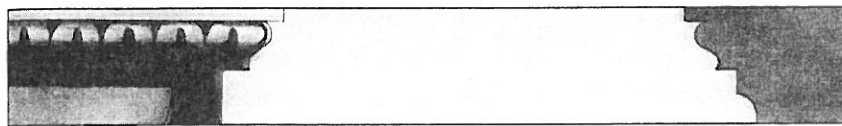


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THEODORE K. RABB

IF ONLY IT HAD NOT BEEN SUCH A WET SUMMER

The Critical Decade of the 1520s

Many events conspired to make the 1520s so important. What happened during those ten years, both in Europe and the rest of the world, would permanently affect the way we now live our lives. Not for the first time in history and, as we shall see, not for the last, weather would be a major historical player. What would have happened if, in the summer of 1529, unusually heavy and persistent rains had not delayed the progress of the huge army of the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent in its progress toward Vienna, the main eastern outpost of Europe's dominant Habsburg dynasty? What if Suleyman's siege had not begun so late in the year? Or if he had not been forced to leave behind his mired heavy artillery, without which he could not batter down the city walls? And what would have happened if he had actually taken Vienna? An Ottoman Europe probably would not have been the result: Christian opposition ultimately would have been too powerful. More important, though, far-reaching deals would inevitably have been struck, and those who opposed the Habsburg ascendancy in the continent would have been emboldened to challenge it. One certain loser would have been Martin Luther

and his burgeoning but still fragile Protestant heresy. Henry VIII of England might have received papal blessing for his divorce from his Habsburg queen, and there would have been no Anglican Church—and no lost Catholic country for the Spanish to try to reconquer half a century later.

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Few decades of the 16th century who gave the Spanish and a Danish bloture of both Iberia in 1521, Luther decried the Diet of Worms church. And before the Reformation in Germany, Sweden had become a world power; Mexico; the Turks; and Henry VIII had in England politics at Italy in a campaign of catastrophes of Europe.

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Princeton University, and the author
of *THE STRUGGLE FOR STABILITY*
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historical advisor for the acclaimed and
award-winning *RENAISSANCE*.

Few decades of Western history have been as fraught with consequences as the 1520s. They began with the first recorded passage of the Straits of Magellan, under the leadership of the captain who gave the Straits their name; and, in the same year, a revolt in Spain and a Danish bloodbath in Stockholm that helped shape the political future of both Iberia and Scandinavia. Just a few months later, in April 1521, Luther defied the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, setting the stage for a permanent split in the Roman church. And before the decade ended, eight years later, a peasant uprising in Germany had unleashed new levels of virulent social repression; Sweden had become an independent kingdom; Cortés had conquered Mexico; the Turks had overrun Hungary and reached the walls of Vienna; Henry VIII had intensified his quest for a divorce, which was to transform English politics and society; and Charles V's troops had stormed through Italy in a campaign that climaxed in one of the most devastating cultural catastrophes of European history, the sack of Rome.

Depending on their interests and viewpoints, therefore, historians have at various times settled on this decade as the moment of crucial transformation in the emergence of modern times: the beginning of the Reformation; the first major conquest in Europe's overseas expansion; the start of a new intensity in the struggle between Islam and the West; a turning point in the consolidation of the secular state; the end of the Italian Renaissance. And in most cases, these decisive shifts could easily have taken different forms or moved in different directions, if only one or two contingencies had changed.

Luther's fragile revolt, for example, was little more than three years old when he came to Worms. His early ideas had been put forward in three short tracts published the previous year, but without his leadership

and further writings, the fragmentary eruptions of support that had appeared by 1521 might well have petered out. There were German princes, it was true, who were genuinely moved by Luther's message, and others who had political or economic reasons to resist the will of their overlord, the Emperor Charles V, who sought to suppress the heresy following the confrontation at Worms. But when Luther vanished from sight just a few days after his appearance before Charles, it was widely assumed that he had been removed from the scene, not by his friends (as was the case) but by his enemies.

The artist Albrecht Dürer, though he was never to leave the Roman church, reacted to Luther's disappearance with a lament that echoed the fears of many:

Is he still alive, or have they murdered him? If we have lost this man, who has written more clearly than anyone else, send us another who will show us how to live a Christian life. O God, if Luther is dead, who will explain the Gospel to us?

If Dürer's foreboding had come true, there is a good chance the Reformation would have been snuffed out, as had Jan Hus's similar protest in Bohemia a century before. For within three years, a peasant revolt claiming inspiration from Luther swept through southern and western Germany. Had the reformer not survived to condemn the peasants and reassure the princes that religious change was not an excuse for social upheaval, there is little doubt that Germany's rulers would have taken fright, rushed to reconcile with the emperor, and removed the critical support that enabled Luther to succeed.

