

THE BATTLE OF MALTA, 1283: PRELUDE TO A DISASTER

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ON 8 June 1283, a naval battle took place in the Grand Harbor of Malta which would have profound repercussions on the ability of the Angevins to wage war for the rest of the conflict known as the War of the Sicilian Vespers. Not only would the battle bring to prominence for the first time Admiral Roger de Lauria, who would go on to become one of the great admirals of the period, but it would also lay the groundwork for the failure of the French crusade against Aragon two years later. The battle of Malta is one of the rare cases in the war where an Aragonese fleet met a fleet composed entirely of Provençal ships and crews. The only other instance occurred at the battle of Las Rosas, but, as will be shown, the quality and type of French units deployed at that battle were to a large extent dictated by the results of the earlier battle at Malta. For the above reasons, the battle of Malta offers an opportunity to evaluate both the ships and tactics of two homogeneous fleets without the ambiguities that attend the interpretation of a battle in which one of the fleets, composed of units from various city-states, is plagued by the problems of unity of command, differing tactics within the fleet, and less than enthusiastic participation on the part of one or more of the units. Moreover, the results of the battle of Malta suggest that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the ships and tactics used by the fleets in the western Mediterranean were virtually identical, the Catalans and Aragonese employed subtle, but effective, differences in ship design and tactics to become the pre-eminent naval power in the western basin. This paper will analyze the differences in the tactics and ships utilized by both sides in the battle of Malta, and outline the effects the Angevin defeat there would have on the failed crusade of Philip III.

The battle of Malta was not the first naval engagement between the Aragonese fleet and the forces of Charles of Anjou, but the result of an engagement which had occurred nine months before. Following the Sicilian revolt against Angevin rule in April 1282, Pedro III of Aragon (1276–1285) laid claim to Sicily based on his wife's connection to the Hohenstaufen family. He invaded Sicily in June and by late September of 1282, Charles had been forced to abandon the siege of Messina and cross the straits to Reggio on the coast of Calabria. The actual size of the fleet Charles took with him to Reggio is hard to determine based on the chronicles. Neocastro and Desclot are in virtual agreement, with the former putting the number of vessels at fifty-two galleys, while

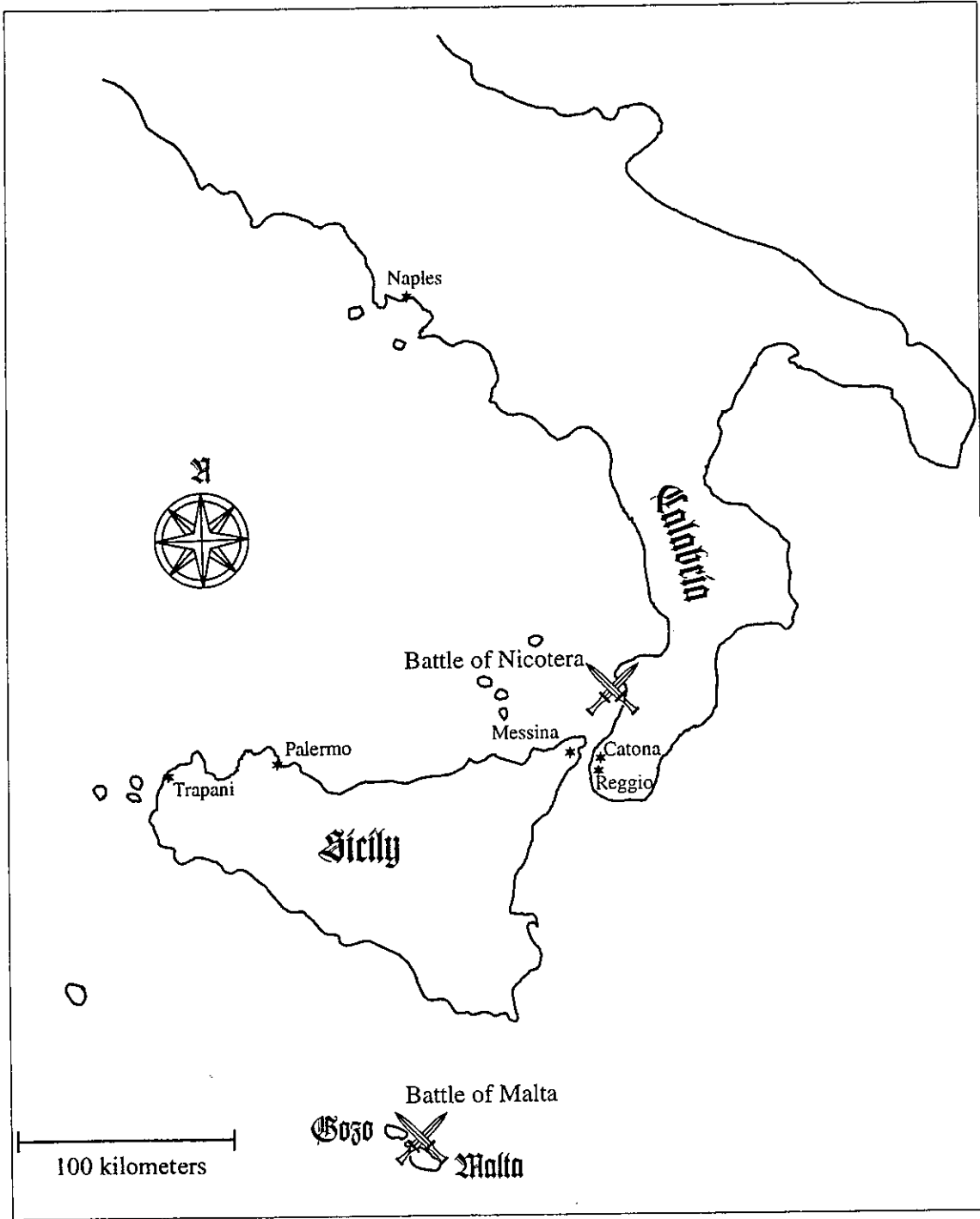


Figure 1. Map of southern Italy, Sicily and Malta

the latter simply states there were a total of seventy vessels, including auxiliaries.¹ Muntaner gives an apparently inflated figure of a total of 120 galleys plus assorted transports.² Based on the chronicles, it appears that the Angevin fleet was composed of twenty-two to twenty-four galleys with an accompanying flotilla of thirty to forty *tarides*, armed *lenys*, and barges.

