

Alio, Jacqueline. *Margaret, Queen of Sicily*. New York: Trinacria Editions, 2016. Paper. Pp. xx, 489; Many maps, charts and black-and-white figures. \$42/€38/£32 ISBN 978-0-991-58865-7.

The first biography of an important historical figure is a rare event. Rarer still is the author who treats her subject with the thoroughness and empathy that is deserved. *Margaret, Queen of Sicily* is such a biography and Jacqueline Alio is such a biographer. Though suitable to the needs of scholars, this is not the typical academic tome but an engaging, readable text endowed with an interesting narrative arc, for Margaret of Navarre lived a very interesting life.

Virtually nothing has ever been written about Margaret despite her being the most important of Sicily's medieval queens. In 1558, Thomas Fazello mentioned her in passing; in 1867, Isidoro La Lumia, in his biography of her son, parroted details from two chronicles; in 1970, John Julius Norwich, using the same sources as his predecessors, concluded that Margaret was incompetent as regent for her young son.

Alio barely addresses the flawed work of these modern historians, choosing rather to rely exclusively on the original sources (pp 3, 5, 457) instead of secondary literature based on those same sources. She takes pains to explain the reasons for this (p 8), making it very clear that the bibliography only lists works that were actually useful in writing this book, without seeking to include every monograph or paper ever published about Norman Italy that mentions Margaret's name. For the most part, these sources are chronicles, letters and charters in Italy and Spain, augmented by artistic and architectural evidence such as the contemporary epitaph at Margaret's burial site. The endnotes in this volume are full of excerpts from the chronicles of Hugh Falcandus and Romuald of Salerno. Some of these passages are translated by the author, a gifted Latinist, whilst others are quoted in the original.

Thus the author brings us an original biography rather than a study of subsequent historiography. Though not lacking in insight, her text is intended chiefly as a reference rather than a commentary or treatise.

Let us look at the book's structure and scholarly apparatus. The volume has 18 clear, distinct maps, 4 detailed genealogical tables, 10 appendices and 444 endnotes. There are numerous photographs of places, chattels and charters, in Italy and abroad, as Alio conducted some of her research in Spain. The back matter, exclusive of the index, runs to 145 pages. This includes both codices of the *Assizes of Ariano* in the original Latin, the marriage charter of Joanna of England (who wed Margaret's son), a description of the reliquary pendant (shown on the book's cover) given to Margaret on the occasion of those nuptials, translations of a few of Margaret's decrees, and other reference material pertinent to the main text. For example, some passages from Romuald's *Chronicon* are published here in English translation for the first time.

The story begins in Navarre, principally at Pamplona. Margaret's ancestry is considered; her mother, Margaret of l'Aigle, was descended

from a prominent Norman family and her father, García, from El Cid, though his branch of the illustrious Jiménez dynasty was one of the less distinguished of this clan that ruled most of northern Spain.

One of four siblings, Margaret was born at La Guardia in 1135. Alio explains how her year of birth was determined; other historians have been known to report it inaccurately.

Following this summary of Margaret's childhood, the focus turns to her marriage to William of Sicily, the last living heir of Roger II. Margaret's wedding took place in Palermo in 1149.

William became king upon the death of his father, Roger II, in 1154. His own death a few years later left Margaret as regent for her young son, William II. The regency was chaotic, made more so by rebellious barons and two of the three kinsmen Margaret invited to Sicily to help her govern the polyglot realm. Court intrigues, corruption and baronial revolts were the norm. Only at great cost did Margaret tame these, and only with mixed results.

Consideration is given to the question of Margaret's use of power even after her regency, and her influence in the construction of abbeys, particularly Monreale, to which an informative chapter is dedicated.

As one might expect from a work based on primary sources, Alio's chronology is flawless, leaving the text devoid of factual errors.

There are several arcane historiographical points to consider, and some of these may prove disappointing to scholars intent on inferring more than the facts actually present us. These comments are intended to dispel a few misconceptions spawned by misplaced expectations.

This is a biography, not a historiographical study of comparative queenship, about which the known facts provide very little information, and it is not intended as a forum for speculation, excessive hypothesis and debate (pp 8-9). For example, Margaret may have met Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1149, but there is merely circumstantial evidence for this and we have no evidence of further contact between the two queens, even though Margaret's son wed Eleanor's daughter. Indeed, the author explicitly states (p 154) that Margaret had little, if any, contact with contemporary queens regent. It is unlikely that Adelaide del Vasto, an earlier regent (grandmother of Margaret's husband), was in any way a "role model" for Margaret, who arrived in Sicily thirty years after the death of Adelaide and could not have known very much about her. Nevertheless, Adelaide's regency of Roger II is briefly considered (pp 310, 319, 417n1). Although several of Margaret's contemporaries further afield are mentioned (p 432n153), it is not the author's stated purpose, nor the purpose of a biography dedicated to a single historical figure, to digress upon a detailed study of them.

Jacqueline Alio has few peers in the field of medieval Italian regional biography; Nancy Goldstone and Colette Bowie come to mind. Future biographies of Margaret of Sicily will be indebted to this one.