This is the first detailed study of Sicilian life in the reign of Frederick III (1296–1337), a period which marked Sicily's transition from a bustling and prosperous Mediterranean emporium to a poor backwater torn apart by violence.

The relative economic and social backwardness of Sicily, above all since the time of the nineteenth-century unification of Italy, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Most attempts to explain Sicily's ingrained poverty and civil strife have fallen into one of two main camps: those – chiefly Sicilians themselves – who blame the legacy of 2,000 years of colonization by rapacious foreigners, and those – chiefly non-Sicilians – who in one way or another blame the inherent weaknesses in the island itself and its people. More recently a model of "economic dualism" has been emphasized, which points to basic structural flaws in the economic relations that were established between the island and its continental trading partners from the twelfth century onwards.

This book, by focusing on Frederick III's crucial reign, argues that there were many more things "wrong" with Sicilian life than just the shape of its overseas trade relations. Placing itself between those who blame the foreigners and those who blame the Sicilians themselves, it shows that an entire nexus of factors and influences were at work in unraveling Sicilian life. It also demonstrates that these forces can be seen best in the forty years that followed Sicily's liberation from foreign control in the bloody war of the "Sicilian Vespers."

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF MEDIEVAL SICILY

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF MEDIEVAL SICILY

Politics, religion, and economy in the reign of Frederick III, 1296–1337

CLIFFORD R. BACKMAN

Boston University

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521496643

First published 1995
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Backman, Clifford R.
The decline and fall of medieval Sicily: politics, religion, and
economy in the reign of Frederick III, 1296–1337 / Clifford R. Backman
p. cm.
Based on the author's doctoral dissertation, UCLA. Cf. Preface.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 49664 0
1. Sicily (Italy) – History – 1282–1409. 2. Frederick II, king of Sicily,
1272–1337. I. Title.
DG867.5.B33 1995
945′.804–dc20 94-48333 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-49664-3 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-52181-9 Paperback

To Nelina

Contents

Preface

Sicily inspires strong emotions, and few who travel there fail to come away with conflicting feelings about the island and its people. Plato thought it a place of great potential until the harshness of everyday life there became plain to him; in the end, he could endure no more than a stay of a few weeks. Goethe fell in love with its cloudless blue skies and scenic coastline – parts of which (such as at Taormina and Monte Pellegrino) he reckoned to be among the most beautiful spots on earth – and his insights into the culture and economy led him to conclude that the island was "the key" to understanding all of Italy. But, even so, he recoiled from the poverty and meanness he saw in each city and hurried back to the mainland as soon as he could. And Bertrand Russell, who always had a sharp eye for what pleased him and a sharper tongue for what did not, thought the island to be "unimaginably beautiful" but the people to be "a revelation of human degradation and bestiality." My own first impressions remain vivid: blazing heat, a ubiquitous scent of lemons, the flowers and songs of a saint's-day festival in a mountain village, a riotous fishing expedition off Pantelleria, the mosaics of the cathedral in Monreale. I also saw many of the sights that so horrified Russell and Goethe, although to my eyes it was the poverty in which the people were trapped, not the people themselves, that was degrading and bestial.

The bulk of the historical literature dealing with Sicily parallels or mirrors the polarized nature of people's reactions to the island. Ranging from romanticized wailings of outraged innocence (Sicily as the victim of foreign tyranny) to irritable censures of outrageous incompetence (Sicily as the victim of its own lack of talent and superabundance of corruption), this literature has contributed powerfully to popular bias regarding the island and its people. These prejudices have a long genealogy and indeed, as I argue in

this book, they began to emerge as early as the first half of the fourteenth century. But the problem of how to perceive Sicily has taken on particular importance ever since the unification of Italy in 1870 – and the role of Garibaldi and his southern supporters in that cause – highlighted anew the disparities between the economic and social developments of northern Italy and the *Mezzogiorno*. This "southern question" has troubled four generations of Italians and, with the approach of a unified European economy, the issue now lies before a larger audience: what to do with the poor, backward south? What was it that caused this seemingly ineradicable underdevelopment? Can such persistent problems of ingrained poverty, poor education, institutional corruption, and reflexive distrust of outsiders be explained, much less solved? Opinions have varied widely, but there has been a general consensus that, on the economic level at least, Sicily fell permanently behind the rest of Italy at some point in the later Middle Ages.[1]

