

# Braudel, Lepanto, and Philip II

Sarah Rolfe Prodan  
Stanford University

**T**his brief intervention on Philip II (1527–1598) in the context of the era that he helped to shape and define takes as its point of departure and as its primary object of reflection the Battle of Lepanto (1571): not the military history, but rather the religious significance of the event and the phenomenon of its commemoration. This Christian victory was widely celebrated throughout Europe between 1571 and 1573 by all *except* Philip II, an individual who had invested more financially in the naval alliance of the Holy League than any other member and who had more cause than most to champion it. Revisiting the matter of Philip II's loud silence on an event so significant for Christendom, this speculative contribution reconsiders scholarly assessments of the statesman and reimagines his understanding of both the maritime military conflagration and the site of its unfolding.

The Battle of Lepanto was fought in the Mediterranean, east of Greece, on October 7, 1571, between the forces of the Ottomans and those of the Christian alliance known as the Holy League (the combined forces of Spain, Venice, and the Papacy).<sup>1</sup> The battle was pursued in the manner of a crusade. Public processions and devotions were organized, prayer and rosary recitation were encouraged, and galleys were decorated with religious banners. On the ships, Mass was performed daily, rosaries were distributed, crucifixes raised, blessings, confession, and last rites administered, and absolution for Christian combatants declared.<sup>2</sup> Following the victory, Pope Pius V proclaimed the date of the battle the Feast of Our Lady of Victory in honor of Mary, who was held responsible for a sudden shift of wind that favored Christian forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Histories abound. Compelling recent narratives appear in Niccolò Capponi, *Victory of the West: The Great Christian–Muslim Clash at the Battle of Lepanto* (Da Capo Press, 2006), and in Roger Crowley, *Empires of the Sea: The Siege of Malta, the Battle of Lepanto, and the Contest for the Center of the World* (Random House, 2008). I draw on them and the primary sources they cite in my description here.

<sup>2</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Lepanto*, ed. Dale Ahlquist (American Chesterton Society, 2003), 63.

Braudel described Lepanto as “the most spectacular military event in the Mediterranean during the entire sixteenth century.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, it has been characterized as “one of the bloodiest single days in military history.”<sup>4</sup> The numbers Braudel reported concerning the event were staggering. To my knowledge, they have not been substantially revised: 438 fleets (230 Muslim and 208 Christian) and sixty thousand combatants dead or injured.<sup>5</sup> Some 170,000 individuals fought at Lepanto.<sup>6</sup> An estimated 70 percent to 90 percent of the Mediterranean’s galleys participated in the battle.<sup>7</sup> Braudel marveled along with Voltaire at the seeming inconsequence of Lepanto from a military perspective, conceding that it had no great “strategic consequences,” other than “halt[ing] progress towards a future which promised to be very bleak indeed.”<sup>8</sup>

As Braudel saw it, the response to Lepanto was no less significant than the matter of the battle’s strategic inconsequence. He described the “immediate impact of the victory” as “breath-taking.”<sup>9</sup> By impact, Braudel meant the celebrations, plans, and campaigns devised in the direct aftermath of the battle, which included expeditions to North Africa (of crucial interest for Spain) and aspirations to reclaim the Holy Land and Constantinople, desires expressed by Pope Pius V and by John of Austria, Philip II’s half-brother, the leader of the Spanish forces of the Holy League and the romanticized hero of nearly all Lepanto narratives in Christian Europe. Because Philip II was “not haunted by dreams of crusades,” Braudel observed, such “extravagances” did not captivate him.<sup>10</sup> One could hardly imagine the Philip of Braudel’s *Mediterranean* as a man who dreamed at all.

For Braudel, Philip II was most easily envisioned as a monarch immersed in a vast, horizontal network of ceaselessly flowing information, an embodiment of the imperial state conceived as an administrative apparatus.<sup>11</sup> An imaginatively inert sovereign lacking visionary capacity, Braudel’s Philip II was more a bureaucrat than a true leader or statesman.<sup>12</sup> Though Philip II sat at the center of the Christian world, Braudel suspected that he had never contemplated it in embodied physical or concrete geographical terms:

I do not believe that the word Mediterranean itself ever floated in his consciousness with the meaning we now give it, nor that it conjured up for him the images of light and blue

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<sup>3</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 2:1088.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth R. Wright, Sarah Spence, and Andrew Lemons, eds. and trans., *The Battle of Lepanto* (I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2014), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1102; compare with John Francis Guilmartin Jr., *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century*, rev. ed. (Conway Maritime Press, 2003), 235–68.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Imprudent King: A New Life of Philip II* (Yale University Press, 2014), 204.

<sup>7</sup> Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys*, 250.

<sup>8</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1103.

<sup>9</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1103–4.

<sup>10</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1104; compare with Laura Stagno and Borja Franco Llopis, “A Brief Review of the Scholarly Literature on Representation of the ‘Turk’ and Image of Lepanto in Italy and Iberia,” in *Lepanto and Beyond: Images of Religious Alterity from Genoa and the Christian Mediterranean*, ed. Laura Stagno and Borja Franco Llopis (Leuven University Press, 2021), 32. The authors cite as a common explanation the “complicated relationship” Philip had with his half-brother, John of Austria.

