in Corfu and again wreaked havoc on the rural areas but following a vigorous counter-attack by the Venetian-Corfiot forces, the Ottoman troops had once more been forced to abandon their efforts.

The last great siege of Corfu took place well after Giovanni Barelli's death from natural causes. It happened in 1716, during the last Ottoman–Venetian War (1714–18). After the conquest of the Peloponnese in 1715, an Ottoman fleet under admiral Canum Hoca Mehmed Pasha appeared in Buthrotum opposite Corfu. On 8 July this fleet, carrying 33,000 soldiers under the command of Kara Mustafa Pasha, sailed from here to Corfu, establishing a beachhead at Govino and Ipsos, later moving to Potamos. In the meantime, however, a Venetian fleet under the command of Andrea Pisani and Andrea Cornaro, encountered the Ottoman fleet off the Corfu Channel and, although outnumbered, defeated it in the ensuing naval battle. On 19 July, after taking some outlying Christian forts, the Ottoman invading army reached the hills around the city of Corfu and laid siege to it. Despite repeated assaults and heavy fighting, the Ottomans seem to have been unable to breach the new defences and were forced to raise the siege after 22 days. The 5,000 Venetians and foreign mercenaries, together with 3,000 Corfiots,

Venice, 1545. An excellent engraving of the castle of Corfu as it would have appeared to the ottomans at this time, was produced by Hendich van Cliven (1525–89) which is reproduced on the frontispiece of the above-mentioned 1978 book by courtesy of G. Linardos.

⁵³ Stamatopoulos, 34. The new defences of Corfu, built in two stages in the periods 1576–88 (strengthening of the fortifications around the castle and the erection of new curtain walls and bastions encircling the castle and its suburb) and 1576–1645 (the building of a new fortress) converted Corfu into one of the strongest fortified places in the Mediterranean, as seen in a bird's eye view drawing by Jean Baptiste Homann which was first published in Nurnberg in 1735.

under the command of the German *condottiere* in the employ of Venice, Count Johann Matthias von der Schulenburg (1661–1747)⁵⁴ were once again victorious⁵⁵. Viewed by many as the final check – after Malta, Lepanto and Vienna – to Ottoman attempts at penetrating Western Europe, Schulenburg’s triumph was widely celebrated in Europe, Corfu being seen as a bastion of Western civilization against Ottoman ambitions to destroy it. The German general’s achievement was later celebrated in grand style in the allegorical oratorio *Juditha triumphans devicta Holofernis barbarie*, composed by the great Venetian Baroque composer Antonio Lucio Vivaldi (1678–1741).

Just before his death in 1568, Grand Master Jean de Valette, had given orders to an Albanian Knight called Gasparo Bruni to first visit Rome as part of a three-man delegation and afterwards, armed with a strong letter of recommendation from Pope Pius V Ghislieri (1566–72) dated 6 December 1567, to take up residence in the borderland town of Dubrovnik – then called Ragusa. Although an Ottoman vassal state, Ragusa was not immune from Ottoman suspicions about possible leakages of classified information from Istanbul to the Christian West. Operating in such a difficult environment – where things were accelerated in 1572 when the Ottoman sultan prohibited the passage of Christian merchants to Istanbul, Bruni’s task was to co-ordinate the covert activities of the existing spy network of the Order in Istanbul⁵⁶. Among other things he was entrusted to collect all messages in cipher from these ‘*amici*’ (trusted friends) in Istanbul and forward them to the Grand Master in Malta. At this time, de Valette, would have been a worried man. Anxious to finish the *Città Nuova* of Valletta but also conscious of spy reports that several new galleys were being constructed in the arsenal of Istanbul (and that the port towns of the North African coast had ominously received large orders for galley *biscotto* from Istanbul), the Grand Master would have been anxious to receive

⁵⁴ According to Fr. Albr. v. d. Schulenburg’s book *Leben und Denkwürdigkeiten des Johann Matthias v. d. Schulenburg* published in 1834 in two volumes in Leipzig, Count Johann Matthias Reichsgraf von der Schulenburg (1661–1747) was a German aristocrat and a brilliant general of Brandenburg-Prussian background, who served in the Saxon and Venetian armies in the early 18th century and found a second career following his retirement in Venice, as a grand collector of art works. For an account of the 1716 siege of Corfu, see also Werner v. d. Schulenburg, *Roman über die Verteidigung Korfus gegen die Türken Der König von Korfu*, 1950.

⁵⁵ Stamatopoulos, 35–37. The successes of Count Johann Matthias von der Schulenburg of Saxony in the wars of the Habsburg emperors against the Turks in Hungary (1687–88) and in the Battles of Oudenaarde and Malplaquet during the wars of Spanish Succession (1700–14) when he was serving under Prince Eugene of Savoy, attracted the attention of the Venetian authorities who were then anxious about the defence of the Ionian Islands. He was therefore recruited into the successful defence of Ulcinj in 1711 and, five years later, of the island of Corfu where he was entrusted with the conduct of the 1716 siege against the invading Ottoman Turks. According to Fr. Albr. v. d. Schulenburg’s *op. cit.*, he was decorated by the *Serenissima* for his outstanding victory with a statue and an annual pension of 5000 ducats.

