Serving in the Fleet: 
Crews and Recruitment Issues 
in the Catalan-Aragonese Fleets During 
the War of Sicilian Vespers (1282-1302)

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Abstract
When Peter III of Aragon invaded Sicily in 1282, he had expected a swift resolution to the conflict with Charles of Anjou. Instead, the Crown of Aragon was drawn into an essentially naval conflict that spanned twenty years and required it to maintain two separate fleets to guard Catalonia and Sicily. The fleet guarding Valencia and Catalonia had the luxury of recruiting men locally who would be fighting to protect their regions. Yet despite this, because of internal politics, the commanders at one point faced open rebellion and continual recruitment problems. To man the Sicilian fleet, Roger de Loria had to recruit both Muslim and Christian crews and amphibious units from Iberia, North Africa and southern Italy, which would seem to be a volatile mixture. Yet by using incentives and strong leadership, he was able to meld the disparate groups into a deadly fighting force, demonstrating that crews of the period often had complex motivations transcending traditional political, social, and religious boundaries.

Keywords
recruitment, Sicilian Vespers, Crown of Aragon, mercenaries, Catalonia

When Peter III began to assemble his fleet in 1282 with the aim of invading Sicily, he was immediately confronted with the problem of finding sufficient numbers of men to man the ships. This problem became increasingly critical as what had seemed to be a short war dragged on, and he was forced to maintain two fleets— one to defend Sicily and one to protect the coasts of Catalonia and Valencia. If he hoped to control Sicily, Peter had to have a fleet capable of policing the water around Sicily and the nearby islands. One would assume that there would be substantially more problems recruiting for
the fleet stationed in Sicily than the one in home waters, but the evidence suggests the opposite. Admiral Roger de Loria succeeded in recruiting and leading polyglot crews composed of men of different ethnicities and religions in the Sicilian fleet; vice admirals Raymund Marquet and Berenguer Mallol had serious problems recruiting and maintaining discipline in the fleet stationed in Catalonia. The recruitment problems that confronted Marquet and Mallol, and the lack thereof encountered by Roger de Loria during the War of the Sicilian Vespers (1282-1302), stemmed from a complex mixture of politics and greed. This article examines recruitment for the home and the Sicilian fleets in order to show how Roger de Loria overcame potentially debilitating obstacles to solve his recruitment problems, while the home fleet remained plagued by these same issues.

Charles of Anjou had invaded Sicily in 1266 and proceeded methodically and ruthlessly to squeeze all the available resources out of the island. By 1282 the resentment of the Sicilian population reached the point that on Easter Sunday the people rose up and massacred the French in a bloody revolt. The sixteen years of Angevin rule had bred a deep hatred for the French, and Charles’s attempts to retake the island had met with fierce resistance and little success. The Sicilians had pleaded with Pope Martin IV for protection, but his insistence that they return to the rule of Charles of Anjou forced them to search for an alternative. Meanwhile, Peter III of Aragon had already been preparing to assert his ancestral claim to the island by force and since 1281 had been assembling a Catalan-Aragonese fleet at Port Fangos under the pretext of undertaking a crusade in the Maghreb, though the real target was clearly Sicily. Peter, who had been waiting at Collo in North Africa, quickly responded when the Sicilians asked for his help in August 1282 and landed in Sicily on August 31. He received the unreserved support of the Sicilian communities and was quickly crowned king at Palermo. By October 2, he had pushed the Angevins out of Sicily and consolidated his control. This seemed to be the end of the conflict, but it soon became clear that Charles intended to continue the war.

Peter III had expected a short campaign against Charles of Anjou and so had used traditional means to man the fleet. In the fall of 1281, Peter began to issue orders to various towns throughout the Crown of Aragon to provide men and equipment for the fleet. ¹ The requirement for nobles and towns to

¹ A typical order given on February 23, 1281, lists a number of towns and gives the number of men each was to provide along with the equipment they were to bring to the fleet. Barcelona, Archivo de la Corona de Aragón (hereafter ACA), reg. 44, fol. 209v.