

Appendix 7

THE LAST QUEEN

Elisabeth Wittelsbach of Bavaria became Queen of Sicily in 1250 when her husband, Conrad, ascended the throne upon the death of his father, Frederick II. Some six centuries later, young Maria Sophia, who was born into the same Bavarian dynasty as Elisabeth, became Queen of Sicily in 1859 when her husband, Francesco II de Bourbon of the Two Sicilies, succeeded his father, Ferdinando II. (Ruled from Naples, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies established in 1816 was coterminous to the kingdom founded by Roger II in 1130 that existed until 1282.)

Born in October 1841, Maria Sophia von Wittelsbach was the daughter of Maximilian, Duke in Bavaria. She was raised in a rather informal setting at Possenhofen Castle on the family's Alpine country estate, developing an early love for equestrian sports and country life. In this she was not unlike her siblings, and particularly her elder sister, Elisabeth ("Sissi"), who wed Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria. The physical resemblance between Elisabeth and Maria Sophia was striking but so, it is said, was their character.

Maximilian was regarded by his contemporaries as something of an eccentric. He promoted Bavarian folk music and played the zither, and encouraged his cousin, Ludwig II, to sponsor Richard Wagner. He was a kindly man. In 1838, during

a visit to Egypt, he purchased the freedom of several slave children. Though unorthodox in some ways, he seems to have been a positive influence on his daughters.

Maria Sophia's mother, Ludwiga, raised eight children (two others died in infancy) in what many would have considered a liberal environment where daughters were treated as the social equals of sons. To say that this was extremely unusual in the middle of the nineteenth century, even among royalty, would be an understatement. It seems to have left the Wittelsbach sisters with a very egalitarian view of how the world should be, and a great sense of altruism.

Like Elisabeth, Maria Sophia was rather impulsive, independent, and no slave to tradition or protocol, though she had a great sense of duty. By most contemporary accounts, both girls were intelligent as well as beautiful. Each was an exceptionally accomplished equestrienne who could wield a sabre or rifle while on horseback.

Maria Sophia and Elisabeth were especially close, while their elder sister, Helen, was a bit distant. This may be explained by an incident that occurred in 1853. Ludwiga introduced Helen to Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria, hoping for a betrothal, and Elisabeth went along on the trip. The Emperor was smitten by Elisabeth, who became his bride, leaving Helen feeling sad and rejected. She eventually married the Prince of Thurn und Taxis.

Maximilian did not have the good fortune to provide very lavish dowries for his daughters. Maria Sophia's would be a "paltry" twenty-five thousand gold ducats, but this was of little consequence when marrying regnant royalty.

In 1859, the young Maria Sophia wed Francesco of the Two Sicilies. Then styled Duke of Calabria, he was the eldest son and heir apparent of King Ferdinando II. Maria Sophia's younger sister, Mathilde, eventually married Francesco's half-brother Luigi, a younger son of Ferdinando.

When King Ferdinando died later in the year, Francesco ascended the throne as King Francesco II. Descended from the House of Bourbon, the dynasty had reigned in Naples since 1734, and Francesco spoke Neapolitan as his mother tongue, though he was proficient in French, German and Italian.

Rarely the pragmatist, pious Francesco was not particularly well-suited to the demands of kingship in a tumultuous era. The House of Savoy had proffered the crown of a united Italy to his late father, who refused, but Ferdinando's deserved reputation as an iron-fisted warrior king willing to defend his country was sufficient to discourage any attempt at invasion. What is more, the fact that the young Francesco was greatly influenced by dogmatic Pope Pius IX did not augur well in a political pond full of anti-clericals and unificationists. The monarch's failure to extricate himself from the papal spell would write the denouement of Italy's most prosperous state.

Maria Sophia was an adamant proponent for establishment of a permanent constitution, something that was already in place in Bavaria, and she admonished her stoic husband to grant one. Alas, when he finally assented it was too late.

Ever convinced of the cause of continued sovereignty for Italy's South, Francesco II opposed the goal of Italian political unification as it was advocated by exponents in Turin. This reflected no nationalistic or dynastic bigotry. In fact, Francesco's mother, Maria Cristina (who had died giving birth to him), was a Savoy, making Francesco a cousin of King Vittorio Emanuele of Sardinia, who ruled from Turin.

