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Review of *Roger of Lauria (c.1250-1305) 'Admiral of Admirals'* by Charles D. Stanton

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Charles D. Stanton, *Roger of Lauria (c.1250-1305) 'Admiral of Admirals'*. The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2019. ix + 336pp. ISBN 978-1783274536 (hardback). Price £65.00.

The Aragonese admiral, Roger of Lauria, is not well known among medievalists, even among those interested in warfare and shipping. He was however an astonishing successful naval commander who managed to defeat a variety of foes in encounters fought across the Mediterranean, most particularly those surrounding the conflict known as the War of Sicilian Vespers. This work by Charles D. Stanton serves to draw attention to the martial achievements of this ruthlessly competent admiral set against the backdrop of the dramatic events of his time. Stanton himself has published extensively on Mediterranean naval warfare in the central Medieval period, his major works being: *Medieval Maritime Warfare* and *Norman Naval Operations in the Mediterranean*.

Roger of Lauria 'Admiral of Admirals' is a sustained narrative covering the unfolding horrors of the wars fought over Sicily and Southern Italy between the 1260s and the early Fourteenth Century. It charts the variable fortunes of the various major factions involved, chiefly: the Angevins who staked their claim to their region under Charles of Anjou following his victories over the Hohenstaufen rulers of Italy and Sicily in the 1260s, and also their Aragonese opponents who, under Peter III and his heirs, contested Angevin rule. Other protagonists, including the kings of France and Castile; the leaders of a resurgent Byzantium as well as the papacy; and North African rulers serve to complete the picture.

The history of these wars is dizzyingly complex, consisting of tens of invasions, naval battles and sieges. However, the major vector lines within this conflict were the rapid rise in Angevin fortunes in the 1260s and 1270s, followed by the sudden advent of the Aragonese who conquered Sicily in 1282. There followed a long period of fighting and failed truces which engulfed much of the Western Mediterranean, with the conflict focused particularly on Sicily and Calabria, but also incorporating a French Crusade into Aragon in 1285. The two sides eventually reached a stalemate with the Angevins retaining much of southern Italy and the Sicilian King Frederick III (Aragonese by extraction but estranged from his brother King James II of Aragon) holding-onto Sicily itself.

Roger of Lauria built his reputation within this conflict. For a long time he was a staunch supporter of Aragonese interests, but his relationship with Frederick III of Sicily later collapsed, leading his career into a more politically ambiguous phase. Amidst these wars, Roger manifested a talent for naval warfare and he won six major battles at sea as well as numerous other encounters. His success is presented here as

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rooted in a wide range of factors. These include his strenuous efforts to keep his sailors/soldiers motivated and resourced, linked to his ability to make effective use of both the fabled Catalan crossbowmen and the much-feared *almogavars* (whose death-dealing exploits run through much of this work). Roger himself was a very capable strategist and it is interesting to see the use he made of feigned-flight tactics to win several major encounters. However, his track-record was more mixed in encounters fought on land. Roger's deeds are reported throughout this study, but - in balance - this work is more a history of the Sicilian Vespers, than it is a biography of Roger's life.

Several thought-provoking points emerge from this work. Firstly, it is notable that the major naval powers of Genoa, Pisa and Venice *did not* play a decisive role in deciding the outcome of this predominantly-naval Angevin/Aragonese conflict. Despite their former maritime supremacy, it was Catalan-Sicilian and Angevin fleets which dominated the Western Mediterranean with the Italian cities playing little more than an auxiliary role. It is especially notable where Stanton discusses James II of Aragon's naval raid -led by Roger of Lauria- into the Adriatic and the Aegean in 1302, which damaged both Venetian and Genoese interests, that neither power sought redress for the injuries they had suffered. At this point at least, Aragon-Sicily ruled supreme.

It is also notable how little the troubles of the Crusader States impinged on these powers' thought-worlds, despite the fact that they were among the Christian states best placed to intervene. Stanton does a very effective job of demonstrating how closely the papacy tracked the Angevin-Aragonese conflict with only sporadic efforts – none successful – to galvanise the major players into a major campaign to the east. Indeed, on those occasions when the Aragonese sought to wage war along Christendom's frontiers it was nearly always against the Muslim territories of North Africa; more rarely against the Byzantines.

Reflecting on this work and its place within current scholarship, the contemporary vogue among historians generally tends towards thematic rather than narrative history – and even those authors who do offer a narrative element to their work generally include very substantial thematic asides. Consequently, *Roger of Lauria 'Admiral of Admirals'* may, to some, feel rather old-fashioned, being overwhelmingly a political-military narrative. There is a brief thematic section of naval warfare in chapter 10, but little more. I would argue, by contrast, that this work serves to restate the importance of detailed, well-researched narrative histories. The War of Sicilian Vespers was an extremely complex and tortuous conflict and it is recreated here with lucidity, authority and insight. Mostly importantly, Stanton never gives way to the temptation of summarising complicated histories but works through the events blow-by-blow. His sure-footed ability to view the conflict in such detail and in the *longue-durée* is highly important and allows the reader to grasp the broader lines of development

which shaped this region's profile and character. In short - a model political-military history.

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Charles J. Esdaile, *Walking Waterloo: A Guide*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2019. xix + 300pp. ISBN 978-1526740786 (paperback). Price £16.99.

'I rode to a hill where there had been a battle [...]. There was nothing to see. Nothing to touch or hear. And yet somehow there was.' This extract from Kevin Crossley-Holland's novel *Arthur: King of the Middle March* brilliantly captures the unique atmosphere that shrouds battlefields. By their nature, battlefields are unremarkable contours of an emotionless landscape formed thousands of years ago, yet they are simultaneously imbued with a historical and emotional significance by the chaos and bloodshed they witnessed.

Battlefield visitors will know the challenge of reconciling the tranquillity of these locations with the violence which made them so remarkable. Perhaps the greatest difficulty though, is knowing precisely what they are looking at, for whilst the narrative of a battle may be well known, identifying the precise locations of a battle's pivotal episodes can be difficult in a relatively featureless landscape. Battlefield guides are invaluable in addressing these problems.

The Battle of Waterloo, one of the most famous, and most written about, battles in history, is well served with battlefield guides. Uffindell's *On the Fields of Glory* offered sage advice, useful maps, and, vitally, a consideration of Prussian operations. However, a gold standard was set by David Buttery's detailed, engaging and beautifully illustrated *Waterloo: Battlefield Guide*.

Walking Waterloo: A Guide therefore faces strong competition, something which is acknowledged by its author, Charles Esdaile. The publication is based on a tour guide app created in association with the Belgian War Heritage Institute, which is available for download. The app is itself a very valuable resource, and it is a shame that more is not made of it, given its portability, impressive layout, and relevance in the modern era.