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The Crown of Aragon and the Government of Sicily

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Topic/event Description

In 1282, on the occasion of the so-called Sicilian Vespers, the island of Sicily rebelled against its monarch Charles I of Anjou (1266–1285) and separated from Southern Italy. This event broke up the unity of the century-old Regnum Sicilie (Kingdom of Sicily), which was formally reunited only at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To resist Angevin attempts to retrieve the island, Sicilian communities offered the Crown to Peter III of Aragon (1276–1285). This choice was not accidental. Not only did this monarch possess one of the most powerful Mediterranean fleets, but he was married to Constance of Sicily, daughter of Manfred of Sicily (1258–1266), and in Sicilian eyes, the only legitimate heir to the Sicilian throne.

Although Sicily regained its independence in 1296 under a cadet branch of the House of Aragon, it remained within the Crown of Aragon’s political and economic sphere of influence. After the Sicilian Vespers, a number of Iberian aristocrats moved to the island, acquiring new lands and fully integrating with the local nobility through marriages and alliances. Moreover, the Catalan mercantile class gave the Crown its full economic support to conquer the island, hoping to position itself as the main competitor to Italian merchants. In the fourteenth century, the Catalan traders still had commercial hubs in Sicily and controlled the Mediterranean’s main routes, all of which had a mandatory stopover on the island.

In 1392, following the death of Frederick IV of Sicily (1355–1377) and the collapse of the Sicilian royal authority, the Crown of Aragon invaded the island to enthrone the Aragonese monarch’s grandson, Martin of Sicily (1392–1409). After the latter’s death, his homonymous father Martin I of Aragon (1396–1410) inherited the Kingdom of Sicily, which became a constituent member of the Catalan-Aragonese union. With the rise of the Castilian ruling dynasty of the Trastamaras (1412–1516), the new monarchs governed Sicily through viceroys and promoted the island’s growing political, social, and economic integration with the Crown of Aragon. This, in turn, led authorities to develop governmental strategies and information tools for ruling the realm from afar, building the institutional framework that the Spanish Empire then developed further and that was key in exercising its global dominance.

Perspective

Scholarship has investigated the socio-political, economic, and financial-institutional relationships between Sicily and the Crown of Aragon, focusing on the late-thirteenth and the fourteenth century. The fifteenth century, on the other hand, has mostly remained in the
background, although hundreds of governmental records and accounts survived for the period in both Sicilian and Iberian archives.

Historians have stressed that the Catalan conquest of Sicily in 1282 began the island’s permanent socio-political transformation. To establish a solid base of power, James II of Sicily (1285–1296) and his brother Frederick III (1296–1337)—under whom the island recovered its independence—knighted hundreds of faithful Sicilian and Iberian subjects (from the Aragonese and Catalan major aristocracies), entrusting them with fiefs, incomes, and royal offices. Despite the Kingdom of Sicily’s independence in the fourteenth century, the island and the Crown of Aragon maintained strong political and social relationships, with frequent interactions between Catalan and Sicilian royal dynasties and aristocracies. This process became even stronger during the fifteenth century, when the island was reincorporated within the Crown of Aragon. Under the Trastamara dynasty, an increasing number of Aragonese, Valencian, and Castilian nobles moved to Sicily and merged with local ruling classes, permanently changing the structure of Sicilian political society.

Second, following the Sicilian Vespers, the island became part of the Crown of Aragon’s economic area, strengthening its commercial relationships with Catalonia in particular. This led Catalan merchants (and to a lesser degree, Majorcans, and Valencians) to establish commercial hubs (consulates and vice consulates) in Palermo, Messina, and other towns; to obtain significant trading privileges for marketing from local ports; and, more importantly, to take over grain export across the Mediterranean. In the fourteenth century—when the Catalans preserved their privileged position in Sicily—commercial interactions between the Crown of Aragon and the island continued, with the Catalans exporting cloth in exchange for grain. As Mario Del Treppo discusses in his *I mercanti catalani* (1972), it was only in the fifteenth century that the Catalan-Aragonese economic area evolved into an organic trans-Mediterranean commercial system, following the strategy pursued by Alfonso V of Aragon (1416–1458), called the Magnanimous. This system consisted of two well-integrated and interconnected markets: a mostly manufacturing area including the Crown’s Iberian territories (with Valencia increasingly important), and a largely agricultural area in the Italian dominions.

