

## **„Desperta, ferres, desperta“ – The Catalan Company as a (Military) Player in the Eastern Mediterranean**

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In common depictions of medieval battles and sieges, great and glorious armies of knights often take centre stage. However, paid soldiers also played a decisive role as part of the regular armed forces. On the battlefield, they supplemented the feudal units and usually formed specialised infantry contingents.<sup>1</sup> The late Middle Ages were one period in which mercenaries had a particular influence on warfare. In conflicts such as the 100 Years' War or the conflicts in northern Italy, the demand for experienced and well-equipped mercenary companies was high. The history of a unit from the Kingdom of Aragon has also been preserved in an extensive chronicle by Ramon Muntaner.<sup>2</sup> The so-called Catalan Company is a testimony to the dynamic and often precarious situation of mercenary groups in the late Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

### **Odyssey in the eastern Mediterranean**

The company emerged in the tumultuous political environment of 14th century Sicily. Its organisation allows us to grasp various aspects of late medieval warfare.<sup>4</sup> Due to this, its composition and fighting style have been of interest to historical research. In addition, the biographical backgrounds of their noble leaders, men such as Roger de Flor or Berenguer de Entença, have also been analysed. They not only had to repeatedly prove their worth as a fighting force, but also the economic, logistical, and diplomatic skills of their captains. Their founder, Roger de Flor, skilfully exploited the uncertainties in the Byzantine Empire to secure an influential position at court and a first contract for the company. The company demonstrated its abilities in several campaigns through Anatolia before having to assert itself against its former employers. Following the assassination of Roger de Flor on the orders of Emperor Andronikos II, the mercenaries had to ensure their own survival in what was now enemy territory. They took up service with the Duke of Athens, Walter V of Brienne, hoping to improve the company's precarious position in Anatolia. In exchange, the duke received a unit that had

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<sup>1</sup> CURRY, Anne: Foreign Soldiers in the English Pay. Identity and Unity in the Armies of the English Crown 1415-1450, in: PÉPIN, Guilhem/ LAINÉ, Françoise/ BOUTOULLE, Frédéric (ed.): *Routiers et mercenaires pendant la guerre de Cent ans*, Bordeaux 2016, p. 303-316, p. 304.

<sup>2</sup> *Crònica de Ramon Muntaner (Les Quatre Grans Cròniques 3)*, edited by Ferran SOLDEVILA, *Revisió Filològica de Jordi BRUGUERA, Revisió històrica de Maria Terese FERRER I MALLOL*, Barcelona 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'Catalan Company' should be viewed critically, because (1) with a probable size of around 6000 men, the company was particularly large and thus exceeded the contemporary size of a corresponding unit and (2) although the company was initially made up of men from the Catalan-Aragonese heartland, it received several additions, including Turkish cavalry units. It therefore did not remain a purely Catalan group.

<sup>4</sup> SABLONIER, *Krieg und Kriegerum in der Crònica des Ramon Muntaner. Eine Studie zum spätmittelalterlichen Kriegswesen aufgrund katalanischer Quellen (Geist und Werk der Zeiten 31)*, Bern/Frankfurt 1971; BURNS, Robert I.: *The Catalan Company and the European Powers 1305-1311*, in: Ders. (ed.): *Moors and Crusaders in Mediterranean Spain. Collected Studies (Collected Studies Series 73)*, London 1978, p. 751-771.

been tried and tested in battle for years. However, Walter V of Brienne, encouraged by a temporarily pacified situation, then decided against the company: „*E, com ell veé que hac pau ab tots sos veïns, pensà's una gran malaventura, ço és, que pogués la companya destruir.*”<sup>5</sup> At the Battle of Halmyros in 1311, the duke therefore sought to disband the mercenary company. However, thanks to their experience and tactical superiority, they succeeded in defeating the Athenian army. The duke and most of his noble knights fell and the way was paved for the start of a new, now Catalan-Aragonese rule.

