

MARGARET

Queen of Sicily



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Chapter 4 BETROTHAL

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“I feel sure that no woman would go to the altar if she knew all.”

— Queen Victoria

An unspoken but very real part of the education of a young princess involved learning about responsibility. As she became a woman, she came to understand what was expected of her, something she must accept without question or complaint. The most important part of her role was easily summed up in two words. Marriage and motherhood.

Coming of Age

Adulthood came quickly, especially for royalty, typically seventeen for a boy and fourteen for a girl.

Some girls were betrothed at an even younger age, and in June 1144 García Ramírez took as his second wife Urraca, who was only twelve. She was the illegitimate daughter of his ally King Alfonso VII of Castile. This union was meant to resolve a short-lived but potentially catastrophic conflict with Alfonso.

The marriage, happy or not, would strengthen the bonds between Navarre and Castile.³⁹

Urraca⁴⁰ was about the same age as Blanca, so the young bride was hardly a “stepmother” to the daughters of King García Ramírez. They may not have been too accepting of a very young woman who they probably perceived more as a sister than their father’s wife. Some semblance of such attitudes existed even in the twelfth century.

Another complexity was Urraca’s social, and even dynastic, position. Because she was now Queen of Pamplona, Blanca and Margaret had to defer to her rank and status. Much had changed since the death of the mother of the two young sisters just a few years earlier.

For Sancho, as heir apparent, the new situation was less severe. Whatever he thought of Urraca, or she of him, his dynastic position was assured. At this point in his young life, he was already being taught about geography and politics, as well as the importance of dynastic marriages arranged with both in mind.⁴¹

In truth, we know virtually nothing about the intricacies of the relationship of Blanca and Margaret with their father’s second wife, who eventually gave birth to a daughter.

Though remarried, García Ramírez had not put his first wife completely out of his mind. In August 1145, he seized a synagogue at Estella (Lizarra) which was to be converted into a church that would be ceded to Pamplona’s diocese in memory of the late queen, *pro anima uxoris Margarite regine*, as well as the souls of himself and his entire family.⁴²

Blanca and Margaret saw their father only rarely during these years. Ever the warrior king, he occupied Tauste in 1146. Though located very near the border, it was claimed by Aragon, and García’s father-in-law, Alfonso of Castile, intervened to negotiate an immediate end to what might have sparked a war between Navarre and Aragon.

A few towns in La Rioja, on the southern fringe of Navarre, had already been lost to Castile. Although none were very important economically, at least two had sentimental value. The Jiménez kings rested at Nájera, and García's daughters were born at La Guardia. Nevertheless, García Ramírez had consolidated his power and re-established a kingdom. Navarre was finally at peace with her neighbors, at least for now.

Crowned in a Far Country

The Kingdom of Pamplona, as it was still known officially, was beginning to attract the attention of kings further afield, and it was time to find suitable husbands for the Jiménez sisters.

Here age conferred precedence. Negotiations began for Blanca to marry into the family that ruled Catalonia from Barcelona on the other side of Aragon, a dynastic union meant to neutralize the more zealous machinations that emanated from Zaragoza every now and then.⁴³

Late in 1148 there arrived at Pamplona several noblemen and a bishop sent from Palermo by Roger II, the King of Sicily.

Established just eighteen years earlier, the Kingdom of Sicily encompassed the southern half of the Italian peninsula, and its sovereign also controlled part of the African coast. It was ruled by the Hauteville dynasty, which, like the Aigle and Perche ancestors of Margaret's mother, had roots in Normandy. It was through an informal network of such families that the Hautevilles were familiar with Norman activities in the Iberian lands, such as the adventures of Rotrou of Perche.

In the chess board of Norman society, which was a patchwork of kingdoms and counties, there was a great deal of kinship and camaraderie going back several generations. Some of

the same Norman knights present at the Battle of Messina in 1061 fought at Hastings five years later. In 1097, Odo of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror, died at Palermo, where he rests in the crypt of that city's cathedral.⁴⁴

The Sicilian ambassadors were seeking the betrothal of Margaret to King Roger's son. One imagines the heart of the young princess being filled by equal parts of exhilaration and apprehension.

Rotrou of Perche had died too soon to be involved in the marriage negotiations, although he may have spoken to García Ramírez about the possibility of one of the girls marrying into a Norman family, but his son, Margaret's cousin, was to play a role in Sicilian history.⁴⁵

From England to Spain to Constantinople to Antioch to Tunisia, the Normans had made their influence felt, and no family was more successful than the Hautevilles. It will be remembered that Rotrou himself went on crusade with Bohemond of Hauteville, who established a monarchy at Antioch.