In response to Charles's retreat to Reggio, Pedro III had a fleet assembled in Messina in order to intercept the Angevin fleet as it attempted to pass north through the straits (Figure 1). Nominal command of the fleet at this time had been given to the natural son of King Pedro, Jaime Perez, but for this operation Pedro de Queralt and Ramon de Cortada were placed in command. Muntaner states that the king wished his son to remain in order to oversee the fleet at Messina, but the appointment of Queralt and Cortada may have signaled a growing lack of faith in the leadership abilities of Perez. In any case the two vice-admirals were placed in command of sixteen galleys.³

At first glance, the Angevin fleet would seem to have held the advantage, but it was a fleet made up of a conglomerate of units from Genoa, Pisa, Provence, and the Principality of Naples. What is more, at that point it was a fleet that had very little enthusiasm for a fight. Part of this lack of enthusiasm came from the fact that the Genoese and Pisan were essentially mercenaries who had no particular stake in the outcome. Moreover, while the fleet had been at Sicily, the Genoese had been openly fraternizing with the Sicilians who had revolted against Charles.⁴ However, the main reason for the reticence by the various units to engage the enemy had been created by Charles of Anjou himself. Because of the relative lack of seaworthiness of galleys, it was customary throughout the Mediterranean for fleets to be dispersed and laid up during the winter months in order to repair and refit the ships. After the Angevin fleet had retired to Reggio, following the common practice, Charles had disbanded the fleet so that the various units could return to their homeports.⁵ While this practice was common enough, the locale where Charles decided to disband the fleet was poorly chosen. The result of this decision was a fleet with no unity of command, composed of various units, and simply striving to return home, that would have to pass within sight of the enemy fleet at Messina. In summary, the

¹ B. Neocastro, *Historia Sicula*, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores [RIS]*, ed. L.A. Muratori (1921), vol. 13, pt. 3: chap. 53; B. Desclot, *Llibre del Rei en Pere*, in *Les Quatre Grans Cròniques*, ed. Ferran Soldevila (Barcelona, 1983), chap. 98.

² R. Muntaner, *Cronica*, in *Les Quatre Grans Cròniques*, chap. 66.

³ In a letter to Count Guido of Montefeltro, Pedro III describes the battle and notes that the Aragonese fleet consisted of sixteen galleys. As a comparison, both Desclot and Speciale state that the Aragonese fleet was composed of fourteen galleys and Neocastro says there were fifteen galleys, while Muntaner places the number at twenty-two. *De rebus Regni Siciliae (9 settembre 1282–26 agosto 1283) documenti inediti estrati dall' Archivio della Corona d' Aragona* (Palermo, 1882), doc. CXV, p. 109; Desclot, chap. 98. Muntaner, chap. 67; Neocastro, chap. 53. N. Specialis 1727, *Rerum Sicularum* in *RIS*, 10: bk. I, chap. 18.

⁴ Stephen Runciman, *The Sicilian Vespers* (Cambridge, 1992), 224, 233.

⁵ Desclot, chap. 97; Muntaner, chap. 67; Neocastro, chap. 53.

Aragonese faced a leaderless fleet composed in part of mercenaries who would see no financial gain from a fight, and of individual units which had been disbanded. King Pedro appears to have recognized this when he reportedly described the Angevin fleet as “a people who are fleeing and who have lost all heart, and . . . are of many nations and are never of one mind.”⁶ Regardless of whether he said this or not, it was a shrewd observation and it undoubtedly was the main reason he felt his smaller fleet could have success against a much larger force.

The Angevin fleet had attempted to go north through the strait on October 11, but had been chased back into port by the Aragonese galleys. Desclot and Neocastro state that they were then held in port by unfavorable winds until October 14 when they again made an attempt to pass through the strait.⁷ Again the Aragonese fleet came out in pursuit and this time caught the Angevin fleet at Nicotera. The result of the battle that followed was dictated as much by the composition of the Angevin fleet as by any particular battle plan on the part of the Catalans and Aragonese. The chronicles are in virtual agreement that none of the groups within the Angevin fleet trusted each other for support in the battle, and at the advance of the enemy they simply scattered and tried to escape without putting up any kind of resistance. The brunt of the attack was borne by the Pisans and the galleys of the Principality, which had attempted to flee back to Nicotera. By the end of the day, twenty-one Pisan and Angevin galleys had been captured along with an assorted group of *tarides* and barges.⁸

This battle was an unmitigated disaster for Charles. Not only had his fleet been soundly defeated and a large number of warships and transports been captured by the enemy, the majority of galleys captured had been those of the Principality, which left his territories in Calabria virtually defenseless. Pedro took advantage of the situation and proceeded to launch a number of raids into Calabria. One of these raids was lead by Jaime Perez in January 1283 against the arsenal at Catona just outside of Reggio, which was being held at that time by a force under the command of the count of Alençon, who was the nephew of the king of France and the brother of Charles of Anjou. Perez ferried a contingent of *almogavers* in four groups from Messina to Catona under the cover of darkness and apparently caught the garrison by complete surprise. According to Speciale, Muntaner and Desclot, the raid was a great success in which the garrison was wiped out.⁹ Included among the dead was the count of Alençon, who had been apparently butchered in his bedchamber along with his household guard despite having surrendered.

⁶ Muntaner, chap. 67.

⁷ Desclot, chap. 98; Neocastro, chap. 53.

⁸ Pedro III in his letter to Count Guido states twenty-one Angevin galleys were captured. For comparison, Desclot and Neocastro state twenty-two galleys were captured along with assorted transports. Muntaner states that a total of forty-five galleys, armed lenys and barges were captured. *De rebus Regni Siciliae*: doc. CXV, p. 109; Desclot, chap. 98; Neocastro, chap. 53; Muntaner, chap. 67.

⁹ Desclot, chap. 102; Muntaner, chap. 70; Speciale, bk. 1, chap. 19.

There is general agreement that it was the conduct of this raid that led to the removal of Jaime Perez as admiral of the fleet, and the appointment of Roger de Lauria as his replacement. Most of the chronicles are mute concerning the reason for the removal of Perez as commander. It has been speculated that Perez's inability to control the *almogavers* and the subsequent death of the count of Alençon were the contributing factors for his being removed from command, but this alone seems to a rather weak excuse of his removal.¹⁰ The *almogavers* were traditionally hard to control, and this was not the first nor the last time that they would run amuck. The death of the count certainly deprived the king of a very valuable hostage, but there may have been other reasons for the removal of Perez. Zurita, citing a chronicle by an anonymous author, states that Perez had undertaken the raid without royal permission and that he nearly lost his head because of the casualties he had sustained.¹¹ On the other hand, both Muntaner and Desclot state that King Pedro was present at Messina and that the raid was authorized by him after being approached by the *almogavers*.¹² Considering the men and ships involved in the undertaking, it seems highly unlikely that a sortie of this size could be organized without the king's knowledge.