Nevertheless, Piedmontese-backed troops attacked and occupied Sicily in 1860 in an undeclared war. Francesco, who commanded Italy's strongest army, failed to respond, and additional Savoyard troops eventually invaded the kingdom's mainland territories (see the map following this appendix), beginning with Calabria. Tacit support from the British navy, and

treason on the part of several high officers in the Neapolitan army, made this bloody campaign that much easier for the invaders to win.

Under the command of loyal officers, the fortress of Messina held out for months, but Francesco, wishing to avoid a civilian slaughter like the one that had taken place in Palermo, abandoned Naples in favor of the coastal stronghold at Gaeta to the north.

Maria Sophia accompanied him, and during the siege in early 1861 she earned the nickname "Heroine of Gaeta."

Gaeta finally fell in February, followed by the citadel of Messina the next month, but an armed resistance continued in the hinterland, led by military officers loyal to their king. Soldiers who continued to fight were branded "brigands" and several hundred that were captured were incarcerated as the newly-united Italy's first political prisoners in Fenestrelle, an Alpine fortress.

In response to guerilla warfare, the invading troops sent from Piedmont committed the kind of atrocities that in our times earn universal opprobrium. In August, the town of Pontelandolfo suffered mass rape and murder for two long days (see note 10).

The royal Neapolitan couple were exiled following the surrender of Gaeta. A dubious referendum, showing an incredible approval of some ninety-nine percent, confirmed Vittorio Emanuele II of Savoy as "King of Italy."

Francesco and Maria Sophia then took up residence at Palazzo Farnese, a family home in Rome. (It currently houses the French Embassy.) The royal family took virtually none of their possessions or financial assets into exile, and eventually sold this palace.

Some developments during this period were nothing short of bizarre, and a particularly sobering incident said much about the credibility of the neocratic Italian state in the eyes

of the world. In November 1861, a Marseille court upheld Francesco's earlier sale of two Neapolitan ships despite a vociferous protest from the hubristic Italian ambassador, who claimed that the vessels belonged to Italy. The splenetic reasoning advanced for this idea was that Francesco was no longer a reigning king when the ships were sold, and his former kingdom was by then part of the Kingdom of Italy. (History would repeat itself nine decades later when Great Britain refused to relinquish to the Italian Republic several million pounds that the "patriotic" Savoy kings had stashed in British banks.) Rarely in the decades to come would the united Italy have anything resembling a cohesive foreign policy. In the Kingdom of Italy, right up until the realm's woeful final years, subterfuge often took the place of statecraft.

It has been suggested that Maria Sophia gave birth to the daughter, or possibly twin daughters, of a military officer during her sojourn in Bavaria in 1862, but the evidence of this is scant at best, based almost entirely on hearsay emanating from questionable sources.

She was back in Rome with Francesco the next year. There, in 1869, Maria Sophia gave birth to a daughter, Maria Cristina. Her sister, Sissi, was present for the delivery. Sadly, the baby died aged only three months. The next year, papal Rome fell to the invading troops of the nascent Kingdom of Italy, and Francesco and Maria Sophia departed for Paris. Over the next decades they sometimes lived apart, travelling around Europe visiting their numerous cousins, particularly in Austria.

Admired by her contemporaries, Maria Sophia passed much of her time in Paris and Munich. The last decade of the nineteenth century was an especially trying one. Her sister Helen died in 1890. Her brother Maximilian died in 1893. Her devoted husband Francesco died in Arco, near Trent (then part of Austria), in 1894. Her younger sister, Sophia Charlotte, died in a Paris fire in 1897 at an annual charity bazar while helping

the girls who worked there to escape the blaze. Maria Sophia's beloved sister Sissi was killed by an anarchist in Geneva the following year.

Plagued by riots against the government and the Savoys, the Kingdom of Italy continued to vilify the House of the Two Sicilies, which remained exiled until the Allied occupation of southern Italy during the Second World War. Much of this defamation was directed at Maria Sophia, and it said far more about the tenuous position of the Italian unitary state than it did about the woman being disparaged. Indeed, the only overtly negative commentary published about Maria Sophia was hatched in Italy, a country where she never again set foot after the age of nineteen.

