

MARGARET

Queen of Sicily



Jacqueline Alio

A small body of surviving correspondence offers us insight into the rapport between the Sicilian and English courts during the regency and in the years before the wedding between Margaret's son, William, and Henry's daughter, Joanna.

From Thomas Becket to Queen Margaret

A surviving letter sent to Queen Margaret from Thomas Becket late in 1168 thanks her for granting refuge to two of his nephews, as well as other kin, during the exile of the archbishop (and some members of his family). He makes reference to her request to assist in prompting the return of her cousin, Stephen of Perche, formerly the chancellor. The letter is borne by Thibauld, Prior of Saint-Arnoult de Crepy, who shall elucidate (verbally) more information than Thomas does in the correspondence itself. This translation is from the book by John Allen Giles⁴²⁷ published in 1846; the Latin original was published by him the previous year.⁴²⁸

The Translation:

“To the most serene lady and dearest daughter in Christ,

Margaret, the illustrious Queen of Sicily, Thomas, by divine appointment humble minister of the church of Canterbury, sends health, and thus to reign temporally in Sicily, that she may rejoice forever with the angels in glory!

“Although I have never seen your face, I am not ignorant of your renown, its fame supported by nobility of birth and by greatly numerous virtues. But amongst other perfections which we and others praise, we owe a debt of gratitude to your kindness, which we are now endeavouring to acknowledge, for the generosity with which you gave refuge to our fellow exiles, Christ’s poor ones, our own kin who fled to your realm from him who persecutes them. You have consoled them in their distress, which is a great duty of religion. Your wealth has relieved their indigence, and the amplitude of your power protected them in their needs. By such sacrifices God is well pleased, your earthly reputation is enhanced and made known, and every blessing is poured upon you. By these means you have bound ourself also to you in gratitude, and we devote all that we possess and all we are to your service. As the first fruits of our devotion, we have used our good services to present your request to the most Christian king, as you may know by the requests which he had made to our dear friend, the King of Sicily, and by the words of the venerable prior of Crepy, whose literary attainments, single-mindedness and sense of justice make him dear to all good men. He is a man of correct life, sound doctrine, and perfect sanctity in human judgment. We beg of you to hear him with as much reverence as you would listen to the entire Western Church were it assembled at your feet. And I beseech you, not only out of respect for his person, but in high regard for the Church of Cluny, whose necessities he is charged with and which is reputed throughout all the Latin world to have possessed, within its walls, all the glory of virtue and perfection from the time of our first ancestors. In other respects also, I ask you, if it so please you, to

place as much confidence in all that he shall tell you as coming from me, as if I myself had said it. Farewell."

The Original:

"Serenissime domine, et in Christo carissimae Margarete, illustri reginae Siculorum, Thomas divina dispensatione Cantuariensis ecclesiae minister humilis, salutem, et sic temporaliter regnare in Sicilia, ut cum angelis aeternaliter exultet in gloria.

"Licet faciem vestram non noverimus, gloriam tamen non possumus ignorare, quam et generosi sanguinis illustrat claritas, et multarum magnarumque virtutum decorat titulus, et famae celebritas numerosis praeconiis reddit insignem. Sed inter caeteras virtutes, quas cum aliis auditoribus gratanter amplectimur, liberalitati vestrae debemus, et qua nunc possumus devotione, gratias referimus ampliores, quae coexules nostros, proscriptos Christi, et consanguineos nostras, fugientes ad partes vestras a facie persecutoris, consolata est in tribulatione sua, quae profecto magna pars verae et Deo gratissimae religionis est, si pro iusticia patientibus clementia ferat solatium, si pauperibus opulentia suffragetur, si sanctorum necessitatibus absoluta potestatis communicet amplitudo. Talibus enim hostiis promeretur Deus, exhilarascit et dilatatur gloria temporalis, et omnium bonorum gratosus conciliatur affectus. His meritis inter alios specialiter tamen promeruistis et nos, qui totum id quod sumus et possumus ad vestrum devovimus obsequium. Cujus devotionis primitias, quas pro tempore potuimus excellentiae vestrae nuper optulimus, preces vestras apud regem Christianissimum promoventes, sicut perpendere potestis ex precibus ejus dilecto nostra illustri regi Siciliae porrectis, et ex verbis venerabilis prioris Crispiniacensis, quem et eruditio litterarum, et vitae sinceritas et integritas famae bonis omnibus amabilem et commendabilem reddunt. Est enim vir