However, concerning the loss of men, Desclot recounts how a company of *almogavers* was left behind during the withdrawal and goes into lengthy detail as to King Pedro's attempts to rescue them. Desclot states that there were only thirty men left behind, but this figure may only represent one group of several stranded by Perez. What this suggests is that the raid was not as singular a success as purported, and that reinforcements sent from Reggio may have forced Perez into a disorganized retreat that left a number of troops stranded. As will be discussed later, the *almogavers* were considered elite troops who were highly prized. If Perez did bungle the withdrawal and left a number of troops at Catona, it would have been a serious mistake and certainly grounds for his dismissal as admiral. As we have seen, King Pedro already seemed to have had misgivings about Perez's ability to lead the fleet, and a bungled raid capped off with the death of the count of Alençon may simply have deepened his doubts about his natural son to the point where he lost all confidence in him. Jaime Perez held the office of admiral until April 1283 when he was finally replaced by Roger de Lauria.

On 12 April 1283 at Messina, Roger de Lauria was appointed as the Admiral of the Crown, Catalunya, Valencia and Sicily.¹³ Roger was not Catalan nor Aragonese, but had actually been born in the town of Scala in Calabria in 1250. His life followed that of a typical son of a feudal lord, and he was sent to the court of

¹⁰ J. Pryor, "The Naval Battles of Roger of Lauria," *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 183.

¹¹ J. Zurita, *Anales de la Corona de Aragon* (Zaragoza: Institucion "Fernando el Católico," 1977), chap. 24. This charge is repeated by Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, *Commentarios de los hechos de españoles, franceses y venecianos en Italia* (Madrid, 1624), 7.

¹² Desclot, chap. 102; Muntaner, chap. 70.

¹³ ACA, Cancillería real, R 54, f. 227r; G. La Mantia, *Codice diplomatico dei re aragonesi di Sicilia (1282-1353)* (Palermo, 1990), I: doc. 222.

King Manfred to be educated. However, his education was cut short when Charles of Anjou invaded Italy, and his father died along with Manfred at the battle of Benavento in 1266. His mother fled with him and his boyhood friend, Conrad de Lancia, to the court of Aragon. Both young men found favor at the court of Jaime I, and by 1270 Roger received lands from the king for services rendered. The lands he was granted were in a relative hot spot for the Crown. Not only did he have to contend with the continual border squabbles that arose with Castile, but in 1276 he had to put down a general insurrection by the *mudejar* population. His actions apparently pleased the king for we have a letter sent to Roger thanking him for his service in the war and granting him 5,700 royal *solidos*.¹⁴ When Jaime I died that same year, his son Pedro III ascended to the throne and proceeded to name Roger as the bailiff of Concentaina and Alcoy. Finally, on October 12, 1278 he was named governor of Valencia.¹⁵ He is mentioned in command of a trading ship at Tlemcen in that same year, but other than that his activities seem to have been limited to Valencia.¹⁶ The next major position he appears to have been given was that of governor of Reggio on 14 February 1283, a day after Charles had vacated it at the approach of Pedro III's forces.¹⁷

The appointment of Roger de Lauria has been somewhat of a puzzlement. He certainly had been involved in hard fighting during the insurrection, and his position as governor had made him responsible for not only defense of the territory but also maintaining the naval forces of the city. Yet, as Pryor has pointed out, he was surrounded by a number of men who had more experience with regard to naval matters.¹⁸ His friend Conrad de Lancia had held the title from 1278 until 1280 when it had passed to Jaime Perez. Pedro de Queralt, who had been in command of the fleet that routed the Angevins at Nicotera, was certainly available, along with two competent vice-admirals, Ramón Marquet and Berenguer Mallol. Pedro III's decision to choose Roger ahead of these other candidates was probably based on several factors. The admiral of the fleet had to be not only a tactician and strategist, but also a good administrator. The maintaining of a fleet required the commander to arrange for provisions, pay, equipment and maintenance. The other candidates undoubtedly had the skills necessary, but Roger had been governor of one of Aragon's newest and most important provinces and, as such, was responsible for both its land and sea defenses. Roger was a trusted friend of the crown, and the king needed a commander he could trust to maintain the fleet after he had returned to Aragon.

Finally, the choice was probably influenced as much by the political situation

¹⁴ R. Fullana Mira, "La Casa de Lauria en el Reino de Valencia," in *III Congrés de historia de la Corona de Aragó, dedicat al període compres entre la mort de Jaume I i la proclamació del rey Don Ferrán d'Antequerra*, 2 vols. (Valencia, 1923), 1:82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷ Neocastro, chap. 59.

¹⁸ Pryor, 183.

as the strategic one. After moving into Calabria in February 1283, Pedro had set about winning the hearts and minds of the inhabitants, and achieved some success. As part of this policy, he had appointed locally popular individuals to important posts, including Alaimo di Lentini as grand judge and Juan de Procida as chancellor of Sicily.¹⁹ Pedro was actively trying to recruit men from Calabria, and what better choice for command of the fleet in the region than a native son. Roger had proven himself in Valencia and the king would have little to worry about concerning his loyalty since Roger had an undisguised hatred for the Angevins, and Charles of Anjou in particular. When the appointment of Roger to admiral is seen from both a political and military standpoint, the choice of Pedro III becomes much more understandable. If there were any misgivings about his ability as a naval commander, Roger would soon dispel them.

The fleet that Roger de Lauria inherited from Jaime Perez was without doubt the best in the western Mediterranean. This was due in large part to the crews which were composed primarily of Catalans and Sicilians. According to Muntaner, Pedro III had specified the composition of the crews before he departed:

“Admiral, arm twenty-five galleys at once, and arm them in this way: that in each one there is one Catalan Master’s Mate and a Latin one, and three Catalan pilots and three Latin, and likewise the same of *proers*, and the rowers should be all Latins, and the crossbowmen should be all Catalans. And in this way, that from now on, all fleets will be fitted in this way, and that for no reason will you change it.”²⁰

As can be seen from the passage, the Aragonese ships contained mixed crews. However, unlike the Angevin fleet, these crews were highly motivated; the Sicilians because they were fighting to oust the Angevins from their home, and the Catalans because they were fighting for their king and to acquire an important holding for Aragon and Catalonia. The distrust of one’s allies, which was so rife in the Angevin fleet, was simply lacking. Adding to the apparent high morale of the fleet had to have been the belief of the crews that they were lead by highly competent and aggressive commanders.

