

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Lepanto, the Battle of

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In the last third of the 16th century, three critical events had a decisive impact on the course of Islamic history. One was the Battle of Lepanto (1571) fought off the coast of Greece in which the combined navies of the Vatican, Venice and Spain managed to stop the Ottoman navy, slowing the Ottoman advance to the west and denying them access to the Atlantic Ocean and the Americas. The second was the Battle of al Qasr al Kabir (1578) in which the Moroccan army crushed Portuguese invaders in North Africa, shattering Christian ambitions to conquer and colonize the Maghrib. The third was the Moroccan invasion of the Songhay Empire (1592), which destroyed Timbaktu and other major trade centers along the Niger River, contributed to the political disintegration of West Africa, and facilitated increased slave trade to America.

The key to understanding these events lies, once again, in the social and political disintegration of Muslim North Africa after the dissolution of the Al Muhaddith Empire. Muslim Spain was not the only object of Christian Iberian Crusades. Sensing a political vacuum in the Maghrib, and taking advantage of the mutual warfare among the local emirs of Morocco (the Merinides), Algeria (the Zayyanids), and Tunisia (the Hafsids), both Portugal and Castile moved to occupy important strategic posts along the coast of Africa. In this effort, they were helped by the naval power of Venice and Genoa. Not that the Christians were contemplating a conquest of the Maghrib at this time. As yet, they did not possess the superiority in organization and arms necessary for an outright conquest. Moreover, there were internal rivalries among the Christians themselves, in particular between Portugal and Castile, precluding a sustained onslaught on North Africa.

In 1355, Tripoli was attacked and briefly occupied by Genoa. In 1390, a combined French and Genoese force invaded the ancient city of Mahdiya. In 1399, Castile occupied Tetuan in Morocco. In 1415, the strategic harbor of Ceuta on the Straits of Gibraltar fell to the Portuguese who continued their advance along the Atlantic coast occupying the strategic port of Al Qasr al Kabir in 1458. By 1470, Tangiers was under Portuguese control. Trade routes between North Africa and southern Europe were now firmly in Christian hands.

The union of Castile and Aragon under Ferdinand and Isabella, and the conquest of Granada (1492), removed the last hurdle in the way of Spanish expansion. Flush from their victory, and expulsion of the Jews (1492) and Muslims (1502) alike, the Spaniards expanded their possessions in the Mediterranean. The discovery of America (1492), and the subsequent loot from the Aztec, Mayan and Inca empires, made Spain a world power. The Popes acted as powerbrokers in medieval Europe, and they brought

about a reconciliation between Spain and Portugal. In 1494, Pope Alexander VI drew an arbitrary line around the globe, dividing up the world between Spain and Portugal, for each to conquer and bring under the fold of Christianity.

The military machine of the Iberian Christians had been perfected during their protracted struggle with the Muslims. Now it was let loose on the rest of the world. There followed a general thrust of the western Crusades aimed at the total conquest of the Maghrib. In 1505, Mars al Kabir (Algeria) fell to the Spanish. Oran (Algeria) fell in 1509. Bogie (Tunisia) was captured in 1510. Tripoli (Libya) was destroyed in 1511. Tlemcen became a Spanish protectorate in 1512. Meanwhile, the Portuguese moved along the western coast of Morocco. Agadir was occupied in 1505. Converted into a strong fortress named Santa Cruz, it became a powerful base for further expansion. In 1507, Safi was occupied. In 1513, Azemour fell. By 1515, the Portuguese controlled the entire coastline of West Africa, from Morocco to the Horn. The bases along this coast served as an anchor point for their further expansion around the coast of Africa and into the Indian Ocean. They also served as shipping centers for the Atlantic slave trade, which now began to gather momentum.

The global tide of Portuguese and Spanish expansion took place precisely at a time when the Islamic world was in convulsion. This was the period during which the great dynasties of the Safavids (1501) and the Moghuls (1526) were founded and the Ottomans were consolidating their power. The Battle of Chaldiran between the Safavids and the Ottomans was fought in 1514, and 1517 was the year when the Ottomans captured Egypt from the Mamlukes. It was not until 1526 that the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Moghuls finally settled down and started the process of global resistance to Portuguese and Spanish aggression.

By 1530 the Spaniards had conquered most of the trading outposts on the Mediterranean coast of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Tripoli (Libya) and Malta fell to the Spaniards who handed them over to the Knights of St. John to garrison and hold. The Spanish were not alone in their thrust into Muslim territories. Venice, Genoa and the Vatican were equally active. At stake were not only the trade routes of the Mediterranean but also the very soul of North Africa. In 1532, the Genoese captured Coron in the Adriatic. Sulaiman the Magnificent (1520-1565), the Ottoman Sultan, could not disregard this challenge. As the Caliph, he was duty bound to protect Muslims no matter where they lived.

Sulaiman ordered Ibrahim Pasha, grand vizier of the Caliphate, to upgrade the Ottoman fleet. Ibrahim was in Egypt, reorganizing the administration of that province. He was a man of extraordinary abilities whose legacy sustained the Ottoman administrative machinery until the 19th century. The Ottoman navy was already a force to be reckoned with, thanks to the initiatives taken by Sultan Selim I. Ibrahim Pasha proceeded to build on that foundation. Timber for shipbuilding was plentiful in Lebanon. There were first-rate harbors in Turkey, Egypt and Syria. What was needed was leadership and trained manpower for the sea. This he found on the coast of North Africa.

As the Christian powers of Spain, Venice and Genoa monopolized the Mediterranean trade (1500-1530), the North Africans increasingly turned to piracy. Rich bounty was available from Genoese ships in the Mediterranean as well as Spanish ships in the Atlantic carrying the loot from the Americas to Spain. The North Africans-as well as the English-attacked these ships for their booty. The skills and the art of the seas were perfected in the process.

