

2014

Review of Phillip Williams, *Empire and Holy War in the Mediterranean: The Galley and Maritime Conflict between the Habsburgs and Ottomans*

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Recommended Citation

Perrone, Sean (2014) "Review of Phillip Williams, *Empire and Holy War in the Mediterranean: The Galley and Maritime Conflict between the Habsburgs and Ottomans*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol39/iss1/14>

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Phillip Williams. *Empire and Holy War in the Mediterranean: The Galley and Maritime Conflict between the Habsburgs and Ottomans*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. 359 pp.

The Conquest of Tunis (1535) and the Battle of Lepanto (1571) are two unforgettable events etched in the minds of all students of Spanish history. The actual process of making war in the Mediterranean and the policy objectives of the Spanish and Ottoman protagonists, however, are less well known. Phillip Williams explores this “forgotten frontier” in his splendid new book *Empire and Holy War in the Mediterranean*.

Williams, a research fellow for the Spanish Commission for Military History, addresses a number of interrelated and, for many readers, unfamiliar themes in this book. First and foremost, he describes the galleys, their crews (particularly the rowers or *chusma*), and their military use. A short review cannot convey the level of detail that Williams provides, but the thrust of the argument is that the Habsburgs had better rowers than the Ottomans, and these oarsmen gave smaller Habsburg fleets an advantage over larger Ottoman forces. Experienced rowers meant faster, more agile ships, and veteran rowers were less likely to fall ill during a cruise than novices. The development of a skilled *chusma*, however, took time. Unlike soldiers and sailors, experienced rowers were hard to find. Consequently, Spanish admirals were leery of engaging the Ottomans in battle, fearing that defeat would lead to the loss of irreplaceable oarsmen and thereby jeopardize all Spanish holdings in the Mediterranean. Maintaining the galleys to move resources and men over the seas was more important to the Spanish monarchy than conducting an unwinnable and risky holy war.

Risk aversion on the part of kings and admirals, however, undercut notions of chivalry, honor, and crusade. The Spanish armada’s annual “cleaning of the coasts” campaigns partially compensated for this by offering officers, soldiers, and sailors a chance to win glory by bringing the fight to Algerian corsairs. More importantly, these “cleaning” operations kept the galleys in fighting shape and provided a fresh supply of captives to row them. Spain’s defensive strategy was also practical given its resources and the Mediterranean environment. By letting the enemy strike first, the Spanish admirals were able to husband their limited resources and let the elements defeat the larger, lower quality Ottoman fleets. Inexperienced Ottoman *chusma* were essentially worn out by the time the Turkish fleets reached the Western Mediterranean, limiting the Ottoman fleets’ fighting power and allowing smaller, well-trained Habsburg galleys to hold them at bay. Williams’ superb discussion of environmental factors (wind patterns, fresh water supplies, protected harbors, etc.) and their role in Mediterranean warfare is

particularly interesting. Of course, learning how the elements had already debilitated Ottoman forces prior to the battle of Lepanto diminishes the significance of the Holy League's "epic" victory on October 7, 1571.

Second, Williams argues that the Mediterranean was never abandoned by either the Spanish Habsburgs or the Ottoman Empire. Each side continued to pour money and men into their Mediterranean fleets well into the seventeenth century. However, after 1574, neither side hoped to win a resounding victory. Rather, armed deterrence became the salient characteristic of the Mediterranean conflict between Habsburgs and Ottomans. Williams also posits that Spain's Mediterranean galleys underpinned its policies in both the Mediterranean and northern Europe. Success in either theater of arms required good galleys. We need to recognize this fact in order to understand the centrality of the Mediterranean in the military and political calculations of Spain's rulers.

Third, Williams uses the galleys as a spring board to examine sovereignty and feudalism in the Mediterranean. He notes that the maintenance of fleets required the delegation of authority to private contractors and thereby reduced centralized state power. Here Williams adds additional details to a growing body of research emphasizing accommodations between the ruler and the ruled, but he goes further, suggesting that the demands of fighting Mediterranean wars actually reinvigorated aspects of medieval feudalism. Thus, the paradox of early modern warfare was the continual reliance by rulers on medieval mechanisms to fight their wars. More interestingly, he suggests that feudal obligations as much as messianic objectives fueled the Hapsburg-Ottoman conflict in the Mediterranean. Williams does not develop this intriguing proposition as fully as he does other themes, but this proposition deserves serious consideration and leaves readers with much to ponder.

The book includes an introduction, eleven thematic chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter 1 provides a general overview of Habsburg and Ottoman history from the late fifteenth century to the early seventeenth century. Chapter 2 outlines the maritime conflict between the two powers over nearly one hundred years. Chapters 3-5 examine the galleys – providing details on the rowers, the construction of the ships, fleet formation, and so forth. Chapters 6-11 turn to policy and strategic goals plus the religious nature of the conflict. Certain individuals (e.g., Andrea Doria and Philip II) and events (e.g., the siege of Malta in 1565) appear in multiple chapters, which leads to some repetition. In general, though, the repetition reinforces crucial points and does not distract from the argument. The lack of maps and tables, however, does make it difficult in places for the reader to follow the narrative and to grasp particular details. Nevertheless,

Williams' straightforward prose makes it easy even for a landlubber to follow the technical aspects of galley warfare.

Future historians will need to take account of Phillip Williams' well-argued and thought provoking book, and all students of early modern history will enjoy this engrossing read.

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