Not only was the Aragonese fleet manned by highly motivated men, but also by units which were ideally suited for galley warfare. In the above passage, Pedro III specified that all of the crossbowmen should be Catalan, in part because the Catalan archers were the best in Christendom, the Genoese not withstanding. Most of what we know of them comes from Muntaner who described them thus:

The Catalans are the best, in that they know how to make a crossbow, and each knows how to adjust his crossbow, and knows how to make a bolt, and a nut for the cord, and to string it, and to fasten it, and all that pertains to a crossbow; and the Catalans do not understand how anyone could be a crossbowman if he did not know, from beginning to end, all that pertains to the crossbow.

¹⁹ Runciman, 238–40.

²⁰ Muntaner, chap. 76.

And so they carry all their tools in a box, as if they had a crossbow workshop, and no other people do this. The Catalans learn this while drinking their mother's milk, and the other people of the world do not do this; that is why the Catalans are the supreme crossbowmen of the world. And because of this, the admirals and captains of the Catalan fleets should give all attention that this singular ability, which is not in other nations, they do not loose and that they practice it.²¹

Muntaner does not give the actual number of crossbowmen carried on an Aragonese galley, but we can get a reasonable estimate from the *Ordinacions* of Pedro IV, dated 1354. The *Ordinacions* state that a *galéa grosa* was to carry forty *ballesters*, while a *galéa sotil* was to only have thirty. Each archer was to have a leather curass, two crossbows, and two claws, one of with two hooks. The two crossbows that they carried may well have been different.²² In a charter party written in 1292, the contract states that the crossbowmen on the ship were to have two bows, one was to have stirrup and the other was to be a "two-foot crossbow," that is a bow requiring the archer to sit and use both feet to cock it.²³ The requirement that the archers have two types of crossbow can be traced back to regulations promulgated by Jaime I in 1258. The *Ordinacions* of 1354 also stipulate that has two hundred bolts, one hundred *de prova* and one hundred *de matzém*. Capmany translated the two types of bolts as "tested" and "government issue." Muntaner states that the crossbowmen had two types of bolts, *vires* and *tretes*, but whether these two types represent those in the *Ordinacions* or a particular style of bolt is unknown.²⁴

The *ballesters* in the Aragonese fleet were supported by some of the best light infantry in the Mediterranean. The *almogavers* were fighters from the areas bordering the Muslim territories and as such were accustomed to raiding and fighting under a variety of conditions. The best description of them comes from Desclot:

And the people who have the name *almogavers* are a people who only live by arms, and are not of cities or villages, but only live in the mountains and the forests. And they make war with the Saracens every day and enter into the territory of the Saracens for a day or two, pillaging and seizing, and taking many Saracens prisoners and much of their goods. And these men live by their booty, and they suffer great hardships which other men could not suffer, that they are well even after two days without eating, if necessary, or they eat the herbs of the countryside which only for them are not harmful. And the *adelils* are the leaders who guide them, who know the lands and the trails. And they wear no more than a very short leather tunic or a shift, whether summer or winter, and on the legs close-fitting leather leggings, and on the feet good leather sandals. And they carry a good knife, and a good leather belt, and a

²¹ Ibid., chap. 130.

²² A. Capmany, *Ordenanzas de las armadas navales de la Corona de Aragon* (Madrid, 1787), 19, 25.

²³ ACA, Pergaminos de Jaime II, no. 120.

²⁴ Ibid., chap. 130; Capmany, 25.

scabbard on the belt, and each carries a good lance, and two darts, and a leather pack on the back in which there is bread for two or three days. And they are a very strong people and swift in fleeing or pursuing, and they are Catalans and Aragonese and Saracens.²⁵

At first glance the *almogavers* were hardly an inspiring sight, as Muntaner notes. When the *almogavers* sent to relieve Messina arrived, the people were dismayed by their ragged appearance, and despaired that they would be of any help.²⁶ But the *almogavers* were highly proficient warriors and, despite their light armor, they were not intimidated by heavily armed knights. As Charles tried to retreat from Messina across the straits to Reggio in September 1282, a group of *almogavers* attacked his army and managed to get in among the troops trying to embark. In the resulting battle, they managed to burn a number of ships and to slaughter at least five hundred French knights.²⁷ In another instance when confronted by mounted knights, they broke their lances in half and then ran in among the horses, gutting them, and then pouncing on the fallen knights.²⁸ Unencumbered by restrictive armor, the *almogavers* used quickness and mobility for protection. Their agility and background made them perfect marines for the Aragonese navy, since they could keep their feet better on a pitching slippery deck than a heavily armored knight, and they already had the experience necessary for the type of slashing raids practiced in galley warfare. These troops were highly prized by the Aragonese and Catalan commanders, and if Jaime Perez did loose or strand a number of these men during his raid at Catona, it is little wonder Pedro III replaced him as admiral.

The rowers were armed as well and expected to participate in the battle. Based on the *Ordinacions* of 1354, we know that the rowers were actually divided into groups. In the first row of benches in the bow sat the *cruillers* and *aliers*, both of whom wore a leather cuirass and carried a shield. The *aliers* sat on the outboard end of the benches and were there to protect the sides of the bow. The *cruillers* sat inboard and handled the ground tackle and supported the men on the forecastle. Because of their position and duties, the *aliers* were the highest paid group of rowers. In the stern in the last row of seats were the *spatters* who served a similar function to the *aliers* and carried the same armor.²⁹ According to the *Ordinacions*, the *remers simples* were only expected to carry a sword, but an inventory from 1359 suggests that they sometimes worn an iron cap, a collar and a cuirass, and carried a shield. In battle, the rowers would stay at the oars until the galley had grappled with the enemy and then leave the benches to join the fight.³⁰

²⁵ Desclot, chap. 78.

²⁶ Muntaner, chap. 64.

²⁷ Ibid., chap. 65.

²⁸ Ibid., chap. 134.

²⁹ Capmany, 25–6.

³⁰ Laures F. Foerster, "The Warships of the Kings of Aragon and their Fighting Tactics During the 13th and 14th Centuries," *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 16.1 (1987): 24.

