

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

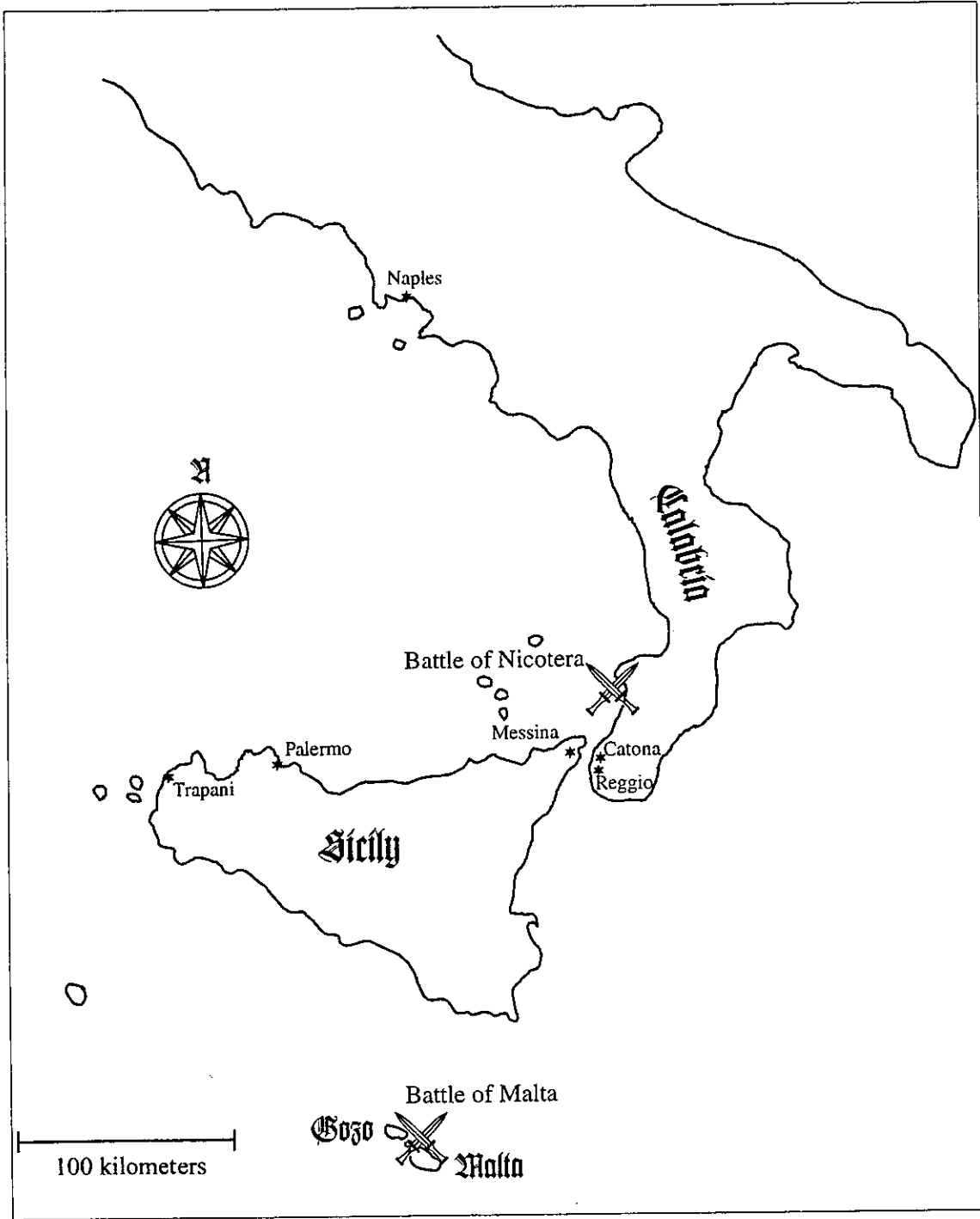


Figure 1. Map of southern Italy, Sicily and Malta

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.