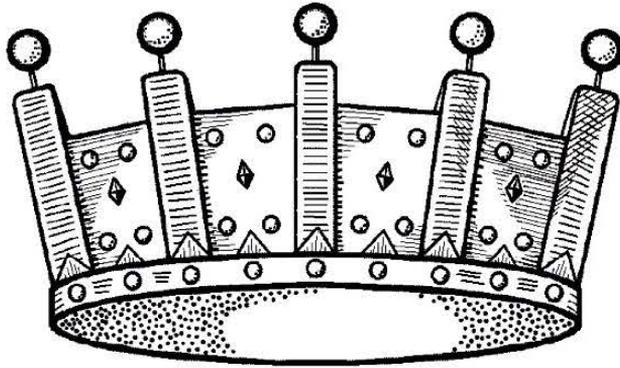


SICILIAN MEDIEVAL STUDIES

Queens of Sicily

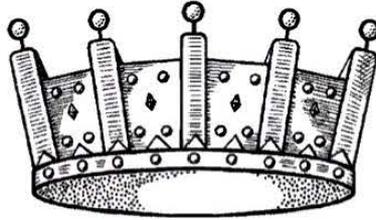
1067-1266



The Queens Consort, Regent and Regnant
of the
Norman-Swabian Era
of the
Kingdom of Sicily

Jacqueline *Alió*

PREFACE



“One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it.”

— Joan of Arc

They are the semi-forgotten women of history. Some of them are little more than names mentioned in passing in medieval chronicles or charters. Only a few stand out, and only because they were called upon to step into roles more important, more visible, than what was otherwise envisaged for them. In an age when the typical woman could aspire to nothing more grandiose than a convent or a kitchen, queens were very special indeed, destined to confront challenges beyond field and forge. Queens consort, regnant and regent were a breed apart.

To ignore queenhood is to overlook an important part of the history of womanhood.

Queenship always engendered a certain mystique, a quasi-mysticism, and Walter Bagehot famously observed that, “we must not let in daylight upon magic.” Yet the reality of queenly life could be very different from popular perceptions. In the following pages, we shall see how dangerous, indeed fatal, it

could be to stand so closely to the seat of power, or even to wield that power.

In widowhood, three of these women actually ruled Sicily as regents: Adelaide del Vasto, Margaret of Navarre, Constance of Hauteville.

We shall seek to discover something of their personalities. Conventional wisdom suggests that women are more inclined than men to use force of argument instead of the argument of force. Was that the case of Sicily's queens? Sometimes, perhaps, but history tells us that Margaret of Navarre, probably the most powerful of the women profiled here, and one of the most fondly remembered, was willing to imprison criminals and adversaries without batting an eye, even when their guilt was questionable. Indeed, there is credible evidence to suggest that she acted to target a few of her husband's opponents for assassination following a baronial revolt. When Joanna of England learned that her brother, Richard Lionheart, had been killed by an arrow, she had the archer who loosed it tortured to death. Here we find the queen not as shrinking violet but she-wolf.

Sicily's first queen, Elvira, achieved her reginal status with the coronation of her husband, Roger II, as the first Sicilian king in 1130. Amongst the women whose stories are told here are the three who were wed to Roger I, the father of Roger II. This is why we look to 1061, the signal year the Hauteville brothers of Normandy came to Sicily and the year Roger I married Judith of Evreux, as the beginning of our journey, even though Judith was never a queen.

That path shall take us through Sicily's Norman period, and thence through the Swabian era of the Hohenstaufens, from the Battle of Messina in 1061 to the Battle of Benevento in 1266, key events in the rise and fall of these dynasties. The polyglot *Regnum Siciliae*, the Kingdom of Sicily founded by Roger II, encompassed not only the island from which it took its name but most of the Italian peninsula south of Rome, along with

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Malta and, at times, a chunk of Africa. It was one of Europe's most prosperous realms, and an experiment in multiculturalism.

Queens were all but ignored by Thomas Fazello, author of the first general history of Sicily, a lengthy, post-incunable tome published between 1558 and 1560, where Margaret, as regent for William II, is conceded just a few sparse lines. She is one of only four Sicilian queens before 1266 whose stories have been the subject of detailed biographies worthy of their dignity, the others being Joanna and Isabella "Plantagenet" of England (in 1850) and Helena Angelina of Epirus (in 1791). It is this book's objective to fill a void by bringing to light the others, whose stories have been largely neglected. Along the way, we shall explore some of the intricacies and nuances of queenship into the middle years of the thirteenth century, particularly in the Kingdom of Sicily.