⁵⁶ Bonello, 97. According to Malcolm, 5., Gasparo Bruni was the brother of the influential Archbishop Giovanni Bruni of Bar who participated in the deliberations of the Council of Trent (1545–63) but was later enslaved after the Ottoman occupation of Bar in August 1571 and condemned to row as part of the *chusma* of an Ottoman galley. He was killed accidentally at the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571 by Spanish soldiers who, it is said, ignored his cries of “*I’m a bishop, I’m a Christian*”. His more fortunate brother Gasparo became a Knight of Malta in October 1567 and achieved fame for his covert activities as a spy in the Adriatic area, as extensively discussed by Malcolm, 135–136. Together with the Knight of Malta Mathurin Romegas, he participated, as captain of the papal flagship, in the naval battle of Lepanto where he earned himself a position of honour fighting bravely on board his ship, despite his several wounds and the shock of receiving news of the tragic death of his brother. After 1573, Gasparo Bruno was sent by the pope to stiffen the Catholic cause in the French wars of Religion (1562–98), at the head of a company of 190 soldiers sent to fight the Huguenots who were then threatening the papal enclave of Avignon, for which see Malcolm, 278–298.

updated news about plans of the new sultan Selim II to send out a major expeditionary force to once again attack Malta in the following Spring. In these letters from Bruni, the code name for the Grand Master was *Vittorio Belforte* derived, according to Bonello from the victory of the Great Siege (*vittoria*) and the building of the new town of Valletta (*Belforte*), which was then still under construction. In the meantime, the espionage activities of the Knight of Malta Giovanni Barelli, whose family interests in Corfu had suffered tremendously during the Ottoman incursions of 1537 and 1571, were attracting the attention of the Spanish authorities in Sicily who seem to have been conscious of the fact that the spymaster had been treated with great familiarity by the hero of the Great Siege who had admired his encyclopaedic knowledge of Ottoman affairs.⁵⁷

Sultan Suleyman had died on 6 September 1566 after setting out from Istanbul at the head of a fresh military expedition in Hungary. In view of his experience in espionage activity, Barelli now seems to have emerged as the focal point in a vast intrigue of the Christian powers to neutralize the renewed aggressive plans of Suleyman's successor, Sultan Selim II (1566–74) (FIG. 6) who was the son of Suleyman the Magnificent and Roxelana. For this purpose the new viceroy of Sicily, Francesco Ferdinando d'Ávalos d'Aquino, VII Marquis of Pescara and III Marquis of Vasto, summoned Barelli to Palermo to discuss ways and means to implement instructions that he had received from Madrid to get to know all that concerned the state of affairs in the Ottoman Empire after the death of the dreaded Suleyman⁵⁸. At this meeting held in the Summer of 1569, Barelli had so impressed the Viceroy that the latter advised him to travel to Spain to reveal his plans directly to King Philip II. These "*algunas cosas de consideración*"⁵⁹ were recorded in a letter that the Viceroy sent to the King on 15 September 1569⁶⁰ from where it emerges that Barelli had mentioned that he had managed to make contact with a number of Greeks, two of whom were Giovanni Acida, a leading cleric (*pope*) of Rhodes, and his son-in-law who was the master of a merchant ship. Acida, explained Barelli, had taken the initiative to contact a certain Greek called Mustafa Labudi who although born in the Morea, had lived for a long time in Turkey where he had occupied a number of high posts of trust despite secretly receiving the Sacrament of confession and communicating with the deceased Grand Master de Valette about plans to set fire to the naval arsenal of Istanbul and to poison the twenty-eight year old son of the sultan!⁶¹ Barelli continued saying that this Labudi had in the past collaborated with a certain Nicola Cernotabey – a man of great authority – to organize the evacuation to Christian territory and

⁵⁷ Malcolm, 98., suggests that there could have been instances of networking between between Barelli and Bruni in 1567–68 when earlier reports written by the former on Ottoman support for the *Moriscos* of Spain could have passed through the hands of Bruni' It is possible that it was this information concerning the fight of Philip II against these *Moriscos* that had first attracted the attention of the Spanish authorities in Sicily.

⁵⁸ Canosa, Romano and Colonello, Isabella, *Spionaggio a Palermo: aspetti della Guerra segreta turco spagnola in Mediterraneo nel Cinquecento*, Palermo: Selleri editore, 1991, 85.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84 citing [A]rchivo [G]eneral de [S]imancas: fondo Estado, leg.1132, doc.155.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 85 citing AGS: fondo Estado, leg.1132, doc.164.

subsequent mobilization of some 50,000 rebel Greeks and Albanians from the Morea who had managed to escape from the cities of Napoli di Romania, Napoli di Malvasia and Corinth before they had been occupied by Ottoman forces.⁶² In the troubled climate of fear prevailing in the Morea, Barelli also promised to personally deliver to the Spaniards, the “treacherous” Duke of Naxos – a man called Josè Nasi (1520–79) (Fig. 7) – who was a Jew who had carved out for himself a career as an influential advisor and spymaster in Istanbul where, he had vented his well-known hatred of the Christian faith by becoming one of the main instruments of the new Sultan Selim II’s aggressive policy of hate, inherited from his mother Roxelana, against Christian Europe⁶³.

Who was this Josè Nasi, the Duke of Naxos, also known in various Christian and Ottoman contemporary sources as Dom João Micas Mendes, Juan de Miches, Giuseppe Nasi and Yosef Nasi and considered by Gaspare de Caro as the “*principale ideatore delle imprese contro la cristianita e potente per i molti informatori su cui egli poteva contare nella stessa Madrid*”⁶⁴ ?