<sup>11</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1236.

<sup>12</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1236.

water it has for us; nor even that it signified a precise area of major problems or the setting for a clearly conceived policy. Geography in the true sense was not part of a prince's education.<sup>13</sup>

While Philip II may not have studied geography, he certainly experienced it, both physically and culturally. Though he may not have thought in terms of policy, he likely reflected on the sea and on broader questions of meaning. He had travelled widely and, if nothing else, he would have been familiar with the trope of the ship of the church and related scriptural and religious imagery.

In his study of the Escorial, Henry Kamen posited the genesis of the architectural project in three of eight years (1548–1551) that Philip had spent traveling in Europe between 1543 and 1559 while he was in charge of Spanish affairs.<sup>14</sup> As Kamen emphasized, Philip was the most widely travelled European ruler after his father, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500–1558),<sup>15</sup> and the Escorial was a building "inspired by European experiences, constructed by men of international vision."<sup>16</sup> Arguing against the long-standing scholarly opinion that with the Escorial Philip II sought "to vaunt his military victories,"<sup>17</sup> Kamen noted how the palace's Hall of Battles emphasizes peace rather than triumph and how neither Philip's momentous military victory at St. Quentin nor that of Lepanto are celebrated there. Instead, "Philip chose to commemorate a wholly unknown medieval incident, involving very few soldiers, fought within the country and with no significant repercussions for anyone," a victory pre-dating Spain's existence as a "political entity" and for which "the Muslims in the battle were, indeed, as Spanish as their Christian adversaries."<sup>18</sup>

In her study of poetry celebrating Lepanto in its immediate wake (1571–1573), Simona Mammana underscored how the battle was indeed viewed and commemorated as a crusade.<sup>19</sup> Contemporary verses depicted Lepanto as a "theomachy."<sup>20</sup> In them, Lepanto's protagonists are represented symbolically, and the terms of their comparison are mythological, historical, and biblical.<sup>21</sup> The victory of Lepanto is represented as "universal in significance"<sup>22</sup> and as denoting "the fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecies," those of "religious unity" and "the arrival of a golden age."<sup>23</sup> Turkish power was viewed as a just divine instrument for the punishment of Christian sins and a means to purge the world of them.<sup>24</sup> Defeat of the infidel would lead to the "reunification

<sup>13</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1236–1237.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Kamen, *The Escorial: Art and Power in the Renaissance* (Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Kamen, *Escorial*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Kamen, *Escorial*, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Kamen, *Escorial*, xiv.

<sup>18</sup> Kamen, *Escorial*, 196. On the Hall of Battles, see 176–99. Kamen notes how striking these absences are: "The great enigma is why, after so many triumphs, he failed to commemorate any of them in his new palace, where he had received the first official news [of Lepanto]," (187).

<sup>19</sup> Simona Mammana, *Lèpanto: rime per la vittoria sul Turco: regesto (1571–1573) e studio critico* (Bulzoni, 2007), 15–16.

<sup>20</sup> Mammana, *Lèpanto*, 98: "teomachia."

<sup>21</sup> Mammana, *Lèpanto*, 104–105.

<sup>22</sup> Mammana, *Lèpanto*, 107: "il cui significato è universale."

<sup>23</sup> Mammana, *Lèpanto*, 122: "il compimento delle profezie apocalittiche ... unione religiosa e avvenuto del tempo aureo."

<sup>24</sup> Mammana, *Lèpanto*, 111.

of all peoples under one shepherd” and “would give rise to the millennium described in John’s Apocalypse.”<sup>25</sup> Lepanto was interpreted as a “pledge of the promise of universal palingenesis.”<sup>26</sup>

I have always been struck by the fact that Philip’s bed at the Escorial was positioned to offer him a view of the altar and that, if reports are correct, he wanted to view Bosch’s triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, as death approached. Might the Escorial reflect Philip’s choice to emphasize millenarian dreams and eschatological expectations rather than military aspirations or missionary aims? Might it reflect the highest spiritual significance of events, the anagogical level of meaning for crusades like Lepanto (to borrow a construct from scriptural hermeneutics)?

The Philip “most accessible” to Braudel was the monarch “who sits silently reading at his desk, annotating reports in his hasty handwriting, far from other men, distant and pensive.”<sup>27</sup> The devout builder and patron of sacred art at the Escorial is also knowable, and he is a very different character. Philip II may not have been endowed with political vision, but he was possessed of (if not by) biblical vision. For someone thus oriented, the Mediterranean was not only a natural body of water or a geopolitical reality, it was also a storied site in the creation, a theater of divine works where God’s providential design became manifest. A

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<sup>25</sup> Mammana, *Lèpanto*, 116: “riuniti tutti i popoli sotto un pastore, avrebbe avuto inizio il millennio annunziato dall’Apocalisse giovannea.”

<sup>26</sup> Mammana, *Lèpanto*, 116: “pegno della promessa di una palingenesi universale.”

<sup>27</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1236.