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How cruel was Roger de Lauria?

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Catalan Review, Vol. VII, number 1 (1993), p. 79-96

HOW CRUEL WAS ROGER DE LAURIA?

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Roger de Lauria has been rightly to be one of the premier strategists and tacticians in naval history. For a medieval admiral he had an unusually high degree of command and control of his forces and consistently won victories despite being outnumbered and in tactically unfavorable conditions. He was one of those rare individuals whose personal actions directly affected the fate of a country. Yet this brilliant career has had one cloud over it: the persistent charge that, in regards to the treatment of prisoners, he was cruel to the point of being inhuman. Zurita in his *Anales de Aragón* (1562) was one of the first Spanish writers to indirectly make the charge with paragraph headings such as *Crueldad del almirante con los vencidos*. This theme was amplified by one of Spain's most famous authors, Don Manuel Josef Quintana, in *Vidas de Españoles Celebres* (1811) where he wrote, «Es lastima que juntase á tan grandes y bellas qualidades la dureza bárbara que las deslucia: su corazon de tigre no perdonó jamás; y abusando con tal crueldad de su superioridad con los vencidos y los prisioneros, se hacia indigno de las victorias que conseguia.» This opinion has been echoed by most authors up until the present. A few, such as Fort i Cogul, have defended him with the somewhat questionable argument that his alleged atrocities were no worse than those committed in the 20th century. But all of these past discussions have not seriously addressed the issue: How cruel was Roger de Lauria? To answer that question several other questions have to be asked. How reliable are the sources concerning each case and were his actions within the boundaries of established medieval laws and traditions concerning war? Outside of the few alleged incidents, what was his treatment of prisoners throughout his career? And finally, how does his behavior compare to that of his contemporaries, both allies and enemies? This paper will try to answer each of these in an endeavor to not only answer the primary question but to gain some insights into the man himself.

sage inaccurately states that Roger acted unilaterally when in fact the evidence indicates that he was acting with the full knowledge of the new king of Aragon, Alfons III.⁴

Front this point on the chronicle becomes increasingly critical of Roger. Under the auspices of the papacy, on June 12, 1295 peace was signed between the Crown of Aragon and the Kingdom of Naples. Under the treaty Sicily was to be turned over to the papacy, which accommodated everyone except the Sicilians to whom the treaty was anathema. The Sicilians' hate for the papal authorities was second only to their hate for the Angevins and they urged the Infant Frederic, brother of King Jaume II of Aragon, to become king. In December of that year Frederic declared himself king of Sicily putting Roger in a precarious position. Roger was forced to choose between fighting for the Aragonese or the Sicilians. After trying to persuade Frederic to agree to the terms of the treaty Roger finally decided to stay with the Aragonese, who were now allied with the Angevins against the Sicilians. That Roger was now depicted in the chronicle in an unfavorable light is not surprising. Not only had he failed to take Naples and had signed a treaty with the Angevins, he was now allied to the Sicilians' archenemy. In his conversations with Frederic just before he left the Sicilian cause, Roger is depicted as argumentative and abusive.⁵ At the Battle of Cape Orlando he is depicted as so distraught with grief over the execution of his nephew that, not content with the fact that many Sicilians died in the battle, he «unjustly» executes the noble from Messina. Speciale spills a great deal of ink condemning Roger for this and for the cruelty of the executions.⁶ Later, at the Battle of Ponza he is again vilified for taking revenge on Genoese prisoners because of the casualties they had inflicted on his men. The overall picture given in

⁴ Pryor, L., 1983, *The naval battles of Roger de Lauria*. Journal of Medieval History 9:204; La Mantia, G., 1908, *Documenti su le relazioni del re Alfonso III di Aragon con la Sicilia*. Anuari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans 2: doc. 16.

⁵ Speciale, book III, XIX, col. 984.

⁶ *Ibid.*, book IV, XIII, col. 1005.