Born in the Iberian peninsula within a family of Maranos who secretly, and in constant dread of the Inquisition, were still practising their Jewish faith – Josè Nasi’s childhood had been marked by the early death of his father Agostinho Micas – a well-known physician and professor of medicine at the University of Lisbon.⁶⁵ The child had afterwards been brought up by his father’s brothers Francesco and Diego Nasi. After having changed their family name to Mendez to conceal their Jewish origins, Francesco and Diego had, with the help of a relative called Rabbi Abraham Benveniste, amassed a fortune as well-connected bankers. Forced to flee from the Spanish Inquisition and take up residence in Antwerp in 1546, the rich Mendez family, including the young Josè and his aunt Doña Gracia, (the widow of Francesco who had since died) opened a branch office of their Portuguese banking house in Antwerp where the clever Doña Gracia soon took over the management of the family fortune and bank. Under her care and affection, the young Josè grew up as a man of high education, excellent manners and great charisma. After completing his studies at the University of Louvain, he took over the management of the Mendez bank and, in the course of his business, came into contact

⁶² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

⁶⁴ De Caro, BARELLI Giovanni. The quoted text in translation reads: “the prime mover of Ottoman enterprises against the Christian faith and very powerful because of the many informants on which he could rely, in the same Madrid”

⁶⁵ Unless otherwise stated, this and other information about the Duke of Naxos are based on the following sources: Bulut, Mehmet, *Ottoman-Dutch Economic Relations in the Early Modern Period 1571–1699*, Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2001; Freely, John, *The Cyclades*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2006; Gordon, Benjamin Lee, *New Judea: Jewish Life in Modern Palestine and Egypt*, Manchester: New Hampshire, Ayer Publishing, 1977; Hillgarth, Jocelyn Nigel, *The Mirror of Spain, 1500–1700*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000; Morris, Jan, *The Venetian Empire*, London, Penguin Books, 1980; Pasachoff, Naomi E. and Littman, Robert J., *A Concise History of the Jewish People*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005; Rezachevici, Constantin, “Ereii în țările române în evul mediu,” in *Magazin Istoric*, September 1995, 59–62; Roth, Cecil, *A Bird’s Eye History of the World*, New York City: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1954; Stillman, Norman A., *Sephardi Religious Responses to Modernity*, London: Routledge, 1995; Urman, Dan and McCracken Flesher, Paul Virgil, *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Data*, Leiden: Brill, 1995 and an online article by Nissan Mindel published and copyrighted by the Kehot Publication Society.

with members of the royal houses of many European countries. His personal charm and wisdom stood him in good stead. The king of France himself borrowed a large sum of money from the Mendez bank as did Mary of Austria (1505–58), also known as Mary of Hungary who in 1531 had been appointed Regent of the Spanish Netherlands by her brother, the Habsburg Emperor Charles V who, in a letter to his sister had once remarked that *“I am only one and I can’t be everywhere; and I must be where I ought to be and where I can, and often enough only where I can be and not where I would like to be; for one can’t do more than one can do.”*⁶⁶ Although unhappy in her role in the Netherlands, Mary had bestowed several honours on the brilliant banker.

In the course of their business in Antwerp, the Mendez family learnt that in the Ottoman Empire, Jews led a far better life than in Christian territory, sometimes even becoming close advisers of Sultan Suleyman. Besides, they also enjoyed greater freedom of movement. As early as 1417, when the Albanian town of Vlorë had been seized by the Ottomans, a large number of Jews, fleeing persecution in Western Europe, had found refuge there and by 1520, the size of the original Jewish community in Vlorë had swelled to 2700, becoming a vital factor in the vibrant commercial life of that Ottoman town.⁶⁷ As the operations of the Inquisition in the Spanish Netherlands intensified, Josè and his aunt Dona Gracia decided to leave Antwerp for good and eventually seek refuge in the Ottoman empire, where they would be permitted to openly practise the religion of their family. It took them several years to arrange their business affairs so as to enable them to leave Antwerp without ruining themselves financially. Nevertheless it had cost them a goodly part of their fortune before they were able to depart in 1549. Although they had formed their plans in strict secrecy, a suspicious Charles V, was just about to take over the entire Mendez fortune when Josè and Doña Gracia succeeded in escaping from Antwerp at night, taking with them a great deal of their valuables and funds. They reached Venice safely under the assumed names of Juan Miguel and Beatrice de Luna but when their true identity was eventually discovered by the Venetian authorities, Doña Gracia was placed behind bars and her nephew José was forced to flee Venice and seek refuge for a time in nearby Ferrara under the protection of Duke Ercole II d’Este (1508–59), the eldest son of Alfonso I d’Este and Pope Alexander VI’s daughter, Lucrezia Borgia. The final decision to leave Italy and set sail for Istanbul was taken by Josè and his aunt Doña Gracia in 1522, after clearance had been obtained from the Court of Suleyman the Magnificent through the good offices of Jose’s friend Rabbi Moshe Hamon who was the personal physician of the sultan.

In Suleyman’s Istanbul, Josè and his aunt soon started using their old family name Nasi and they made the fortunate decision of supporting Suleyman’s favourite son, the future Sultan Selim II, against his rival Bayezid, with the result, that José, now Yosef Nasi, eventually became, during Selim’s reign, a high ranking diplomat and a highly respected

⁶⁶ Koenigsberger, Helmut Georg, *Monarchies, States Generals and Parliaments: the Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, 123.