The twelfth century was the Normans' century.

But the Sicilian ambassadors did not bring with them just a marriage proposal. Margaret was being offered queenship. All that was needed was her father's approval. Despite his frequent absences, García Ramírez was probably present in Pamplona on this occasion to receive the Sicilians.

In reality, of course, Margaret had little say in the matter, nay none at all. The decision would be her father's.

It was proposed that Margaret marry William, King Roger's only legitimate, surviving son, who was fourteen years her senior. There was a certain urgency in the wedding arrangements because by late 1148 the Sicilian royal family found itself, rather unexpectedly, with a dearth of heirs to the throne.

Roger's wife, William's mother Elvira, had died the same year Margaret was born, leaving behind four healthy sons. The king loved Elvira so profoundly that he was reluctant to re-

marry after her death. Indeed, when she died he went into seclusion, leading many of his subjects to think he too was dead. Roger mourned Elvira for years. When his sons were all alive, the widower saw no reason to take another wife simply for the purpose of producing more heirs. But with the recent death of William's elder brother the situation had grown dire. Roger now had only one legitimate son and no grandsons.⁴⁶

The ambassadors wanted to see the girl, and perhaps even speak with her. Was she reasonably intelligent and well-educated? Was she pretty enough to become their queen? Most importantly in view of the dynasty's present predicament, was Margaret of childbearing age?

In the case of Sicily, as opposed to a kingdom like England, there was an additional consideration, and it was almost as pragmatic as the others. Could Margaret, devoutly Catholic though she may be, accept the presence of people of other religions and cultures in her own kingdom, perhaps even in her own household?

Palermo had a large Muslim population and a fair number of Jews. It was full of mosques and synagogues. Margaret need not be a theologian, but it was important for her to understand something of Islam and Judaism, and to understand that in Sicily the people of these faiths enjoyed the same rights as Christians. Many held positions in government, and some served in the royal bodyguard.

This matter was not an obstacle, as Margaret was familiar with the Muslims and Jews of her native land. In Pamplona, as in Palermo, there were mosques and synagogues just down the street from the cathedral. Spain's Muslims and Christians had their differences, but the experience of cities like Tudela had shown that peaceful coexistence, even brotherhood, was possible.

Margaret had a tenuous dynastic connection to the man she was expected to wed. Through his mother, William was Mar-

garet's third cousin once removed. King Roger's first wife, the much beloved Elvira of Castile, was a Jiménez.⁴⁷

The precise details of Margaret's betrothal and dower are not known to us, but we do have a well-documented example that offers us some insight into what it was. This is the betrothal of Joanna of England to Margaret's son in 1176.⁴⁸ By then, such things had changed, but not very much.

With her father's consent, Margaret was betrothed to William and given a few months to prepare for her voyage to Sicily.

In the late spring of 1149, she said good-bye to her father, brother and sister. She would never see them again. Parting from her sister, Blanca, was especially trying, but Margaret gathered up all the courage her tender years allowed.

Setting off for Sicily, Margaret was accompanied by a few ladies-in-waiting, a few barons, a bishop or two, a small company of knights and around twenty servants and other retainers. In all, there were at least sixty people traveling in Margaret's entourage. A dozen or so would remain with her in Sicily.

Undertaken in early summer, the first leg of the journey would take them across Aragon and Catalonia to Barcelona, through lands ruled by Christians or friendly Moors. From there, they would follow the coast from Girona, passing Perpignan, Marseille, Toulon and other cities along the French coast. Around Nice, they would board a flotilla of galleys sent by the King of Sicily, for Navarre had no fleet to speak of.

The ships would follow the Italian coast to Naples or Salerno, and thence to Messina and finally Palermo. This maritime route along the coasts ensured that the travelers were always in friendly waters.

A faster, direct route from Barcelona to Majorca to Sardinia and then Sicily would have entailed a far greater risk of the flotilla encountering pirates. The ships of the Sicilian navy could very effectively respond to such a threat, but there was

always the danger of a galley or two being lost. Natural hazards posed another danger. Whilst the Mediterranean was usually serene by May, storms were unpredictable, so it was better to stay fairly near the coast.

At Palermo, where she was acclaimed by ecstatic crowds, Margaret met the man she was to marry. William had medium brown hair and brown eyes, essentially the same coloring as Margaret.

The wedding was celebrated in the Palatine Chapel of the opulent royal palace, where the couple took up residence. The setting was nothing if not romantic, but were Margaret and William in love?

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