probatissime conversationis sanae doctrinae, et quantum ad humanum spectat examen, perfectae pro tempore sanctitatis, quem tanta reverentia a sublimitate vestra desideramus et petimus exaudiri, quanta totam occidentalem ecclesiam, si vestris pedibus assisteret, audiretis. Et hoc quidem tum pro suae personae reverentia, tum pro merito et auctoritate Cluniacensis ecclesiae, cujus procurat necessitates, quae in orbe Latino dinoscitur, a diebus patrum nostrorum in monastica religione perfectionis gloriam quasi propriam possedissee. In caeteris, quae vobis ex parte nostra dixerit, ei, si placet, credatis ut nobis. Valete.”

From Thomas Becket to Richard Palmer

The request of the Archbishop of Canterbury to prevail upon his countryman, Richard Palmer, to seek the return of Stephen of Perche coincides with Margaret’s wishes. This is another fine translation by John Allen Giles.⁴²⁹

“Your humanity makes us, by comparison, guilty of presumption, and the bounty which you have displayed towards our relations makes us doubly debtors to you and yours. In this interchange of kindnesses we are compelled, and not unwillingly, to contract debts with so kind a creditor, trusting that God will discharge all our obligations, for it is He alone that can release those who fear Him. You have entertained our fellow exiles and kin; and without doubt have thereby entertained Him who promises to repay all that shall be lent to the poor in his name. You have gained praise among your countrymen, and glory among posterity, and made us your debtors. God does not permit us to meet. Receive, therefore, the bearer of this letter as my second self, and trust him as you would trust me. He is distinguished for his literary attainments, as well as his moral conduct, and amongst the monks of Cluny he is a

model for imitation. He is charged with commissions from his brethren, from his most Christian majesty, and from me. By receiving him with respect, you will receive us also, that pious king and me, whose agent he is. There is one thing remaining, which I will whisper into your ear, and which I hope you will grant me: To do your utmost with the king and queen to procure the recall of that noble-minded man, Stephen of Perche, Archbishop-elect of Palermo, both for reasons which at present shall be nameless, and because by doing so, you will confer a lasting favour on the French king.”

From William II to Henry II

In the spring of 1173, the sons of King Henry of England and most of his baronage in France rose up against him. The tense situation between King Henry and his sons, Henry and Richard, was eventually resolved, if ever tenuously. When the revolt broke out, he sent letters to a number of brother sovereigns, including William II, who had only recently reached the age of majority. We do not know how much Margaret influenced William’s response to the King of England. Henry Riley, whose translation of Joanna’s wedding charter appears in another appendix, translated this letter from the *Annals of Roger de Hoveden*.

“To Henry, by the grace of God the illustrious King of the English, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and Count of Anjou, William, by the same grace King of Sicily, Duke of Apulia and Prince of Capua, wishes the enjoyment of health, and the desired triumph in victory over his foes.

“On the receipt of your letter, we learned a thing of which indeed we cannot without the greatest astonishment make mention, how that, forgetting the ordinary usages of humanity and violating the law of nature, the son has risen in rebellion

against the father, the begotten against the begetter. The bowels have been moved to intestine war, the entrails have had recourse to arms, and, a new miracle taking place, quite unheard of in our times, the flesh has waged war against the blood, and the blood has sought means how to shed itself.

“And, although for the purpose of checking the violence of such extreme madness, the inconvenience of the distance does not allow of our power affording any assistance, still, with all the loving kindness we possibly can, the expression of which, distance of place does not prevent, sincerely embracing your person and honour, we sympathize with your sorrow, and are indignant at your persecution, which we regard as though it were our own.

“However, we do hope and trust in the Lord, by whose judgment the judgments of kings are directed, that He will no longer allow your sons to be tempted beyond what they are able or ought to endure; and that He who became obedient to the Father even unto death, will inspire them with the light of filial obedience, whereby they shall be brought to recollect that they are your flesh and blood, and, leaving the errors of their hostility, shall acknowledge themselves to be your sons, and return to their father, and thereby heal the disruption of nature, and that the former union, being restored, will seal the bonds of natural affection.”