

*Richard W. Bulliet, The End of Middle East History and Other Conjectures, Boston: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2019*

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## The Siege of Vienna and the Ottoman Threat

(2014)

Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pupils might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.

Edward Gibbon on the possibility of Charles Martel losing the Battle of Tours to the Saracens in 732.<sup>1</sup>

**I**N 1521 THE ELECTORS OF THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE chose Charles V, the Hapsburg ruler of Spain, over Francis I of France as the imperial candidate most likely to press a successful war against the Ottomans. A month later, Ottoman forces took the Danubian fortress of Belgrade, and the following year the island of Rhodes, the eastern Mediterranean stronghold of the Knights of the Hospital of St. John. In 1526, at the Battle of Mohács, Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent's artillery annihilated the Hungarian heavy cavalry and killed their king, Louis II. He left no heir. Buda fell less than two weeks later, but Süleyman chose to withdraw leaving the Hungarian Diet to elect John Zapolya, the voivode of Transylvania, as tributary king. Two months later, an anti-Zapolya faction of Hungarian notables met at Pressburg (now Bratislava) further up the Danube to offer the throne to the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand, the brother of Charles V and of Marie of Hungary, Louis II's widow. The following year Ferdinand drove Zapolya out of Buda and took control of a narrow strip of Hungarian territory bordering Austria.

Ferdinand's aggressive actions, and pleas for aid from John Zapolya, provoked a return visit by Süleyman in 1529. The sultan and his army left Istanbul on May 10. On September 8, Buda again fell to the Ottomans, and Zapolya was reinstated as king. Despite the lateness of the season and the onset of autumn rains, Süleyman decided to take the war to Ferdinand. He reached Vienna with 120,000 troops, but without his heavy siege artillery, on September 27. Knowing that a relief force was on its way, Ferdinand pru-

1. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, New York: Bradley, nd, vol. V, 423.

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dently retreated from his capital leaving a defensive garrison of 16,000 men. Ottoman siege operations against a courageous and vigorous defense lasted until October 16. Two months later, Süleyman was back in Istanbul unaware that the high point of Ottoman conquest in Europe had been reached.

Taking note of the bad weather and a German raid on Ottoman cannon and supplies being transported on the Danube, the authoritative Turkish historian Ismail Hakki Uzunçarsili concludes: "if it had been two months earlier [i.e. July] and the heavy cannon had arrived, there can be no doubt that Vienna would have fallen."<sup>2</sup> William H. McNeill's appraisal differs significantly. "Even at the beginning of Suleiman's reign (1520-66), the Turkish land frontiers had been pushed so far from Constantinople that the imperial field army lost a good part of its effectiveness. Sieges that had to be broken off after only a few weeks, like the famous beleaguering of Vienna in 1529 ... were predestined to failure."<sup>3</sup> What Uzunçarsili seems to take into account, but McNeill ignores, is the fact that the second Ottoman siege of Vienna by an imperial field army from Istanbul commenced in July of 1683 rather than September, clearly demonstrating that distance alone was never a guaranteed protector of the city of Vienna.

Today the second siege of Vienna is generally considered a more important historical event than the first because it presaged the rollback of Ottoman power in the Balkans. But the theme of Ottoman decline did not always trump the theme of Ottoman expansion. Writing in 1915, for example, when the Ottoman Empire was a major power in World War I and the outcome of that war was still in the balance, D. G. Hogarth displayed the continuing mindset of Gibbon when he wrote:

[T]he most brilliant and momentous of [Süleyman's] achievements ... was the conquest of Hungary. It would result in Buda and its kingdom remaining Ottoman territory for a century and a half ... and passing for all time out of the central European into the Balkan sphere; but also it would result in the Osmanli [i.e. Ottoman] power finding itself on a weak frontier face to face at last with a really strong Christian race, the Germanic, before which, since it could not advance, it would have ultimately to withdraw; and in the rousing of Europe to a sense of its common danger from Moslem activity. Süleyman's failure to take Vienna more than made good the panic which had followed on his victory at Mohacs. It was felt that the Moslem, now that he had

2. Uzunçarsili, Ismail Hakki, *Osmanli Tarihi*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1964, vol. II, p. 330

3. McNeill, William H., *Europe's Steppe Frontier 1500-1800*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 42