

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

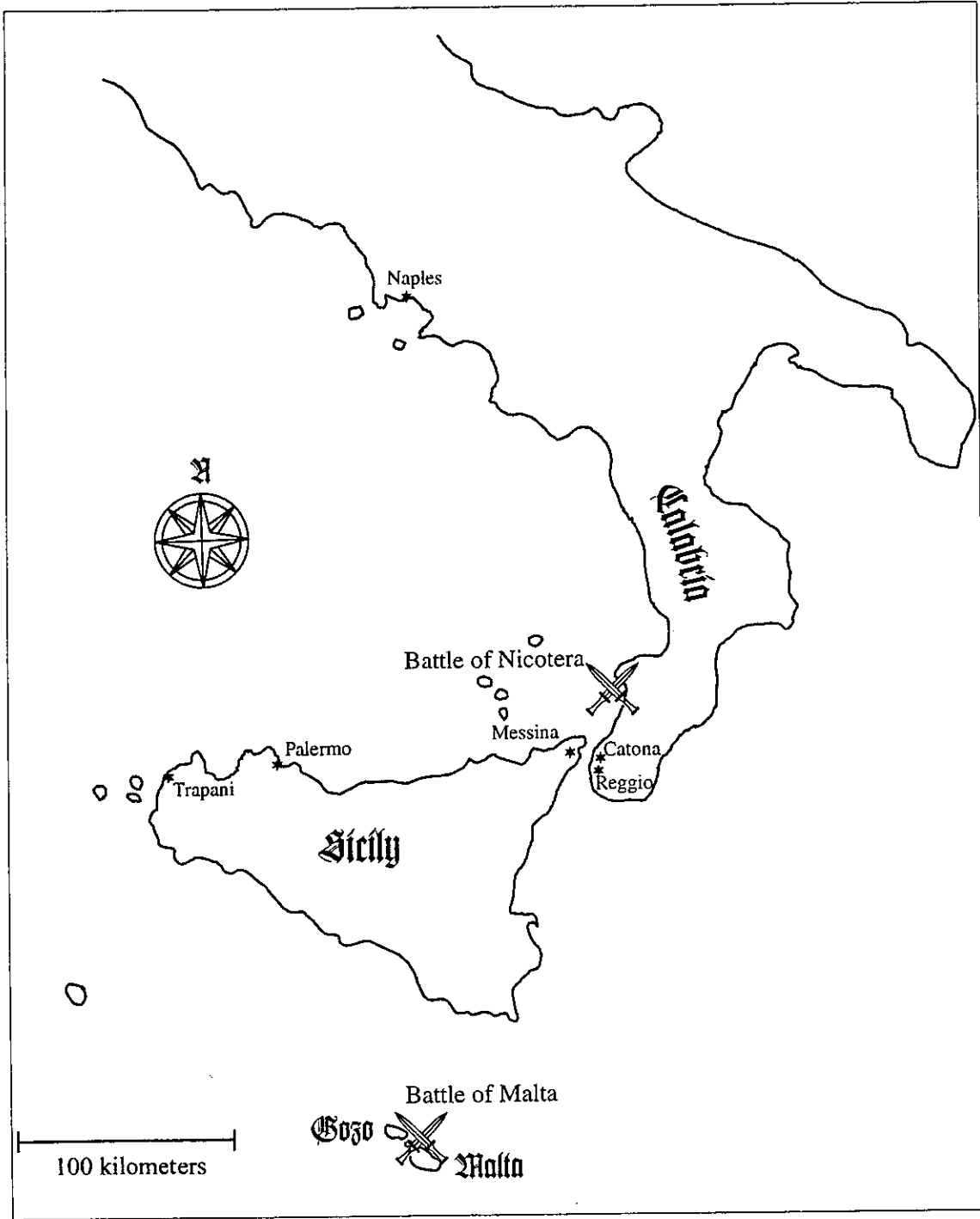


Figure 1. Map of southern Italy, Sicily and Malta

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 Congrès de historia de la Corona de Aragó, dedicat al periode 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 led 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.