Ibrahim Pasha convinced Sulaiman the Magnificent to invite these captains of the sea to Istanbul and press them into the service of the Caliphate. One of these captains was Khairuddin of Algiers, who was amongst the ablest admirals of the age. Khairuddin was made the admiral of the empire. Within a span

of five years, he changed the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean. In 1534, he recaptured Tunis from the Spanish.

There began an historic struggle between Spain and the Ottomans for control of North Africa. The question was whether the Maghrib would remain Muslim or be ceded, as Spain had been, to the Christians. The shaykhs in Tunisia and the emirs of the old Hafsids dynasty resisted Ottoman rule because it meant a loss of their privileged position. They preferred the Christian Spaniards to the Muslim Turks. With the connivance of the shaykhs and the emirs, the Spanish took Tunis in 1535, reinstalling the old Hafsids ruler, Hassan. In retaliation, Khairuddin raided the coast of Valencia (1536) in Spain. In 1537, he captured the Venetian island of Corfu and Otranto in southern Italy where he established an Ottoman base. Morea and the islands in the Adriatic Sea followed. With the Turks at the doorsteps of Rome, panic set in. Pope Paul III organized a combined armada of the principal Christian sea powers to resist the Ottomans. In 1538, at the Battle of Prevesa, the Turks destroyed this armada, consisting of the navies of Venice and the Vatican. The issue was settled for the time being. For thirty-two years thereafter, from 1538 to 1570, Ottoman power in the eastern Mediterranean was supreme.

The focus now shifted to the western Mediterranean. Charles V, Emperor of Spain struck at Algeria in 1541, wreaking havoc on the coastal cities. In turn, Khairuddin took Otranto in Italy in 1541, forcing Venice to sue for peace. Khairuddin died in 1546, leaving behind a large cadre of trained admirals including the celebrated Piri Rais. Piri Rais was a consummate seaman who combined in his person outstanding organizational abilities with a superb understanding of sea power. A map of the Atlantic produced by Piri Rais in 1561, shows the coasts of West Africa, Europe and Brazil in such detail and such accuracy that it would meet the requirements of modern day cartography.

Tripoli in Libya, and the island of Malta, were keys to the trade routes in the Mediterranean. Since 1530, Spain had occupied Malta and had delegated the task of defending it to the Knights of St. John. These Knights acted as pirates, wreaking havoc on Muslim ships and pilgrims on their way to hajj. In 1551, one of Piri Rais's admirals, Torgud Rais, reclaimed Tripoli, throwing out the knights of St. John. In Spain, meanwhile, Phillip II had succeeded Charles V. The Spaniards mustered a powerful fleet and moved against the Ottomans. Admiral Piyali Pasha routed and destroyed this fleet at Djerba in 1561. Piri Rais followed up with a siege of Malta in 1565, but the effort was not successful. Sultan Sulaiman the Magnificent passed away the following year (1565). He had made Ottoman power the dominant land power in Europe and almost realized his goal to make the Ottoman navy the dominant navy in the world.

The struggle between the Ottoman Caliphate and the Christian powers of Spain and Portugal had now become global. Moroccan, French and English ships routinely intercepted Spanish ships carrying the loot from the Mayan, Aztec and Inca civilizations of America. In the Mediterranean, the Ottomans faced the combined naval power of Spain, Italy and the Vatican. In the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, the Ottoman navy took on the Portuguese. Battles were fought as far west as Algiers (Algeria) and as far east as Diu (India). After Sulaiman, Selim II (1566-1574) continued to challenge the naval power of Spain, Portugal and Venice. In 1571 Cyprus was captured from Venice. The Ottomans proceeded to lay siege to the island of Malta. But the defending garrison withstood the assault. The successful resistance encouraged the European powers. Urged by Pope Pius V, the combined navies of Spain, Venice and the Vatican joined battle. On October 7, 1571, the Christian navies squared off against the powerful Ottoman navy at Lepanto, off the coast of Greece. Losses were heavy on both sides but the Christian navies had the upper hand. The remnant of the Ottoman navy was forced to withdraw to Istanbul.

The Battle of Lepanto was a benchmark in world affairs. It broke the naval initiative of the Ottomans. Combined with the unfolding events in Morocco where the Sa'adids successfully spurned the Ottoman advances, it confined Turkish naval power to the eastern Mediterranean. The Ottomans would no longer be a credible threat in the western Mediterranean or the Atlantic. In time, the Dutch and the British would displace the Iberian powers. Before the Battle of Lepanto, the odds were even for a Muslim penetration of the Atlantic. After Lepanto, these odds disappeared. The road to America was controlled by Spain and Portugal. American history would henceforth be determined by the interaction of Europe with the New World.

The Ottomans did make a supreme effort to rebuild their navy. Within a year, the Turkish navy was back in action. In 1572, the Turkish admiral Uluj Pasha held off a combined assault by the European navies. Meanwhile, taking advantage of a respite from Turkish pressure, Spain occupied Tunis (1571). But the Ottomans retook it for good the following year. Thereafter, Tunisia was to remain in the Muslim camp until the colonial period of the 19th century. In 1573 Venice sued for peace and agreed to cede Cyprus and make a large payment as war indemnities. By 1585, the entire coast of North Africa from Tunisia to western Algeria was firmly in Turkish hands.

Thus ended the Spanish attempt in the 16th century to conquer and colonize North Africa. It had started as a spillover of the conquest of Granada under Isabella and Ferdinand. It ended in failure because the Ottoman navy proved to be just strong enough to frustrate their designs. However, the Battle of Lepanto ensured that Ottoman naval power would be contained within the eastern Mediterranean. The Atlantic Ocean, and America, would belong to the West Europeans.

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