⁶⁷ Malcolm, 131

minister of the *Sublime Porte* using his former trading connections in Europe, to exercise great influence on the foreign policy of the Ottoman Empire. Despite opposition from the Grand Vizier Mehmed Sokollu – a Bosnian of unscrupulous character – he managed to negotiate peace with Poland and rig the election of the Polish king Sigismund II. He was also awarded with a monopoly of the beeswax trade with Poland, and of the wine trade with Moldavia, also manoeuvring the key positions of the Moravian princes Ioan Iacob Heraclid, Alexandru Lăpușeanu and Ion Vodă cel Cumplit, who supported the sultan's foreign policy. During the reign of Selim II, Yosef Nasi also instigated, among other things, a fire in the naval arsenal of Venice (for which his relative Abraham Benveniste had been arrested in 1571), a Protestant uprising against Spanish rule in the Netherlands, the formation of various Jewish colonies in the Ottoman Empire and Selim II's invasion of Venetian Cyprus in 1570–71, which ended with the capture of Famagusta when all Christians still in the city were massacred and the Venetian commander Marco Antonio Bragadin tortured and killed⁶⁸. After being kept in prison for two weeks without medical attention for his wounds, he was, according to Norich, dragged round the walls with sacks of earth and stone on his back; next, tied to a chair, he was hoisted to the yardarm of the Turkish flagship and exposed to the taunts of the sailors. Finally, he was taken to his designated place of execution in the main square, tied naked to a column, and flayed alive like St Bartholomew, while reciting the *Miserere* and invoking the name of Jesus. Bragadin's quartered body was then distributed as a war trophy among the army, and his skin was stuffed with straw and sewn, reinvested with his military insignia, and exhibited on an ox in a grisly procession along the streets of Famagusta. The macabre trophy, together with the severed heads of general Alvise Martinengo, Gianantonio Querini and the castellan Andrea Bragadin, was then hoisted upon the masthead pennant of the personal galley of the Ottoman commander, Amir al-Bahr Mustafa Pasha, to be brought to Istanbul as a gift for Sultan Selim II⁶⁹. As a result of these and other achievements, a grateful Selim appointed Josè to serve the Ottoman Empire as the Duke of Naxos; also later becoming the Count of Andros. Represented in Greece by Francesco Coronello, Nasi mainly ruled his duchy from his Istanbul palace of Belvedere, where he also maintained a Hebrew printing press, which was kept by his wife, his aunt's daughter Doña Reyna, after the duke's death in 1579. After the death of Selim, he had lost influence in the Ottoman Court, but had been allowed to keep his titles and pension for the remainder of his life. Christian Europe, it was then said, would never forget the alleged role that the Duke of Naxos had played in orchestrating

⁶⁸ Despite Giovanni Barelli's accusations about the treacherous role of the duke of Naxos in the Ottoman Court made to the Viceroy of Sicily in the Summer of 1569, Yosef Nasi's role in the Ottoman invasion of Cyprus is rather doubtful since, according to Malcolm, 101–103, a complex set of geopolitical considerations concerning pilgrimage and trading sea-routes, could also have played a crucial role in influencing Sultan Selim's decision to invade Cyprus. An added religious motivation – the presence on the island of a number of mosques and other relics from a brief period of Ottoman rule in the past, was also possible.

⁶⁹ Norwich, John Julius. *A History of Venice*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982, 479.

Selim's invasion of Cyprus and, perhaps, the unprecedented atrocities committed by the Ottomans in Famagusta.

But there was much more to the Jew. Was there some other reason why the Order's spy Giovanni Barelli had also promised the Spanish authorities in the Summer of 1569, to personally deliver to the Spaniards, the "treacherous" Duke of Naxos, dead or alive? By this time, Yosef Nasi had become not only Sultan Selim's principal advisor but also his most trusted spymaster, commanding a vast undercover network of Ottoman agents surpassing in efficiency that of his already-mentioned omnipotent rival in the sultan's court, the Grand Vizier Mehmed Sokollu. Nasi is thus described by Gürkan:

*"Joseph Nasi, the powerful Marrano with large financial means managed to become Selim II's favourite and a formidable rival to omnipotent Grand Vizier Sokollu during the Ottoman-Venetian War. He employed numerous spies in the West and used his connections in trade and financial centres, first and foremost with Jewish communities in Mediterranean ports, for gathering information on behalf of the Ottomans."*⁷⁰

In his role as Sultan Selim's spymaster, Nasi would have therefore been in a unique position to exploit to the full the benefits of his extensive financial networks in those countries bordering the Mediterranean as well as his close connections with all those Jewish communities who would have provided him with information to express their anger at their Christian persecutors. According to the Sultan Selim, there was no one in his court who was better informed about "Christian affairs" than Yosef Nasi⁷¹ and according to documents in the Simancas archives, also cited by Gürkan, Nasi's spy network included several Jews living in Bologna, Ferrara, Venice, Prague, Antwerp, Candia, Corfu Thine, Lvov, Lublin, Cracow, Cutin and many other European towns. So efficient was Yosef Nasi's counter-espionage network that it had been already been seen as a threat by the Doge of Venice in the 1560's when it had become known that Nasi's spies had instigated Duke Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy to reclaim an old right to the Venetian island of Cyprus, later even devising a devilish plot to enable the Ottomans to pounce upon the key Cypriot port city of Famagusta that Sultan Selim would, as above mentioned, eventually conquer two years later, on the Jew's advice⁷² Nasi also seems to have had connections with the leader of the Protestant Dutch revolt against Spain, since William of Nassau, the Prince of Orange, had sent him an envoy to keep communication channels between them, open. These were but some of the results of Selim's spymaster which drew upon him the ire of the Catholic Habsburgs, the Grand Master of the Order of Malta, the Pope in Rome and the Doge of Venice. Rivalling his extensive network was that of Selim's Grand Vizier Sokollu (1565–79). In 1572, one of

⁷⁰ Quoted from Gürkan (2012B), 11.