Before reviewing the individual incidents which have tainted the career of Roger de Lauria, a few words are necessary concerning one of the primary sources. The single source for the worst atrocities of which Roger is accused is the *Historia Sicula* of Nicolo Speciale. While Speciale, an official in the Sicilian government, is a generally reliable source for events of the War of the Sicilian Vespers, his chronicle has a distinctly antagonistic tone towards Roger de Lauria. The chronicle initially portrays Roger in a very favorable light when he is appointed admiral of the Aragonese fleet sent to help the Sicilians fight the Angevins. In describing Roger and Johanni de Procida, Speciale states that «among the Sicilians they shine forth like two stars in the sky».¹ Especiale also is reserved in his criticism of Roger concerning the mass execution of French prisoners at Barcelona after the Battle of Les Formigues which will be discussed later. While he implicates Roger indirectly in this affair, it is the *Comitia Santi Pauli* that is charged with cruelty, not Roger.²

However, the chronicle becomes very antagonistic towards him after the Battle of the Counts in June, 1287. The battle had resulted in the capture of a large portion of the French nobility and had left Naples in a state of turmoil. However, Roger had his own problems. The pay for the crews had been long in arrears, and in order to pay them he signed a truce with Roberto de Artois and ransomed the captured nobles for large sums of money. Speciale is highly critical of this. In his view the city of Naples should have been seized, and he further writes «But instead Roger, being elated with the success of the war, not considering this (the taking of Naples), but contemptuous of nearly everything, having accepted large amounts of money, then signed useless treaties with the enemy without having consulted with the king».³ Besides being derogatory in tone, the pas-

¹ Speciale, N., 1727, *Historia sicula in VII libros distributa ab anno MCCLXX-XII usque ad annum MCCCXXXVII*, in Lodovico Antonio Muratori, 1727, *Rerum italicum scriptores*, vol. X. Milan: book I, XXV, col. 940.

² *Ibid.*, book II, IV, col. 950.

³ *Ibid.*, book II, XI, col. 955.

these last two battles is essentially one of a cruel man whose only thoughts were of revenge and blood. These descriptions of Roger and his behavior are a far cry from those of his earlier battles and he certainly is no longer being described as one of the «lights of the sky». In fact, the alleged atrocities for which Roger is vilified by Speciale occur after the Battle of the Counts when the chronicle becomes highly antagonistic towards him. This is not to argue that the events described by Speciale, such as the beheading of the Messina nobles, did not occur but the obvious bias in the chronicle does call into question the purported motives and the severity of the actions ascribed to Roger. As shown in the passage concerning the Battle of the Counts, Speciale correctly stated the overall facts, but depicted Roger as greedy and contemptuous of the king's authority when in fact the evidence points to the contrary. It may well be that Roger de Lauria did participate in some of the more unsavory affairs that occurred during the War of the Sicilian Vespers, but as we will see the motives and reasons for his actions were far different than those attributed to him.

Probably the most grotesque incident occurred after the Battle of les Formigues in September, 1285. After decisively defeating the French fleet in a night battle, Roger had sailed south to Barcelona with thirteen captured galleys and nearly six hundred prisoners. After the nobles being held for ransom were separated, the remaining prisoners met an unenviable end on reaching Barcelona. By either the order of King Pere III or the *Comitia Santi Pauli*, depending on whose account one uses, 300 wounded prisoners were executed by being tied together with a rope and then dragged out to sea behind a galley. The remaining 260 prisoners, after having their eyes gouged out, were bound together by a rope and sent to the King of France.⁷ Speciale adds that their right hands were also cut off.⁸ Zurita, based on Speciale, states that Roger was responsible for this atrocity, and this

⁷ Desclot, B., 1885, *Crónica del Rey En Pere*. Barcelona: chap. XCIV.

