

## **The Norman Conquest of Sicily** *Kelly*

The Norman conquest of Sicily was a result of earlier Norman involvement in the affairs of Southern Italy for almost half a century.

According to Cassidy (1986), Norman involvement with Sicily and southern Italy began in 1016, when a party of forty Norman pilgrims, visiting the shrine to the archangel Michael at Monte San'Angelo, on the Gargano Peninsula in southern Italy, were enlisted as mercenaries by a certain Melus, a dispossessed Lombard nobleman. Melus had been exiled from Bari by the Byzantine government of southern Italy, and was seeking mercenaries to help him regain his power. Melus and his Norman-Lombard forces were defeated at Cannae by the Byzantine general Basil Boioannes in 1018, but the Norman leader, Rainulf, escaped into the hills to become a mercenary. Many Normans began enlisting in the Byzantine army, and Norman involvement in southern Italian affairs had begun. A steady trickle of soldiers of fortune began arriving from Normandy.

Some twenty years after this initial involvement, the three eldest Hauteville brothers (William, Drogo and Humphrey) arrived from Normandy and enlisted in Rainulf's service. In 1038, as vassals of Gaimar V of Salerno, they enlisted in the service of the famous Byzantine general George Maniakes for an attempted Byzantine re-conquest of Sicily. This campaign also featured the services of the famous Viking adventurer, Harald Hardrada, whose experiences were recorded in King Harald's Saga. The campaign lasted for two years, during which William won fame as a great warrior (he was nicknamed *bras-de-fer*) According to the monastic chronicler Amatus of Monte Cassino, William was a large, handsome man.

George Maniakes continued to campaign in southern Italy from 1041 onwards, and was largely successful in destroying the old Lombard kingdom. However, Cassidy points out that the destruction of Lombard power in this region merely left a vacuum into which the Normans were destined to step. William de Hauteville emerged from this campaign with official recognition, having been made Count of Apulia.

In 1046 William's younger brother, Robert de Hauteville, arrived in Southern Italy. He established himself at San Marco Argentano, a bleak mountainous region, from where he terrorised the neighbourhood. During this time he earned his nickname of Guiscardo, or The Weasel

By 1053 the Normans had become a threat to peace in Southern Italy, hated by the local population and seen by Pope Leo IX and the Emperor as a menace that must be removed. A Papal army, led by Leo himself in a 'holy war', marched against them but was defeated at Civitate. The pope was taken prisoner and held captive by the Hautevilles in his palace at Benevento for several months until he finally recognised their titles and lands. By 1057, Robert was the biggest landowner south of the Papal states, and was soon to cross the Adriatic and menace the eastern Roman Empire.

In that same year, 1057, the youngest Hauteville, Roger, arrived in the south.

Roger de Hauteville was destined to win equal fame by crossing the straits of Messina and subduing the Arab rulers of Sicily. In doing this, he brought together the various cultures of

Sicily - Greek, Arabic, Jewish, and Norman - into a multicultural state that became a unique example of religious and ethnic toleration for over one hundred years. Little is known of his actual motives, some historians claiming that the de Hautevilles were interested only in plunder and power, while others argue that the brothers set out to eradicate Islam from the island. It seems likely that both motives were present. Events suggest that their activities in Sicily were necessary to ensure that they held on to their lands in Apulia and also that they were drawn into Sicilian affairs as a result of their military service with Ibn-al-Timnah, one of the Arabic rulers of the island.

A description of Roger de Hauteville is given by the contemporary writer Malaterra, one of the chroniclers of the family's deeds:

Roger, the youngest of the brothers, whom youth and filial devotion had heretofore kept at home, now followed his brothers to Apulia (south east Italy).. and the Guiscard (Robert de Hauteville) rejoiced greatly at his coming and received him with the honour which was his due... For he was a youth of great beauty... He was gifted also with great strength of body and courage in battle. And by these qualities he soon won the favour of all.

Roger was welcomed by his brothers and joined them in their mercenary service. He seems to have travelled first to Amalfi, and then soon afterwards arrived in Calabria, where he joined his brother Robert. However, this did not last. According to Malaterra, he decided to leave Robert's service at the beginning of 1058 and joined his brother William, who had offered him an equal share in all that he possessed. At William's castle overlooking the sea at Scalea, Roger accumulated approximately one hundred soldiers for his ever growing army.