⁷¹ A[rchivio di] S[tato di] V[enezia], CX-Lett. Amb., b.3, 179–180 cited in Gürkan (2012A) 378.

⁷² Sereno, Bartolomeo, *Commentari della Guerra di Cipro e della Lega dei Principi Cristiani contro il Turco*, Monte Cassino: Tipi di Monte Cassino, 1845, 16–17, cited in Gürkan (2012B), 379.

Sokollu's spies who had visited Naples and other cities in Habsburg Italy and even had the daring to sail on the *capitana* of the Order of Malta under the guise of a slave-ransom broker, had left Dubrovnik to spy in Rome. In January 1574, the Habsburg authorities were informed that, as had happened before the Great Siege of Malta, two Ottoman engineers, this time posing as slave-ransom agents, had been sent by the Grand Vizier to survey the fortifications of Corfu and Puglia. And in 1567, had not Sokollu made arrangements with a number of disgruntled Moriscos to spy for him in Sicily, Spain, Italy and Germany?⁷³

On being received by King Philip II of Spain, where he presumably elaborated on the above-mentioned plan to neutralize the undercover activities of the detested Nasi, it seems to have become clear that Giovanni Barelli's proposals much depended on generous rewards for the players and their accomplices involved in all these covert operations, particularly important to succeed in the difficult operation of kidnapping the elusive Yosef Nasi, whom Barelli knew personally⁷⁴. It is revealed⁷⁵ that one of these accomplices was a mysterious *Padre Isacco*, the abbot of the monastery of S. Michele della Morea who was Nicola Cernotabey's confessor. The Patriarch of Istanbul was another who expected a handsome reward for his covert services in the vast network of informers that had been set up by 1569. Barelli's ambitious plans would have also depended on money to cover the salaries that in the past had been previously covered by Grand Master de Valette and to ferry armaments and explosives. King Philip II's approval, emphasising the importance of abducting the duke of Naxos, was given in a long letter in code communicated to the Viceroy of Sicily dated 22 October 1569⁷⁶ which specified among other details, that the Knight of Malta Barelli was to be given 400 ducats and a chain of gold besides all the necessary explosives and money to carry out his dangerous mission successfully⁷⁷.

Barelli started his infiltration operation in January 1570, on the eve of the Ottoman invasion of Cyprus and just one year and four months before the crucial naval battle of Lepanto on 7 October 1571. It was doomed to failure from the very start when, on arriving in Candia (Crete), from Messina, he had an argument with the *pope* Giovanni Acida. He was then informed that Cernotabey had died in the previous month and,

⁷³ Sola, Emilio, *Uchali el calabrés y Margliani el Milanés, frente a frente en Estambul el 10 de febrero de 1580* *Guión historio para un posible juego audiovisual* in *Archivo de la Frontera*, <http://www.archivode.la.frontera.com/pdf/A-MED24.pdf>, 141 cited in Gürkan (2012B), 377, fn.121.

⁷⁴ Gürkan, (2012A), 237 citing AGS: *fondo Estado*, leg.1332, fol. 167 informs us that in so far as early modern espionage was concerned, there had to be a direct correlation between the financial capabilities of rulers and the efficiency of their spy networks, this explaining why a Habsburg spy in Dubrovnik in 1573 complained that "*Omnia per pecuniam facta sunt et sine ipsa factum est nihil*," which was considered necessary to gather information "*de tal calidad que es menester*"

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 85–86 citing AGS: *fondo Estado*, leg.1132, doc.176.

⁷⁶ Canosa and Colonello, reproduces some extracts of this long letter (which, incidentally refers to Giovanni Barelli as *Com.or Vareli*) on pages 87–88. Concerning the need to capture the duke of Naxos, Juan Miches, we are informed in endnote 4, on page 166 of this book that the extracts which are reproduced on pages 87–88 have been also mentioned in Arce, A., *Espionaje y ultima Aventura de Jose Nasi (1569–74)* in *Sefarad*, 1953, 265.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 88, citing AGS: *fondo Estado*, leg. 1132, doc.193.

worse, that the Duke of Naxos, who seems to have been his prime target, had gone to Istanbul implying that their meeting had to be cancelled since Barelli could not travel to Istanbul because of bad winter weather which had kept him holed up in Zante. All this was explained in a letter⁷⁸ sent by the Viceroy of Sicily to his king and collaborated in a report⁷⁹ of another spy in the service of Venice in Istanbul called Giovanni Maria Renzo. Renzo also provided details about the other failed attempt to set fire to the arsenal of that city which, had it materialized would have considerably weakened the Ottoman forces at Lepanto. Although the ring leader of this attempt – named as Suleyman Bey – managed to vanish into thin air, his accomplices were either impaled or roasted on a galley anchor or condemned to spend the rest of their lives as galley slaves.⁸⁰

A more elaborate version of Barelli's plans spearheaded by Venice – now including the Sultan himself as one of the targets – was reactivated soon after the Christian victory at Lepanto, in late 1571. By then, Barelli, despite his tarnished credibility due to his failed 1570 mission (which had earned him temporary imprisonment in Messina by the viceroy of Sicily, Francesco Ferdinando d'Avalos d'Aquino), had been exonerated from all fault by direct order of the newly appointed commander of the Christian allied fleet at Lepanto, King Philip's half-brother, Prince Don Juan of Austria⁸¹. Did Barelli know too much? Was it possible that his still intact network of spies in the Ottoman Empire had served well Don Juan when he had managed to obtain precious pre-Lepanto information about some glaring weaknesses of the Ottoman fleet?⁸² This would explain why the liberated Barelli would have continued serving well the Spanish and Austrian branches of the Habsburg Imperial family as an intrepid spy, travelling several times to Istanbul. There is some evidence that in 1574, the master spy was in Naples where,

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 90–91, citing AGS: *fondo Estado*, leg.1133, doc. 62 and 64.