The more outlandish accusations were little more than unfounded conspiracy theories associating Maria Sophia with a series of violent anarchists bent on wreaking havoc in politically fragile Italy, as if a solitary, exiled woman could bring about the country's demise. Such revisionism was part and parcel of Italian nationalist propaganda during this period, making its way into subsequent historiography; for example, the anarchist who assassinated King Umberto I in 1900 was painted as an "American" even though he was born and raised in Italy.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the last Queen of the Two Sicilies definitively abandoned Paris for Munich, where she died in January 1925, six months before her younger sister, Mathilde.

Maria Sophia was immortalised in Proust's *La Prisonnière*. She reposes with her husband and daughter in the Royal Chapel of the Basilica of Santa Chiara in Naples.

Sir Harold Acton wrote that "age spiritualised her beauty." Even as an octogenarian, Her Majesty rode the horses she so loved.

Only with the collapse of the Kingdom of Italy in 1946 following a disastrous war was there a balanced reassessment

of the merits of the Neapolitan Bourbons and their role in history, and indeed a belated, pragmatic reappraisal of the Italian unification movement, the *Risorgimento*. Excoriating the fallen regime, some Italians began to question whether a federalist state along the lines of the Swiss or German models would not have been better than what was introduced in Italy. In view of the destruction and suffering wrought by the lost war, many ordinary people began to doubt the hyperbole and aphorisms that had constituted Italian political thought since 1861.

In addition to Harold Acton's books, a novel published in English translation in 1960 brought this issue to the fore. This was *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, made into a film starring Burt Lancaster in 1963.

In a sense, the post-war establishment of Sicily as a "semi-autonomous" region confirmed Francesco's certitude that the unified Italy would always be a tenuous ensemble of culturally diverse regions, an opinion shared by a great many in our times.

In death, Francesco and Maria Sophia became greater symbols of southern identity and "regionalism" than they were in life.

The most imposing reminder of the dynasty is Caserta Palace, constructed in a large estate outside Naples on the orders of Charles III beginning in 1752. The largest royal palace in Italy, Caserta has been compared to Versailles, and it has occasionally played a part in history since the fall of Naples in 1861. Housing the Allied military command in 1945, it was the site of the signing of the formal surrender of German forces in Italy. Since then, the palace has been the location of everything from international summits to Hollywood films.

Other royal residences of note are the palaces in Naples, Capodimonte, Portici and (in Sicily) the Norman Palace and Chinese Villa in Palermo, and the Ficuzza Hunting Lodge near Corleone.

Today most would agree that it was necessary to unify the former Italian states in some way, probably as a republic rather than a monarchy. In 1861 Palermo was wealthier than Milan. The subsequent northward shift of national administration and industry left the south less industrialized and generally less affluent than the north. This provoked mass emigration.

History is based on what actually occurs, not on what might have happened otherwise. We cannot know with certainty that the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, or perhaps a federation of united Italian states, would have avoided the succession of calamities that plagued the Kingdom of Italy established in its stead. Among these were the mass genocide perpetrated in Libya and Ethiopia, the infamous anti-Semitic laws of 1937, and Italy's suicidal alliance with Nazi Germany in its war against the Allies, during which entire historical districts of Milan and Palermo were bombed into inexistence.

Maria Sophia spent almost her entire adult life, from the age of nineteen, as an exiled queen, a footnote to history, a curiosity. For many, her very survival into the twentieth century evoked bittersweet memories of an earlier, simpler age.

Interview with Princess Urraca of the Two Sicilies

Urraca Maria Isabella Carolina de Bourbon of the Two Sicilies (1913-1999) was a granddaughter of Prince Alfonso, Count of Caserta (1841-1934), the younger half-brother and heir of King Francesco II. As a child, she knew Queen Maria Sophia.

In 1951, acting on the wishes of her father, Prince Ferdinando Pio (1869-1960), who was then head of the dynasty, Princess Urraca consigned the private papers of Francesco II to the Naples Archive of State, where the collection was catalogued two years later.

Her mother, Maria Ludwiga von Wittelsbach of Bavaria (1872-1954), was descended from the family of the Elisabeth who became Queen of Sicily in 1250. Urraca was the youngest of six children.

In December 1994, when Princess Urraca visited Palermo to observe the centennial of the death of her great uncle, King Francesco II, she was interviewed by a historian specialized in the Kingdom of Sicily who rec-

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ognized her as a living link to Queen Maria Sophia.⁷²¹ The interview (translated by this book's author) is published here for the first time.