That Cortés's vastly outnumbered incursion into Mexico, or Magellan's perilous expedition around Cape Horn, could also have come easily to grief scarcely needs arguing. Spain would probably have persisted in seeking an American empire, but one can question whether it would have been conquered so quickly and so cheaply. And it is worth remembering that, if progress had been slower overseas, it might have been overtaken in the 1530s by Charles V's mounting determination to over-

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come his Muslim foes in the Mediterranean. As he revised Spain's priorities, he would have regarded Algeria as a more important target of expansionist aims and resources than the wilds of a new continent. It could well have been in North Africa rather than Peru, therefore, that Pizarro and other adventurers would have sought their fame.

And that other major event of the decade, the sack of Rome, was equally beset by happenstance. As Charles V's troops, having defeated their main enemy, France, moved across a seemingly helpless Italy, none of their commanders had any designs on Rome. Indeed, the emperor was to be furious when he heard of the assault on the holy city. Charles's magisterial biographer, Karl Brandi, noted over half a century ago how much that terrible event owed to sheer ill fortune:

Now and again in history long-forgotten decisions and long-suppressed emotions, under the direction of some invisible impulse, generate elemental forces which, like gigantic and slowly rolling dice, work out their horrible and destructive course, guided by chance alone.

Thus it was with the sack of Rome, which was inflicted on the city by an army out of control, driven by a frenzy of hunger, lack of pay, and a generalized hatred of the papacy and all its works. The result was a destruction of life, art, and treasure of awesome proportions, not to mention a flight of talent that affected Roman culture for a generation (while at the same time giving Venice, a safe refuge, an unprecedented infusion of new ideas and creativity). Yet all of this, too, could have been avoided, not only by better supply and firmer command in the imperial army, but also if either of two accidents had turned out differently the previous year.

Charles V's army had crossed the Alps under the command of Georg Frundsberg in 1526. Essential to their advance was a good supply of heavy artillery, which they had been unable to carry over the mountains, and for which their best source in Italy was Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. The Estes were a perpetual thorn in the papacy's side, particularly now, when a Medici from the rival city of Florence, Clement VII, sat on the papal throne. To forestall any deal between Ferrara and the emperor,

Clement decided to send a bribe to Ercole, but he moved too slowly and his offer arrived after the transaction had been completed. Had the pope's payment not been delayed, the artillery might never have been delivered.

The second accident occurred in November 1526, when the one really effective soldier in the Medici family, a young man named Giovanni della Bande Nere—who bore an uncanny resemblance to the later conqueror of Italy, Napoleon—was accidentally wounded by a cannonball from one of the Ferrarese guns in a small skirmish with Frundberg's troops. He died soon thereafter, thus removing the last military commander who stood between the imperial army and Rome.

Nor did this succession of misfortunes have serious consequences merely for the holy city and its medieval and Renaissance wonders. For in the very month of the sack, May 1527, nearly a thousand miles away, the queen of England, Catherine of Aragon, was being told by her husband, Henry VIII, that he wanted a divorce. Thus began "the king's great matter"—his quest for a new wife who could provide him with a male heir, a demand that at first seemed straightforward. After all, Henry had married his brother's widow; there were good biblical grounds for annulling such a marriage; and popes usually obliged the crowned heads of Europe. But this pope was now under the control of Catherine's nephew, Charles V, and so the permission was not forthcoming. Within a few quick years Henry solved the problem by having himself proclaimed head of an independent Anglican church; the Reformation gained a crucial and redoubtable ally; and English society and institutions were transformed beyond recall.

Of all the near misses and "what ifs" of the 1520s, however, none is as pregnant with possibilities as the aftermath of the Battle of Mohács in Hungary in 1526. For here we can speculate on consequences that encompass not merely one but a number of the great changes of the time: not only the Italian Renaissance and the Lutheran and Anglican Reformations, but also the clash between Christendom and Islam, and the her-

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The victory won by the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent at Mohács on August 29, 1526, was unquestionably one of the decisive military engagements of world history. It was nearly three-quarters of a century since the conquest of Constantinople, but now the Turks were on the move again. Sweeping through the Balkans, Suleyman had captured the powerful citadel at Belgrade in 1521, and five years later, after turning aside to conquer the hostile island of Rhodes from the crusading order of the Knights Hospitaller of St. John, he was ready to advance further into Europe. At Mohács he encountered and destroyed the flower of the kingdom of Hungary, the last Christian power capable of resisting the Muslims in the Balkans. The slaughter that followed was ghastly. Not only did the king, two archbishops, five bishops, and the bulk of the aristocratic leadership of Hungary perish, but some 30,000 troops on the losing side either died on the field or were killed by a victor who took no prisoners. Suleyman's exultation on behalf of his faith as well as his regime leaps from the pages of his announcement of victory:

Thanks to the Most High! The banners of Islam have been victorious, and the enemies of the doctrine of the Lord of Mankind have been driven from their country and overwhelmed. Thus God's grace has granted my glorious armies a triumph, such as was never equaled by any illustrious Sultan, all-powerful Khan, or even by the companions of the Prophet. What was left of the nation of impious men has been extirpated. Praise be to God, the Master of the World!

The Turks were masters of the Balkans. But the question remained: What next?

Suleyman's answer in 1526, as it had been in 1521 after the capture of Belgrade, was to take his crack troops, the Janissaries, back to Constantinople to regroup. Not for three years did he venture forth again, to probe further up the Danube into Austria, and to besiege Vienna. By

then Charles V's brother Ferdinand (already the dominant figure in the Habsburgs' Austrian and Bohemian domains) had established his claim to what remained of the crown of Hungary against his rival, John Zapolya of Transylvania, and Zapolya in response had turned to Suleyman for help. Aware that the Habsburgs were his chief antagonists in central Europe, the sultan agreed to help the Transylvanian gain the crown on the condition that he pay tribute and owe allegiance to the Ottomans. With that agreed, Suleyman at long last marched from Constantinople on May 10, 1529, at the head of an enormous army of perhaps 75,000 men.

It was now that contingency intervened. The summer of 1529 happened to be one of the wettest of the decade. In the laconic judgment of Suleyman's biographer, Roger Bigelow Merriman, the rains "were this year so continuous and torrential that they seriously affected the outcome of the campaign." If we change "seriously affected" to "determined" we will come closer to the truth. Because of the rains, Suleyman was forced to abandon, on the way, his hard-to-move heavy artillery, which had been a crucial asset in earlier sieges. Moreover, the adverse conditions prevented his troops from marching at their normal speed; they covered ground so slowly that nearly five months passed before they reached the gates of their target, Vienna. Not until September 30 (virtually the end of the campaigning season) was Suleyman ready to send his bedraggled and weary troops into the attack, and by then he also had to contend with another consequence of the delay: the Viennese had had the time to reinforce their position. Over the summer they had been able nearly to double the size of the defending garrison, which now held some 23,000 men, 8,000 of whom had reached the city only three days before the Turks arrived. The sultan's assaults proved futile, and by mid-October he had decided to withdraw—only, so he later claimed, because Ferdinand had run away, and there would be no glory in capturing the city without his adversary.

But let us suppose it had not been such a terribly wet summer—or, to rely on human rather than meteorological happenstance, suppose that Suleyman had pressed ahead more promptly, in the much drier summer

of 1527 that was fully captured another very Styria—though defended by what Western Europe comes have been (1532), when prepared?

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of 1527 that followed the battle of Mohács. In 1532 he showed that he was fully capable of overrunning the Habsburg territory when, despite another very wet summer, he laid waste to the Austrian province of Styria—though he did avoid Vienna, which by now was massively defended by what Merriman calls “possibly the very largest [army] that Western Europe had ever been able to collect.” What might the outcomes have been if the incursion had begun in 1527 (rather than 1529 or 1532), when the conditions were right and the Habsburgs were far less prepared?

One has to assume, first, that Suleyman would almost certainly have captured Vienna. And, secondly, that he would soon have found allies in the West. As titular rulers of all Germany, and effective rulers not only of Austria, Bohemia, and the Netherlands, but also of large stretches of Italy and all of Spain, the Habsburgs were feared and resented by almost every other leader in Europe. They might now stand on the front line against the Muslims, but that did not mean their fellow Christians stood with them, for their power often seemed far more threatening than Islam. Indeed, in the very year of Mohács, the papacy, France, and many of the Italian states formed the League of Cognac to try to sweep the Habsburgs out of Italy. The campaign that led to the sack of Rome was to be Charles V's reply, but he could never have mounted that campaign if Suleyman had threatened his flank from Vienna. Indeed, there is a good chance that the participants in the League of Cognac, emboldened by the emperor's troubles, would have made a pact with Suleyman and thus have been able to end, almost before it began, a Habsburg ascendancy in Italy that was to last nearly a century and a half. After all, the Venetians had already signed a commercial treaty with the sultan in 1521, and the French were to ally with him in the 1530s. Although the pope would have had to stay aloof, the other Italian princes would have had no more compunction about joining with the infidel against the hated Habsburg in 1527 than did the Venetians or the French in these years.