⁷⁹ Canosa, Colonello, 93–95 citing AGS *fondo Estado*: leg. 1133, doc 124.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ De Caro.

⁸² AGS, *fondo Estado*, leg.1401,fol.149 (Spy Reports from Istanbul dated 19 March 1571, from Otranto dated 13 June 1571 and from Corfu dated 24 June 1571) and AGS, *fondo Estado*, leg.1401, fol.141 (Spy Report from Dimitri Risicari in Corfu dated 30 May 1571) cited by Williams, 69 and 290. These and other reports enabled the high command of the Christian allied forces at Lepanto to assess the grave weaknesses of their Ottoman adversaries which included the low morale of its captains and sailors, the inexperience of the novice oarsmen of the ships that had been sent out by the sultan and the sickness that was rife among the soldiers on board. All these weaknesses would have affected negatively the propulsion and manoeuvrability of the Ottoman galleys. In the sixteenth century Mediterranean, the oarsmen of galleys of the type employed at Lepanto varied greatly in their 'levels of ability, stamina, physical strength, health and resistance to disease' so that the best galleys were those that had a large proportion of well-trained, experienced rowers, for which see Williams, 75–90. Gürkan (2012B), 1–38, quotes archival sources that he investigated in Istanbul which confirm that Don Juan had also received reports from the Orthodox metropolitan of Balya Badra (Patras), who not only organised a local rebellion against the Ottomans in co-operation with some Greek rebels of Manya, but also provided critical information for the Christian fleet. He sent letters including his observations about the Ottoman navy when it reached the shores of Patras confirming that the galleys were not fully manned and that it was high time for the Christians to attack (BOA, MD, X, no. 174; H. 28 Şaban 979, A.D. 15 January 1572). It is significant that the Ottomans at this time issued an order for inspection against the monks of a monastery in Eğriboz (Negroponte/ Euboea) who were suspected to be sending information to the enemy (BOA, MD, X, no. 299). It is possible that all these members of the Greek Orthodox Church had formed part of Barelli's vast network of spies in the Eastern Mediterranean.

although criticised by the influential Cardinal Antoine Granvelle⁸³ as a person of ‘little or no credibility,’ he continued communicating updated news about Ottoman preparations to attack La Goletta and Tunis⁸⁴. In 1575 he spent several months in Istanbul, and on his return he wrote a very detailed and well-informed analysis of the new Sultan’s likely military and geopolitical strategy for the following year. What is amazing is that, as had happened on previous occasions, his presence in Istanbul, was tolerated and even appreciated by his Ottoman hosts, presumably for his tireless efforts of ransoming Muslim slaves held in Christian hands. As he himself put it in a memorandum for his Spanish masters in 1574, *‘I have gained great fame among the Ottomans by having a reputation for doing them a service by ransoming Ottomans who are slaves.’* It would seem that, as had happened before with two other spies in the service of Spain called Adam de Franchis and Giovanni Maria Renzo (who, according to Malcolm,⁸⁵ has been in Istanbul in the 1560’s on the same pretext of ransoming slaves), Barelli was comfortably installed in a palatial residence in contrast to several Christian suspects who, for security reasons, were confined in the prison tower of the Yedikule fortress⁸⁶ where they were subjected to frequent interrogations and beatings. On 20 July 1576, the Duke of Sessa, Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordoba, described Barelli as an *“hombre de confianza... muchos años ha andado ocupado en cosas secretas.”*⁸⁷ It seems that in the years following Lepanto, Barelli was once again offering to continue serving the Spanish Habsburgs by obtaining for them the services of a Christian renegade who had assumed the Muslim name of Azan Aga. He was a close and trusted advisor to the king of Algiers. And in a later 10 October 1579 communication addressed to the new viceroy of Sicily, Marco Antonio Colonna

⁸³ His Eminence, Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (1517–86), Comte de La Baume Saint Amour, was a Burgundian statesman, made a cardinal, who followed his father as a leading minister of the Spanish Habsburgs, and was one of the most influential European politicians during the time which immediately followed the appearance of Protestantism in Europe; In 1575, he was summoned to Madrid by Philip II to be president of the council for Italian affairs. Described by Hugh Trevor-Roper in his book *Princes and Artists, Patronage and Ideology at Four Habsburg Courts 1517–1633*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976, 112) as “the dominating Imperial statesman of the whole century”, the Granvelle was also a notable art collector who possessed the greatest private collector of his time, also a friend and patron of Titian and Leoni and many other artists of the time.

⁸⁴ Malcolm, 232.

⁸⁵ Malcolm, 217.