Interviewer: Your Highness, I know you used to visit Naples and Rome quite often, but had you ever been to Palermo before this trip?

Princess Urraca: Yes. The last time was some years ago, around 1977, by ship, with the Order of Malta, and our [mutual] friend Cyril Toumanoff⁷²² but on that occasion we went directly to visit Monreale, and spent very little time down here in the city. I had never been to the Magione church until this morning. It is beautiful.

Interviewer: My first curiosity, thinking about an era that has become the subject of historical discussion, even debate, is the exile of your father's family beginning in 1861.

Princess Urraca: Well, my mother was German, and I was raised mostly in Bavaria, so it wasn't something that touched me very noticeably, personally. My father was permitted to visit Italy at the height of Fascism, but only on the condition that he be accompanied everywhere by a police escort, not for his protection but to protect that paranoid regime. So he decided not to make such visits a habit even though my sister, Lucia, was married to a Savoy and lived for some years in Italy, until the fall of the monarchy.

Interviewer: That's when [beginning in 1946] your father could finally come here [to Italy] without those complications.

Princess Urraca: Yes. And around 1950 I began visiting Italy fairly frequently, especially Rome and Naples. I love Naples.

Interviewer: It is interesting that the Italy you've known best has been the republic, not the kingdom.

Princess Urraca: That is true, but I don't think the people had changed very much by 1950 or even 1960, and my interest has always been the people rather than the government. And especially the people of the south.

Interviewer: Yet your mother's family ruled Bavaria, which today remains one of Germany's most fiercely independent regions. Your mother's father

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was its last monarch. And, looking back to the thirteenth century, a woman of the Wittelsbach dynasty married a son of Frederick II. That's quite a distinguished family history.

Princess Urraca: But a little bit before my time. What I remember most are the stories my parents told me, and what I've read.

Interviewer: Anything in particular that would surprise people?

Princess Urraca: Well, when one is raised in a formerly ruling family, those stories, or their political implications, are known quite widely. I don't believe there are many secrets of substance.

Interviewer: I've heard that you knew your great aunt, who was the last Queen of the Two Sicilies, and of course a Bavarian princess by birth. What can you tell me about her?

Princess Urraca: Although she seems to have preferred Paris, she had to leave it when the war broke out in 1914. The war was terrible because it made enemies out of friends, almost overnight. That's when she came to live in Bavaria. So from my earliest years it was normal to see her around. For some time she spent the warmer months of each year in a cottage in the country outside Munich so she could be near her horses.

Interviewer: She rode often?

Princess Urraca: Almost every day, I would say, in good weather. It's something I didn't notice consciously as a little girl, but my aunt, though slender for a German lady, was not very tall. That probably added to the effect of a competent equestrienne riding a large horse. One was an Arabian, a high-spirited breed.

Interviewer: You were about twelve when she died. Do you remember any conversations with her, or perhaps between her and your mother?

Princess Urraca: Not with a great deal of detail, but what struck one most about Maria Sophia was her great dignity. It spoke for her. And even at her age, she was in good health. No problems moving or walking. Her posture was perfect, and so was her memory. My mother said that Maria Sophia looked younger than her actual age.

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Interviewer: Did she ever seem melancholy, embittered about exile?

Princess Urraca: I never saw that. However, I would say that she was not very moody, so no highs and lows. She had the aura of a person to be taken seriously. She had a keen sense of humor, and even when she was scolding somebody she didn't raise her voice. She didn't have to.

Interviewer: Did she seem well-informed?

Princess Urraca: She read the newspapers in German, French and Italian. They were delivered to us in Munich a few times each week, and I recall her saving articles she felt were worth keeping. I would say she understood the politics of each country very well.

Interviewer: She held strong opinions?

Princess Urraca: That was normal between the two wars, certainly in Germany and certainly for people of her generation. But yes, the only time she ever became noticeably angry was when she read the newspapers. So, yes, I would say she was rather opinionated about some things.

Interviewer: Was she a reactionary?

Princess Urraca: I would not use that word. She was a traditionalist, but she seemed to believe in the rights of women to vote and to hold political office. I don't think she criticized women who supported social progress. After she died, I recall friends of hers, other women, saying she was very loyal to them even when she disagreed with their social or political views.