With Charles distracted by Suleyman in the north, those Italian states that were his allies would soon have succumbed to the League of

Cognac. And the consequences for European culture would have been enormous, for not only the treasures of Rome but the city's entire artistic culture would have been spared the sack of 1527. Investigating the effects of that terrible event over a decade later, the art historian and painter Giorgio Vasari recounted in painful detail the grim experience of the distinguished artists whose lives had been shattered. Some had been killed; many had been assaulted, ruined, or forced into menial occupations; others had fled; and all had in one way or another been deeply affected. "One need only understand," wrote Vasari, "that violence makes delicate souls lose sight of their primary objective and regress." Indeed, one of the victims, Sebastiano del Piombo, wrote: "I don't seem to be the same Sebastiano I was before the sack; I can never again return to that frame of mind."

Even a heartwarming story recounted by Vasari—and there were not many of them—had no happy ending. As he tells it, the great Mannerist painter Parmigianino was unable to complete his *St. Jerome*

because of the catastrophic sack of Rome in 1527. This not only caused a halt in the arts, but for many artists the loss of their lives as well. It would have taken little for Francesco [Parmigianino] to lose his too, for when the sack began, he was so immersed in his work that despite the eruption of soldiers into the houses, and Germans already inside his own, with all the noise they made, he continued to work. Bursting in on him, and seeing him at work, they were so amazed by the painting that, evidently men of breeding, they let him go on . . . But when these soldiers left, Francesco was a hair's breadth from disaster.

Eventually, Parmigianino escaped and returned to his native Parma. Whether or not Vasari was echoing a similar story from antiquity—of an artist, interrupted during a siege of Rhodes, who told the soldiers he assumed they had come to make war on Rhodes, not on art—the message was unmistakable.

Nor was this merely the exaggeration of contemporaries. The chief modern historian of the sack, André Chastel, has described Roman art as

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traumatized for a generation, though he acknowledged that those who fled could enrich the culture of other cities, notably Venice, the prime refuge for the persecuted. And it is also worth noting that there would have been one other momentous result had Charles's troops been kept out of Italy. The emperor would not have controlled the papacy; Clement would doubtless have granted Henry VIII his divorce; and England might well have remained a Catholic nation indefinitely.

That likelihood would surely have been strengthened by the effect on Germany of Suleyman's presence in Vienna. A quick look at the map will suggest the implications of the capture of the Austrian capital for the future of Central Europe, especially if one imagines the sultan continuing westward along the Danube to the rich cities of Passau, Regensburg, and Augsburg, ravaging the terrified dukedom of Bavaria, and so forth. Either some of the princes in his path would have made deals with him—keeping their positions if they paid tribute and allegiance to Constantinople, as Zapolya had done in Hungary—or they would finally have been forced to rally around Charles V. Not that the second option would have seemed inevitable, even in the face of invasion. There had been civil warfare in western Germany in the early 1520s and a huge peasant uprising in the mid-1520s, and the emperor's pleas for unity and help against the Turk had little effect. Typical was the behavior of one gathering of princes, summoned to discuss the Turkish advance through the Balkans. Before agreeing to provide support, they decided they needed a fact-finding mission; delaying even this action, they did not finally vote to dispatch a delegation to Hungary until the day before the battle of Mohács.

Whether making deals with Suleyman or joining together to protect their lands, however, the princes of Germany would almost certainly have realized by the late 1520s that they could no longer afford the divisive presence of religious dissent. To link up with the devout Charles V they would probably have agreed to end their support for Luther, and most would have realized anyway that a united front required the suppression of the animosities caused by the Reformation. Bereft of essential protectors, and with Charles seeking to placate the papacy, Luther would

WHAT IF?

have been isolated and his following would have dwindled, though the reformer himself might have found a protector in the north, far from the Danube. New movements to reform the church would undoubtedly have arisen, and Luther's impact might have been postponed rather than eradicated; but the religious complexion of Europe at midcentury would have been radically altered, with immense consequences for all her states.

One in particular catches the eye. If both England and the Netherlands had remained Catholic, and the Habsburgs had given up their Italian ambitions to concentrate on their German and Spanish territories, the struggles of the second half of the sixteenth century would have taken very different forms. With religious antagonisms subdued, Spain would not have aroused such enmity elsewhere in Christian Europe, and she would have been able to develop her empire in the New World largely free of the hatreds that eventually propelled her challengers. Today, as a result, all Americans, both North and South, would have spoken Spanish. If only it had not been such a wet summer . . .

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