⁸ Speciale, book II, IV, col. 950.

accusation was continued by Quintana.⁹ Yet Desclot is quite clear in stating that it was done on the king's orders and Neocastro implies this as well. Since the king was present in Barcelona, it is highly unlikely that Roger would have executed or maimed any prisoners without direct orders. Medieval law was fairly clear on this point. The *Siete Partidas* clearly state that anything captured at sea was the property of the crown.¹⁰ Both the jurists Giovanni de Legnano and Henri Bonet agreed that any booty or prisoners taken in battle technically belonged to the king and should be dealt with at his pleasure.¹¹

For Roger to have acted unilaterally with the king present would have been an infringement of royal prerogative, and would have gone against prevailing medieval law and custom. It would have also been uncharacteristic of him. After the Battle of Malta in July, 1283 he held the captured galleys and men for the king. Again, after the Battle of Naples in June, 1284 Roger sailed to Messina with all of his prisoners in order to deliver them to the Infant Jaume.¹² It seems unlikely he would have gone to the trouble of returning the prisoners to Barcelona just to execute them without royal permission when his past behavior indicates that, where feasible, he left the fate of captives up to the crown. There can be little doubt the men were sent to Phillip III by Pere III as a rather pointed message as to what the French king could expect if he continued his crusade. The responsibility of Pere III for these executions is completely suppressed by later writers. Both Zurita and Quintana shifted blame completely to Roger and omitted any reference to the king.¹³ Why these authors did this, particularly Quintana who used Desclot's chronicle, can only be guessed at. Roger de Lauria was not Spanish by birth, but had fled to the Aragonese court with his mother from Calabria after his father was killed by the Ange-

⁹ Zurita, J., 1977, *Anales de la Corona de Aragón*. Zaragoza: Book IV, chap. LXVIII; Quintana, M. J., 1811, *Vidas de Españoles Célebres*. Madrid: 82.

¹⁰ Alfonso El Sabio, 1972, *Las Siete Partidas*. Madrid: II, XXVI, XXIX.

¹¹ John of Legnano, 1917, *Tractus de Bello*. Oxford: chap. LXI; Bonet, H., 1949, *The Tree of Battles*, trans. by G. W. Coopland. Liverpool: IV, chap. XIV.

¹² Desclot, XLII; Muntaner, R., 1860, *Crónica Catalana*. Barcelona: CV.

¹³ Zurita, *op. cit.*; Quintana, *op. cit.*

vins. It may be that for both authors it was easier to shift blame on to a foreigner than to implicate the crown in a rather sordid affair.

A similar incident occurred after the Battle of Cape Orlando in July, 1299. The battle had been fought between the combined Aragonese and Angevin fleets, and the Sicilian fleet. The battle ended in a stunning victory for Roger with the capture of many nobles, particularly from Messina. After the battle, Speciale states that Roger had the prisoners executed by either a sword in the chest, by being clubbed to death with an iron rod, or were beheaded. The alleged motive for the executions was revenge for the execution of his nephew Joan de Lauria.¹⁴ Joan had been captured earlier in the year by the Sicilians, and had been taken to Messina. There he was tried as a traitor, and executed.¹⁵ The problem with this explanation for the mass execution after the battle is that again it has Roger acting unilaterally in the presence of the king. King Jaume II was with Roger at the battle, and it seems inconceivable that the admiral would have executed any prisoners, much less nobility, without the express permission of the king. It is much more probable that the Messina nobility lost their heads for the same reason Joan de Lauria had lost his.

All of the Sicilian nobles at the battle at one time had sworn fealty to Jaume II when he was King of Sicily before he became King of Aragon after the death of Pere III.¹⁶ Jaume was still the King of Sicily and did not recognize the claim of his brother Frederic. This situation meant that any nobles who had sworn allegiance to Frederic and were now fighting with the Sicilian fleet were, as far as the Crown of Aragon was concerned, traitors. When seen in that light it is no surprise these men were executed. Under medieval law these men had foresworn themselves, an act which was punishable by death.¹⁷ That King Jaume would have allowed prisoners, for whom a substantial ransom could have been demanded, to be executed simply to

¹⁴ Speciale, book IV, XIII, col. 1005.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, book IV, X, col. 997.

¹⁶ Muntaner, CXLVIII.

¹⁷ Bonet, IV, chap. VIII.

satisfy his admiral's lust for revenge seems highly unlikely. This incident appears to be a clear case of where Speciale has presented the basic facts, but then overlaid them with his own prejudices.