In the twelfth century the Norman kingdom of Sicily was one of the strongest and wealthiest states in Europe. Roger II, in his imposing new palace at Palermo, enjoyed revenues at least four times greater than those of the contemporary king of England, which he derived from a vibrant and variegated economy. By the end of the fourteenth century, however, Sicily was in ruins physically, economically, and morally. War, plague, and famine had killed hundreds of thousands of people; the diverse rural economy had taken a disastrous turn to grain monoculture; and a once strong central government had given way to a petty baronialism that eventually gave birth to a proto-Mafia. Yet, remarkably, Sicily's fortunes rebounded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the population and the economy grew rapidly, government became more stable, and cultural life (at the aristocratic level, at least) took on a new vibrancy under the impact of Spanish Gothic and continental humanism. What, then, caused the late medieval collapse? How permanent were its consequences? And why did the recovery of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries fail to effect more widespread and long-lasting social development?

[1] Giuseppe Galasso, "Considerazioni intorno alla storia del Mezzogiorno in Italia," in his collection of essays, *Mezzogiorno medievale e moderno* (Turin, 1975), pp. 15–59, summarizes the debate.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries two schools of thought offered competing answers to these questions. The first argued that, on account of fixed geographical and hereditary factors, Sicily had *always* been doomed to failure. The story of the late Middle Ages was not one of decline from an assumed earlier golden period, but rather one of the same plodding poverty and backwardness that had been there all along. Norman glories had indeed been glorious, but they were Norman, not Sicilian. This school, with its stress upon genetic factors and its implicit belief in immutable historical fates, clearly betrays its nineteenth-century origins. The second school, comprised chiefly of native Sicilian writers, emphasized instead Sicily's victimization. Some argued that the island's troubles actually began with the arrival of the Normans who, by imposing a foreign and artificial feudal structure on society, fundamentally crippled it at a time when urban–commercial energies were first being released in the northern communes. Others, most notably Benedetto Croce, identified the revolution known as the Sicilian Vespers, and the two decades of war it sparked, as the culprit. This struggle – which began when Sicilian mobs rose against their Angevin rulers in 1282, bloodily overthrew them, and ultimately offered the throne instead to the royal family of the then fast-growing Crown of Aragon confederation centered in Barcelona – not only depleted vast amounts of human and material resources during the twenty years of fighting that followed, but even more disastrously resulted in the permanent rupture of Sicily from its traditional political and cultural partner in southern Italy – Naples. All the foreign meddling that was involved in finding a solution to Sicily's dynastic problem, this school asserts, resulted in a permanently structurally handicapped Sicilian world. Croce's interpretation proved to be remarkably resilient, and it still lives on in the works of Steven Runciman and a few others. Behind this line of thought there lies a firm assumption of the primacy of political and institutional factors – an assumption no longer accorded much currency by most historians, who instead seek the answers to the Sicilian problem in economic factors.

Through most of the decades since World War II, a model of "economic dualism" has steadily attracted support as the best explanation not only of Sicily's underdevelopment but of the backwardness of many decolonized lands all around the

world.[2] This model, in general, posits a traditional nexus of complementary, or mutually dependent, economic relations between two lands, or between discrete regions of the same state – one being dominant or "advanced," the other acquiescent or "backward" – that alone gives the territories involved economic viability; but this linkage results actually in a "blocked" economy for the subservient partner that merely survives and never thrives. The "advanced" partner, being based on manufacturing and commerce, adopts a quasi-paternalistic or even an overtly colonial attitude towards the "backward" agricultural sector. As far as Sicily is concerned, the dualists assert, the predominance of the rural basis of the Sicilian economy, and its transition from varied agricultural production to grain monoculture, made the island inescapably dependent on the manufactures of the northern communes. The trend to monoculture began with the Norman conquest and the consequent shift of Sicily's foreign commerce away from north Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, where there was ample demand for a variety of Sicilian products, and towards continental Europe, where demand for wheat predominated to the virtual exclusion of everything else. As a consequence, the uncommercialized nature of the rural economy made it increasingly impossible to generate domestic industries, since greater outlays of capital were required to start up a new manufacture, or to resuscitate a moribund one, than were needed to maintain an on-going enterprise; moreover, the institutional and cultural constraints that hampered the movement of labor from the rural to the industrial sector made it more difficult for the populace to acquire the skills it would need, even if capital were available, to initiate a more advanced level of economic activity. Thus the more Sicily came to depend on its agricultural production, the more impossible it became for the overall economy, and the social structures that depended upon it, to develop. This resulted in a "blocked" economy and a structurally decreed state of underdevelopment. And this increasing dependence on agriculture was made permanent by the