The fleet of which Roger de Lauria took command was highly motivated, manned by what could be described as professionals, and was battle-tested. The fleet did not have to be reorganized or assembled, and no training of the crews was needed. Yet, he may not have had a complete complement of men. While Muntaner states the fleet was well-manned and rested, Desclot declares that there was a shortage of experienced men and good weapons since most of the Catalan and Aragonese soldiers had returned with Pedro III to Catalonia.³¹ There may be some truth in the statement. Pedro III had returned to Catalonia in April 1283 and most likely took a number of ships and men with him. Philip III of France had moved into Navarre and Pedro most likely took a number of galleys with him to counter any raids against the Catalan coast. Muntaner states that he left with only four Catalan galleys, but if that was the case one has to wonder why Roger had only twenty galleys to pursue the French when after the battle of Nicotera he should have had the twenty-two Aragonese galleys, plus the twenty-one enemy galleys which were captured.³²

Charles of Anjou faced an entirely different set of problems. The botched evacuation from Messina and the subsequent battle of Nicotera had been a blow to Charles. Not only had he lost most of the galleys from the Principality, but he had also discovered that his erstwhile allies could not be counted on in a close fight. However, the lessons of the battle had not been lost on him and he set about assembling a fleet composed entirely of his French subjects. Realizing that only by controlling the waters around Apulia, Calabria and Sicily did he have a chance of recovering his territories, Charles wrote to the seneschal of Provence from Reggio in November 1282 and ordered him to assemble a fleet composed entirely of men and ships from southern France.³³ In this letter, he orders twenty well-armed galleys and two thousand crossbowmen and spearmen to be assembled at Marseille. Based on the correspondence, it appears that the Angevin fleet was manned in a manner similar to that of Roger de Lauria's in that there appears to have been an equal mix of archers and spearmen in the fleet, with about one hundred men for each galley.

It has been generally assumed that the *ballisters* of Provence were substantially inferior because of the generally poor performance of the Angevin naval forces in the War of the Sicilian Vespers, and because of their lack of any reputation. Though the Provençal archers did not have the notoriety of the Catalans or the Genoese, that does not necessarily imply incompetence on their part. Many of the crossbowmen came from the Narbonne region as well as from Marseille, areas which shared a cultural background similar to that of the Catalans, and it would seem to be a mistake to assume a total lack of proficiency on their part simply because they happened to be part of a losing effort. Likewise the *lancearius* were probably similar to the *almogavers* in their function, though they probably wore the standard iron cap and leather cuirass. Again, though

³¹ Desclot, chap. 110.

³² Muntaner, chap. 76.

³³ A. Bouard, *Actes et Lettres de Charles I Roi de Sicile* (Paris, 1926), doc. 1222, p. 365.

these men lacked the reputation of their counterparts, that does not mean they were either incompetent or untrained. Marseille was a large and important Mediterranean port, and therefore had the same constant need for crossbowmen and spearmen to man their galleys and merchantmen as did other Mediterranean port cities. The men recruited for the fleet were probably for the most part experienced personnel and not raw recruits. Charles could also recruit the men from the Provençal galleys which escaped the battle of Nicotera. In other words, the fleet that Charles assembled was manned by competent, experienced personnel, and not raw recruits of questionable ability as has been implied by some. They may not have had the proficiency level of the Aragonese crews, but that does not mean they were substantially inferior. However, in recruiting for the new fleet Charles apparently stripped Marseille of every experienced man, and pressed into service those who did not join willingly. This decision would have profound repercussions for Marseille and the French fleet in general.

Charles chose two men from Marseille to command the fleet, Barthomeu Bonvin and Guillaume de Cornut, the latter of whom is said to have sworn an oath to bring back Roger de Lauria dead or alive.³⁴ While there is no information as to their naval experience, the two admirals probably had gained a substantial background having been members of important merchant families in Marseille, and having served in the city government and the Angevin administration.³⁵ From Charles's correspondence, we know that Johanne Yvaldo had been in command of the Provençal galleys in August 1282, but the poor performance of the galleys at Nicotera apparently led to his removal as there are no further references to him in the correspondence or the chronicles. The first mention of either admiral comes from a document for the victualing of the fleet at Marseille, dated 17 April 1283, in which Bonvin is identified as the fleet admiral.³⁶

Sometime in late April or early May the Provençal fleet weighed anchor and set sail for Naples. The orders received at Naples from the prince of Salerno, Charles's son, were for the fleet to go to Malta to relieve the garrison at the *Castrum Maris*, now known as San Angelo, located at the end of a point in the Grand Harbor. The French garrison had been restricted to the castle from the outset of the war due to a general insurrection which was later bolstered by an Aragonese contingent under Manfred de Lancia. Malta lay in a strategic position, and both sides were anxious to control it. As a result, the composition of the fleet was apparently changed. Charles, in ordering provisions for when the fleet arrived at Roseti, stated that the port should be ready to provide victuals for eighteen galleys, a *panfil*, and eight armed boats, which confirms the statement by Desclot that a number of auxiliaries were attached to the fleet at Naples.³⁷ The reason for the difference between the eighteen galleys stated in

³⁴ Desclot, chap. 110; Muntaner, chap. 81.

³⁵ G. LeSage, *Marseille Angevine* (Paris, 1950), 117, 120.

³⁶ Bouard, doc. 1125, p. 368.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, doc. 1126, p. 368.

the document and the twenty galleys mentioned in the earlier documents and the chronicles is unknown.

The course the fleet set for Malta probably took it around the western end of Sicily in an attempt to avoid the Aragonese fleet at Messina. Muntaner states that the Angevin fleet went through the straits, but, as Pryor has points out, this would have required it to row against the current in the strait while passing within sight of the enemy.³⁸ Most likely in order to avoid any entanglements with the Aragonese, the fleet left Naples and sailed past the island of Ustica on its way around the western tip of Sicily, as both Desclot and Neocastro state.³⁹ How Roger received news of their sailing is unclear since none of the chronicles appear to agree. Muntaner states that while out raiding the Apulian coast Roger captured three light galleys sent by Bonvin to watch the Boca del Faro for the Aragonese fleet and that it was from the crews he learned of Bonvin's sailing.⁴⁰ Desclot states the news was spread by fishing boats which had seen the Provençal galleys, while according to Neocastro, on hearing rumors of the sailing of the enemy fleet Roger sent a *sagetia* to reconnoiter Naples to confirm the sailing of the Angevin fleet.⁴¹ The truth of the matter may well be a combination of both accounts. The decision of Bonvin and Cornut to send galleys to watch the enemy fleet would have been a prudent move, and the use of light galleys to scout and report on enemy movements was a common tactic. Likewise, it would have been very difficult for the Angevins to skirt the island of Sicily without being noticed by merchant ships or fishing vessels. In either case, Roger de Lauria probably had news of the Provençals within two to four days of their sailing.