The executions may have been also a matter of practicality. King Jaume may have felt that any money received in ransom was far outweighed by the potential harm the Sicilian nobles could have created if they were free. While by today's standards this would hardly be a reason for a summary execution, under medieval law the potential damage a released prisoner might cause in the future was legitimate grounds for his execution. Giovanni de Legnano wrote, «Should mercy be shown to persons captured in a lawful war? We say that it should, unless by sparing them there is a fear of disturbance of the peace». The legal basis for this exception given by both Giovanni de Legnano and Bonet is the execution of Conradin by Charles of Anjou when the latter was trying to consolidate his claim to the Kingdom of Naples.¹⁸ It is doubtful that Jaume II worried about legal technicalities when he executed the Sicilian nobles, but his reasoning may have been very similar to that expressed in the legal tracts. The men he executed were all experienced military leaders from the largest city in Sicily. He may well have decided that by killing the nobles he was not only giving due punishment to traitors but was also removing a potential source of future problems. In any case, while Roger may have participated willingly in the executions, the reasons for them were undoubtedly different than the ones given by Speciale, and the ultimate responsibility for them certainly lies with King Jaume II.

The final incident where Roger is accused of mistreating his prisoners comes after the Battle of Ponza in June, 1300. The Sicilian fleet was commanded by the Genoese admiral Conrad d'Oria, and was composed of ships from Sicily and galleys from the Ghibelline faction in Genoa. The battle had been a particularly hard fought one in which Roger's ship had been alongside d'Oria's. According to Speciale, because of the casualties the Genoese crossbowmen have their eyes

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, chap. XIII; Legnano, chap. LXIX.

gougued out and their hands cut off.¹⁹ It may well be that the high number of casualties was the reason for this harsh reprisal, but the political situation at that moment suggests another possible motive. What is interesting in this case is that the punishment meted out to the Genoese archers is the same as that given to the French prisoners sent back to Phillip III of France. Up to this point in the war the Genoese government had wavered in deciding what to do. The victory of King FredERIC over Angevin forces at Falconaria in October, 1299 had encouraged the Ghibelline faction in Genoa and a large number had joined the Sicilian force. Rumors were circulating that Genoa might openly declare for the Sicilian cause, which would have complicated the military situation for the admiral.²⁰ It is quite possible that the Genoese crossbowmen were maimed for the same reason the French sailors had been, that of sending a pointed message to the other side, in this case to send a strong message to Genoa not to get involved. If Roger was simply seeing revenge he could have just as easily executed them and the other prisoners. The reason that this punishment was inflicted on only these Genoese was that the other five Genoese galleys had held back during the battle and then fled when they saw the battle go against the Sicilians.²¹ In any case, what we do know is that after this battle Genoese participation in the war stopped and the state declared itself neutral.²²

The above incident is the one case where Roger appears to be directly responsible for the mistreatment of captives, and regardless of the motives, it certainly shows that there was a ruthless side to the man. Yet by medieval standards he was quite moderate. The fate of prisoners of war during the 13th and 14th centuries depended on several factors. The most important factor determining whether a captive lived or died was whether he was a noble or commoner. If the prisoner was of the nobility then his chances of survival were relatively good, not because of any charity on the part of his enemies but because he

¹⁹ Speciale, book V, XIV, col. 1027.

²⁰ Runciman, S., 1958, *The Sicilian Vespers*. Cambridge: 273.

²¹ Speciale, book V, XIV, col. 1025.

²² Runciman, *op. cit.*

was a potential source of money. As we have seen, Roger at the Battle of the Counts used the ransom he received for the captured nobility to pay off his crews. Likewise, the prisoners who were executed or maimed at Barcelona were all common sailors or soldiers, any valuable nobles having been removed earlier.²³ In theory, the captor was obligated to demand only an amount which was within the means of the family to pay, which seems traditionally to have been one year's revenue from the prisoner's estate.²⁴ However, this proviso was honored more in the breach than in fact. Sometimes the prisoners were threatened into promising extravagant sums and it was not unknown for a family to be forced into financial ruin by the amount of ransom required to extract a relative from prison.²⁵