Interviewer: Was she devoutly Catholic?

Princess Urraca: Yes, but how does one measure something like devotion? She sometimes attended mass with us on Sundays.

Interviewer: I realize we're talking about a cosmopolitan woman, and that one's views can change over time, but how would you describe her sense of identity?

Princess Urraca: Very Neapolitan, by choice. She visited Italian prisoners during the war, but it transcended nostalgia. I believe she truly loved Naples, as I do.

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Interviewer: A true southerner.

Princess Urraca: Yes, from southern Germany to southern Italy. The sun is always brighter in the south!

Interviewer: She had been close to her sister, Sissi. Do you recall her ever talking about the empress?

Princess Urraca: I do, but only in passing. Most of what I learned about Sissi came from my mother or my teachers, when I was sixteen or seventeen, after Maria Sophia was already gone. Bavaria has always had a close connection with Austria.

Interviewer: Was Maria Sophia reclusive?

Princess Urraca: As I knew her, she never sought attention. She was a private person, though not reclusive or shy.

Interviewer: I have researched in the family papers that your father donated to the Italian state, but there's rather little about Queen Maria Sophia, either before or after 1861.

Princess Urraca: Well, there is no single collection of Maria Sophia's correspondence, although we have some of it in Germany, so nobody has access to all of it. In the end, my aunt had very little in the way of jewels. As you may know, the king and queen took virtually nothing with them when they left Gaeta for exile, unlike the other dynasty [the Savoys] who had millions in foreign banks. They owned some property in Rome, but little else.

Interviewer: The ignorance of people in this country [Italy] regarding the unification movement, and even the Fascist regime, is appalling. Maria Sophia's life spanned both eras, yet most Italians — even southerners — have no idea that the last Queen of the Two Sicilies lived until 1925.

Princess Urraca: That is true. There has been an attempt here to bury history. Never a good thing. But our family, my cousins and I, are always very well received in Naples, so *somebody* remembers us.

Interviewer: Your grandfather [Prince Alfonso], who died in 1934, was

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the half-brother of King Francesco II. Did you ever discuss with him anything regarding the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies?

Princess Urraca: I saw my grandfather only rarely, as he lived in France. What little I learned of his opinions was through my father, who, of course, was his heir.

Interviewer: Was there anything in particular?

Princess Urraca: I only recall my grandfather mentioning this or that comrade from the Siege of Gaeta, things like that. Most of his attention seemed to focus on his family.

Interviewer: And of course he was the last Italian prince to lead men in cavalry charges in the manner of a medieval king commanding mounted knights.

Princess Urraca: Yes, at the Battle of the Volturno, against the Piedmontese invaders.

Interviewer: I don't want to pose too many hypothetical questions but, especially considering that, for example, Italian women were granted the right to vote only in 1945, and then only by the Allies occupying the very ground beneath us, how much worse could life have been in southern Italy if your kinsman, Francesco II, had continued to rule, without Italian unification? Or perhaps in part of a federalist state like Germany's?

Princess Urraca: Clearly, grave mistakes were made in the Kingdom of Italy. Hypothetical discussions can be very complex because one opens a box to find another inside it, and so forth. And empty because the last, smallest box, contains nothing at all. But war and death are real. I think we can all agree about that. I saw it in Germany.

Interviewer: What is life like for the Wittelsbachs in Munich?

Princess Urraca: My mother's family was never exiled, and never divested of property like the families in East Germany following the war. But it is also true that my grandfather, and his father, enjoyed a good rapport with the Bavarians, who viewed them as populists. Their family

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granted a constitution early in the nineteenth century, and they were never too aloof of the people they ruled.

Interviewer: Maria Sophia cited that when encouraging her husband, the king, to re-institute Sicily's constitution of 1812, which predated Piedmont's by decades.