Third, the Kingdom of Sicily and the Crown of Aragon had strong institutional relationships that reciprocally influenced both governmental systems. As soon as James I of Sicily became King of Aragon (1291), he brought to Barcelona the sophisticated Norman-Swabian administrative apparatus of Sicily. This led to the development of the Crown of Aragon’s royal chancery in the Sicilian style and to the establishment of the accounting office of the *mestre racional* (accounting master). After the island’s reincorporation into the Crown of Aragon in the late fourteenth century, monarchs introduced new offices, including the secretaries and the financial organ known as *conservator maior regii patrimonii* (higher conservator of the royal patrimony), and innovated local record-keeping and archival practices. The institutional relationships between Sicily and the Crown of Aragon were deep during the fifteenth century, when the island’s financial organs collected massive contributions for Alfonso the Magnanimous’ Italian campaigns.
Scope

In his early fourteenth century chronicle, Ramon Muntaner wrote that Catalans and Sicilians were, and forever would be, like brothers who always agree. As Jocelyn Hillgarth points out, this statement reflects the friendly interactions Peter III of Aragon had with his Sicilian subjects. While in Sardinia, the Crown of Aragon took a brutal colonial approach, excluding Sardinians from key administrative positions and treating them as separate from the Catalan “nation,” in Sicily the Catalans adopted a bargaining strategy that helped them rule peacefully. They fully involved the local political society in the island’s government, offered privileges and liberties to its urban centres, and allowed Sicilian merchants to trade. We may assume that a different governmental approach would have been impossible, for Sicily was geographically much more distant from Barcelona than Sardinia, and possessed centuries old institutional and political traditions that could not be eradicated or replaced with different administrative structures. Moreover, the agreement between Peter III and Sicilian political society established that the island would remain independent from the Crown of Aragon under a cadet branch of the Catalan dynasty. Although Sicily returned to independence in 1285 under James, Peter III’s second-born, the island was automatically absorbed by the Crown of Aragon in 1291, when the King of Sicily inherited all the Catalan-Aragonese dominions after the unexpected death of his brother Alfonso III (1285–1295).

Despite the supposedly undisputed brotherhood between Catalans and Sicilians, the latter—along with the Iberian aristocrats who had moved to the island—took the first opportunity they had to recover the Kingdom of Sicily’s independence, offering the Crown to Frederick (1296–1337), brother of James II of Aragon and lieutenant of Sicily. This let Sicily remain independent for about a century, although within the Crown of Aragon’s sphere of influence (as discussed above). The fourteenth century saw the gradual weakening of the Sicilian central authority to the advantage of the local aristocracy, which economically and politically supported the Crown in its defensive war against the Angevin kings of Naples. In the mid-fourteenth century, while the Black Death was ravaging Sicily and its economy was waver ing, a civil war began between the two main local aristocratic parties, known as the “Latins” and the “Catalans.” This conflict, narrated in the fourteenth-century chronicle (Historia Sicula) by Michele da Piazza, led to the collapse of the island’s governmental system in 1377, when King Frederick IV died leaving only a young daughter, Maria. The main aristocratic lineages put an end to the monarchy and divided the realm into four areas of influence (called “vicariates”) under their direct control.

When the Duke Martin of Montblanc, brother of the king of Aragon, invaded the island in 1392 to enthrone his young homonymous son as King of Sicily, new authorities promoted the restoration of Sicilian institutions. Duke Martin gave prominent positions to trustworthy Iberian officers and shifted the island’s governmental apparatus to uses typical of the Crown of Aragon’s central administration. This is attested, for instance, by the operation of the Sicilian royal chancery in the fourteenth century’s last decade. This experiment, however, was of short duration. As soon as Duke Martin went back to Barcelona to take the Crown of Aragon’s throne, his son restored the old-century Sicilian institutional traditions and removed
most of the Catalan officers operating in Sicily. Most probably, he hoped this would give him autonomy from his intrusive father and the latter’s men in Sicilian government. Yet the Catalan influence over Sicilian institutions endured, crucially influencing the Sicilian administration’s operation in later centuries. For instance, since 1392 Sicilian secretaries modelled on their Iberian counterparts worked at the service of the King of Sicily. However, rather than operating within the royal chancery as in Barcelona, Sicilian secretaries constituted an independent office with designated administrative personnel and its own records series. Less evident but equally important was the introduction of new record-keeping methods for preserving and organizing ongoing letters, as well as the implementation of a more functional archival system.