If the family and friends of the captive could not or would not pay the demanded sum then the prisoner's position became very tenuous. An example of this can be seen in the fate of captives held by Spanish troops after the taking of Prato in 1512: «And when someone was left alive, they seized him, whether he was rich or poor, for an exorbitant ransom, and whoever could not raise payment was tortured in the most abominable ways.»²⁶ Another example comes from the battles during the Hundred Years War between the Frisians and the allied forces of France, England, Holland and Hainault. Froissart rebukes the Frisians for refusing to ransom their men from captivity and in the process shows what happened to prisoners who could not buy their freedom: «If any prisoners were taken there no raunsome coude be gotten for them, for their frendes wolde nat quyte them out, but rather suffre them to dye in prisone.»²⁷ What actually happened to prisoners often depended on the mood of their captors. sometimes prisoners were released after they had sworn to return at an appointed time with the ransom, as happened after the Battle of Poitiers

²³ Desclot, XCIV.

²⁴ Keen, M. H., 1965, *The laws of War in the Late Middle Ages*. Toronto: 158.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 159 & 181.

²⁶ Cochrane, E. and Kirshner, J., 1986, *The Renaissance*. Chicago: 167.

²⁷ Froissart, J., 1967, *Froissart's Chronicles, The Tudor Translations*. London: vol. VI, 223.

when French noblemen were released on the promise they would return by Christmas with their ransom.²⁸

However, a knight could expect no mercy if he was captured by common foot soldiers or archers. During the Battle of Crecy English soldiers went out and slit the throats of French noblemen who were laying wounded on the field. Froissart further records that after the battle when English soldiers found any French nobles « that they were ever nighe salyne, for there was none taken to mercy nor to raunsome, for so the Englyssmen were determined».²⁹ Even if a knight was captured by a member of the nobility, if that knight had committed some offense against the other side, or was charged with treason, then he could likewise expect to receive little mercy. For this very reason the Count of Monfort, his brother and two cousins fought to the death at the Battle of Naples because they knew they would be executed if captured.³⁰ At the siege of Balaguer the rebellious counts and barons who surrendered to King Pere III fully expected to be executed for their treason, even though they had willingly turned themselves over to the mercy of the king.³¹

For the common soldier or sailor on the defeated side the situation was decidedly worse. In virtually all of the land battles only nobles were taken prisoner. The only chance a commoner on the losing side had of survival was if he could run far enough from the battle so as not to be caught. Froissant wrote of the day after the Battle of Crecy, «This mornyng thenglyssshmen mette with dyverse Frenchmen, that had loste their way on the Saturday and had layen all nyght in the felde, and wyst nat where the king nor the captayns. They were all slayne, as many, as were met with; and it was shewed me, that of the commons and men a fote of the cyties and good townes of France, ther was slayne foure tymes as many as were slayne the Saturday in the great batayle.»³²

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 382.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 298-99.

³⁰ Muntaner, CV.

³¹ Desclot, III.

³² Froissart, vol. I, 303.

Of the Battle of Blanchtaque Froissart wrote, «They that were a fote coude nat flee, so that ther were slayne a great number of them.»³³

Battles at sea tende to result in the massacre of most of the common sailors and soldiers. Froissart clearly recognized the reason for this when he wrote of a naval battle off Flanders, «for the baytys on the see ar more dangerous and fierser, than the batayls by lande; for on the see ther is no reculyng nor fleyng; ther is no remedy but to fight, and to abyde fortune, and every man to shewe his prowes.» He goes on to note that no Normans or Frenchmen, the losers in this battle, survived.³⁴ Similar incidents occurred during the War of the Sicilian Vespers. Muntaner in describing the taking of some galleys by the Aragonese forces at the Battle of Naples wrote, «And then they went on board all the galleys; and all they found on deck were killed, except the barons and counts, those who escaped alive, who were held for the admiral.»³⁵ Desclot reported that after the battle of Malta 870 Provençals had died versus 8 men in Roger's fleet, whik Muntaner states that only 500 Provençals survived the battle.³⁶ Villani reported that over 6,000 Sicilians died at the Battle of Capo Orlando.³⁷ Even accepting that this figure is probably inflated it would still indicate that a majority of the sailors and rowers died in the battle. Even surviving a naval battle did not guarantee safety. Two contemporaries of Roger de Lauria, Ramon Marquet and Berenguer Mallol, did not even bother to take prisoners back to Barcelona after capturing seven Franch galleys at Roses in Catalunya. After separating out any nobles for whom they could get a ransom, they simply crowded the captive sailors and rowers onto two galleys which they then sank with all on board.³⁸ The Catalan and Aragonese sailors knew they could expect the same treatment from the French. King Pere III made that clear in a speech he gave to

³³ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 292.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 147-48.

