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## Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di  
VIRGLIO ILARI



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*Ultima Ratio Regum* (Estrema ragione dei Re) iscrizione su un cannone all'ingresso del Museo di Storia Militare di Budapest. Foto O. Mustafiri, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication (Wikipedia commons).

Il celebre motto fu apposto sulle canne delle artiglierie francesi fuse dal 1650 al 1793, e anche su parte delle coeve artiglierie sabaude. La variante *ultima ratio regis* (estrema ragione del re) fu usata a partire dal 1742 sulle artiglierie prussiane e successivamente anche sui cannoni spagnoli, mentre l'analogo *regis ultima ratio* è tuttora il motto dell'artiglieria belga.

MARIA DEL PILAR MESA CORONADO

## *Las Fuerzas Terrestres del Reino de Sicilia 1665-1700*

Collana Fucina di Marte, 11 (Società Italiana di Storia Militare:  
Rome, Nadir Media, 2023 ISBN: 9788894698428; 311 pp.



**S**icily – the largest island in the Mediterranean, midway between the pillars of Hercules in the west and the Dardanelles in the east and offering a bridge between the Mezzogiorno and north Africa - has long been among the most strategically important territories in Europe; it certainly was so in the late medieval and early modern eras, not least under the Spanish Habsburgs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Sicily was one of the many territories which composed the so-called Spanish Monarchy. And yet Sicily's early modern military history has not attracted much attention, apart from the Messina revolt against Spanish rule (1674-78) during Louis XIV's so-called "Dutch

War” (1672-78); Sicily suddenly became one of the many fronts of that conflict, briefly reversing the more usual relationship between the island and the rest of the Monarchy, receiving rather than exporting men and materiel. At the same time the military performance of the entire Monarchy in the reign of the last Spanish Habsburg, Carlos II (1665-1600) is frequently dismissed, although a wave of revisionist research by Luis Ribot, Davide Maffi, Antonio Jose Rodriguez Hernandez and others has sought to enhance both our knowledge and understanding of the military history of the reign and to offer a more positive assessment of that reign. In the book under review, Maria del Pilar Mesa Coronado, who has - drawing on her PhD thesis (2013) - been publishing for a decade now the fruits of her research on the military and naval history of Sicily under Carlos II, builds on and contributes to that revisionist project.

The book comprises an introductory chapter, four chapters on different aspects of the Sicilian military and a Conclusion. Chapter One sets Sicily and its military (and naval) establishment in broad political and strategic context, emphasising the extent to which the Spanish Habsburgs were threatened on two fronts, by France in the West, and by the Ottomans in the east, the threat posed by the latter by no means (pace Braudel) a thing of the past in the later seventeenth century. Sicily offered an opportunity for forward operations in the Mediterranean and was also an outlying antemural of the Spanish Monarchy – and of western Christendom more generally. The island was also economically valuable, not least as a source of grain for other parts of the Monarchy. Pilar Mesa identifies early on one of the key issues at the heart of the revisionism surrounding the reign of Carlos II, the extent to which Spain survived in the Mediterranean (and of course elsewhere, including Flanders and the Americas) because of the armed intervention of other powers – the Dutch republic, the Emperor, England - which were determined to prevent Spain and its global empire (Sicily being an important staging post from north west Europe to the Levant) from falling into the hands of Louis XIV. The chapter prepares the ground for what follows, although this reader would have welcomed some brief discussion of the relationship between the key, decision-making institutions in Sicily and Spain – including, in Madrid, the council of Italy and the council of State, whose archives underpin Pilar Mesa’s exploration and analysis of Sicily’s military institutions and experience.

Chapter Two discusses Sicily’s permanent forces, above all the island’s Spanish *tercio*, which was increased in size from about 2,500 men (c. 1668) to about

3,000 (c. 1670) in the wake of the fall of Candia to the Ottomans. Following the Messina revolt that *tercio* was reinforced not only by other Spanish units, drawn from neighbouring Naples (the most important outside source) and Sardinia, from Spain's High Seas Fleet (the *Armada del Mar Oceano*) which temporarily relocated to Sicilian waters, from Mallorca and from Spain, but also additional units of Italians, Germans and others. The revolt also triggered an increase in the island's much smaller cavalry forces. Finally, the chapter discusses the garrisons of the various major fortresses on the island, those (far smaller) of the many coastal towers – the main threat to Spanish Sicily coming not from the inside, from revolt, but from outside, from the sea - and their armament. Discussion of the artillery offers Pilar Mesa an opportunity to make a revisionist point, suggesting that the traditional historiography erroneously dismisses the Spain of Carlos II as unable to adapt to innovation. The forces on the island never reached the 15,000 aimed at by Madrid during the revolt, but did total over 10,000 men by 1678. Once the revolt was over, that reinforced permanent contingent was reduced to just over 3,000, as many of the troops newly levied or transferred to Sicily were reformed or removed; the permanent force may have remained at that level down to 1700.

