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Roger Crowley, *Empires of the Sea: The Siege of Malta, the Battle of Lepanto, and the Contest for the Center of the World*. New York: Random House, 2008. Pp. xxi, 336. ISBN 978-1-4000-6624-7.

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Readers familiar with the late Samuel P. Huntington's essay, "The Clash of Civilizations?"¹ may find Roger Crowley's narrative of war between the Christian West and Islamic East in the sixteenth century somewhat apocryphal. Eight years before the attack on the World Trade Center, Huntington argued that the age of nation states was giving way to the age of civilizations. Conflicts in the future, he predicted, would no longer be dominated by political ideologies. Instead, the fault lines along the tectonic plates of future conflicts would be cultural. The West, Huntington warned, could recognize the changed environment and adapt, or find itself immersed in conflicts that could easily escalate to a global scale.

Nearly eight years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq seem to have borne out Huntington's thesis, with *Empires of the Sea* providing the necessary context. But Crowley's book in fact points out the danger of reductive interpretations. A former reader in English at Cambridge and author of *1453: The Holy War for Constantinople and the Clash of Islam and the West*,² Crowley illustrates that culture was only one factor that influenced war and warfare in the Early Modern period. Seemingly obvious fault lines become blurred when examined against historical forces that point to similarities, not distinctions, between the combatants. The most important similarity between Christian and Ottoman emperors, Crowley argues, was an appreciation of control of the inland sea.

In 1453, the Ottoman emperor Mehmet II completed his siege of Constantinople, fueling the ambitions of his heirs to extend the conquest throughout Christendom in Europe. Seventy years later the task lay before Suleiman, great-grandson of Mehmet. One of a constellation of absolute monarchs emerging in the sixteenth century, Suleiman astutely concluded that the key to conquering Europe lay in controlling the Mediterranean Sea. Very systematically, the Ottoman emperor began by clearing the waters closest to the Levant.

Rhodes was the last stronghold of Christendom in the Aegean. Defending the island were the Knights of St. Johns, an order known as much for piracy as for piety. In July 1522, Suleiman laid siege to the island, with technology and techniques reflective of the broader military revolution then overtaking Europe. The island fell the following December, and over the next five decades the war spread throughout the inland sea. While Suleiman set his sights on the Italian coast, the war was spreading to the western half of the Mediterranean. The brothers Oruch and Hzir, skilled mariners who had been chased out of the Ottoman Empire, established strongholds along the north African littoral from which they ravaged European coastal towns for loot and slaves. Eventually brought back into the Ottoman orb,

¹ *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (1993) 22-49 <www.miwsr.com/rd/0904.htm>.

² NY: Hyperion, 2005.

these early Barbary corsairs turned their predations in the western Mediterranean into a broader war, as much a clash of empires as of cultures.

The defense of Christian Europe fell to the Habsburg emperors Charles V and Philip II. But Crowley observes that the defenders of the faith had pragmatic objectives. The Habsburgs also had an empire to consolidate and defend. During the twenty years of Charles's reign as Holy Roman Emperor, the war between East and West was fought on the extremities. Neither emperor faced off in a decisive battle. Instead, war raged across the Mediterranean in the form of hit and run raids against coastal cities by both Ottoman corsairs and the seaborne equivalent of European *condottieri*. Crowley points out that the religious underpinnings of European unity proved too tenuous for any type of unified political and military effort. Venetians, for example, saw accommodation with Suleiman as a more practical way to temper his wrath, while Ottoman ships swung gently at anchor in the French port of Toulon.

By the time Charles turned over the crown to Philip in 1556, the Mediterranean was virtually an Ottoman lake. The only obstacle to complete mastery of the inland sea was Malta. Suleiman recognized that controlling the island was essential to blunting the growing power of the Spanish navy. He would also finally be rid of the Order of St. Johns, whose surviving knights once again found themselves serving as the shield of Christ. So, in 1565, the Ottoman emperor mobilized a fleet to carry an invasion force over eight hundred miles from Istanbul. The fate of Europe, Crowley argues, hung in the balance over the next five years.

The final chapters of the book deal with the Suleiman's siege of Malta in the summer of 1565 and the climactic sea battle off Lepanto six years later. Drawing from an astonishingly rich cache of primary sources, Crowley weaves a detailed and vivid picture of the transformation of warfare in the age of gunpowder weapons. Arrayed against Suleiman's invasion force of twenty-four thousand soldiers was a Christian force of five hundred knights, three thousand Maltese militiamen, and four thousand other fighters. While Ottoman and Christian viewed the world through different cosmological lenses, as Crowley notes, their ways of war were nearly indistinguishable. Both sides used the emerging gunpowder technologies, such as grenades, incendiaries, and arquebuses. Suleiman's siege tactics were no more alien to the defenders of Malta than were their own defensive innovations to the Sultan's engineers. The Ottoman failure to take the island was not a consequence of divine intervention, but rather of logistic and command failures that could plague contemporary military commanders.

The bloody dénouement of the struggle for dominance of the inner sea occurred on 7 October 1571. A fleet formed from a Holy League of the Pope, Philip II, and the Venetians sailed to rid the Mediterranean of the Muslim scourge once and for all. In the Gulf of Patras on the west coast of Greece, six hundred ships and 140,000 men converged along a four-mile front. The tactics represented over a thousand years of galley warfare, as ships rammed together to enable soldiers to carry the fight to the decks. But the Europeans also made extensive use of cannon and sail, leading to destruction of a hundred Ottoman ships and twenty-five thousand of the Sultan's men.

Victory at Lepanto assured Christian Europe control of the sea. And yet Crowley observes that the victory was pyrrhic. While the Ottomans immediately set about rebuilding

their fleet, the Holy League disintegrated amid squabbling over booty and the divergent individual interests of its members. The Venetians still had money to make, while Philip had coffers to refill and an empire to administer. The Pope might have seen the opportunity for another crusade, but Philip proved unwilling to continue the war. The pragmatic emperor signed a peace with his Ottoman counterpart in 1580, and the Mediterranean remained a divided sea.

Thoroughly researched and exquisitely written, *Empires of the Sea* is an extraordinary work of military history. Crowley combines sophisticated explanatory depth with a narrative that captures and holds the reader's attention. The book exemplifies the technological, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of war. The bibliography features many first-person accounts of fighting, though Crowley cautions that they were often accentuated to gain the gratitude or allay the wrath of the emperor. Yet, even under a skeptical eye, the magnitude of the sources establishes that war between Europeans and Ottomans in the sixteenth century was a savage affair of abject cruelty. More broadly, Crowley offers a contextual challenge to the notion of a clash of civilizations. Both Christian and Muslim took advantage of the emerging technologies of warfare. Neither Christ nor Allah, but bureaucracy, logistics, organization, geography, and politics conditioned the mobilization of armies and fleets. Religious proscriptions failed to constrain the atrocities committed by both sides. The clash was as much about imperial ambitions as about culture, with constituencies like the Venetians ignoring cultural affinities while playing to economic self-interest. The lasting impression of this book is of an increasingly globalized world where fault lines between civilizations are less distinct than they appear. Culture may determine the boundaries of war, but war itself remains an ingrained part of a shared human condition.