³⁵ Muntaner, CV.

³⁶ Desclot, XLII; Muntaner, LXXXIII.

³⁷ Villani, G., *Historia universalis*, in Ludovico Antonio Muratori, 1727, *Rerum italicum scriptores*, vol. X. Milan: book VIII, XXIX, col. 362.

³⁸ Desclot, LXXXVI.

captured Angevin sailors whom he eventually released: «O men, you see well that I have you in my power and that I could do with you as I will and you know also if my men had fallen into the hands of Charles, which God forbid, he would have delivered them all unto death.»³⁹

Compared to the above examples, Roger de Lauria appears to be moderate, and in some cases, merciful. After the Battle of Naples, he first sailed to Ischia, then Procida and Capri with the rowers and sailors he has captured from those islands. Instead of executing them or demanding ransom, after receiving from them, he not only let them go, but gave them cloths as well.⁴⁰ Besides this, he released the knights for whom he could get not ransom. In another case Roger appears to show a great deal of restraint. A majority of the 4,500 sailors and rowers captured at the Battle of Nicotera in 1282 were from Apulia and Calabria. King Pere III, after giving them food and money, released them but also warned them: «Now take good heed that you do not come again to make war against me, for if I should ever capture anyone of you, I would cause him to die a foul death.»⁴¹ Yet five years later after the Battle of the Counts, Roger had these same men as prisoners. Under medieval law the lives of these men should have been immediately forfeit. Instead, Roger takes them back to the Queen at Messina, where they are eventually pardoned.⁴² Undoubtedly, part of the reason for this leniency was that these men came from areas which were not only claimed by the Crown of Aragon, but which had also been ruled by the de Lauria family before it was forced to flee by the Angevins. The stated reason for their release was an acknowledgment by the Crown that they had been forced into service. Nevertheless, it indicates a high degree of restraint for those times. Roger could have legally executed them on the spot but instead went to the trouble of taking them all the way to Messina. If nothing else, this episode shows that Roger tended to follow custom very closely and was inclined to wait for the Crown to decide the fate of his prisoners, instead of unilaterally executing them as implied by Speciale.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, XXVI.

⁴⁰ Muntaner, CXIII.

⁴¹ Desclot, XXVI; Muntaner, LXXIV.

⁴² Muntaner, CVI.

Other examples show that, while Roger could be ruthless, he also had a sense of duty to the commoners under him. He was constantly worried about the pay of his fleet and, as we have seen, was willing to use ransom that would normally have been his and the Crown's to pay off his crews. At the Battle of Malta he relinquished his rights to any booty and permitted the marines and sailors to keep any loot they had captured.⁴³ And finally, if we do accept the account of the Genoese crossbowmen as given by Speciale then it shows that Roger had more concern for his sailors and rowers than most nobles, even if he expressed in a rather brutal way. Many nobles had little or no regard for the common soldiers underneath them. The Angevins treated their rowers as little better than slaves, and at the Battle of Naples literally drove the men into the galleys. The classic example of the contempt the nobility could have for the common foot soldier is the Battle of Crecy where on seeing the Genoese recoil from the hail of English arrows the French nobility rode down and killed the hapless men for being «rascals».⁴⁴ Compared to these examples, Roger de Lauria appears to have had a high degree of concern for the commoners under him.