[2] See, for example, the essays gathered in *Il Mezzogiorno medievale nella storiografia del secondo dopoguerra: risultati e prospettive*, ed. Pietro De Leo (Cosenza, 1985), Atti del IV Convegno nazionale dell'Associazione dei medioevalisti italiani: Università di Calabria, 12–16 giugno 1982; and in *Sviluppo e sottosviluppo in Europa e fuori d'Europe dal secolo XIII alla Rivoluzione industriale*, ed. A. Guarducci (Florence, 1983), Istituto internazionale di storia economica "Francesco Datini," Pubblicazioni, 2nd ser., vol. x.

cataclysmic Vespers struggle, for by losing its connections with Naples, Sicily was left without the means of maintaining its own economic diversity and viability, leaving it increasingly at the mercy of the merchants from Catalonia, Genoa, Pisa, and Florence, who were interested in only one thing – grain.[3]

This model, with certain adaptations provided by writers like Henri Bresc, Stephan Epstein, and David Abulafia, sheds much light on the Sicilian problem and provides a useful starting point for further study. Epstein's great contribution has been to indicate the extent to which the interior, domestic economy of the island had greater overall influence on society than did the foreign trade that is so central to the dualist theory – and must therefore be taken into account whenever analyzing the "Sicilian problem." Abulafia, by contrast, highlights foreign trade but points out that it was actually the northern communes, not the Sicilians, who were economically "blocked." Being unable to feed themselves, the Genoese, Pisans, and Florentines had no option but to industrialize and diversify; without industry Sicily certainly would not thrive, but without agriculture the north would not even survive.

The jury is still out on dualism as an interpretive model. Its beauty lies in its simplicity, but like many such cases it is the very simplicity of the theory that makes it suspect to some writers, economists and historians alike.[4] Apart from disagreement over some specifics (such as the argument that Sicily produced nothing else for which there was continental demand; in fact sugar, cotton, and alum were easily available in Sicily and were highly prized across Europe), my own objection is not with the theory itself but with the nearly exclusive explanatory role its adherents have assigned it. Among some of them, such as Henri Bresc, the dualist diagnosis of Sicily's ills is asserted with a calm certainty that resembles the self-confident belief in historical fate elucidated by the historians of the nineteenth century.

In hopes of offering a subtler response to the Sicilian problem, I suggest in this book that there were many more things "wrong"

[3] The first person to put forth a fully developed dualist explanation for the *Mezzogiorno* was Gino Luzzatto, *Storia economica dell'età moderna e contemporanea*, 4th edn. (Padua, 1955); and Luzzatto, *Breve storia economica dell'Italia medievale dalla caduta dell'Impero romano al principio del Cinquecento*, 2nd edn. (Turin, 1965).

[4] See the discussion in R. Hodson and R. L. Kaufman, "Economic Dualism: A Critical Review," *American Sociological Review* 47 (1982), 727–39.

with medieval Sicily than simply its economy, and that in order to understand the enormity of the island's suffering in the fourteenth century we must take into account aspects of Sicilian life that certainly bore relation to, but were not entirely dependent on, economic concerns. Among these other factors are a knot of ethnic rivalries, persistent problems in spiritual life, faults and shortcomings in the physical infrastructure of the island, a set of technological hurdles that made improvements in daily life unnecessarily difficult, changes in demographic patterns (especially the dramatic proportionate increase in women among the populace), administrative failures at the royal and local levels, and the development of an overbred sense of personal and family "honor" and the violence it justified in the face of any perceived threat to it. Many of these problems were of long standing, but for a number of reasons, as this book argues, they came to a head during the reign of Frederick III (1296–1337).

