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TRADE AS A WEAPON DURING THE WAR OF THE SICILIAN VESPER

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The War of the Sicilian Vespers (1282-1302) between the Crown of Aragon and the Angevins for the control of Sicily was a bloody conflict that affected virtually every community in the Western Mediterranean. From 1282 when Peter III of Aragon invaded Sicily until 1295 when Frederick III broke with the Crown of Aragon, Sicily provided a unique location from which the Catalan-Aragonese fleet could attack Angevin interests. The occupation of Sicily not only gave the Crown of Aragon control of the important grain trade and trading centers of the island, but also of the strategic choke points through which commercial traffic had to pass. Neither of these points was lost on the crown and Peter III, Alfonso III and James II all used the control of trade in and around Sicily as a weapon. Not only was the control of trade used to directly attack Angevin interests, but also to undermine alliances vital the Angevin cause.

Immediately after ousting Charles of Anjou from Sicily in September 1282, Peter III set about exerting control over the trade passing through Sicily. This control was exercised using the traditional means, primarily the office of the *portulani*. The office had been in existence since the Norman period and was simply refined under the Hohenstaufen and Angevin regimes. Each harbor had two *portulani* and a notary assigned to it. Under the previous regimes the *portulani* were responsible for harbor defense, coastal watch, collection of customs duties and the control of contraband.¹ The two most important taxes were the *ius dohane* (customs tax) and the *ius exiture* (export tax), which were particularly lucrative with regards to the grain trade.² They also collected a myriad of

¹ Huillard-Breholles, J.L.A. *Historia Diplomatica Frederici Secundi*. (Paris, 1852): vol. 5, pt. 1, 418-423.

² Arndt, Helene. *Studien zur inneren Regierungsgeschichte Manfreds*. (Heidelberg, 1911): 179. Huillard-Breholles, J.L.A. *Historia Diplomatica Frederici Secundi* vol. 5, pt. 2, 309, 334.

smaller taxes for port usage, anchorage rights and fishing concessions. These funds flowed directly to the curia and the port officials answered to the separate office of the *magistri portulani*. The port officials were more than just tax collectors and were required to insure that ships were properly equipped and loaded, and that they did not sail during storms.

When the Crown of Aragon gained control in 1282, a series of changes were made over the following years. While the office of *portulani* was not reorganized substantially, to whom the *portulani* answered and the emphasis of their duties changed. In 1283 shortly after Roger of Lauria became admiral of the Catalan-Aragonese fleet the office of the *portulani* passed to the control of the office of the admiral. Under the Angevins the office had been largely ceremonial, but under Peter III it was reconstituted and given broad powers. Not only did the *portulani* fall under the direct command of the admiral, but also the revenues generated in the ports now flowed directly into the office of the admiral in order to fund the fleet. Moreover, by the reign of Alfonso III harbor and coastal defense was delegated to the naval district commanders known as the *prothontini*.³ In many ways the duties of the *portulani* had not changed, but the emphasis on particular duties was substantially different. The Aragonese administration had become preoccupied with controlling trade in and around Sicily, not only as a means of generating funds for the fleet but also to insure strategic goods were not passing to the enemy.

The change in emphasis in the duties is best illustrated by comparing the *capitula* of 1278 issued by Charles of Anjou describing the duties of the *portulani* and the appointment letter of Framenrissi of Pistoro as *portulanus* of Agrigenti issued by Peter III in February 1283.⁴ In the *capitula* of 1278, besides collecting the various harbor and customs taxes, the *portulani* were to insure that no prohibited goods or animals were exported without the proper letters of authorization. However, the *capitula* goes on to state that the port officials were responsible for the safety of ships entering and leaving port, for the control of traffic in the port, and for preventing ships from sailing during the threat of a storm. They were also to insure that no illegal activities were taking place along the

³ La Mantia, Giuseppe. *Codice diplomatico dei re aragonesi di Sicilia*. (Palermo: Ristampa Anastatica, 1990): vol. I, doc. 241, p. 607.

⁴ Minieri-Riccio, Camillo. *Saggio di codice diplomatico*. (Naples, 1878): vol. 1, doc. 28, p. 39. *De Rebus Regni Siciliae (9 settembre 1282-26 agosto 1283): documenti inediti estratti dall'Archivio della Corona d'Aragona*. (Palermo: Lo Statuto, 1892): doc. 511. pp. 170-1.

nearby shorelines and were to intercept any criminals and 'traitors' trying to land. They also shared responsibility with the local *prothontinus* for maintenance of the harbor chain.