## **A community of violence**

Communities such as the Catalan Company specialised in the use of violence as a means of securing their existence. In recent military-historical research, such groups have therefore been labelled as communities of violence.<sup>6</sup> If we look at the functions and internal structures of violent communities, we find a complex network of skills and abilities that were intended to ensure the long-term survival of the company. Through their constant interaction with weapons, they guaranteed success in battle and on the mercenary market. The company also had the potential to exert pressure on its paymasters, which it could use to make demands.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there were more obvious actions that ensured survival, such as the supply of food and materials. The search for provisions often meant damage and suffering among the local population.<sup>8</sup> The effects were so devastating in places that the company had to abandon its own position in 1308 because it had plundered Gallipoli so thoroughly: „*(...) e així mateix havíem deshabitada tota aquella encontrada a deu jornades de totes parts, que havíem tota la gent consumada, sí que res no s'hi collia; per què convenia per força que desemparássem aquell país.*”<sup>9</sup>

By means of raids and plundering, the company members created a financial basis that also served to provide for their families. Even their diplomatic endeavours, i.e. the mercenary contracts, reflect acts of violence. After all, this was a search for the legitimised exercise of violence as soldiers. They did not abandon these dynamics when they became rulers over Athens.

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<sup>5</sup> Crònica de Ramon Muntaner, p. 397.

<sup>6</sup> SPEITKAMP, Winfried (Hrsg.): *Gewaltgemeinschaften in der Geschichte. Entstehung, Kohäsionskraft und Zerfall*, Göttingen 2017, S. 27.

<sup>7</sup> They hereby skillfully exploited the worries and fears of the employers, exemplified by KYRIAKIDIS, Savvas: *The Employment of Large Groups of Mercenaries in Byzantium in the Period ca. 1290-1305 as Viewed by the Sources*, in: *Byzantion* 79 (2009), p. 208-230, p. 214.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Pachymérès. *Relations historiques* (Vol. 4), edited by Albert FAILLER, Paris 1999, p. 433 und 459-461.

<sup>9</sup> Crònica de Ramon Muntaner, p. 380.

## Of continuities and ruptures

Problems of a financial and supply nature were largely covered by the regular levies paid by the population. In addition, the training and maintenance of their own equipment continued to be part of an overall military security. The company also had to position and assert itself in the new political context. Before its time in Athens, the Catalan Company had had to ally itself with various rulers, or at the very least, to be on good terms with them. After 1311, it used alliances to further secure its strategic position. For example, it formed a long-term alliance with the Venetians and some Turkish bands.<sup>10</sup> The company was relied upon as a raiding force along the Adriatic coast in exchange for lucrative trade relations. The raids also made it possible to capture goods that were in demand: slaves, livestock and valuables continued to arouse the desire of the company members.<sup>11</sup> The exercise of violence continued to be the main instrument for maintaining their own power and influence.

Furthermore, by submitting to the House of Barcelona in 1318, the Company gained the necessary legitimacy as well as the protection and support of the Sicilian royal house, albeit primarily only in theory. Above all, the community thus succeeded in securing its previous territorial gains: (...) *non minuendo aliquem de eodem exercitu de hiis que usque ad presentem diem acquisiverit, tenant et possident in ducatu Athenarum* (...).<sup>12</sup> These regulations ensured that although the company took on a new role, it remained intact as an organisation.

The mercenaries established their value as a community through the use of violence. But their value as the elite of the duchy was also based on these special skills. Through violence, the company conquered it and was able to maintain their rule until 1388. From 1311 onwards, it was involved in various military campaigns and even extended its rule to include territories on the Negroponte. For the time being, the accession to power only ended the phase of (in)secure employment as a paid soldiers. This emphasises the continuity of violence as a central aspect of their identity, even when they assumed positions of political influence.

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<sup>10</sup> *Diplomatari de l'Orient Català (1301-1409)*. Col·lecció de Documents per a la Història de l'Expedició Catalana a Orient i els Ducats d'Atenes i Neopàtria, edited by Antoni RUBIO I LLUCH, Barcelona 1947, CIX.

<sup>11</sup> Exemplified by MARCOS HIERRO, Ernest: *The Catalan Company and the Slave Trade*, in: AMITAI, Reuven/ CLUSE, Christoph (ed.): *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000-1500ce)* (Mediterranean Nexus 5), Turnhout 2018, p. 321-352.

<sup>12</sup> *Diplomatari de l'Orient Català*, LII, S. 68.