Chapter Three deals with the occasional rather than the permanent forces, those mobilised in an emergency: the militia – 1600 horse and 9,000 infantry - the “*socorro general*” ( a sort of general mobilisation), the *servicio militar* owed by the barons in return for their fiefs, and any voluntary service which barons and towns might do in response to an appeal from the viceroy. None of these proved of much value. The deficiencies of the militia prompted a project for its reform which however ran into opposition which delayed implementation until the suppression of the Messina rebellion and the associated French intervention rendered it less pressing. The disappointing contribution of the militia is one reason why the proportion of the total forces in Sicily between 1674 and 1681 shifted strikingly: just over 15% Spaniards and almost 85% Italians (the Sicilian militia just under 11%) in 1674, but almost 80% Spaniards & just over 20% Germans, and no Italian contribution in 1681, an interesting perspective perhaps on the relative importance in the survival of the Spanish Monarchy of domestic and foreign resources. The response to efforts to call on the “*socorro general*” proved even more disappointing. As for the feudal levy, which should have yielded between 1600 and 1900 horse, it produced about half that number in reality, while both barons and viceroy preferred composition (payment in lieu), although it was wis-

er for the viceroy not to insist on this at the start of the process. Voluntary service, too – something of a misnomer as those serving were in the pay of the Crown – was patchy, although Pilar Mesa focuses on that of the barons, saying little about that of the towns.

Chapter Four looks behind the figures given in the relatively few surviving muster and other lists of men serving in Sicily at recruitment – voluntary and otherwise (including in Spain) - at the problem of desertion, that of fraud (essentially by the officers), and at the complicated issue of “reform” (ie the reduction of numbers), as in the period from late 1677. Pilar Mesa also discusses the difficult relationship between the army and Sicilian society, with specific reference to the issues of lodging (quartering of troops on the population), pay and the supply of the men; defects in all of these respects – primarily due to want of funds – could trigger violent confrontations between the soldiers and the local population. In such circumstances it might be thought surprising that, apart from the Messina revolt, there was not more discontent and upheaval on the island, although in reality outside the period of the revolt the concentration of troops and the associated pressures were less evident.

Chapter Five addresses the life of the soldier, paying particular – and detailed - attention to the medical services available to the men and to the system of military justice, Pilar Mesa demonstrating in addressing these topics her awareness of many of the new approaches to the military experience of the early modern era throughout Europe.

In a very helpful Conclusion Pilar Mesa repeats her main findings and again engages with what we might call the “black legend” of late Habsburg Spain: Madrid may not have achieved its target in Sicily but that it reached more than 10,000 revealed a functioning system which could move men from one theatre to another as required. Strictly speaking Sicily’s galleys might not appear to fit into a study of the island’s landed forces, but in fact as the author demonstrates – having already published elsewhere on the subject – those galleys were a crucial auxiliary to the land forces, as fighting force and as a means of transporting men, guns and more both to Sicily and from one point on the island to another. The fundamental problem was inadequate funding and too many competing commitment. In that sense the situation of the Spanish Monarchy under Carlos II was much like that under the earlier Habsburgs.