The chronicles also disagree as to the course he took from Messina to intercept the Angevin fleet. According to Muntaner and Speciale, after receiving news of the enemy he took the shortest route to Malta by passing south through the Straits of Messina.⁴² However, Desclot and Neocastro state that the Aragonese fleet left Messina and then turned west in pursuit, eventually following them around Sicily and to Malta.⁴³ It is impossible to tell which version is the most likely. If Roger de Lauria did have accurate intelligence that the Provençal fleet was headed for Malta, he would have most likely set a course directly for Malta instead of engaging in a long and fruitless pursuit around Sicily. However, if he only knew that the Provençals had sailed but did not know their intentions, then it would have been prudent for him to follow after them to prevent a possible attack on a Sicilian port.

The Provençal fleet probably arrived at the Grand Harbor sometime on June 4. Manfred de Lancia, on receiving word from Queen Constance in Messina that

³⁸ Pryor, 184.

³⁹ Desclot, chap. 101; Neocastro, chap. 76.

⁴⁰ Muntaner, chap. 83.

⁴¹ Desclot, chap. 111; Neocastro, chap. 76.

⁴² Muntaner, chap. 82; Speciale, bk. I, chap. 26.

⁴³ Desclot, chap. 111; Neocastro, chap. 76.

the French were coming, lifted his siege of the *Castrum Maris* and retreated to the old city of *Città Notabile* with his troops and siege engines. The Provençals apparently made the six mile trek to the city to attack Manfred and the Maltese nobles there, but were soon pushed back to the castle at the harbor. The chronicles are not clear, but it appears that by the time Roger de Lauria arrived at Gozo in the evening of June 7 the Provençals had been forced back into the *Castrum Maris* and *Il Borgo* which was the small village next to it. After Roger landed at Gozo, he sent word to Manfred and inquired about the enemy fleet. After receiving news from Manfred and local fishermen that the fleet had been at Gozo and had then left for Malta, he moved his fleet that very same night to Malta and the entrance of the Grand Harbor. Bonvin and Cornut had set out two *lenys* as pickets at the harbor entrance, but instead of actively patrolling, they had tied up on either side of the harbor entrance. According to Muntaner, an armed boat, guarded by two *lenys*, was able to slip into the harbor using muffled oars and discover the disposition of the French galleys. It is quite probable that he also received intelligence from *almogavers* on shore.⁴⁴

Just before sunrise, Roger moved his fleet to the harbor entrance and deployed it for battle (Figure 2). In arranging his ships, he used the common tactic of deploying the galleys in a line abreast and then passing heavy cables between them so that enemy ships could not pass between the galleys. The Genoese apparently developed this tactic sometime in the twelfth century, and by the thirteenth century it had been adopted by most Mediterranean fleets. That the tactic arose with the Genoese and was actively practiced by the Catalans is not surprising. Both peoples relied heavily on missile weapons, the crossbow in particular, to decide the issue in naval combat. The general tactic, as we will see, was to close with the enemy and shower him with projectiles until his crews were so depleted that they could be overwhelmed by a boarding party. Without cabling the galleys together, a battle would quickly devolve into a disorganized melee with the likelihood that the low sides of the galleys would be exposed to attack and immediate boarding. If the attacking crews were composed of heavily armored troops, the result could be disastrous for a lightly armored defender.

However, the cabling of the galleys together was not necessarily a defensive posture. In a number of battles, including that of Malta, the ships were placed in an open formation so that their oars were clear and they could actually row forward as a unit. In such a formation, the light galleys and armed *lenys* were not lashed together but placed as a mobile reserve behind the cabled galleys. This formation was often modified if large vessels were in the fleet. In such a case the heavy transports, the *uxers* and *tarides*, were cabled together in the center, while the galleys were placed on the wings, and the lighter vessels at the rear. When used as a defensive posture, the galleys were rafted together in a line

⁴⁴ Muntaner, chap. 83; Neocastro, chap. 76; Speciale (chap. 26) states that Roger received the news from Manfred Lancia, while Desclot (chap. 112) states that local people provided the information on their arrival at Malta.