Roger could be thoroughly ruthless when the situation called for it, as can be seen in the next two examples. However, as will be shown, his behavior even in these cases was better, or at the least no worse, than his contemporaries. Roger de Sengeneto had been captured earlier by King Jaume and to obtain his release he payed homage and promised to turn over the city of Gaita his release he reneged on his promise. During the following siege of Gaeta, the camp of King Jaume II was harassed by stones from catapults in the city. To stop the attacks one of the two sons of Roger de Sengeneto was brought out by the king, at Roger de Lauria's urging, and placed in a cage in front of the king's tent. Roger is roundly condemned for this suggestion by both Speciale and Quintana. Roger de Sengeneto, after deciding that by withholding fire he would dishonor himself, continued to fire at

⁴³ *Ibid.*, LXXXIII.

⁴⁴ Froissart, vol. I, 298; Oman, C., 1969, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*. New York: vol. II, 142.

the camp which eventually resulted in his son being struck and killed by one of the missiles.⁴⁵ While it might seem to us that using a hostage in such a manner was cruel, based on medieval custom the lives of both sons were forfeit the moment Roger de Sengeneto refused to open the city gates. Interestingly, the medieval jurists Legnano and Bonet are both silent on the subject of hostages even though the custom of using hostages was widespread. The jurists discuss prisoner treatment and ransom extensively but completely ignore the subject of the of hostages. Conrad of Antioch was released from a sentence of death by Charles of Anjou, not out of mercy, but because his wife held several important noblemen whom she threatened to kill if her husband was not released.⁴⁶ During the Hundred Years War, when Robert Canoll refused to turn over his castle to the Duke of Anjou, the duke had three hostages brought out and beheaded in front of the castle. Sir Robert replied by beheading four prisoners and having their heads thrown over the wall.⁴⁷ The above are but two examples of a normal state of affairs in medieval Europe. What is interesting is that in the case of the siege of Gaeta neither of the hostages was summarily executed, and even after King Jaume was forced to lift the siege the surviving son was not killed.

The sacking of towns and cities was how commanders, like Roger de Lauria, made their living. The spoils were how they financed their expeditions and paid their men. If the town was taken in a siege then, by medieval custom, the lives of all the inhabitants were forfeit. The reasoning was that the refusal of a town to open its gates to a prince was an act *leasa maiestas* and so the pillaging of a town was viewed as an act of justice. While this practice was never codified in law it was openly stated in a number of court cases where the act of pillaging was defended as a *coustume de la guerre*.⁴⁸ During the invasion of Cata-

⁴⁵ Neocastro, B., *Historia Sicula*, in Ludovico Antonio Muratori, 1727, *Rerum italicum scriptores*, vol. X. Milan: CXII, vol. 1144-45; Quintana, 94-95; Speciale, book II, XIII, col. 956-57.

⁴⁶ Runciman, 115.

⁴⁷ Froissart, vol. II, 440-41.

⁴⁸ Keen, 121.

lunya in 1285 the French certainly followed this custom. In sacking the city of Elna French troops killed all of the inhabitants including the women and clergy.⁴⁹ They then went on to pillage and burn all the towns between Roses and Barcelona.⁵⁰ The fall of Durham and Saint Severe during the Hundred Years War are but two examples of where the inhabitants lost their lives after a siege.⁵¹

Roger was certainly not above sacking a town and did so on numerous occasions. However, compared to his contemporaries, he was relatively moderate. In taking the towns of Gozo and Lipari he simply demanded tribute and homage from the inhabitants.⁵² He could be more ruthless when the situation called for it, such as the invasion of Catalunya by France. When he took the French city of Agde he ordered that every man between fifty and sixty years old be executed. However, he also forbade that any church property be touched and likewise ordered that the women of the town should not be molested in any way.⁵³ Of course, the above only applied when dealing with Christian cities and Roger, like his contemporaries, viewed non-Christian populations as fair game. In the case of Muslim towns, like Jerba, besides any booty, he also carried off many of the inhabitants as slaves.⁵⁴ According to Muntaner, Roger de Lauria always safeguarded the churches and women in the towns he sacked. While this may seem an embellishment by the chronicler, the one accusation that has never been laid against Roger de Lauria is that he allowed the desecration of a church or that he ordered the wholesale slaughter of the inhabitants of a town. Those two facts alone set him apart from many of the commanders of his era.