The legacy of these eighteen women is inextricable from the cultural heritage of southern Italy.

None of these women chose to be queen, and in youth few foresaw being crowned, but each rose to face the challenges of complexity, even adversity, that the duties of queenship entailed.

Here we shall celebrate the distinctly feminine virtue of perseverance.

Seven centuries was a long time to wait.

Acknowledgments

Writing history is a sacred trust.

The author wishes to thank the cooperative staffs of the Vatican Apostolic Library, the British Library and other libraries and archives where charters, letters and chronicles mentioned in this volume are kept, including repositories at Palermo, Naples, Munich, Pamplona, Zaragoza, Toledo, Barcelona and Kew, which permitted her consultation of these precious documents, of which rather few are available on the internet.

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Thanks to the Archdiocese of Palermo for permission to photograph the crown of Constance of Aragon shown on this book's cover, and to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for permission to publish the photograph of the pendant of Queen Margaret through the OASC program. The latter is far superior to the photographs taken by the author at The Cloisters, in Manhattan, a few years ago.

Special thanks to the colleague who generously provided the transcript of his unpublished interview with the late Princess Urraca de Bourbon of the Two Sicilies in Palermo in 1994.

Sincerest gratitude is expressed to the two colleagues who reviewed the manuscript of this monograph prior to publication. Heartfelt thanks to the author's fans, thousands of readers who constitute a "tribe" that enthusiastically welcomes publication of each of her books. Such a following is a rare phenomenon in the world of academic publishing, where a printing of more than a thousand copies of a work like this one is the exception rather than the rule.

Many thanks to the publisher for making this volume available in paperback at a price affordable to students and underfunded libraries in a market where academic monographs of this length typically sell for two or three times the price of this one and include but a tiny fraction of the number of figures, maps and tables seen in the following pages.

The author alone is responsible for the positions, conclusions, and any errors, present in the pages that follow.

— C. Jacqueline Alio

Pietratagliata, Palermo, November 2018

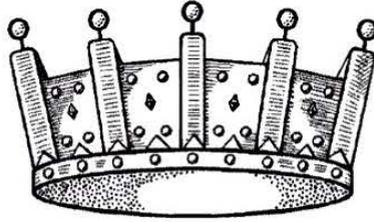
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INTRODUCTION



“Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good.”

— Charlotte Whitton

For too long have the voices of medieval women gone unheard or unheeded. The women whose stories are told in this book deserve to be remembered as something more than footnotes to history. How we remember them is nearly as important as why we remember them. This is a plea not for idolatry but for accuracy.

This work is about the women who stood at the apex of society in the Kingdom of Sicily, and in a few cases actually governed it. It is obvious enough that any study of this era must also consider the history of the society itself, and that includes its kings.

However, this is not an exhaustive history of the Kingdom of Sicily, its kings and institutions, about which many volumes have been written. At best, we can consider these when it is necessary or appropriate. Our focus shall be the queens and

the world they knew. True, this era is framed by the battles of Messina (1061) and Benevento (1266), but a book such as this one is not the venue for detailed accounts of such events.

We shall venture into largely uncharted territory, for only a few of our countesses or queens have ever been the subject of a biography.

What is presented in these seven hundred pages is not intended to be explicitly analytical, anthropological, revisionist or even monarchist. It is, first and foremost, factual, historical and biographical. So much the better if a certain queen's story makes for an interesting narrative.

“Narrative is the lifeblood of history,” declared Barbara Tuchman. “To offer a mass of undigested facts, of names not identified and places not located, is of no use to the reader and is simple laziness on the part of the author, or pedantry to show how much he has read. To discard the unnecessary requires courage and also extra work.”¹

Whilst a historical work may have “entertainment value,” most of us read history out of curiosity, to learn something from it. Ideally, it should be interesting, even enlightening, and perhaps inspiring, avoiding the semantic and the pedantic. Some works are purely pedagogical.

Medieval biography should be treated as a subfield of medieval history. Many scholarly histories published nowadays include commentary regarding historiography, such as earlier scholars' observations about, for example, the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Since very little has ever been published about most of the women whose stories appear here, the author has elected, for the most part, to place such commentary and references in the endnotes rather than the main narrative text, where tangential or parenthetical remarks about sources or prior research might prove distracting to the reader more immediately interested in reginal biography than scholarship and methodology. Such an approach differs somewhat from that



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