The appointment letter of Framenrissi of Pistoro as *portulanus* of Agrigenti is a totally different proposition. It is not that any new duties are added, but that different stress was placed on particular duties and there is a total lack of mention of others normally associated with the office. As noted above, the office would soon have the responsibility for the coastline removed, but the other duties would continue. The document notes that the *portulanus* was to control all 'food, legumes, arms, warhorses, live animals and any other prohibited goods.' Moreover, he was visually to inspect the loading of each ship with his officials, who were to be 'experts in the arts of the sea', and the captain of the vessel. During this examination, the length, beam and depth of hold of the vessel were to be measured. This was important, not only to ensure the proper and allowed amount of goods were loaded, but also for accessing anchorage taxes, which were normally based on the size of the vessel. All of this information was to be publicly noted and recorded in three accounts that were to contain also a list of the goods and the name of the ship, the patron, and merchants on board. Finally, the *portulanus* was to inspect the letters of export to insure that only goods mentioned in the letter were being loaded and that they were not being shipped to a prohibited destination. Merchants tried to circumvent the limits on goods and when caught were subjected to heavy fines.⁵

The difference between the documents is striking. In the *capitula* of 1278, the duties of the port officials with regards to taxes and proscribed goods is only mentioned in general terms, whereas in the appointment of 1283 the proscribed items are listed and the duties of the *portulanus* with regards to ship inspections is laid out in excruciating detail. Moreover, there is no mention of the *portulanus* being responsible for the safety of the ship or for insuring it did not sail during inclement weather. The entire appointment revolves around the collection of taxes and the control of trade. It is clear that the crown was preoccupied with the control and the taxing of goods leaving. The taxes were vitally important for operating the fleet and it hardly surprising they funneled directly into the office of the admiral since maintaining a medieval fleet was an extremely expensive proposition. However, not only was efficient port control a source of money, as we will see, it was

⁵ La Mastia, Giuseppe. *Costumi*: vol. I, doc. 241, p. 398.

also a means for denying resources to the enemy and influencing the enemy's allies.

Controlling trade in Sicilian ports was only part of the program instituted by the office of the admiral under Roger de Lauria to harass the Angevins. Sicily throughout history has been of strategic importance in Mediterranean conflicts due to its location astride the trade routes connecting the east and west basins of the Middle Sea. By the nature of its location Sicily any east-west traffic is funneled through a series of choke points surrounding the island. By controlling Sicily and Malta a government was in position to control or interdict maritime traffic attempting to transit between the two basins. The traditional routes for ships sailing to or from Marsilles, Genoa or Naples were either through the Straits of Messina or around the west end of Sicily and past Malta. In either case, these routes were easily patrolled from Sicily and Malta, a point not lost on Peter III or his successors.

Following the defeat of the Angevin fleet at Malta in July 1283 and the control of the island by the Crown of Aragon, the office of the admiral began to institute regular patrols of the trade routes through these choke points. The first mention comes in 1285 when the office of the admiral was operating at least three galleys and a galion to patrol Sicily.⁶ By 1286 the office of the admiral was operating between four and eight galleys on continuous patrol and sometimes sent out massive patrols, such as that of 1292 made up of nine galleys, a galion and a vaccetta.⁷ In part, the patrols were instituted to control piracy, which became endemic by the end of the war, but there is little doubt they also operated against enemy shipping. An indication of this can be seen in the two-year truce signed between the Crown of Aragon and the Angevins following the siege of Gaeta in August 1289. The first article in the truce is that all hostilities will stop at sea as well as on land. Moreover, the treaty goes on to mention that the terms are to be enforced against Admiral Roger of Lauria. The Angevins undoubtedly inserted these articles since the Angevin fleet by this time had been rendered impotent by the Catalan-Aragonese fleet and the Crown of Aragon had nothing to fear from it.⁸

Another piece of evidence is the use of pirates by the office of the admiral. Initially, the office of the admiral had licensed 'pirates' to attack

⁶ La Mantia, Giuseppe. *Codice*: vol. I, doc. 241, pp. 607, 615.

⁷ Archivo de la Catedral de Valencia Pergrinimos 737, fol. 3.

⁸ La Mantia, Giuseppe. *Codice*: vol. I, p. 445.

enemy shipping.⁹ These 'pirati' were in fact more close to what today we would call privateers since for a fee of one to two ounces of gold they were given a license by the office of the admiral which permitted them to attack enemy shipping in return for one fifth of the spoils. However, following 1287 the office of the admiral stopped issuing licenses. By 1287 the office of the admiral was arming its own galleys for the specific purpose of commerce raiding.¹⁰ It is at this very same time that the number and size of patrols around Sicily and Malta increase. With the Angevin fleet having been rendered virtually impotent following June 1287, the office of the admiral could use its own vessels for commerce raiding and reap all of the rewards instead of just one fifth.

