

SICILIAN MEDIEVAL STUDIES

# Queens of Sicily



1061  
1266

Jacqueline Alio

Alio, Jacqueline. *Queens of Sicily 1061-1266: The Queens Consort, Regent and Regnant of the Norman-Swabian Era of the Kingdom of Sicily*. New York: Trinacria Editions, 2018. Paper. Pp. xiv, 726; Many maps, charts and black-and-white figures. \$42/€38/£32 ISBN 978-1-943-63914-4.

As stated on its back cover, this is the first collection of scholarly biographies of the countesses and queens of Sicily during the Hauteville and Hohenstaufen periods, a prosperous time in the multicultural kingdom's history. Researched over a period of years in several countries, it is an ambitious undertaking, even for somebody like Jacqueline Alio who has been studying Sicilian medieval history for decades.

Recent years have seen a plethora of research dedicated to medieval Sicily, but very little of it is biography. Here the author has few peers; Nancy Goldstone and Alison Weir come to mind, as a few of the queens about whom they write occasionally stepped foot on the sunny island. As a biography, this book is not a dissertation to be defended but a reference to be consulted.

Alio has brought us a major reference work intended for use by scholars, yet its readability makes it appealing for anybody interested in this subject. Before grappling with its copious content, let us look at its structure.

While its scholarly apparatus is conventional, certain details were tailored specifically to the format of this book. The author sagely elected to use endnotes, rather than footnotes, to avoid distractions and leave more space for lengthier citations and excerpts; indeed, several notes are over a page long (pp 625-26). The topics of the seven appendices range from both codices of the *Assizes of Ariano*, the first legal code of the Kingdom of Sicily, to the *Contrasto*, the longest poem of the Sicilian School; the latter is accompanied by the author's original, quasi-literal translation from the Sicilian. Some material, such as the complete text and English translation of the reginal rite of coronation, is published here for the first time, never having appeared in a book or journal. Alio's bibliography of primary sources is ample. As she explains in her lengthy introduction, secondary literature is limited to works actually used or cited (p 47). Nothing is listed merely for the sake of being listed. There are 722 endnotes in the main notes section, plus a total of 26 under separate numeration following two of the appendices. Beginning at page 495, the back matter is substantial for a volume of 740 pages; without the index, it runs to 217 pages. The book has 26 full-page genealogical tables (these include line drawings of dynastic coats of arms) and 20 clear maps. There are numerous photographs. The colophon tells us the text is set in Garamond, a highly legible typeface even at the tiny point size of the notes.

This volume offers the researcher some helpful aids, like a chart indicating the women's "reigns" (p 50) and a map showing where each countess or queen was born (p 52). Every part of the book, even the front and back covers showing photographs of reginal regalia, is design-

ed to be instructive as well as visually attractive.

The author makes it clear that this is a traditional work of biography, not a treatise on queenship or feminism (p 25), even though both topics, and others, are considered in the fifty-page introduction. Tangents and recondite discussions are kept to a minimum. Those seeking more detailed treatments of certain subjects should expect to find these in end-notes and appendices rather than chapters. There will be some scholars who disagree with this approach, but few such critics are likely to have had the personal experience of authoring or editing a biographical monograph of this length, which relies overwhelmingly on original "primary" sources as the basis for the information and conclusions presented.

Alio's emphasis throughout is the consultation of those primary sources, chiefly chronicles, charters and research at pertinent sites around Europe; the contemporaneous epitaph over the tomb of Margaret of Navarre is cited as the source for her date of death (p 299). Nothing is left to chance. Here the author follows in the footsteps of David Abulafia and Hubert Houben, who wrote (respectively) significant biographies of Frederick II and Roger II, to whom some of these queens were married. She makes the emphatic point (p 14) that this book is not the place to rebut the perceptions of modern scholars; diplomatically, she does not mention the names even of those who are now deceased (e.g. Ernst Kantorowicz, Isidoro La Lumia, John Julius Norwich).

Consistent with the use of original sources, most of the translations are the author's. Her previous monographs, which include the first English translation of the *Ferraris Chronicle* completed in 1228, reveal her to be a competent Latinist. It is clear that the author is also conversant with the Sicilian language, art, architecture, genealogy, geography, agriculture, canon law, feudalism, coronation practices and heraldry, as well as the cultures and faiths of her island during the period considered. Her previous books, listed at the very beginning of this one, have dealt with some of these topics, and in her introduction (pp 28, 47) she refers to a few of these for the reader seeking further information on Sicily's multicultural heritage, Norman-Arab architecture or historical cuisine. Unlike the majority of scholars writing about Sicily in English, Alio, who resides in Palermo, knows the place and its "real-life" history extremely well; this shows in her scholarship.

It should be remembered that biography, as a scholarly and literary form, presupposes a biographer's decisions to ascribe importance to some facts and events over others. It is not meant to be excessively "creative" or "original." Here Alio takes a cue from Barbara Tuchman, whom she cites early in the text (p 2), who advocated strongly for the use of original sources. Alio's few critics may, however rarely, take issue with particular aspects of her emphasis, style or approach (criticisms that might strike some of us as pedantic), but never with the facts or substance of what is presented in these biographies. Here the author has chosen, in every instance, to direct her attention to the women under

consideration, the countesses and queens. She states at the outset (p 1) that this volume is not intended to offer excessive details on the kings of Sicily. Furthermore, it is meant to present facts rather than exhaustive analysis of the reasons, or presumed reasons, behind every event (p 25). For this reason, signal events like the battles of Messina (in 1061) and Benevento (in 1266), though necessarily mentioned, are not treated as exhaustively as these would be in a general history, or in a biography of Roger Hauteville or Manfred Hohenstaufen, the protagonists of those decisive campaigns (p 2).

What, then, is the purpose and usefulness of this book? Above all else, it will be of use to scholars seeking a foundation for further research, or a springboard from which to launch analytical theses. This makes sense, for even a volume of this length cannot include ponderous discussions of, for example, every implication of this or that royal union. The author also makes the point that, as the first work of its kind, this book addresses the question of queenhood as an essential underpinning of Sicilian identity (p 42). None the less, she leaves it to others to draw conclusions from the information she provides in these pages.

Following the introduction, which covers a number of topics connected in one way or another to the text of the book, there is a short but functional introduction to Sicilian history before the Norman era, considering as well the mainland region that constituted part of the kingdom.

Some of the biographies are far longer than others. Margaret's is the lengthiest, running to more than a hundred pages, adapted from the author's earlier biography of her. Following the eighteen biographies is an informative timeline spanning three centuries on fourteen pages in small print. This complements the useful chart of reigns near the beginning of the volume.

The reason for inclusion of an obvious anachronism, the appendix dedicated to the last Sicilian queen, who died in 1925, is explained in the introduction (p 40). This is part of Alio's declared effort to provide context to a subject, Sicilian queenhood, about which very little of value has been published. Unsurprisingly considering Alio's personal background, *Queens of Sicily* has a slightly Sicilian cultural flavor, or *sicilianità*.

First-ever works on specific subjects seem to enjoy a certain prestige. Such a volume can break new ground and accord its author a position of "authority" in the field. Not every biography in this book is that kind of historiographical landmark, but a few are. More importantly, the author has brought us the framework with which to place each of these women into her appropriate place in Sicily's distinguished reginal pantheon.

Books of this length and depth are rare in an age of academic publishing that sees most monographs limited to 500 pages or less. Jacqueline Alio has written a monumental work that transcends the ordinary. This is erudite scholarship at its best. *Queens of Sicily* is the kind of book that will be consulted and enjoyed for generations, beginning with our own.

— L. A. Mendola