From a social perspective, as mentioned above, the island’s invasion of 1392 led to a new wave of transfers from Catalonia to Sicily, with a significant number of second-born aristocrats and petty nobles seeking their fortune on the island. The social interconnections between the Sicilian and the Iberian aristocracies can be seen in the plan Duke Martin devised in the 1380s—even before the invasion—to connect the highest aristocratic strata of Aragon and Catalonia through marriage to the Sicilian aristocracy’s main nine families and important members of urban elites. Although this plan did not work, as discussed by Pietro Corrao, it shows the duke’s attempt to build support for his son and new Sicilian king Martin and better integrate Sicily with the Crown of Aragon. Due to the Sicilian aristocracy’s rebellion (1392–1398) against the new Catalan authority, the transformation of the main strata of society was more radical than originally planned. After confiscating the immense feudal possessions of the Alagona, Chiaromonte, and other lineages, Duke Martin and his son Martin of Sicily parceled them out to the new regime’s Sicilian and Iberian supporters. The recipients of this feudal distribution were not just the highest members of military aristocracy like the *magister iusticiarius* Bernat Cabrera, who received the huge County of Modica, but others who obtained minor territorial possessions, demesne incomes or commercial privileges.

But as soon as Duke Martin became king of Aragon (1396–1410), many of the Catalans who had obtained fiefs in Sicily sold their possessions and returned to the Iberian peninsula. This meant that a number of feudal lands and aristocratic titles were sold, mostly to the urban ruling classes’ wealthiest members. This process accelerated in the following age of the Trastamara, with the urban elites—composed of both Sicilians and non-Sicilians—acquiring governmental offices thanks to their professional and technical expertise. Service to the Crown was a fundamental step for gaining more power, obtaining senior positions in central government and eventually becoming part of the higher aristocracy. These Sicilians, alongside the Italians (in particular from Tuscany) who supported the Crown economically, and Iberians from Valencia and later, increasingly, from Castile, shaped Sicilian society in the fifteenth century.

Unlike the realms of Sardinia and Maiorca, which during the later Middle Ages were fully Catalanized in terms of culture, language, and society, Sicily took a different direction. While Catalans remained dominant in the island’s commerce during the fifteenth century, their political role became increasingly marginal, with Catalan nobles at this point mostly
represented by their Sicilian descendants. From the mid-fifteenth century onward, Castilian aristocracy was predominant in Sicily, with important lineages acquiring titles and fiefs, including the aforementioned County of Modica, which the Castilian aristocrat Fadrique Enríquez, son of the Admiral of Castile Alfonso, acquired in 1481 by marrying Anna, the last heiress of the Catalan Cabrera family.

However, it should be stressed that the Sicilian native elite maintained significant power and made important contributions to Sicily’s government. In an un-written agreement for reciprocal benefit and maintaining peace, the Sicilian ruling classes supported the fifteenth-century kings of Aragon’s agenda politically and financially, in exchange for de facto administrative autonomy, which Henri Bresc vividly described as *autonomie surveillée*. Unlike the other territories of the Crown of Aragon, Sicily maintained its own institutions after it formally became a constituent member of the union in 1409, with the island’s central offices operating complementarily with the Crown of Aragon’s central administration, not as hierarchically subordinated organs. This meant that Sicily had a royal chancery with its own records series—even the kings of Aragon’s orders had to be transformed into Sicilian letters produced in loco—and its treasury with its own separate accounts, also preserving the centuries old local accounting office (*magna curia rationum*) entrusted with auditing accounts pertaining to the island. On top of this, King Alfonso the Magnanimous promoted the transformation of the Sicilian parliamentary assembly. On this circumstance, however, he followed the Iberian model of the *corts* or *cortes*, which perfectly suited the Crown’s governmental needs and the island’s autonomous’ tendencies. Starting in 1446, the Sicilian parliament was the main representative body of the realm’s political society (aristocracy, clergy, and urban elites) and the centre of the political and financial negotiation between the king and his subjects.

**Key Debates**

Over the last thirty years, scholarship has neglected the study of the Crown of Aragon as a union of territories under the rule of one dynasty, focusing instead on its components, often examined in isolation. The occasional exceptions to this historiographical approach explored the Crown of Aragon as a de facto union of Iberian territories, leaving the realms of Majorca and Sardinia—often examined as mere colonies—at the margins. Sicily and Naples, meanwhile, were mostly studied by Italian scholarship.