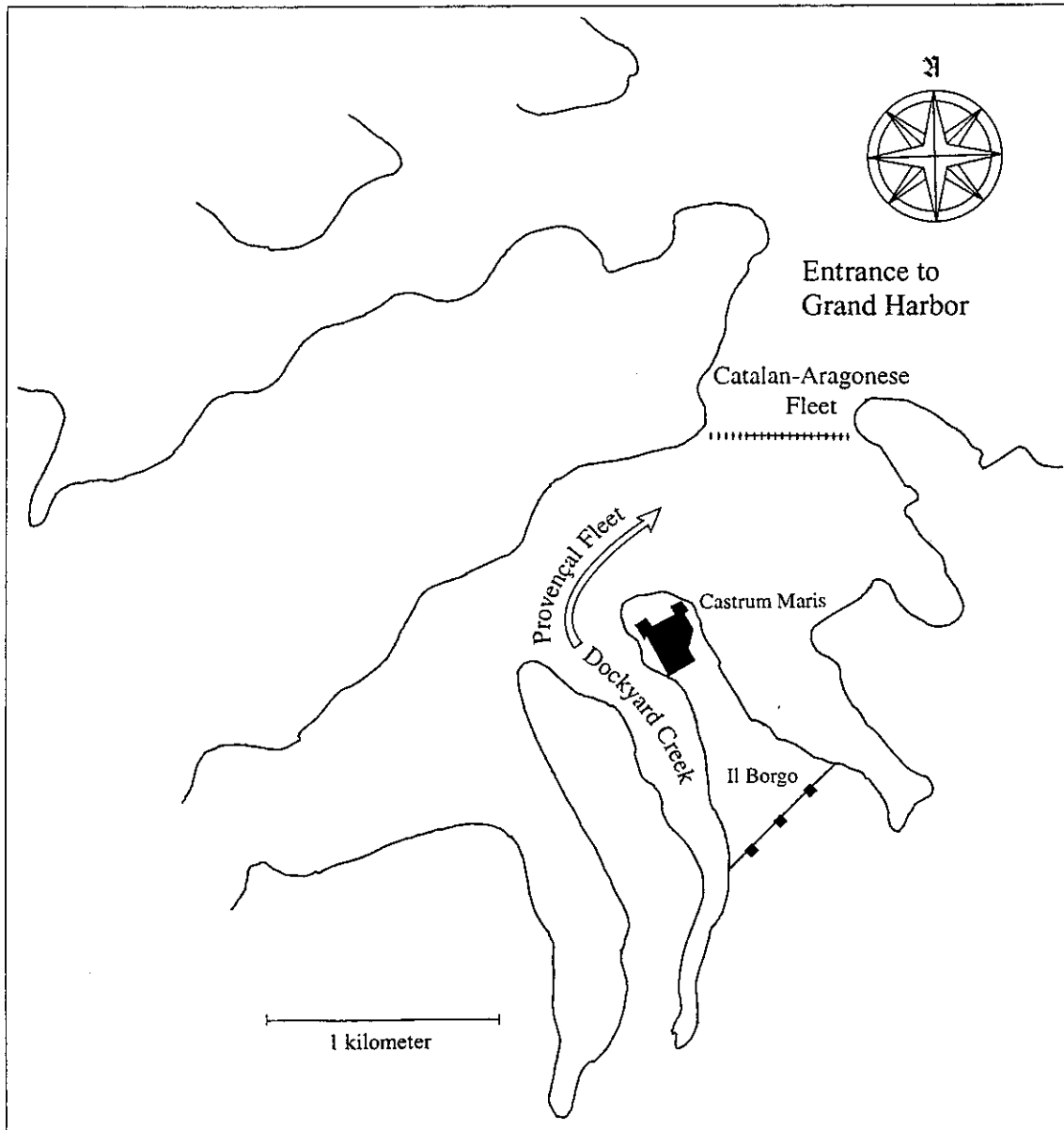


Figure 2. Map of the Grand Harbor showing the disposition of the fleets on 8 June 1283

abreast so closely that oars actually overlapped and were lashed together. While the chronicles are silent about disposition of troops on galleys in this formation, it is quite likely that gang planks were placed between the ships so that men could be easily transferred from one ship to another as the situation demanded. In all of these cases, the main objective was to prevent the battle from turning into a general boarding brawl in which individual ships could be cutout and overwhelmed.

Before the battle, Roger had his ships cabled in an open formation and then proceeded to do something which Muntaner considered quite mad. Instead of falling on the Provençals in their sleep, he woke his adversaries and announced he was prepared for battle. Muntaner states that he did this by sounding his

trumpets and nakers, while Desclot asserts he sent an armed boat in to Dockyard Creek to challenge the Provençal fleet to battle.⁴⁵ Muntaner's statement that Roger did this so that he could not be accused of having won the battle by attacking men in their sleep sounds chivalric, but, as Pryor has pointed out, Roger's decision to do this was probably more of a tactical ploy.⁴⁶ While Roger may have had the initiative, the prospects of attacking a fleet beached underneath an enemy castle must have given him pause. A fleet of galleys beached stern-first gave a defender a number of advantages, and it was highly unlikely he could have moved the fleet very far into the harbor without being spotted from the *Castrum Maris*. Unlike the attacker, the defender could easily transfer and mass troops to any location in the fleet, and the rowers could be armed and used as troops since there would be no need for them at the oars. If beached under or near a friendly castle, the fleet could expect reinforcements and even artillery fire. The difficulties associated with a seaborne assault on a beached fleet were widely recognized. Speciale, when writing of the battle of Cape Orlando in 1299, noted how a fleet drawn-up in this manner was virtually unassailable.⁴⁷ Another example comes from the Castilian attack on a beached Catalan fleet in 1359. The king of Castile with thirty-three galleys and over forty ships caught eleven galleys of the Catalan fleet beached at Barcelona. Despite the numerical superiority of the Castilians, the Catalans were able to defend themselves by a turning the ships' boats on their sides and using them as mantlets between the galleys. They also brought up catapults from the city and reinforced the galleys with local troops. Despite persistent attacks over two days, the Castilian fleet was eventually forced to withdraw with nothing more to show for their endeavors than several damaged ships.⁴⁸

Roger de Lauria was undoubtedly aware of the hazards of attacking a beached fleet. He would have also had to contend with Dockyard Creek and the *Castrum Maris*. In order to attack the Provençals, he would have had to arrange the fleet in a column, due to the constricted waters of the channel, which is less than 250 meters wide at the entrance. Besides having to parade the fleet underneath the castle, which most likely had some form of artillery, an attack on the beached fleet would have meant committing his fleet piecemeal to a battle in very confined water. By awakening the enemy, Roger was attempting to draw them out in order to neutralize a potential disadvantage and to avoid having to commit his fleet piecemeal. However, he gave up the advantage of surprise and apparently allowed the Angevins to array themselves for the battle.

While it is apparent why Roger would want to lure the Provençals out of Dockyard Creek, the reason Bonvin and Cornut came out has not been addressed. As discussed earlier, both men were probably knowledgeable concerning galley tactics and were surrounded by experienced commanders. The

⁴⁵ Muntaner, chap. 83; Desclot, chap. 113.

⁴⁶ Pryor, 185.

⁴⁷ Speciale, bk. IV, chap. 13.

⁴⁸ Pedro IV of Aragon, *Cronica* in *Les Quatre Grans Cròniques*, chap. 6: 24–6.

chronicles portray the decision as having been made primarily on bravado and later authors have assumed it was based on a desire to close with the enemy. These explanations are simplistic and assume a certain level of incompetency on the part of the French commanders. When one looks at the overall tactical situation, there appear a number of good reasons why Bonvin and Cornut did not wish to be caught in Dockyard Creek. The main incentive for the French fleet to come out was that their landward side was not secure. A beached fleet did have a tactical advantage, but only if it did not face a potential threat from the land. As mentioned earlier, despite the presence of the fleet, the French garrison and the relief had been forced to stay within the castle for protection. The Provençal admirals faced the prospect of an assault from the land as well as the sea. Events had shown that the Angevins could barely cope with the forces of Manfred de Lancia, and the prospect of having to potentially face an assault from the land forces as well as the Aragonese fleet must have been daunting. Even if Roger and Manfred did not attack immediately, the Provençal fleet could not afford to be bottled up. While the Grand Harbor is an excellent anchorage, the harbor itself is surrounded by high ground, particularly the spit of land the Angevins were trapped on. If Bonvin and Cornut dallied in Dockyard Creek, they could have been easily blockaded. They could not send men from the fleet to deal with Lancia without exposing the undermanned galleys to a foray from Roger's fleet. Yet, if they waited, their fleet would be exposed to continual harassment from the land. Manfred had trebuchets with him, and the narrow nature of the inlet would have exposed the fleet to artillery fire from across the inlet and from the besiegers in front of the castle. The close proximity of the fleet to the enemy would have also invited raids from across the inlet and, as has been shown above, a group of *almogaver* raiders could create a great deal of mischief with a beached fleet using relatively few men. Finally, the Angevin admirals had virtually no way to provision the fleet. The fleet had been sent to bring provisions to the garrison which was being starved out, and the village and the castle simply lacked the wherewithal to feed the crews of twenty galleys for any length of time.

