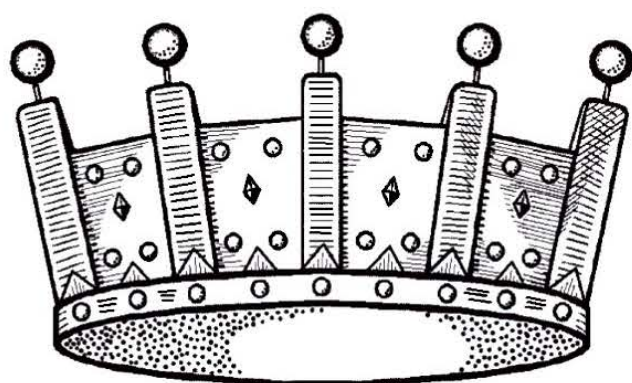


SICILIAN MEDIEVAL STUDIES

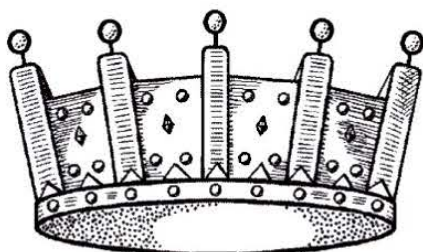
Sicilian Queenship



Power and Identity
in the
Kingdom of Sicily
1061-1266

Jacqueline Alió

PREFACE



Historians are intellectual voyeurs, retrospective observers, travelers through time, commentators about a past that is generally forgotten. Each historian is unique, at least slightly different from every other. Our commonality is our quest for information about our subjects in an attempt to turn raw facts into eternal truths. Only through its dissemination can information become knowledge. Known facts are more useful than those that are not known. This book is part of an effort to bring heretofore little-known information to a curious readership.

If, until recently, the history of medieval women has received less attention than it should, that sad predicament was particularly evident here in Italy, where social, political and academic realities marginalized the study of women, and restricted the rights of women themselves, into the middle years of the twentieth century. Long before researching this history formally, in libraries and archives, the author, as a teenager, had heard stories about the “old” Italy from her mother, grandmother, aunts and other Sicilian women of generations past.

Some of what is presented in the following pages is the result of rather recent revelations brought to us through the efforts of diligent researchers. Although the thesis had been advanced earlier, it was only in the nineteenth century that scholars began to seriously contemplate the possibility of the presence of a woman amongst the poets of the Sicilian School that flourished under the patronage of Frederick II, and two poems attributed to Nina of Messina appear in translation in this volume. It was during the same century that both known codices of the Assizes of Ariano were found. The rediscovery of sources such as Sicily's rite of reginal coronation and the long-lost Ferraris Chronicle, both translated into English by the author for other books, is also quite recent.

The objective of this concise thematic collection, a supplement to *Queens of Sicily 1061-1266*, is to expound upon a few topics which, though relevant, are not necessarily integral to "conventional" biographies of those eighteen countesses and queens as they were presented in that long-overdue compendium. *Queens of Sicily* is essentially a traditional reference work intended to fill a void in the field, not a forum for detailed examinations of queenship, which may be defined as the study of the power, agency and identity of queens, including such topics as diplomacy, patronage and culture.

That was stated in its introduction: "This work is not a general disquisition on queenship or the role of women in medieval society, important as both topics are, although it provides source material for scholars writing about these subjects."

It went on to explain: "While the nature of queenship, with special reference to the queens of Sicily in the context of Norman and Swabian tradition, is considered from time to time, this volume is essentially a biographical reference work. Though queenship, feminism and gender identity are certainly, immediately pertinent to our study, and must not be over-

PREFACE

looked, they are not, as an object of exhaustive analysis, the central focus of this work.”

In other words, that book is an essential foundation in the tradition of published biographies.

This book, conversely, presents a few details gleaned from sundry sources during the research for *Queens of Sicily*. Some of these topics were contemplated by the author for a decade or more and occasionally discussed with colleagues and friends. A few found their way into books, articles or lectures.

Before embarking upon specialized studies in queenship, particularly if a study embraces the life of more than one woman — let’s say it considers the relationship between Beatrice of Rethel and Margaret of Navarre — it is useful to have at hand a grounding in the essential biography of each one, or at least something to which the reader may refer for basic biographical information. Until recently, a reference of that kind did not exist for Sicily’s first eighteen countesses and queens, and no single volume included biographical information on all of them. That made research for biographical facts cumbersome.