A general revolt against the Normans in southern Italy in 1058 led Robert to seek his younger brother's help. Previously he had spurned his arrival. Roger agreed to join forces in return for territory.

In the following year, a dispute over the Papacy (between Nicholas II and Benedict X) led Cardinal Hildebrand (the future Gregory VII) to seek Norman assistance. Led by Richard of Capua, the Normans captured and deposed Benedict X, thus gaining alliance with Pope Nicholas. Subsequently, the Pope made Robert Duke of Calabria, Apulia and Sicily.

The actual conquest of Sicily took thirty one years.

When Roger did finally first cross the straits to Sicily, it is said that he took with him only sixty knights. This operation may have been carried out simply to survey the land and to practise transporting horses by sea. Once Roger had tried Arab resistance in Sicily, he took with him a larger army and captured Messina. This was the first step in his conquest of the island.

By this time Roger had become reconciled with his brother Robert, who assisted him in his dealings in Sicily. Most of the work was left to Roger, since Robert was frequently involved in problems on the mainland. These problems grew so intense that Roger was called upon to assist, and the conquest of Sicily was abandoned for a time.

Roger's first attempt took place in 1061. He was surprised when the inhabitants of Messina resisted 'liberation'.

Roger received an opportunity to return in 1061, when an Arab ruler named Ibn al-timnah called upon Roger for help to defeat his rival, Ibn -al-Hawas. Roger was offered the domination of the island in return for his assistance, and this was obviously a proposition which he could not refuse.

Unfortunately, the expedition was not a success. Roger made a mess of the invasion, but was not deterred and soon began to plan a fresh attempt.

Around the middle of May, Roger and his army sailed forth from the harbour of S.Maria del Faro in thirteen ships. The crossing took a moderate amount of time, but they managed to arrive close to Messina without meeting any opposition. The Saracens in Sicily were expecting the Normans to take a more direct route, and so had the coastline between Messina and Cape Faro well guarded. This meant that Roger and his soldiers could travel without any hindrances back to Calabria to accumulate more troops. While travelling back to Messina, Roger and his troops almost immediately came across a Saracen boat, but this proved to be no trouble and the Saracens were slaughtered and their booty taken.

The next and last leg of the attack was basically just as easy. The Saracens were not well prepared for Roger's invasion, and so fell easily. In their over cautious attempts to guard the strait between Sicily and the mainland, they had left the southern approaches to Messina and the city itself unguarded. Thus Messina was secured.

After Messina, Roger was given another proposition which, if carried out properly, would give him total domination of Sicily. The proposition came again from Ibn al-Timnah, the Arab emir whom Roger had unsuccessfully tried to help before, who sought their help against his old rival Ibn al-Hawas. This time, the effort proved successful. After ensuing battles along the way, Roger, Robert and Ibn al-Timnah arrived at al-Hawas' fortress near Enna. However, the war was far from over. Ibn al-Hawas managed to make it to the safety of his citadel, along with much of his army, and so a siege was ordered. This proved to be a slow and tiresome affair. Two months passed, and Enna showed no sign of weakening. Roger, growing tired of this inactivity, left Enna with three hundred men and spent some time pillaging the countryside. He returned to find the siege still in progress. Eventually the two brothers ordered their men to turn around and leave the fortress.

Although the siege was unsuccessful, the same cannot be said for the entire expedition. Much territory was gained and a considerable amount of booty was added to the Normans' growing riches.

The battles and sieges that followed were many - the conquest of such an island is not easy, even for such a great leader as Roger. However, the main expeditions have been stated, and the ones following these are not entirely dissimilar. Roger had found his path into Sicily and the only way to go was forward. After Enna he had already conquered much of Sicily, and the ensuing battles were just the concluding stages in his conquest.

*Dextra Domini fecit virtutem, Dextra Domini exaltavit me* ("The right hand of God gave me courage, the right hand of God raised me up")

This motto was inscribed on Roger's shield and shows that Roger believed that it was God who had helped him to conquer Sicily. Perhaps it was, or perhaps it was just the leader inside him. Yet, for whatever reasons, it cannot be denied that the Norman conquest of Sicily was

largely due to Roger and his outstanding military skills and techniques. Although there were many setbacks, the eventual result was victory. Roger's conquest of Sicily was a major event not just in the history of Sicily but the history of the Normans as well, and it could be said that his was one of the greatest conquests of Medieval times.

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