Frederick was the third of the Catalan kings of Sicily, successor to his elder brother James who had relinquished the crown in order to receive papal acknowledgment of his inheritance as ruler of the Crown of Aragon. Intensely pious and idealistic, Frederick presided over Sicily's post-war reconstruction, once the war with Angevin Naples finally came to an end in 1302 with a limited Sicilian victory. Though not a very gifted ruler, he nevertheless showed a fair degree of acumen by recognizing that the island had become atomized: petty baronies divided the interior between them, the coastal cities acted as independent agents, domestic trade was limited to the local level with virtually no trade at all between the larger zones (*valli*) of the realm, and a plethora of local customs and tariffs made efficient and fair administration virtually impossible. The central policy behind the reconstruction, therefore, was to promote Sicily's internal integration and to create a sense of the island as an organic whole – as a true "Kingdom of Sicily" and not as a mere congeries of loose-cannon towns and estates united only by the fact that they all hated the Angevins more than they hated each other. For a while, Frederick succeeded. Within a few years of the end of the war, Sicilian life had improved so greatly that the king began to believe the wild prophecies made about him by the apocalyptic prophet Arnau de Vilanova, who eventually assigned Frederick the role of the great reformer of Christendom who would lead the final successful crusade against Islam, would root out all the corruption

in the church and in European society, and would prepare the world for battle with Antichrist. What's more, the Sicilian people began to believe it too; and soon an ecstatic wave of evangelical fervor rushed over the populace that inspired vast numbers of men and women to abandon their families and farmsteads in order to follow itinerant preachers and listen to their claims of how the world was soon to end in glory, and how the Sicilians themselves were going to overthrow Antichrist just as they had overthrown the Angevins in 1282. But then, mid-way through Frederick's reign, a host of forces came together to undo all that had been achieved: the recovery fell apart and Sicily began a dismal slide into poverty and violence. An integrated, reformed, and divinely favored "Kingdom of Sicily" gave way, after about 1317, to a fractured and fractious society upon which, they feared, God had turned His back, and where Armageddon was still expected – but no longer with joyful confidence. This book attempts to explain why.

Frederick's reign began with high hopes and ended in misery. The real disasters were yet to come, when Frederick died: the Black Death and a shockingly savage series of civil wars among the petty lords who were tearing up the countryside. But the groundwork of ruin was firmly laid by 1337, and this book argues that it was precisely this groundwork that went on to undermine Sicilian development in later centuries. The most remarkable thing about Sicily's economic recovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, after all, is that it didn't solve Sicily's problems. If the island was not "behind" the rest of Europe by that time (and I am so far unconvinced by arguments that it wasn't), it was certainly a place set apart, a pariah and a backwater, isolated and disdained.

The surviving records for late medieval Sicily are relatively meager when compared to most western Mediterranean territories of the age – the result of damage done to the archives during World War II – and this makes it difficult to assert anything too boldly. But enough remains to offer compelling glimpses of this intriguing society at a point of unique challenge. In pursuing those glimpses, I have tracked down virtually every surviving document and manuscript from those forty-one years that I have heard of or seen reference to. This would have been impossible without the personal kindness and professional efficiency of many people and institutions. I am grateful to the staffs of all the following for their help.

In Barcelona: the Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, the Biblioteca de Catalunya, and the Biblioteca de la Universitat de Barcelona. In Catania: the Archivio di Stato. In London: the British Library. In Messina: the Archivio di Stato and the Biblioteca universitaria. In Oxford: the Bodleian Library. In Palermo: the Archivio di Stato, the Biblioteca centrale della regione di Sicilia, and the Biblioteca comunale. In Trapani: the Archivio di Stato and the Biblioteca Fardelliana. And in Vatican City: the Biblioteca apostolica vaticana. Within the United States I have debts outstanding in three principal sites. In Boston: Boston University's Mugar Library, the Boston Public Library, and Harvard University's Widener Library. In Los Angeles: the University Research Library of UCLA and the Institute of Medieval Mediterranean Spain. And in Providence: the John Hay Special Collections Library at Brown University. Generous financial assistance was given by the Del Amo Foundation in Los Angeles (during this project's first incarnation as my doctoral dissertation at UCLA), by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and by both the Seed Grant Program and the Humanities Foundation of Boston University. My deepest thanks to all of them.

I wish to thank the two men who co-directed the dissertation on which this book is based: Robert I. Burns, S.J., and Bengt T. Löfstedt. Much of whatever is good in this book is owed to their knowledge and patience, and one of the best things about publishing these results is the opportunity it affords to thank them in public. Their recent retirements from active teaching leave a great institution much diminished. David Abulafia (Cambridge University) and Robert Lerner (Northwestern University) gave advice and encouragement at critical times. My colleague at Boston University, James McCann, split the rent with me and rallied my occasionally sagging spirits during a memorable summer in Rome. To William Davies, of Cambridge University Press, I owe thanks for the interest he showed in this project.

