

# UNIT STUDY

## *Lepanto*

by G. K. Chesterton

Nancy Carpentier Brown



*White founts falling in the courts of the sun,  
And the Soldan of Byzantium is smiling as they run;  
There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men feared,  
It stirs the forest darkness, the darkness of his beard.*

—Opening verses of *Lepanto*, by G.K. Chesterton

*Lepanto* is one of G.K. Chesterton's best-known and best-loved poems. G.K. Chesterton (1871 -1936) was one of the last century's most prolific writers, and remains one of the most quoted authors. The famed British Catholic convert wrote over 4000 essays in daily newspapers, one hundred books, including the famous Father Brown mysteries; he was a biographer, a critic, a public debater and lecturer, a popular speaker and poet.

Written in 1911, when Chesterton was 37 years old, *Lepanto* is a narrative poem, which is a poem that tells a story, or in this case, a historical recounting of fact. But not only does it tell us about a moment in history—as a poem, it is a masterwork of rhyme, rhythm and alliteration (the repeated use of the same sounds).

*Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard,  
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless  
prince has stirred,  
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half-  
attainted stall,  
The last knight of Europe takes weapons  
from the wall.*

Bring history and literature alive for your students by integrating study of this

period in history with Chesterton's poem. Some ideas:

### 1. Read *Lepanto* out loud.

First, read the poem out loud together. The sounds of the marching feet, and the rhythm of the rolling waves on the sea can be heard in this poem when read aloud. The eye can notice the alliterations, but they spring to life when heard by the ear. So, your first task is to read the poem out loud together. Take turns with the stanzas.

### 2. Study the historical references.

An excellent book has just been published by the American Chesterton Society, *Lepanto*, with explanatory notes and commentary. Order from The American Chesterton Society by calling (952) 831-3096 or on-line at [www.chesterton.org](http://www.chesterton.org).

### 3. Line-by-line references.

In *Lepanto*, the lines of the poem are numbered and every reference is made clear. The people mentioned are all explained and the historical facts are fleshed out.

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### 4. Go internet sleuthing.

Find out where Lepanto was. It is now called Naupaktos, Greece. Find pictures on-line which will show you how the boats lined up that day: the Islamic boats lined up in the shape of a crescent (a symbol of Islam). The Christians discussed battle formation to defeat the crescent, and came up with a form that was very much like a cross. In more ways than one, the crescent and the cross did battle that day. Discuss how Lepanto was a battle of ideas as well as a physical battle. Web site suggestions are listed below.

### 5. A miracle occurred that day.

The miracle was a major shift in wind direction. At the dawn of the battle, the winds were blowing behind the Islamic forces, forcing the Christians to use their slaves to row against the wind. When the wind shifted completely around, the slaves were freed and they joined the fight, adding considerable numbers to the already outnumbered Christians. Discuss the miracle and the prayers of the Pope and the Catholics of Europe that day.

### 6. Print out the poem.

It's available on line. Keep it on your refrigerator. Refer to it often.

### 7. Memorize the poem.

Recite it often. Say it in your head as you run or walk, or as you pedal your bike.

### 8. Read the poem out loud.

Sit with your eyes closed. Try to "see" the battle in your mind's eye and what is going on at sea in 1571.

## GET YOUR STUDENTS THINKING

1. How did the miracle mentioned above give the advantage to the Christians?

2. Find out how the Battle of Lepanto is related to the feast of the Holy Rosary, October 7. What was the original name of the feast day? Who was Pope Pius V, who asked all of Europe to pray the rosary for the Christian victory at Lepanto? Every single Christian fighting that day did something that morning, and had something in their hands all day. What did they hold?

3. Who was Cervantes? He makes an appearance in Chesterton's poem, because he was really fighting that day; in fact, he lost the use of his left arm at Lepanto. But that didn't stop him from become famous for something later on. What is he famous for?

4. Something was used by the Christians in battle for the first time in history, and it helped them win the fight. What was it?

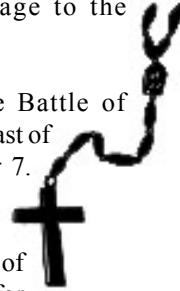
5. Can you give an example of Chesterton's use of alliteration?

6. The poem takes the point of view of eight main characters, and one famous minor character. Who were they?

7. How long did the battle of Lepanto last?

8. What was the name of Don John's ship? What was Ali Pasha's ship's name?

9. How did Ali Pasha die?



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### ANSWERS

1. The miracle of the wind shift made the galley slaves, who until then had to row, available to participate in the fighting. This allowed up to 50,000 extra men to fight on the side of the Christians, who only had 30,000 soldiers fighting (against the Turk's 100,000) prior to the wind shift.