⁸⁶ Built in 1458 by the Sultan Mehmet II, this fortress was situated in the Yedikule neighbourhood of Fatih, in Istanbul, hence its name which means “Castle of the Seven Towers.” It was frequently used as a state prison where ambassadors of states currently at war with the Ottomans were usually imprisoned. The fortress also housed prisoners who were victims of palace intrigue and fighting, as well as political opponents of the imperial court leading to its association with court intrigues which captured the imagination of many over the centuries, as revealed in various legends, stories, and the arts. According to the following extract of a lengthy description of Istanbul provided in the milieu of letters of an Ottoman spy in Paris, known as *Mahmud the Arabian* for which see De Lucca (2018), 5: “*At the extremity of the town is seen the antique building of a fortress, which is called the Castle of the Seven Towers; a work of inimitable architecture. There is a garrison in it of two hundred and fifty soldiers; not one of which dares to set his foot out of the castle-gates without the leave of the Vizir Azem, unless it be on two certain days in the year, that is, the first of Beiram, and Ramezan. In this place formerly the Ottoman Emperors used to lay their treasure of gold and silver, their arms and ammunition, their books, and whatsoever they esteemed precious. But Amurat, the son of Selinus II, translated all these things into the Serail; where they have been kept ever since: And this castle is turned into a prison for kings and princes taken captives by the True Faithful; as also for rebellious bassas, and other persons of quality. Here; Coresqui, Vayvod of Moldavia, was shut up in the year 1617 of the Christian era. And in the year 1622 of the same date, the rebellious Iannizaries imprisoned their sovereign lord, Sultan Osman, whom afterwards they strangled in the same place.*”

⁸⁷ ACS, *fondo Estado*, leg.1132, doc. 193, cited by De Caro in his biography on Barelli. Translated these words mean “a man who for many years occupied himself with secret matters.”

(1535–84), King Philip II mentioned a Giovanni Barelli who had also served for some time in the Spanish armies of Flanders but Gaspare De Caro says that there are some doubts as to whether the king was referring to the same person or to someone else bearing the same name.⁸⁸

In the seventeenth century, the intelligence service of the Order remained very active and seems to have been expanded to include networks of spies in several cities as well as fast brigantine spyships which were sent out to collect information in diverse parts of the Mediterranean. According to Bonello, the Order of Malta now had spy networks in Russia and in several other countries, mentioning that archival documents have been identified to suggest that in 1646, Grand Master Jean-Paul Lascaris Castellar received information from Russia that an army of Cossacks had left Poland to attack Ottoman forces in the sensitive Black Sea region⁸⁹ and that one of the more successful secret agents of the Order was a Dominican Friar called Fra Giovanni from Lucca.⁹⁰ Yet another case of espionage which highlighted the value of espionage activity in the Mediterranean war theatre had happened two years before in the year 1644, during the magistracy of the same Grand Master. It was a memorable year in the history of the long drawn out conflict of the Order of Malta and the Ottoman Empire on the high seas and it was made possible by virtue of continuing activity of spies of the Order providing prior notice of a lucrative prize in the form of the *Gran Sultana*, the largest galleon of the Ottoman fleet, which was on 28 September 1644 making its way from Istanbul to Alexandria. The seven-hour battle took place about 70 miles of the island of Rhodes. The ship which was attacked by six galleys of the Order of Malta under the command of the Knight Gabriel de Chambres Boisbaudran who lost his life in the battle, was carrying a mysterious nineteen-year old woman called Bassebà, described by Pozzo as a '*giovane bellissima*' who, according to the same source, was believed by many to have been the lady-in-waiting of the wife of the Sultan.⁹¹ This woman was accompanied by her two-year old son Osman who had been born out of wedlock as a result of an affair

⁸⁸ De Caro.

⁸⁹ Bonello, 104 citing Bartolomeo dal Pozzo's *Historia*, Volume II, published in Venice in 1715, 48, 71 and 80.

⁹⁰ This was not the only case when Religious attire and connexions were a convenient disguise for espionage activity. The Simancas Archives (AGS, E 1074, fol. 108) reveal that the famous Spanish spy and diplomat Martin de Acuña had, in the previous century, had used monasteries as lodging on his way to Istanbul. And according to the Başbakanlık Osmanlık Arşivleri Archive in Istanbul (BOA, MD, X, nos 325 and 32; H.3 Ramazan 979, A.D. 19 January 1572) cited in Gürkan (2012B) 1–38, there were also cases when Ottoman spies chose to travel disguised as Christian monks until they were discovered and detained, together with the letters they carried.

⁹¹ The capture of the *Gran Sultana* by the galleys of the Order of Malta off Rhodes is described in great detail in dal Pozzo (1715), 82–91. In mentioning this mysterious Bassebà who eventually died in Malta on 6 January 1645, dal Pozzo uses the following words: "Fra gli Schiavi di consideration trovossi Bassebà giovane bellissima di nascita Rosciotta in età di 19 anni, di cui fu variamente parlato e scritto, tenendo alcuni che fosse stata Sultana moglie d'Ibrahim, altri sua Concubina, e & altri Dama ordinaria, ma non ritrovandosi nelle pubbliche scritture niente di certo, non ardirò d'affermar in ciò cosa alcuna. Fama più costante fù, ch'essendo Damigella della Sultana moglie d'Ibrahim, egli fe n'invaghisse, e gli partorisce un Bambino, che seco conduceva alla Mecca; mentre caduta in un'incurabile infermità per forza d'un lento veleno, o dimalie adoperate dalla Sultana rivale..." See also Ganado, Albert, *The Dominican Father Osman in Malta: An Ottoman Prince?* in Sunday Times of Malta, 7 July 2019, who identifies this woman, whom he calls Zafira, with the Zafira shown in an engraving taken from Johann Perer Lotichius and Matthaeus Merian's *Theatri Europaei Fünfter Theill...* published in Frankfurt by Andrea Merian in 1707.