It is rewarding to be able, at last, to thank all the members of my family for the good-natured support they have shown over the years to a wayward son who was determined to study "something practical" (?!) like medieval history instead of pointless ephemera like medicine or particle physics. My mother, Mary Betker, has waited a long time to see this book finally in print. She and my stepfather Al Betker encouraged my love of books and taught me the

virtues of hard work and of seeing a project through to the end. My parents-in-law, Charles and Roelina Berst, unfailingly offered sound advice, good humor, excellent meals, tragic puns, and endless tales about George Bernard Shaw and the continuing parking difficulties on the UCLA campus. Apart from the exuberant generosity that marks everything they do, they gave me the best and most exuberantly generous gift of all – my wife Nelina. She has never been to Sicily, and yet she has patiently endured and even encouraged all of my passion for the place. We met just before I left for the Barcelona archives, in 1987, to start work on my "Sicilian thing," and so it is a special pleasure to share its end with her. She has loved me beyond all hope and sense. To her the book is, like its author, entirely dedicated.

POSTSCRIPT

Portions of chapter 5 originated as articles: "The Papacy, the Sicilian Church, and King Frederick III, 1302–1321," *Viator* 22 (1991), 229–49; and "Arnau de Vilanova and the Franciscan Spirituals in Sicily," *Franciscan Studies* 50 (1990), 3–29. I am grateful to the publishers of each journal, for permission to reprint.

Note on currency and measures

The basic unit of currency in medieval Sicily, even though it was never actually minted, was the gold ounce (Latin *uncia*, or Italian *onza*). Smaller coins, actually circulated, were the *tarinus* (Italian *tarì*) and the *granus* (Italian *grano*). A still smaller denomination, the *denarius* (one-sixth of a *grano*), existed but will not be used here. One ounce represented thirty *tarì*; and each *tarì* was in turn worth twenty *grani*. Thus 1 ounce = 30 *tarì* = 600 *grani* = 3,600 *denari*. Omitting *denari*, the following notation will be used in this book: 00.00.00. Thus, for example, 12.16.09 represents 12 ounces, 16 *tarì*, and 9 *grani*.

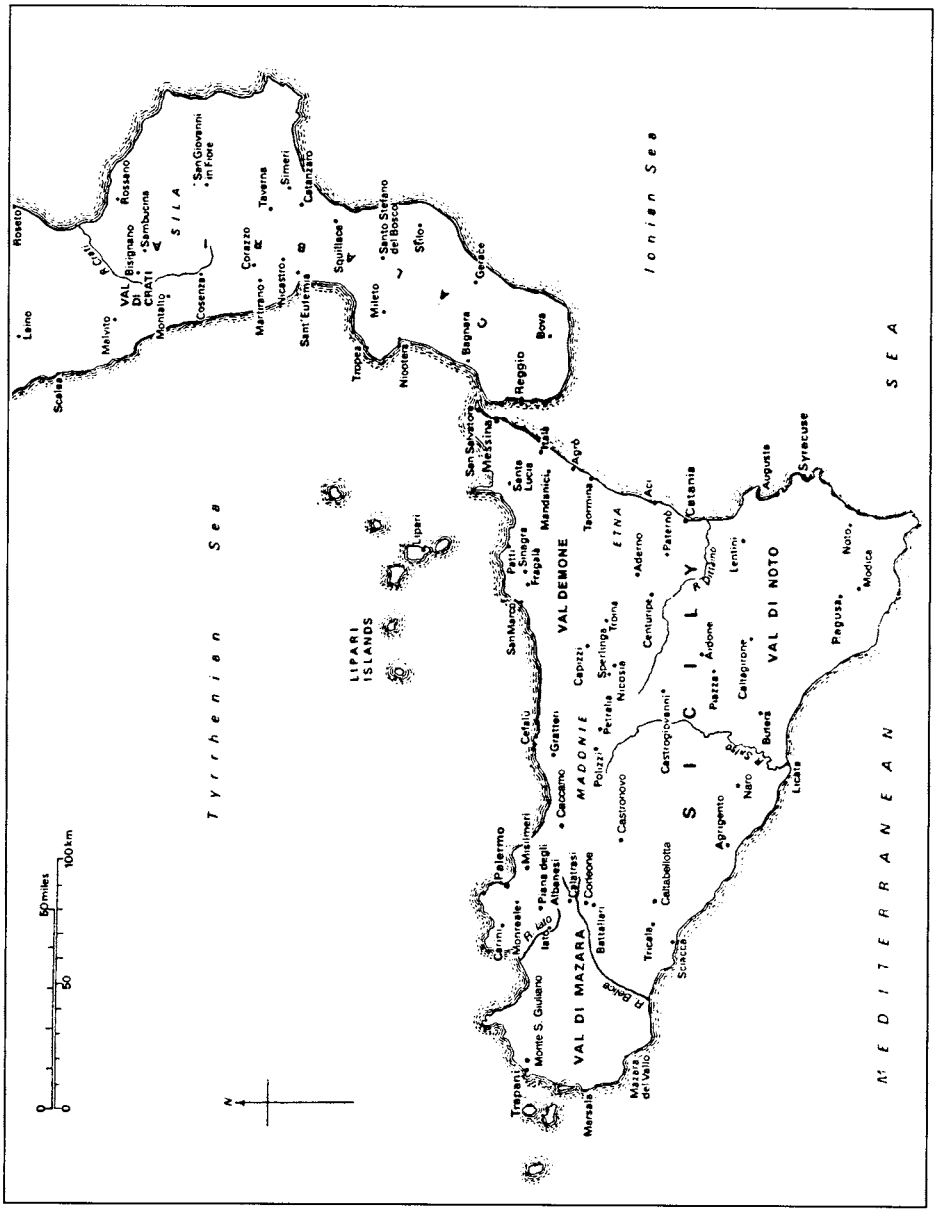
Dry goods like grains and legumes were measured in a unit called a *salma* (pl. *salme*). Two standards were used in the fourteenth century: in western Sicily a single *salma* represented 0.128 bushels (275 liters) or, to figure in the reverse direction, one bushel of grain made up 7.8 *salme*. In eastern Sicily the *salma* was 20 percent larger (or 1 *salma* = 0.154 bushels = 330 liters). But the smaller *salma*, sometimes called the *salma generale*, is that most commonly used by scholars, and I follow their convention. The unit derived as an estimation of the minimum amount of grain needed to support a single individual for an entire year.