2. Pope Pius V had a great devotion to the Rosary and helped to re-popularize the devotion by asking Christian Europe to pray the Rosary for the success of the crusade. The Pope himself spent part of the day, October 7 in his chapel praying the Rosary for the Christian fighters. Our Lady of Victory was the original name the Pope gave to the feast day. He was elected in 1566, after the Protestant revolt. He understood the problem of the Islamic militants. He knew that it would take spiritual help to win the battle that was taking place on the sea, and so he invoked Our Lady's help through the Rosary. There was a priest aboard each galley at Lepanto and that morning Mass was said for all the crusaders. Each crusader was given a Rosary that day.

3. Cervantes was Miguel de Cervantes, a twenty-four year old Spaniard who became famous for his novel *Don Quixote*. It is ironic that he spent his life in adventure and romance and wrote a book ridiculing adventures and romance.

4. For the first time in history, gunpowder was used to sink ships. Prior to this, sea battles were fought by men crossing over to the enemy's boat and engaging them in battle on the boat. Now, there was a force to destroy the boat, and lower the chances of hand-to-hand combat. The Christians were at a disadvantage with numbers of men: there were about 30,000 Christians,

with 50,000 Christian slaves manning the oars, to 100,000 Muslims, with the same or more number of slaves at their oars. However, the miracle of the winds turning, plus the cannon power, along with the intercessory prayers offered that day helped the Christians win the victory.

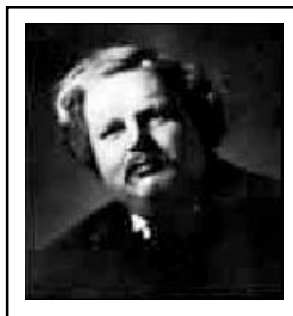
5. **Dim Drums** throbbing, in the **hills half heard**, and there are dozens of other examples in the poem.

6. King Phillip II of Spain, Don John of Austria (King Phillip's half brother), Sultan Selim II, Pope Pius V, Queen Elizabeth I, King Charles IX, Mohammed, St. Michael, and the minor character is the author, Cervantes.

7. The battle began after a pre-dawn mass on October 7, 1571, and it was over around 4pm that same day.

8. Don John's galley was named the *Real* [Spanish for royal]. The admiral of the Turkish fleet that day was Ali Pasha. Ali Pasha's galley was named the *Sultana*.

9. Ali Pasha was killed by a musket ball to the forehead. One of the soldiers, against the wishes of Don John, cut off Ali Pasha's head and held it up on a staff. This so demoralized the Turks that the Christian's gained the psychological edge from that moment on.



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### Further study ideas:

Start your own local Chesterton society. See the information page on the Chesterton Society's web site ([www.chesterton.org](http://www.chesterton.org)).

If your children get excited about Chesterton, have them read up on Chesterton's Junior Debate Club (see my article at: <http://www.homeschoolstories.com/academics/literature>).

The young people may want to read and debate Chesterton's own writings, or pick hot topics from today's news and debate them. The original Junior Debate Club included writing a paper based on the student's position on the debate topic. I encourage any young people who would like to start a Junior Debate Club to do so, and write to me if they need help in getting started.

Another idea: Bring together a lively group of high school age homeschooled students. Purchase a copy of *Lepanto* for each student. (Become a member of the Chesterton society for only \$20 and you will get a 20% discount on all their books.) Have the students read the poem and the explanatory essays before your class. Then have the students take turns reading the poem out loud. Using the discussion materials provided in the notes in *Lepanto* and go over the historical references in detail.

At your next class, you can use the chapters called "The Background" to set the stage for the historical picture of Europe that existed building up to the year 1571 and the time of Lepanto. Teaching the result of the Protestant revolt, the division of loyalties, the lack of faith in the Pope, etc., sets the stage for the history of Lepanto.

For your third class, using a blackboard, dry-erase board or large stand up paper board, show the students the battle plan of Lepanto, explaining the battle using the information gained from reading the chapter entitled "The Battle." This battle can be ex-

plained with great excitement, telling of the formations, the use of the Rosary, the miracle of the change of winds, etc.

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### WEB SITES

See maps of the area where the battle took place at [www.nafpaktos.com/battle\\_of\\_lepanto.htm](http://www.nafpaktos.com/battle_of_lepanto.htm)

More about Miguel de Cervantes: [www.nafpaktos.com/cervantes.htm](http://www.nafpaktos.com/cervantes.htm)

View the text of the poem *Lepanto* at [www.bartleby.com/103/91.html](http://www.bartleby.com/103/91.html)

Info on the history of the battle: [www.geocities.com/Broadway/Alley/5443/lepanto.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/Alley/5443/lepanto.htm)

Info on Pope St. Pius V: [www.newadvent.org/cathen/12130a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12130a.htm)

A technical article about the battle of Lepanto and its impact on the 16th Century: [www.angelfire.com/ga4/guilmartin.com/Lepanto.html](http://www.angelfire.com/ga4/guilmartin.com/Lepanto.html)

### BOOKS

*The Galleys at Lepanto* by Jack Breeching. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1983.

*Lepanto: With Explanatory Notes and Commentary*, edited by Dale Ahlquist. The American Chesterton Society. 2003. To order call (952) 831-3096 or visit [www.chesterton.org](http://www.chesterton.org).