

Lawrence V. Mott**Sea Power in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Catalan-Aragonese Fleet in the War of the Sicilian Vespers****(Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), xi+337 pp., ISBN: 0-8130-2662-8. US\$59.95. [[publisher's site](#)]**

From the early 1970s, the researches of J. Lee Shneidman and Jocelyn N. Hillgarth sought to substantiate or demolish the daring idea that the Crown of Aragon, a set of states in eastern Spain, had established a far flung, Mediterranean empire in the late-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Lawrence Mott deals with this "hot-button issue" only tangentially in his well-balanced and thoroughly researched treatment of the Catalan-Aragonese fleet during the crucial decades after the Sicilian Vespers (1282). He is adamant, however, in supporting his claims that the Iberian and Sicilian naval organization was far superior to that of the French and Italian units commanded by Charles of Anjou. Like many another student of medieval Spain (this reviewer included), Mott sees the general trend of modern scholarship concerning martial and naval conflict between northern and southern Europe in the high Middle Ages as prejudiced toward the former and against the latter. From this northern scholarly vantage point, the stunning successes of the Aragonese-Sicilian fleet under the command of its great admiral, Roger de Lauria, were due less to any original developments in administration, logistics and strategy, and more to de Lauria's wholesale borrowing of earlier, French naval organization which had been rounded into shape under the aegis of Charles of Anjou. Mott's careful study of de Lauria's fleet and its successors down to 1302 disprove this assumption with the extensive use of archival, chronicle, and secondary literature.

In a series of tightly-crafted chapters, Mott recreates each aspect of the naval organization perfected by Roger de Lauria in service of the Aragonese sovereign, Pere II (1276-1285). He traces the development of the officer corps of the Aragonese fleet from the office of Supreme Admiral (a title with a clear Arabic provenance) down to the *prothontinus* (commanders of naval districts) and finally to the *portulanus* (harbor master). Though this organization had discernible Hohenstaufen antecedents, which were eventually assimilated by the Angevins, Mott is careful to untangle these Mediterranean roots from the Aragonese fleet's Iberian origins. He assigns as the baserock of this development Arabic offices which had evolved into the Castilian *almirantazgo* which was fully described in Alfonso X's seminal legal work, the *Siete Partidas*. The Castilian admiral, who was based in Seville, was responsible for the upkeep of royal vessels, the distribution of plunder from royal and freebooting expeditions, and the maintenance of arsenals and shipyards. In the Crown of Aragon, the emergence of a complicated naval structure was due to the advance of Jaume I (1213-1276) into the Muslim principalities of the Balearics and Valencia between 1229 and 1244. With the intensification of the Angevin-Aragonese rivalry in the 1280s, the Iberian fleet underwent a quantum leap of sorts under de Lauria's able leadership. Through the great admiral's skill, daring, and courage, the eastern Spanish and Sicilian fleet became the unchallenged master of the central Mediterranean as the thirteenth century merged into the fourteenth.

To understand this sudden transformation, Mott has assessed a great deal of archival and printed primary sources as well as a great number of Spanish, Catalan, French, Italian, German, and English monographs. To gain a clearer understanding of the Crown of Aragon's rapid rise as a naval power, he breaks down the structure of the Aragonese fleet into its component parts in a series of chapters that respectively focus on fiscal, personnel, and ship design aspects of the great fleet that de Lauria put together. The most interesting of these discussions for naval expert and neophyte alike is that which expertly aligns archeological and artistic evidence concerning ship types with the written description found in contemporary chronicles which is often extremely muddled. The last section of Mott's work centers on fleet operations during the Angevin-Aragonese conflict. Marshaling information from many of his earlier chapters, he provides extremely detailed treatments of the battle of Nicotera (1282) and the bloody raids between Corfu and Lemnos (1291) as well as the Aragonese preparations that made them possible.

Lawrence Mott has undoubtedly produced a well-written and rigorously-researched review of a chapter in

naval history too long dominated by the modern supporters of the Angevins. In this effort, he has shown himself to be an able successor of Archibald Lewis, Timothy Runyan, and John Guilmartin. For its part, the University Press of Florida is to be commended for continuing its long history of producing balanced monographs on medieval subjects.



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