Until now, most of the few biographies of these women have been written by Italians and published here in Italy. That makes sense. Exceptionally, *Margaret, Queen of Sicily* was written in English in the original, though there are plans afoot to translate it into Italian. This is not quite so unusual as it may seem, since the major biographies of Frederick II published during the twentieth century (by Kantorowicz, Van Cleve and Abulafia) first appeared in other languages before making their way into Italian; that was largely because he was claimed by peoples and nations beyond southern Italy. Those biographies, though quite different from each other, were models for *Margaret*.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Mary Anne Everett Green wrote about two Plantagenet princesses, Joanna and Isabella, who were crowned as Sicilian queens, in greater

detail than what was theretofore published about either woman in Italy, where biographies of medieval women were as rare as the saola. In the south, an exception was Joanna of Anjou, a Queen of Naples born around 1326, about whom much was written in Italian.

Some of the subjects addressed in the following pages were considered in *Queens of Sicily* but not at great length. Usually, they were presented as little more than endnotes, appendices or even photo captions. As we have seen, that book's focus was conventional biography rather than the study of queenship as a phenomenon. Yet colleagues, students and Siculophiles clamored for more information, and so did readers curious about such things as the food served at court or the poems read there. This book is a response to that need to bring the queens of Sicily, and prominent women such as Matilda Hauteville, daughter of Roger I, into the wider conversation about the prominent women of the *Regnum Siciliae* during its Norman-Swabian era.

Most of what is included in this monograph is broadly social, considering those contextual details that don't always make their way into a conventional biography as much more than footnotes: What did our queens say? What did they read? What did they write? What did they eat? What did they hear? What did they build? Whom did they destroy?

We'll seek the elusive answers to a few slightly more recondite questions: What kind of challenges did these women and their contemporaries face in marriage and motherhood? What was their rapport with their children? How did their status as part of a social elite affect their lives? How did they help to forge the identity of the place they ruled?

Because it was written by a Sicilian woman in Sicily, this book reveals the legacy of our queens as part of Sicilian society, not only in such pursuits as their patronage of churches but in things that can be seen, heard and tasted today — things

PREFACE

more likely to be known to, and perhaps appreciated by, those of us who live here in southern Italy, the former *Regnum Siciliae*, than those curious Siculophiles who live elsewhere. These pages reflect an effort to bring these sociocultural aspects of medieval queenhood to life as something more than shadows.

The author invites you, the reader, on this journey to discover Sicilian queenship and to explore the place our queens knew, experiencing something of what they have bequeathed us that survived the Middle Ages, making these women and their society more than a memory.

The queens' experiences may be viewed as an international metaphor because what we shall find says something about the roles of queens in medieval society beyond southern Italy.

This book is only a beginning, offering a few succinct ideas based on primary sources. It is a framework for what is to come, and an invitation to other scholars to engage in the field. A few already have, and some of their work is listed in a special chapter.

While many scholars consider Sicily's Norman age distinct from our Swabian era, your author is inclined to regard the second epoch as a continuation of the first.

Another difference involves the scope and implications of *Sicilian* queenship specifically; unlike books and papers written by historians less familiar with Sicily and Sicilians (and such topics as our language, literature and cuisine), this one examines the more general influence of our queens and their era on the social culture of southern Italy, which had its own kingdom until 1860. Not every medieval queen had a great personal impact on the events of subsequent centuries. Collectively, however, the queens, and the civilization they cultivated, had a lasting effect in shaping what was to come.

Our first queens were not merely consorts or regents but, with the kings, threads running through the social fabric of a nation that flourished as a monarchy for seven centuries.

A biography, and certainly a compendium of biographies, should include information about the place a queen was crowned and perhaps passed most of her life. For us, this country is the erstwhile Kingdom of Sicily. In *Queens of Sicily*, the necessity of a detailed background chapter on the kingdom and its multicultural society was largely obviated by the existence of another book, *The Peoples of Sicily*, which introduces the place and its people to those who may not be very conversant with that history. In the study of the biography of an important historical figure, what comes before and after her life facilitates useful insights into context; the book *Sicilian Studies* includes a capsule history of Sicily.