A note of interest is that these patrols were operated on a year-round basis. Normally, cities restricted sailing to between April and September in order to prevent ships being lost to the violent Mediterranean storms that can blow up during the winter months.¹¹ This being the case, the question arises as to why these patrols were needed. Undoubtedly, part of the reason was to provide warning of any attempt by the Angevins to land on Sicily, though the enemy never attempted a winter assault during the entire war. The patrols were also required to control the smuggling of proscribed goods. However, the patrols were often composed of heavy galleys and not the light galleons preferred for use against smugglers and pirates. It seems likely that these patrols were instigated in order to interdict Angevin shipping that might try to slip past Sicily in the winter months. An example of this was the capture of a Florentine ship being sent by the pope to Acre in March 1290. In a letter to Queen Constance the pope complains that the ship was seized by a patrol in the Straits of Messina and should be released so its supplies can reach the crusaders in Acre.¹²

Besides patrolling the office of the admiral used blockading not only to attack Angevin trade directly, but also to support the fleet. Following the Battle of the Counts off Naples in June 1287, Roger of Lauria gained control of the strategic islands of Ischia and Capri off the port of Naples, and would not relinquish them until the fleet left Sicily in 1295. The Island of Ischia was immediately reinforced and a squadron of galleys stationed there. Following the disastrous defeat, the Angevins

⁹ La Mantia, Giuseppe. *Codice*: vol. I, doc. 241, p. 600.

¹⁰ La Mantia, Giuseppe. *Codice*: vol. I, doc. 241, p. 600.

¹¹ Pryor, John. *Geography, Technology and War: Studies in the maritime history of the Mediterranean 619-1571*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 87-88.

¹² Musco Naval, Sanz de Barutell-Diplomática de Barcelona, Artículo 12, no. 74.

immediately signed a two-year truce in which both parties agreed not to attack the others shipping. Again, this was to the advantage of the Angevin government since its fleet had just been crushed. However, for Roger and the crown it was an opportunity to obtain badly needed funds that a simple blockade would not have generated. As part of the truce agreement Roger was permitted to impose a tax on all shipping coming or leaving Naples.¹³ Both Genoese and Venetians tried to run the blockade, but were often captured. The unlucky captains had all of their cargo confiscated, though their ships were returned to them.¹⁴ In essence, by using the truce and its strategic location off Naples Angevin commerce was used to generate funds to support the very fleet that was blockading it. Angevin trade had been essentially subverted and used against itself.

While these activities were used to attack Angevin interests directly, they were also used to undermine the alliance with Genoa. During the conflict Genoa was technically an ally of the Angevins, but its actual contribution to the cause was negligible at best. In all of the battles in which the Genoese participated with the Angevin fleet between 1282 and 1295 the Genoese fled at first contact with the Catalan-Aragonese fleet. The most notable of these cases were the Battle of Nicoterra (October 14, 1282), the Battle of Las Fornigueras (September 4, 1285) and the Battle of the Counts (June 23, 1287).¹⁵ This poor performance has often been ascribed to questionable leadership or outright cowardice. Yet these explanations appear somewhat facile when Genoese performance against other opponents during and after the war is examined. When the Genoese were fighting for their interests they fought hard and well, as they did at the Battle of Meloria against Pisa in 1284 and at the Battle of Curzola Island against the Venetians in 1298.

The answer lies in the trade relations Genoa had with the Crown of Aragon during the war. Genoa had been involved in Sicily for generations and had fought a series of vicious naval battles to gain control of trade on the island.¹⁶ For Genoa the island was of immense importance,

¹³ Muntaner, Ramon. *Cronica*. In *Les quatre grans cròniques*, edited by Ferran Soldevila. (Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1983): chap. 113.

¹⁴ Archivo de la Catedral de Valencia Pergrinino 738, fol. 4.

¹⁵ Pryor, John. "The naval battles of Roger de Lauria." *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 180-216.

¹⁶ In 1241 the Genoese, allied with papacy in hopes of gaining Sicilian concessions, were defeated by the Pisans and Frederick II. In 1266 off Trapani the Genoese are defeated by the Venetians.

primarily for its grain. When Charles of Anjou gained control of the Regno in 1266 Genoa was essentially coerced into an alliance with the Angevins and the arrival in 1282 of the Crown of Aragon, and particularly the Catalans, in Sicily created severe problems for the Genoese. On one hand the Genoese were in an alliance with the Angevins, but on the other the Crown of Aragon controlled the grain trade and the important trade routes linking Genoa to its colonies in the Levant.

