

Battle of Lepanto



The Battle of Lepanto was a key naval engagement during the Ottoman-Habsburg wars between allied Christian forces and the Ottoman Turks in 1571.

The **Battle of Lepanto** is a historical military event that took place on the Eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of the Greek peninsula Peloponeso. [Miguel de Cervantes](#) (author of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*), who participated in the event, described it as *“the highest and most memorable occasion that past and future centuries will ever hope to see”*. The battle is named after the gulf in which it took place. The city of Naupacto (called Lepanto in Italian) sits on the gulf’s coast.

In this battle, the Turkish Ottoman navy faced off against The Holy League, a naval group that united ships and men from Spain, the Papal States, The Republic of Venice, The Order of Malta, The Republic of Genoa and Saboya. These states had answered Pope Pious V’s call to counter attacks by the Turks against Cypress in 1570. The attacks resulted in the Muslim’s takeover of Nicosia, which was seen by Christians as a direct attack on Christianity itself and an arrogant and intolerable siege of territory by the Ottomans.

Miguel Cervantes actively participated in the conflict, where he received permanent wounds, which were for him a source of pride that he made no effort to hide. He lost the

use of his left hand, which is why he was and is still known today as *el manco de Lepanto* (the one-handed man of Lepanto).

The control that the Turks exerted over the Mediterranean endangered trade routes and maritime traffic control in *el Mare Nostrum*, which meant the strong possibility that Europe's economic power could fall into the hands of the Muslims. Neither [Spain](#), Venice nor Genoa were willing to accept those circumstances.

The **Holy League** had gradually built its alliance until September 1571, the year in which the Christian Navy had amassed a total of 300 ships and an army of some 50,000 men. Actual soldiers were in the minority; most of the army was made up of sailors, knights, adventurers and slaves that rowed in the galleys. The Turkish Navy was feared and respected throughout the Mediterranean, and many considered it practically invincible. It was made up of 300 ships with 120,000 men on board, nearly half of which were Christians that had been taken prisoner by the Ottomans and forced to row in the galleys as slaves. It has been estimated that around 55,000 prisoners made up this group.

On October 7, 1571, the Turkish Navy positioned itself in half-moon formation opposite the smaller Holy League Navy, commanded by Juan de Austria. A number of factors added up to give the Christians the advantage in face to face combat, where Turks took the worst part: their effective attack method included using cannon fire to dismast Ottoman ships, modified cannons allowed them to aim at lower range targets and the strength of their arquebus shooters was particularly strong.

As early fighting broke out, ship captains Ali Pacha and don Juan de Austria charged one another at the same time. The mutual charge resulted in their ships joining together, converting them into an open battlefield. A decisive moment, and one that ultimately lead to the Turks defeat, came when a wounded Ali Pacha was decapitated by a Spanish galley slave, which literally left the Ottoman armies without a *head* commander.

After hours of fighting, the smoke finally cleared to reveal the devastating outcome of

the battle: only 50 Turkish ships had avoided definitive damage, Ottoman casualties numbered around 25,000 and another 15,000 were wounded. During skirmishes, between 15 and 20,000 Christian galley slaves that rowed the Turkish ships, managed to escape to freedom, promptly joining the ranks of Christian fighters and attacking their former captors.

The Christian navy suffered fewer casualties than its enemy and came away from the battle victorious.

The Christian victory at the **Battle of Lepanto** was the first major defeat suffered by the Turks. They did not, however, suffer the definitive loss of power that they could have if the Christians had seized the opportunity to finish the *job*, allowing the Ottomans to regroup and over several months recuperate part of their former power.

The news of the Christian victory spread like wildfire throughout Europe, where the event was celebrated and church bells rang out throughout the continent. The day of the battle, October 7th, appears on calendars of Christian celebrations as the day of commemoration of the **victory of Lepanto**, under the avocation of the feast-day of Our Lady of the Rosary, instituted by Pope Pius V in 1573.