Such work may be viewed as part of a resurgence of interest in Norman Sicily amongst scholars writing in English over the last two decades. Antedating that trend, however, your author's interest in the Normans and Swabians who ruled the land of her ancestors places her slightly "ahead of the curve" in this field, as she first attended an international academic conference on this subject in Italy in 1994. Some of the work included in this book was conceived years ago but left unpublished until now; two of the poems were translated by the author from the Sicilian around 1998 (this book's poetry chapter comprises the entire "Frederican Canon" of poems attributed to the emperor), and the chapter on the queens as "she-wolves" is based on a lecture given in Palermo to a group of American women in 2011.

Curiosity is intrinsically personal. It may be that every scholar arrives at her field of study by following a path different from that of each of her peers. Writing in 1913, Evelyn Jamison, whose contribution to these studies was truly remarkable, expressed herself with her characteristic eloquence when she wrote that, "Some fifteen years ago, when this wave of interest was as yet hardly suspected, I was attracted, as all students of the Middle Ages must be, not only by the dramatic

PREFACE

story of the Norman adventure in the South, but by the extreme importance of the constitutional and administrative system which grew up in the conquered regions.”

Here Professor Jamison’s language is slightly reductive, for those “conquered regions” became the Kingdom of Sicily, which was founded a few years before the Kingdom of Portugal and lasted nearly as long, spawning a distinctive culture in the southern half of what is now Italy. Like the first King of Sicily, the first King of Portugal wed a lady of northern Spain’s powerful Jiménez dynasty.

Belatedly addressing a need in the field, *Queens of Sicily* should have been written at least seventy years ago, around 1950, when freedom of expression had already been instituted in Italy following the defeat of Fascism, and *this* book should have been written a generation ago. The penultimate chapter addresses such questions. While these books on the queens of Sicily may interest a few medievalist and gender scholars working outside southern Italy, their chief purpose transcends this in making available to the reader beyond academia information that was not previously accessible in many publications, and far less so in English than in Italian. The story of our first queens is not merely an object of study but a precious part of Sicilian, Italian, European and Mediterranean heritage, and the history of women generally.

As this book was going to press, there was a fine exhibit about Norman Sicily at Palermo’s royal palace, an imposing edifice erected in the eleventh century on high ground where Phoenician and Arab citadels once stood. The exhibit, *Castrum Superius*, brought together a large number of objects and manuscripts (such as the charter in figure I in the chapter on seals) contemporary to the Hautevilles’ reigns. Drawn from various collections, these items are rarely displayed together. The setting was significant. One of the things that made the exhibit truly special was its physical and social (perhaps even spiritual)

place in the home of the Norman monarchs, a few steps away from the sights they knew, near the Arab souk, the charming churches, the Palermitans speaking a language rooted in the Norman era, and foreign visitors enjoying local food based on medieval recipes familiar to our queens.

This is *living* history, connecting the past to the present. Another word for it is *Sicilianità*, a concept of historical and cultural identity to which an entire chapter is dedicated.

Queenship transcends a dry history consisting of facts, words and images. It's about important women as real people. It should be viewed as something more than a museum or a lecture. As the keepers of this legacy, Sicily and Sicilians, and southern Italians generally, are an important part of this story of medieval women. The queens' story is our story, and it has much to teach us.

Books such as this one are a necessary prelude to placing our medieval Sicilian queens into the wider European and global narrative about the role of these elite women in society.

While there are various approaches and paradigms of historiography, feminist theory and even research methodology, the present work is the result of a pragmatic examination of the existing corpus of sources rather than theses to which the evidence was adapted selectively, as one sometimes finds in papers and monographs. The author has sought to avoid the pedantic and the semantic so as to bring you a work of value that may serve as a springboard for further efforts. Unlike much of the work that is published relating to the study of queenship, this book is intended to be useful to casual readers as well as specialist scholars.

In the continuum of the study of medieval queenly biography, this volume is not a destination but a starting point. It is not the last word but the beginning of a new conversation which, one hopes, can be advanced further in the years to come.

If we are to find the answers, we must first formulate the questions.

Avvertenza

As this book is intended to be read in conjunction with *Queens of Sicily*, only a few essential maps and figures from that volume are (redundantly) included in these pages for the benefit of readers who may not have that book, which contains numerous genealogical tables and other material. Most of what is presented in the following chapters presupposes consultation of *Queens of Sicily*.