Abbreviations

(For full bibliographical citations, see Bibliography.)

ACA	Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Barcelona
Acta curie	*Acta curie felicis urbis Panormi*, ed. Francesco Giunta et al., in 6 vols.
ArchStperSic	*Archivio storico per la Sicilia*
ArchStSic	*Archivio storico siciliano*
ArchStSicOr	*Archivio storico per la Sicilia Orientale*
ASC	Archivio di Stato, Catania
ASM	Archivio di Stato, Messina
ASP	Archivio di Stato, Palermo
BCP	Biblioteca comunale di Palermo
bk.	book(s)
Canc.	chancery, cancelleria, cancillería
Cartas	Cartas reales diplomáticas
ch.	chapter(s)
CSIC	Consejo superior de investigaciones científicas
DSSS	Documenti per servire alla storia di Sicilia
EEMCA	*Estudios de la Edad Media de la Corona de Aragón*
FAA	*Acta aragonensia*, ed. Heinrich Finke
GAKS	*Gesammelte Aufsätze für Kulturgeschichte Spaniens*
GG	*Acta siculo-aragonensia*, vol. II, ed. Francesco Giunta and Antonino Giuffrida
Lettres communes	*Jean XXII (1316–1334): Lettres communes,* ed. Guy Mollat
MM	*Mediterraneo medievale: Scritti in onore di Francesco Giunta*, 3 vols.
MRC	Magna Regia Curia
Not.	notary, notario, notario
Perg.	parchment, pergamena, pergamino

QFIAB	*Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*
Reg.	register, registro, registro
Reg. Benedict XI	*Le registre de Bénédict XI*, ed. Charles Grandjean
Reg. Boniface VIII	*Les registres de Boniface VIII*, ed. Georges Digard et al.
Reg. Clement V	*Regestum Clementis papae V . . . cura et studio monachorum ordinis S. Benedicti*
RGBS	*Biblioteca scriptorum qui res in Sicilia gestas sub Aragonum imperio retulere,* ed. Rosario Gregorio
RPSS	*Sicilia sacra*, ed. Rocco Pirri (3rd edn.)
SDS	*Storia della Sicilia*, ed. Rosario Romeo
Spez.	spezzone
Tab.	tabulario
Testa	*Capitula regni Sicilie,* ed. Francesco Testa
XI Congresso	*XI Congresso di storia della Corona d'Aragona*



Sicily in the early fourteenth century