

Naples 1343: The Unexpected Origins of the Mafia

Amedeo Feniello

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Amedeo Feniello's cutthroat book *Naples 1343* reconstructs life and crime in Neapolitan history.

Personal and inviting, with language that trades between academic and direct, this is a book built on the idea that the past reverberates in contemporary Italy. It covers aspects of Naples' social hierarchy via time loops, with chapters and sections addressing different topics in the region. There's focus on wars, which changed the region's borders and rulers; on physical changes to the city; and on infighting between noble families.

In 1300s Naples, Feniello shows, the ruling families were consolidated into five clans. They governed a region wracked by waves of famine. When there was grain or wine, it was taxed, sold, and shipped away. Citizens starved. Early ripples of organized crime began in response to these privations. There's an example of the murder at sea of a Genoan ship captain—an outsider with edible cargo who was in unfortunate proximity to a hungry city.

Stories are used to introduce individuals and instances of trade and crime within the period, with the glossary proving handy for tracking nobles' titles and job functions. Period accounts are a source of additional excitement, as with a Giovanni Boccaccio short story that is a vehicle for commenting on the era's dangers: in its frightening, madcap scenes, a hapless young man falls victim to one scheme after another on his payday. Elsewhere, a woman warrior's story is told with relish: she lifted "a large boulder and a metal beam, and invited the knights to do as she had done," convincing a poet witness that Amazons existed in the process.

Naples 1343 is the history of a dynamic seaport in the fourteenth century, when leadership changed in the wake of wars as the elite scrambled to retain power.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (November / December 2024)

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