It is not the purpose of this work to rebut or critique the efforts of colleagues currently working in this field, where new theses are frequently being advanced, but to focus instead on topics that may be of genuine interest to readers.

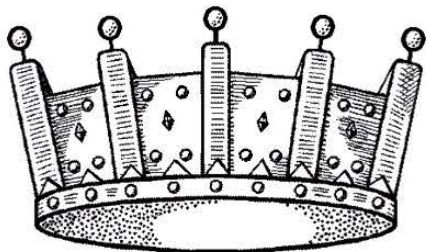
It is not the author's intent to engage in lengthy, contentious debates over historiography, feminism or anthropology, nor endless polemics about what the study of Sicilian queenship should (or should not) be, as if, by way of analogy, Camille Paglia and Gloria Steinem were debating the scope and purpose of the newest wave of feminism in America. Interesting though it would be, an exhaustive examination of feminism (or its absence) in the field of medieval studies in the Italian academy, or feminism in Italian society more generally, is fodder for works yet to be contemplated.

In academia one encounters eclectic ideas about even the simplest subjects. Nevertheless, a biographer's authorial point of view must strive for neutrality. The author resides in Sicily, where she attended high school and university. Like the queens of Sicily, she is Roman Catholic. However, she is not affiliated with any political party or movement, nor has she received any form of funding to write this book beyond a modest advance from its publisher.

CONTENTS

Preface	v
Introduction	1
Maps	31
1. She-Wolves	37
2. Queenly Words	55
3. Seals and Appellations	69
4. Reginal Heraldry	103
5. Sexuality and Marriage	113
6. Queenly Cuisine	151
7. Poetry for Queens	191
8. Margaret's Matronage	217
9. Queens Dubbing Knights	267
10. Queens and Sicilianità	289
11. A Sicilian Biographer's Notes	321
12. Queenship Studies	365
Appendix 1: Places	371
Appendix 2: Nina of Messina	381
Sources and Bibliography	391
Index	413

INTRODUCTION



This book is the beginning of a journey. It is not the destination. Our first stop is Sicily, but it will not be our only stop.

The study of medieval queenship has been defined by a number of historians.¹ Until now, most papers and monographs about the queens of the Norman-Swabian era have tended to focus on Adelaide del Vasto and Constance Hauteville, at least partly because these women were the mothers of our greatest medieval kings, Roger II and his grandson, Frederick II.

Some of those papers were published in thematic edited collections with an emphasis on medieval queenship generally rather than one kingdom specifically, or in journals that focus on medieval studies. In the present volume, this author has sought to avoid duplicating those efforts, listed in a special chapter dedicated to the work of fellow scholars.

Most of the following chapters concentrate on history over historiography, but a few remarks about the latter are appropriate in considering the way we study the lives of the medieval queens of a specific kingdom. Some of these topics are disparate, unified only through our examination of queenhood in medieval Sicily.

Meeting the Queens of Sicily

The queens of Sicily, like medieval women generally, have often been relegated to the margins of published history. Here in Italy, simple sexism accounts for much of this. Into the middle decades of the twentieth century, books about the history of medieval Italian women were almost as rare as female historians. The most obvious exceptions were biographies about saints and martyrs. An aristocratic lady like Caterina Sforza might be mentioned in a general history if she played a major role in important events; apart from the obscene gesture at a siege for which she is remembered in the popular mind, Caterina wrote a book of medicinal recipes.

As stated in the preface, most of what is included in this book constituted part of the preliminary research for *Queens of Sicily* and is obviously complementary to it. The queens' charters, seals and heraldry were part of that research, but so were certain social and cultural topics. Each biography reflects the uniqueness of its subject, and the peculiarities of one kingdom may make it quite different from another.

Several significant affirmations resulted from that research undertaken over the course of a number of years in several countries. Perhaps the most salient of these is the determination that Margaret be considered the Sicilian queen who stands out from the others based on the complexity of her regency and what we know about it compared to the equally arduous regencies of Adelaide del Vasto and Constance Hauteville.

The coronation of Elvira of Castile as queen consort in 1130 was not just a union between the Hauteville family, rulers of a third of Italy, and the Jiménez dynasty, masters of a third of Spain, important as such a union was. It was the beginning of Sicilian queenhood, which ended only with the death of Maria Sophia, the last Queen of Sicily, eight centuries later.

Sicilians' rediscovery of our first queens is a belated