In reviewing the career of Roger de Lauria certain aspects of his behavior stand out. In dealing with prisoners he seems to have been

⁴⁹ Desclot, LXIX; Juan de la Peña, 1991, *The Chronicle of San Juan de la Peña*. Univ. Pennsylvania Pr.: 79.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵¹ Froissart, vol. I, 109; vol. II, 404.

⁵² Muntaner, LXXXIV, XCIII.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, CLII.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, CXVII.

rather methodical and tended to rigorously follow medieval law and custom. In virtually all the situations in which he was involved he turned over his prisoners to the crown, unlike his contemporaries such as Ramon Marquet and Berenguer Mallol. This includes the executions at Barcelona. If Roger de Lauria was as blood-thirsty for revenge against the French as he has been made out to be by later chroniclers then he could easily have pitched the hapless Frenchmen overboard. In none of the chronicles is there an instance where his prisoners were executed without royalty being present. In dealing with past or future vassals he could be extremely lenient even with oathbreakers. His maiming of the Genoese bowmen certainly appears to be a case where he had a specific objective in mind when he gave the orders. In his treatment of captured towns he also appears to have been rather lenient or at the least methodical. While the treatment of the people of Agde strikes us as extremely hard and cruel, by medieval standards, the execution of the males of fighting age was a sensible and legitimate response to a population that was a threat to Catalunya.

This picture of a methodical commander fits much more closely with his career than the one of a man given to mindless cruelty. In his military career Roger was always meticulous, careful and methodical. Unlike the other commanders of the day, he could never be goaded into a rash decision. When in June, 1300 he was challenged by Conrad d'Oria to come out of Naples and fight, he refused because he judged his fleet too weak.⁵⁵ Contemporary commanders, to uphold their honor or allay accusation of cowardice, would have rushed out to give battle. The Prince of Salerno at the Battle of Naples did exactly that even though his father, Charles I, had specifically told him to await the arrival of his galleys.⁵⁶ Likewise, stung by accusations of cowardice, Conrad d'Oria engaged Roger at Ponza even though his position was tactically unfavorable.⁵⁷ There is no instance in which Roger gave rein to his emotions to the point of risking his men and ships. His use

⁵⁵ Speciale, book V, XIII, col. 1024.

⁵⁶ Pryor, 192.

⁵⁷ Speciale, book V, XIV, col. 1025; Pryor, 209.

of night fighting and the high degree of tactical control he had over his men and ships all indicate that he was a rather cool and calculating individual, which conflicts with the picture of a cruel man given to his emotions.

So how cruel was Roger de Lauria? By our standards, he certainly wasn't a fountain of mercy. That he could walk into a town and order the execution of a large segment of the population or order the eyes gouged out of a specific group of prisoners demonstrates that he could be a hard man. Yet each of the instances in which he ordered or urged a harsh of action was done for a specific purpose. In the case of the hostages at Gaeta the son was placed in harm's way for a very specific reason, to stop the bombardment of the camp. A more typical medieval response would have been to execute one of the sons and then threaten to do the same to the other. Similarly, the Genoese bowmen were singled out from the other prisoners for a specific reason. Certainly by medieval standards he more often than not acted with measured restraint. When he did act it was a specific response to a specific action or threat. If he can be accused of anything, it is that he was ruthlessly pragmatic.

Roger de Lauria was no better, and certainly no worse, than most medieval commanders in his treatment of captives. In the cases of the Barcelona executions and the ones at Cape Orlando it certainly appears he was not even responsible. In these two cases the blame seems to have been shifted by later chroniclers and he certainly appears to have been unjustly accused. In the other incidents he was acting well within medieval law and custom, and generally with more restraint than other commanders or princes. If we are to judge Roger de Lauria by our own standards then we have to paint every other leader of that time with the same brush, in which case Roger would appear to be one of the lesser offenders. He was a man of his times who acted according to the prevailing laws and customs. When viewed in that context, what can be definitely said about him is that he certainly was not the cruel and bloodthirsty monster that he has been made out to be.

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