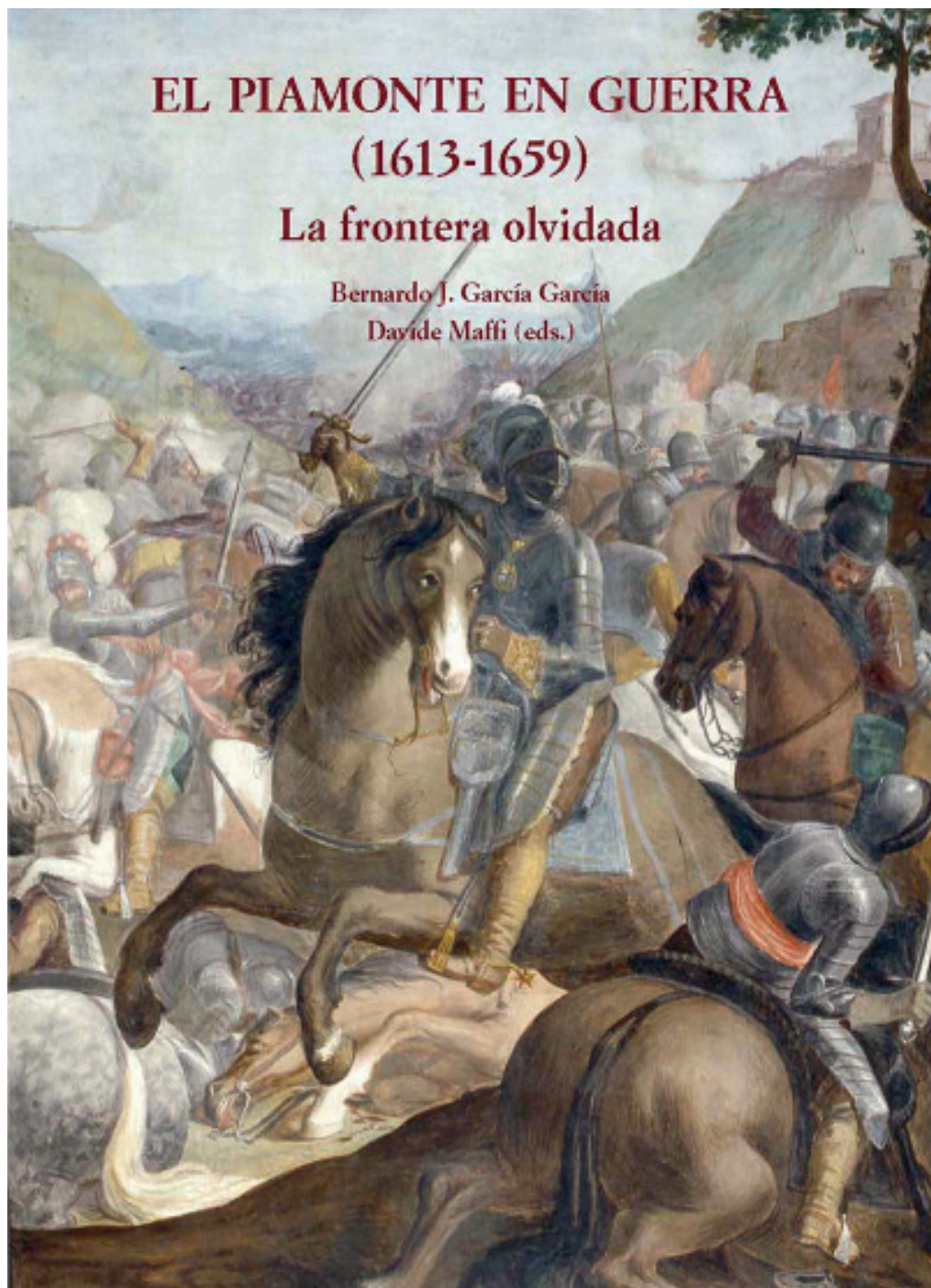
This is an invaluable study by one of the many young Spanish historians whose work is transforming our knowledge and understanding of late Habsburg Spain and the broader Spanish Monarchy. In many respects the picture that emerges is not so different from the difficulties facing the armies of Spain's allies and enemies. In some respects Pilar Mesa is fortunate, as she would surely be the first to admit, in being able to draw on Luis Ribot's excellent 2002 study, *La Monarquía de España y la Guerra de Mesina (1674-1678)*. Indeed, many of her invaluable tabulations of forces in Sicily – a distinctive feature of her book – derive from that work. (Unfortunately, on p. 82 an error in copying the number of troops in the tercio of Sicily from Ribot's original makes the reform of that tercio in 1678 more puzzling). But Pilar Mesa goes beyond Ribot, throwing invaluable new light on Spanish Sicily and its military establishment between the end of the Messina revolt and the death of Carlos II. In doing so she enables us to get a much fuller picture of the military resources of the last Spanish Habsburg and to reach a clearer understanding of how and why Spanish power and dominion persisted as they did to 1700. There are some useful maps, but no index.

CHRISTOPHER STORRS,  
University of St Andrews

# EL PIAMONTE EN GUERRA (1613-1659)

## La frontera olvidada

Bernardo J. García García  
Davide Maffi (eds.)





# Storia Militare Moderna

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