between Bassebà and the Sultan Ibrahim I (1615–48), known in history as *Ibrahim the Mad* because of his mental condition, for which he was later imprisoned and executed. The beautiful Bassebà, and other Ottoman women of high rank, together with their retinues and Jannissary guards, were on their way to Mecca via Alexandria and it is recorded that the ship was stocked with merchandize worth 200,000 *scudi*, also carrying a priceless treasure of precious jewels and gold and silver objects which in the words of the Order's historian Bartolomeo del Pozzo, could enrich half of Malta. Since the galleys of the Knights had docked in Crete on their voyage back to Malta, the Grand Admiral of the sultan, the *Kapudan* Yusuf Pasha had encouraged Ibrahim to avoid a repeat story by invading that island, thus starting a long war with Venice (known as the 'War of Candia') that lasted until 1669 when Crete finally became part of the Ottoman Empire, thus ending its use as a convenient intermediary base for the galleys of Malta in their incursions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Also in the seventeenth century, a mysterious French spy called Francois Simon based in Marseilles sent news to Grand Master about a great armada being prepared by the Ottomans to attack Malta⁹²

In the perspective of the evidence that has been marshalled in this article, would it not seem that the primary objective of espionage activity by the Order of Malta was to keep its Grand Masters updated about the complex political manoeuvres and the military movements of friends and foes alike that could pose a threat to the survival of their strategically-poised power base? Considered from this viewpoint, it would seem that the value of the role that was played by Grand Master de Valette's astute spymaster Giovanni Barelli, during and after the Great Siege of 1565, and of the role that was played by an increasingly effective Ottoman counter-intelligence mechanism that at an early stage of its development, had managed to send two Ottoman military engineers attired as fishermen to survey the island and its fortifications prior to the commencement of hostilities⁹³ – which had shocked Grand Master Jean de Valette, thus refusing him a comfort which he had sought for his peace of mind: access to information about the adversary – was not forgotten by the Christian powers in their struggle with their Ottoman rivals for Mediterranean supremacy. As the seventeenth century approached, an increasingly efficient Ottoman counter-intelligence apparatus, made it harder for spies commissioned by the Grand Masters of Malta and their Habsburg allies to operate. The new possibilities that resulted from improved logistics and technology implied that successive Ottoman sultans in Istanbul would have spared no effort to ensure the protection of important information from the spy networks of Christendom. To do this they employed a variety of methods. The Sultans now supervised their borders with increased efficiency. They patrolled all roads leading to port towns, they carefully watched dangerous elements such as renegades in the Ottoman military and administrative services, as well as foreign merchants, ambassadors and

⁹² Bonello, 98.

⁹³ For more information about the efficacy of Ottoman counter-intelligence in the history of the Ottoman Empire, see Gurkan (2012B), based on Gurkan (2012A).

pilgrims in Istanbul, they used Walsingham methods to check incoming and outgoing correspondence and, finally, they repeatedly utilised their own intelligence networks to reveal the identity of enemy spies operating in Ottoman territory. Despite these precautionary measures, however, several enemy spies on the payroll of the Order of Malta and their Christian allies, continued to penetrate the Ottoman Empire. Among a milieu of communications of a political nature, these spies continued sending updated reports to their employers focused on the movements of all types of Ottoman shipping in the Mediterranean – as Giovanni Barelli had done so successfully in the sixteenth century. The networks that Barelli, and the other spymasters mentioned in this article, had managed to establish in the Ottoman Empire from the 1560's onward, testify to such energetic undercover initiatives. Despite obtaining good results at the time of the 1565 siege of Malta, the efficacy of pro-Christian networks in the Ottoman realm in early modern times, however, remains controversial. With the passage of time, the Ottoman government machinery seems to have become increasingly aware of the potentially disabling activities of enemy spies within their territory. They were sometimes tolerated in view of their intentions of enticing them to act as double agents⁹⁴. They were sometimes caught, tortured and executed with exemplary barbarity, as well illustrated by the French cartographer, Alain Manesson Mallet in 1683⁹⁵ (**FIG.8**). The inevitable result was that as from the 1570's it started becoming clear that Christian espionage networks were producing less efficacious results in information-gathering. Some important plans that were hatched for setting the Arsenal of Istanbul on fire, for sabotaging Ottoman fleets while in combat, for bribing high-ranking Ottoman officials, for inciting Christian rebellions in Greece and in the Balkans, and for bribing Ottoman fortification commanders to surrender their strongholds, failed dramatically. The implication was that despite contemporary Christian propaganda to the contrary, Ottoman preventive mechanisms of counter-espionage did sometimes successfully manage to prevent such costly Christian dreams from bearing fruit.

⁹⁴ Details about the Ottoman use of double agents can be consulted in Gürkan (2012B), 1–38.

⁹⁵ Mallet, Alain Manesson, *Description de l'Univers*, Paris: Denys Thierry, 1683, *Figure IX – Esclaves Chrétiens*.



Fig. 1 Grand Master Jean de Valette (1557–68).



Fig. 2 The Viceroy of Sicily, Don García Álvarez de Toledo y Osorio (1514–77).



Fig. 3 King Philip II of Spain (1556–98).



Fig. 4 Pope Pius IV de' Medici (1559–65).



Fig. 5 Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (1520–66).



Fig. 6 Sultan Selim II (1566–74).



Fig. 7 The Duke of Naxos (1520–79) and his aunt Doña Gracia.



Fig. 8 Alain Manesson Mallet's illustration of various types of punishments meted out to treacherous Christian slaves in the Ottoman Empire [from *Description de l'Univers.*, Paris: Denys Thierry, 1683, Figure IX – *Esclaves Chrétiens*]