It is clear that Peter III understood the quandary the Genoese were in and set about using it to pry the Genoese away from the Angevins. One of the first actions taken to further this policy was the technical removal of the Genoese from the grain trade. In 1283 Genoese merchants paid all of the export taxes, yet by 1286 the only individuals paying the export tax were Catalans.¹⁷ Yet this does not mean the Genoese were not doing business in Sicily. At the very same time the Genoese were technically fighting for the Angevins the Crown of Aragon was renewing the trading rights of Genoese merchants starting in 1284 and again in 1290.¹⁸ But while the Genoese were allowed to trade and ship grain, they now had to work through Catalan merchants. Following 1283 the crown issued the valuable export licenses only to Catalan merchants and Genoa was only doing business in Sicily at the forbearance of the king and Catalan community.

Peter III and Alfonso III could have simply cutoff the Genoese from the trade and used the naval patrols to attack its shipping, but this would not have been nearly as effective. It simply would have pushed the Genoese into the Angevin camp and would have decreased the revenue from export taxes that was being funneled directly into the office of the admiral. The implied threat of cutting the Genoese out of the lucrative grain trade and of attacking its shipping passing through the choke points around Sicily was far more effective.

Besides the implied threats, Crown of Aragon also employed rewards and enticements to achieve its ends. From the French standpoint, the Genoese had proved to be totally useless during the crusade against Aragon in August 1285. However, several documents show that there may have been a reason for their lack of enthusiasm. In a letter dated February 22, 1286, Alfonso III notifies the Genoese of his father's death. He goes on to assure the Genoese that during the upcoming attack

¹⁷ La Mantia, Giuseppe. *Codice*: vol. I, doc. 222, p. 546; doc. 241, pp. 590-1, 600. Rinaldo Zeno. *Documenti per la storia del diritto marittimo nei secoli XIII e XIV*. (Turin, 1936): doc. IV, p. 3. Archivo de la Catedral de Valencia Pergamino 738, fol. 1.

¹⁸ La Mantia, Giuseppe. *Codice*: vol. I, doc. 60, p. 139; doc. 203, p. 480.

against Majorca to punish his uncle for supporting the French that all of their holdings would be safe.¹⁹ Not only were the rights of the Genoese respected in Majorca and Sicily, but the crown also moved against captains who attacked Genoese shipping, as in the case of the captains of Castellón who were called to account at the court in February 1286.²⁰ It seems clear the Genoese were being rewarded for their past behavior during French crusade.

The Genoese were in a difficult position. They could not overtly defy Charles of Anjou and his successors without the risk of having the commune attacked and absorbed by the Angevins. On the other hand, supporting the Angevins meant they would be cutoff from their traditional trade in Sicily and Majorca. Moreover, commerce and communication with its colonies in the Levant would become difficult and dangerous at best. When seen in this light, the reason for the less than enthusiastic participation of the Genoese in Angevin fleet operations becomes clear. They could not directly oppose the Angevins but by feigning incompetence and cowardice at critical points they could undermine the Angevin cause and avoid antagonizing the Crown of Aragon. This is not to say that the Genoese did not attack Catalan interests. There are several examples of Genoese 'merchants' attacking Catalan shipping, but these attacks were a nuisance at best and the Catalan merchant galleys were likewise attacking Genoese targets of opportunity.²¹ Yet overall, these incidents were minor affairs.

The strategy of the Crown of Aragon during the War of the Sicilian Vespers is remarkable for its use of trade as a weapon in a rather sophisticated manner. Not only did the crown directly attack Angevin commercial interests by restricting trade and using the navigational choke points around Sicily to harass Angevin shipping, in the case of the blockade of Naples it used Angevin commerce to fund the very fleet that was blockading it. Moreover, by using port control, export licenses and naval patrols the Crown of Aragon was able to manipulate Genoese behavior to the detriment of the Angevins. The Crown of Aragon's use of trade in the War of the Sicilian Vespers was highly sophisticated and proved just as devastating a weapon as any army or fleet.

¹⁹ Archivo de Corona de Aragon Registro 63, fol. 69v.

²⁰ Archivo de Corona de Aragon, Registro 63, fol. 65v.

²¹ Auria, J. "Annales ann. MCCLXXX-MCCLXXXIII". in *Annali genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*, vol. 5 (Rome: Fonti per la storia d'Italia, 1929); vol. 11.2, pp. 51, 62, 78, 125-6, 131, 145.