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Since the publication of Steven Runciman’s 1958 classic, *The Sicilian Vespers*, the war for Sicily sparked by the 1282 rebellion against Angevin rule has held currency in the historiographical imagination of scholars of the medieval Mediterranean. It was in a very real sense a global war, one that included nearly every stretch of the Mediterranean littoral and that embroiled nearly every major power—from the Byzantines to the Hafsids to the papacy to the English—in one form or another. Yet, as Charles D. Stanton makes clear in the preface to this fine biography of the naval commander Roger of Lauria, outside of Mediterranean studies, the War of the Sicilian Vespers, as the conflict that stretched from 1282 to 1302 is known, tends to be overlooked by scholars of the later European Middle Ages. Rather, Europeanists tend to study other wars, such as the Hundred Years’ War and internecine conflict between city-states in northern Italy.

There have been some recent attempts to remedy this. Works such as Hussein Fancy’s *The Mercenary Mediterranean: Sovereignty, Religion, and Violence in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (2016) have called new attention to this period in Mediterranean history as well as the importance of the connectivity of the Middle Sea in the latter thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Because the War of the Sicilian Vespers and the decades that preceded it, going back to the death of Emperor Frederick II in 1250, involved a laundry list of Mediterranean powers, it is in no small sense one of the most important geopolitical events in late medieval history. But, on the whole, there is still much to be done.

Contributing to our fuller understanding of the War of the Sicilian Vespers is Stanton’s study of Lauria. A somewhat enigmatic figure whose origins remain obscure, Lauria is well known for his talents as a naval commander. However, as is so often the case, he has not been fully studied as a key player in the War of the Sicilian Vespers because he was a minor noble and admiral, not a head of state. Fancy mentions Lauria quite a few times, as did Runciman. There is plenty of source material—mostly chronicles in Spanish and Italian—to paint a full picture of Lauria. Yet a biography of him has long been overdue. Thankfully, Stanton has provided us with a portrait of Lauria that repositions the way we consider global wars like the Sicilian Vespers.

Stanton’s biography of Lauria proceeds chronologically, beginning with the 1266 Battle of Benevento, which led to the Angevin takeover of Sicily and southern Italy from Manfred, the son of Frederick II, who died in the battle. This first chapter on Benevento sets the tone for the remainder of the work, as Stanton stresses that
among the dead at the Battle of Benevento was Richard of Lauria, the father of Roger. While this cannot be definitively proven—and Stanton admits as much—it functions for Stanton as a starting off point to refocus how we see the war through the lens of the experiences and exploits of Roger of Lauria. From there, Stanton weaves a narrative that recounts Lauria’s leadership, seamanship, tactical brilliance, desires for glory and vengeance, and undying loyalty to the Aragonese crown, even if it meant turning his back on the Sicilians whom he commanded for so long in their efforts to liberate themselves from the Angevins.

Throughout, Stanton presents Lauria as the heroic protagonist of a global war that was won and lost due to the brilliance of commanders, the will of troops, and, in the case of Sicily in particular, the desire for self-determination among the local inhabitants. Driving Stanton’s gripping narrative are decisive battles, prolonged sieges, battered navies, and fortuitous turns of fortune that remind us that medieval wars were never really won or lost until they were over. Of course, for Stanton, if Lauria were involved, it seemed that victory was always within reach. Always was never always, though, even for Lauria; in the end, Lauria too had to realize that he was not invincible and that retaking Sicily was far too difficult for even a commander like him. Stanton’s book gives us so much to think about when we discuss the leaders of armies and navies. Lauria is not an obscure figure in the historiography by any stretch, but Stanton’s recalibration of the War of the Sicilian Vespers as the epic story of one man as well as a geopolitical web of power players reminds us that we must be microscopic as well as macroscopic when studying the past.

That said, this book is more than just a biography or a myopic study of one man. Stanton goes to great lengths to situate Lauria into the larger framework of imperial rivalries that pervaded the medieval Mediterranean. Across the book, popes, kings, emirs, and emperors from Iberia, Tunisia, Greece, Italy, and England enrich the story. Stanton in this regard stresses that, while Lauria is the central figure of his book, we cannot understand Lauria without the larger context of Mediterranean rivalries, the political desires of monarchs and popes, and the will of the people who are the objects of conquest and the agitators of rebellion. Helpful in this regard are several chapters that break away momentarily from Lauria to paint a fuller picture and to allow us to best understand Lauria. Chapter 1, on Benevento, and chapters on Aragonese and Angevin expansion, as well as chapter 10, on medieval naval technology, are especially good in this regard. While the fast-paced narrative of some chapters is welcomed and makes for fun reading, these chapters allow us to take a step back, breathe, and recalibrate how we see Lauria and position his life into the larger story.

Stanton’s conclusions are also important to bear in mind. The War of the Sicilian Vespers caused a shift in geopolitical focus in the Mediterranean. As the period of the Crusades ended with the fall of Acre in 1291, just a decade after the war for Sicily broke out, there was little hope for Christian attempts to retake the Levant. The western Mediterranean, in turn, became a theater of conflict as well as commercial growth for Catalan merchants. While Stanton’s claim that Venice and Genoa lost their reach and dominance is perhaps a bit overstated—Venice would still control several colonies in the eastern Mediterranean and would remain an important commercial player well into the early modern period—Lauria nevertheless played no small part in Catalan ascendancy, an important step toward eventual Spanish global dominance in the sixteenth century.

On the whole, Stanton’s biography of Lauria is successful because it is not simply an updated rehashing of Runciman’s *The Sicilian Vespers*, as brilliant as that classic remains. By shifting the central narrative away from the macroscopic de-
criptions of the aims of the most powerful, Stanton reminds us that wars are not fought, won, and lost in boardrooms, papal curiae, and kings' courts, but on battlefields and, in this case, the sea. By bringing the fight to us, so to speak, Stanton emphasizes the comradery and bonds that admirals and their crews forged as they fought wars for someone else and came to earn glory. In the end, Lauria's story puts the emphasis back on the toilsome men of the sea who fought on behalf of the Great Men who ruled and reminds us that not all historical events operated as the powerful so wished.

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