Although Sicily was formally independent from the Crown of Aragon for 113 years (1296–1409), the island remained within the Catalan-Aragonese commonwealth from the late thirteenth until the early sixteenth century, when it became part of the globally extended Spanish Empire. As discussed above, since the Sicilian Vespers the island had continuous political, social, institutional, and economic interactions with the Crown of Aragon. However, if in the thirteenth and fourteenth century those interactions mostly connected Sicily and Catalonia, in the fifteenth century they extended to all the other territories of the Crown and
even beyond. This is attested, for instance, by the economic relationships between Sicily and Valencia and Majorca, as well as the social connections between Sicilian aristocracy and Aragonese and Castilian lineages.

Studying the interactions between Sicily and the Crown of Aragon offers an opportunity to better understand how political unions worked in the pre-modern world. Here, we must remember that in the later Middle Ages multiple territories took the form of political unions, confederations, or empires, including the English Plantagenet Empire, the Venetian commonwealth, and the Polish-Lithuanian Union. To govern their territorial conglomerates, governments adopted strategies that ranged from an agreement between equivalent partners to a colonial/military approach for imposing foreign rule, sometimes involving a process of negotiation between authorities and their territories’ local political societies to define and/or update the respective authority of rulers and subjects. The latter is the case for the relationships between the Crown of Aragon and the Kingdom of Sicily, with their interactions changing over time.

It is undisputed that Sicily gained significant attention among economic and social historians as a case study of backwardness. Scholars looked at the pre-modern age to find the origins of that backwardness, which we can see in 1861 when it joined the Kingdom of Italy as a completely agricultural country with no industrial structure. Credit for scholarship’s attention to Sicily goes to the French historian Henri Bresc. His work—tellingly called *Un monde méditerranéen*—examined Sicily in its Mediterranean context and explained its backwardness by pointing to its commercial system based on exporting grain in exchange for cloth. This meant that in the later Middle Ages the realm’s wealth came solely from grain exports, which produced economic benefits not only for the monarchs—both the fourteenth-century Sicilian dynasty and the fifteenth-century kings of Aragon—but for the aristocracy and private entrepreneurs. According to Bresc, these economic mechanisms both created a monocultural system in Sicily and kept the island from starting any process of industrialization. Moreover, they crystallized a society with a dominant aristocracy and no local urban and mercantile class. On the other hand, British scholar Stephan Epstein proposed a different economic model that significantly diminished the impact of the supposed dualistic economic system (grain export/cloth import) on later Sicilian backwardness. According to Epstein, late-medieval Sicily had many more inhabitants than the number calculated by Bresc, which would suggest that grain exports from Sicily were less significant than previously indicated: in essence, grain fed a greater number of Sicilians than had been thought. Epstein argues that after the restoration of the Catalan-Aragonese authority in 1392, particularly during the age of the Trastamaras, Sicily had significant economic dynamism in terms of exports (not only grain, but also silk and sugar) and an integrated internal market. He attributes these to the economic strategy that the monarchs pursued in the fifteenth century, establishing areas that produced grain in western Sicily, and livestock farming, other agricultural products, silk, and cloth in eastern Sicily. This brought about a more intense commercialization of Sicilian society and a vibrant internal exchange of products that the Crown promoted by establishing a network of trade fairs. In addition, by granting commercial privileges to the foreign mercantile communities operating in Sicily, monarchs gave a new impulse to exports of grain.
and other products. According to Epstein, Sicily’s backwardness only begun in the context of the seventeenth century’s European economic crisis due to the island’s internal and external market structures, namely the Sicilian economy’s dependence on exports, and the lack of integration with the Kingdom of Naples.

At the political-institutional level, for a long-time historiography looked mostly at the Sicilian Vespers and the fourteenth century. This attention originated from the nineteenth-century scholars who examined the uprising against the Angevin foreign rulers and Sicily’s subsequent independence in the context of the Italian Risorgimento, a political and ideological movement that led to the peninsula’s unification and the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy (1861). This approach deeply influenced the analysis of the island’s political and institutional structures. For instance, traditional scholarship interpreted the above-mentioned civil war between the aristocratic factions of “Latinis” and “Catalans” from a nationalistic perspective, imagining a conflict between a fully Sicilian party and a foreign Iberian front. However, recent scholarship argues that the conflict was not generated by the national origins of the families involved, notwithstanding the labels given to two factions. Instead, the civil war resulted from those factions’ attempts to exert more influence over the weak Sicilian monarchs and control the distribution of political and economic resources.