There may have been one other reason for the French decision to come out. According to Desclot, the Angevins sent out an armed boat to reconnoiter the enemy fleet. After coming within bowshot, it returned to the admirals with the inaccurate report that only eleven Catalan galleys were present.⁴⁹ If this account is true, then Bonvin and Cornut may have been lured out by a faulty scouting report. In either case, whether to prevent being blockaded and destroyed piecemeal or because they felt they had numerical superiority, it is apparent that Bonvin and Cornut had good reasons to come out into the central harbor for an open fight, and their decision to do so was probably correct based on the information available to them. In summary, both combatants had very good reasons for deciding to have the battle in the open space of the Grand Harbor.

⁴⁹ Desclot, chap. 113.

The resulting situation was not a major tactical advantage for Roger. Both fleets were evenly matched with respect to the number of men and galleys, and by awakening the Provençals Roger had lost the initiative. Where he did gain an advantage was probably in the resulting confusion in the Provençal fleet as the crews awoke and rushed to the galleys in darkness. The Aragonese fleet had time to prepare for battle, while the Provençal preparations were most likely haphazard due to the urgency of the situation. After one hundred knights from the castle had joined the galleys, the Provençals came out of Dockyard Creek and arranged themselves for battle. Both sides waited for daybreak and then rowed towards each other, coming together in the center of the harbor. As the fleets came together the Provençals opened the battle with a hail of arrows, javelins, stones and lime.

A preliminary bombardment with projectiles against an opposing fleet before engaging in close-quarter combat was a common tactic and for that reason galleys carried a variety of projectiles such as those listed in the *Siete Partidas* written in the third quarter of the thirteenth century:

And for shooting [the galleys] should have crossbows with a stirrup, crossbows of two feet, and crossbows with a winch, and darts, and stones, and arrows as much as can be taken, and jars with lime for blinding the enemy, and others with soap in order to make them fall, and besides all this, pitch for fire in order to burn the ships, and of all these armaments they should have a great abundance so that they will not lack them.⁵⁰

The first two types of crossbows in this list have been previously discussed, but that last is of interest since it appears to have been the main type of artillery used on board galleys. The *ballista de torno* was a large crossbow mounted on a stand and cocked with a winch, which shot all of the above mentioned items. We find mention of them in Muntaner when he is giving advice to the king concerning his planned attack on Sardinia. Muntaner advises loading on board each galley three of these crossbows. However, it is hard to discern if these were intended for the ships or for siege warfare since in the next line he mentions *trabucs* and *manganel*s which are clearly siege weapons, and the overall emphasis of the passage appears to be towards land operations.⁵¹ The other mention of them on ships comes from a 1419 inventory of the galley *Canes*. Besides two *bombards* listed, there are two *ballistas de tornos*.⁵² Except for these two cases, the use of artillery by the Catalans and Aragonese is singularly lacking in the chronicles and the ship inventories. The inventory of the Catalan fleet of 1354 makes no mention of any form of artillery, even though it details every other major piece of equipment on the ships including the boarding planks used to load horses on the *uxers*.⁵³ Likewise, there is no mention in the *Ordinacions* or the inventories of soap, lime, stones or pitch for causing fires. The Catalans

⁵⁰ Alfonso X, *Las Siete Partidas* (Madrid, 1807), pt. 2, tit. 24, law 9.

⁵¹ Muntaner, chap. 272.

⁵² Capmany, appendix 5.

probably had some form of shipboard artillery, but it is obvious they did not rely on it to any significant degree.

The above is not to argue that others did not use these weapons. The use of lime mentioned by Desclot was common throughout the Mediterranean, and it even appears in *Tirant lo Blanc* where the Turks are described throwing lime to order to blind. Likewise, soap must have been a relatively effective device since its use was also common. With regards to this weapon, the *almogavers* had a distinct advantage. Unencumbered by heavy armor and a shield, they would have been able to operate relatively freely in such a slippery environment, which may well be one reason such lightly armed soldiers were used by the Aragonese.

Probably the weapon overemphasized the most by historians is the use of fire. While the *Siete Partidas* mentions the use of pitch to burn enemy ships, the chronicles covering the War of the Sicilian Vespers are virtually devoid of references to the use of fire, much less Homeric descriptions of burning ships which one would expect to find if fire was a common or effective naval weapon. The only chronicler who refers to its use at the battle of Malta and the later battle of Naples is Malaspina, who tends to insert short comments on the use of fire in rather formulaic phrases describing the ferocity of the battles.⁵⁴ There are numerous references to the use of fire in sieges, both by the naval forces and the besieged, but reports of its use by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century naval units against one another are harder to come by. The contract for the Angevin Red Galley includes glass bottles filled with sulphurous fire and tubes for shooting fire, but any reference to their use is singularly lacking.⁵⁵ We are left with the apparent contradiction of having specific references in laws and contracts to a weapon for which there is little evidence that it was ever used on a widespread basis.

The answer may be that naval commanders had several reasons for not utilizing fire as a weapon except under specific circumstances. While firepots and other incendiary devices could play havoc on an enemy ship, once the desired conflagration had been achieved, there was no way to control it. Considering that the battles were fought at close quarters in ships which were roped together, there would have been the strong likelihood of the fire spreading indiscriminately to other galleys, including the ship which used the weapon in the first place. Moreover, there was the problem of handling the inflammable material on board a ship involved in combat. An accident in preparing or launching the projectile could have resulted in major damage to the ship and crew, while also seriously reducing the galley's combat effectiveness. Finally, the object of naval warfare of the period was not to destroy the enemy vessels, but to capture

⁵³ ACA, Cancillería real, R. 1541.

⁵⁴ Sabae Malaspina, *Rerum Sicularum Historia 1250-1285*, in *Cronisti e Scrittori Sincroni Napoletani*, ed. Giuseppe del Re (Darmstadt, 1975), bk. 10, chaps. 8, 15.

⁵⁵ J. Pryor, "The Galleys of Charles I of Anjou King of Sicily," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 14 (1993): 79. J. Partington, *A History of Greek Fire and Gunpowder* (Cambridge, 1960), 27.