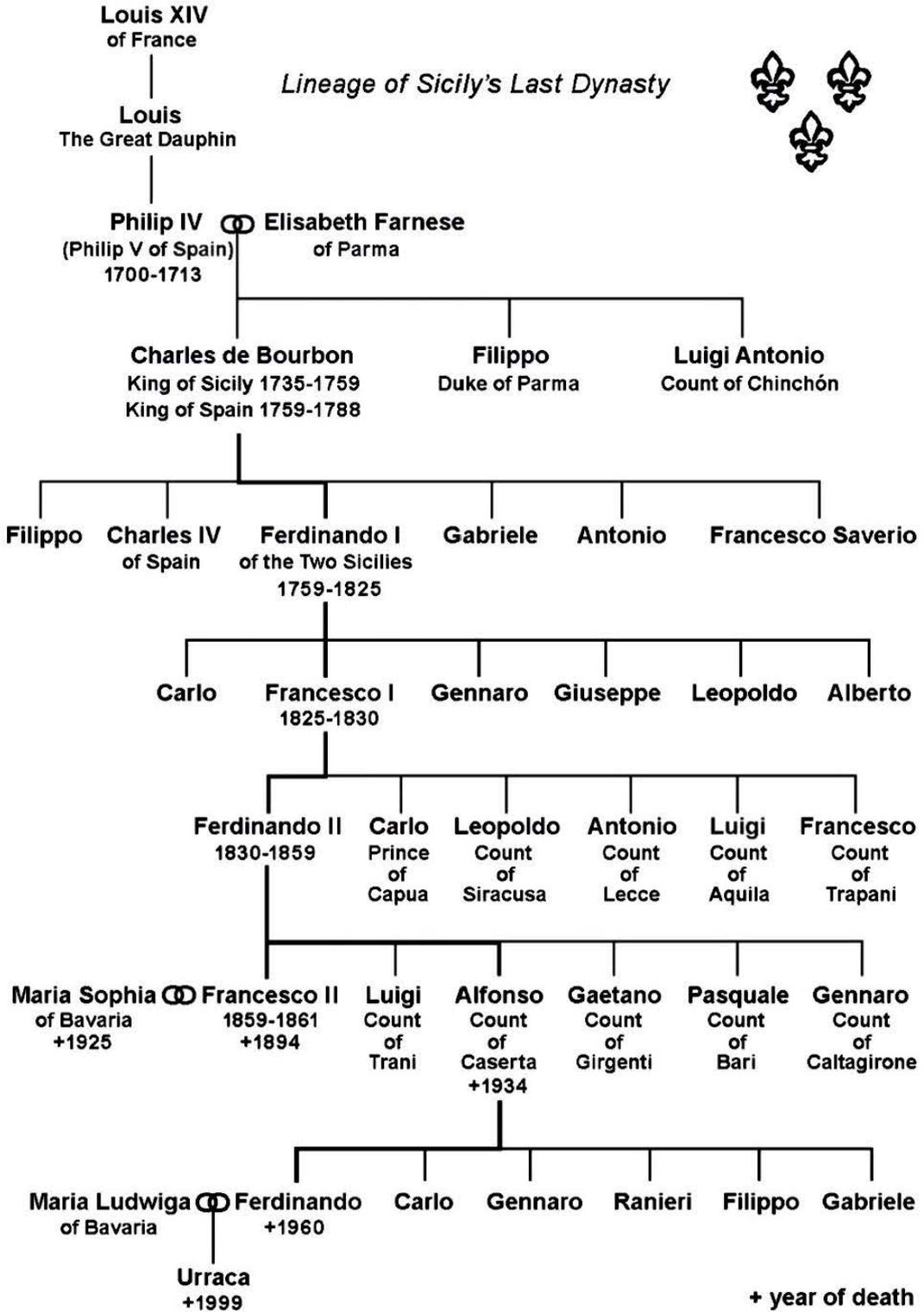
Princess Urraca: A principle worthy of her parentage and mine.

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Maria Sophia Wittelsbach (shown) was Queen Consort from 1859. Elisabeth Wittelsbach, the wife of Conrad and mother of Conradin, was Queen from 1250 to 1254. Her story is told in Chapter 17.

Royal house of Bourbon of the Two Sicilies



Italian States in 1859





Before he abdicated the Sicilian and Neapolitan crowns in 1759 to become King of Spain, Charles de Bourbon began construction of this grand palace at Caserta. It is the largest royal palace in Europe by volume.

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In 1785, Charles de Bourbon, King of Spain, formerly King of Sicily, sponsored the first Catholic parish of New York. Saint Peter's church, in Manhattan, was rebuilt in 1840.