Moreover, scholars examined the institutional framework established during the Norman age and developed under the emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen (1215–1250, but king of Sicily from 1198) as a permanent governmental structure that remained unchanged under various foreign rulers until the post-Napoleonic Regno delle Due Sicilie (1816), a new realm that included southern Italy and Sicily under a cadet branch of the House of Bourbon. In fact, far from remaining identical for six centuries, the Kingdom of Sicily’s institutional apparatus changed according to both monarchs’ governmental needs and the demands of Sicilian political society. The later Middle Ages were crucial for the transformation of the island’s institutions, which though they retained the same names, changed their roles and were integrated into the governmental super-structure of the Crown of Aragon, maintaining their independence and operating in parallel, not as hierarchical institutions subjugated to central administration. For instance, if the Crown of Aragon’s royal chancery issued privileges and letters valid for all the territories of the union, those documents had no effectiveness in Sicily unless the king was present on the island. To become legal, documents produced by the Crown of Aragon’s royal chancery had to be reissued by the Sicilian chancery according to its administrative procedures and traditions. Multiple institutional transformations occurred in Sicily, as shown above with the case of the Sicilian secretaries. The most significant transformation, however, took place in the financial sector. The establishment of the above-mentioned higher conservator of the royal patrimony put into motion a radical transformation of the financial system in which both the treasury and other magistracies entrusted with money collection, as well as the local accounting body, changed their role or took on new tasks. Even the transformation of the Sicilian parliamentary assembly according to the Iberian model resulted mostly from the evolution of the Sicilian financial-fiscal system, as it originated from the Crown’s need to impose a regular system of direct taxation.
Recent scholarship has shown that information played a crucial role in governing, whether authorities exercised direct rule on their subjects or ruled from afar through delegated authorities. This is the case of empires and political unions that operated in the later Middle Ages. In this respect, the Sicilian case study is of exceptional interest because the island, despite being part of the fifteenth-century Crown of Aragon, enjoyed a de facto institutional autonomy. The late-medieval kings of Aragon relied heavily on information to exercise their rule over their distant dominion or influence decision making. The Crown promoted in Sicily the accumulation and organization of information through refining or introducing record-keeping and bookkeeping methods based on the multiple transcription of letters, privileges, and accounts in regular series of book-form records and accounting books. This exceptional repository of information allowed distant authorities to retrieve records and accounts from the island whenever necessary. Although the Crown of Aragon’s central administration produced their own thematic series of records dedicated to Sicily, the monarchs needed to control the information directly produced and preserved on the island. Also crucial was the kings of Aragon’s promotion of the reorganization of the Sicilian realm’s central archival system, which had been destroyed on the occasion of the Messina royal palace’s fire in 1356. With the subsequent collapse of the royal authority, the remaining records and accounts were dispersed, and under the Martins and Trastamaras there was limited success in retrieving them. Only under Alfonso the Magnanimous did the Crown finally establish permanent, centralized archives in Palermo, with dedicated personnel and standardized archiving procedures. Last but not least, the kings of Aragon relied on a network of trustworthy Iberian and Sicilian officers in Sicily’s central and territorial administration, as well as unofficial informants (merchants and others), to keep the Crown informed of a vast range of affairs pertaining to financial strategies, institutional reforms, appointments of officers, and so on. This news complemented official records, even influencing monarchs’ decision-making processes.

Further Reading


This book examines the two-hundred-year war for the control of the Kingdom of Sicily between the kings of Aragon and the Angevin rulers of Naples.


An analysis of the Kingdom of Sicily under King Frederick III, focusing on the contributing factors for its political and economic collapse in the fourteenth century.


A fundamental work on the Kingdom of Sicily’s economic system and political society, examined in the Mediterranean context.

A seminal work on the Kingdom of Sicily under the Martins (1392–1410) and the subsequent establishment of the viceregal system, with a focus on the island’s society and institutions.


A detailed and thorough account of the late-medieval Kingdom of Sicily’s political and social history.


This monograph explores the Crown of Aragon’s trans-Mediterranean commercial and economic system.


A celebrated study that innovated the analysis of the Sicilian economy and society of the later Middle Ages.


A fundamental essay exploring the Catalan expansion across the Mediterranean between the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.


A comprehensive study on the emergence and development of Sicilian aristocracy in the late Middle Ages.


The foremost monograph dedicated to the government of Sicily in the fifteenth century and the institutional and financial relationships between the island and the Crown of Aragon.