THE DECLINE AND FALL OF MEDIEVAL SICILY

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

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CHAPTER I

The kingdom at risk

In the spring of 1314 King Robert of Naples consulted a soothsayer. He was planning a new assault on Sicily, the island-kingdom whose rebellious citizens had driven his grandfather from the throne in 1282 and placed themselves instead under the royal house of Catalonia–Aragon, and he wanted to know his chances for success. He had good reason to feel confident. The previous August, the German emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg – Dante's hero, Robert's nemesis, and the Sicilians' most powerful ally – had died unexpectedly while campaigning to unite all of Italy under his command. Moreover, the ever expanding Crown of Aragon confederation, of which Sicily was now a loose satellite, had for the moment committed the bulk of its military resources to the conquest of Sardinia. Sicily lay temptingly exposed, ripe for the taking.

According to Nicola Speciale's racy *Historia sicula*, our only source for this story, the augur told Robert (as augurs will) that he would indeed gain "Sicily and all her possessions." These last words must have clinched the deal in Robert's mind, for among Sicily's possessions since 1311 was the duchy of Athens, a small but valuable principality also previously under Angevin control and still much coveted by the throne in Naples. Thus encouraged, Robert launched his attack. His fleet landed at the far western end of Sicily's long northern shore, near Castellamare. This was a rather desolate region, but a good place to land because of it. From there his soldiers, having avoided the harbor defenses of the major port cities, could easily move inland and burn the poorly defended fields, vineyards, and villages. Such tactics had served him well in the past: apart from the damage caused to the local economy wherever he struck, these rural raids had the additional benefit of aggravating the seldom dormant peasant and baronial frustration with the

Catalan regime in faraway Messina that so consistently failed to protect the villagers. This discontent was strongest in the western provinces, where Robert aimed the bulk of his attacks. After his soldiers had secured a beachhead and had advanced a short way inland, they came across a woman from nearby Alcamo who was trying desperately to escape into the mountains, and captured her. Although obviously a pauper and dressed "in the filthiest of torn rags" she was evidently a comely woman, for the soldiers, after questioning her about conditions on the island, sent her to Robert's tent. There the king passed his eye over her and asked her what her name was. She replied: "Sicilia."

At these words Robert started and, with the ironic twist common to soothsaying stories, he suddenly understood the true meaning of the prophecy given to him back in Naples: he would gain nothing from his bold venture save this ruined woman and whatever tattered possessions she carried. He reboarded his ships in a fury and sailed further westward to Trapani, where he hoped to avenge his hurt pride and salvage something of value from his efforts by laying siege to the relatively well-to-do merchant center there. But the Sicilians were ready for him, because their soldiers, who earlier had rushed to join the emperor Henry at Pisa, only to learn upon arriving there of his death, had returned to Sicily by way of Sardinia and had themselves landed precisely there at Trapani only a short time before. Stationed in Monte S. Giuliano (modern Erice) on the high ground behind Trapani, they rushed to the city and held the Angevins at bay while an urgent command from their king, Frederick III (also present), soon brought a reinforcement contingent of sixty-five galleys racing from Messina.

The Angevins were trapped. They controlled part of the city, but were unable to advance on land or to retreat by sea. Caught between an impenetrable defense line at their front and a pressing naval counterattack at their rear, they appeared to be on the verge of annihilation. By this stroke of rare good fortune the Sicilians' dream of a definitive and successful end to their drawn-out conflict with Naples seemed to be at hand. Battle was joined – a long and trying double-sided siege.

But bad harvests in the three preceding years had resulted in a severe food shortage throughout the kingdom; hunger gnawed at both sides. The Angevin soldiers stalked through the city and found sufficient stores of food to keep them, for the moment, relatively

well supplied. But those supplies would not last long. The problem for Frederick's forces, however, for those on land as well as for the sailors ringing the city, was even more severe. They could not risk sending any of their galleys off in search of supplies without giving the Angevins a chance at escape (for sixty-five galleys, although a large force, were barely enough to enclose the long, scimitar-shaped promontory that Trapani inhabits); and the land forces held positions largely outside the city, where salt-pans and alum mines outnumbered crop fields. Food would have to be brought in from a distance, provided that any could be found. But as month followed month and expenses continued to mount, Frederick soon ran out of money with which to buy new supplies or to pay his soldiers' wages. When rations grew smaller and less frequent rebellion broke out, and with it a total collapse of discipline. The soldiers saw little reason to continue risking their lives for a king who could not pay them or for a city that could not feed them. Frustrated, hungry, and impatient, they began to desert in large numbers in order to scavenge and pillage their own countryside, while the king looked on in horror. Since neither side was thus able to continue the fight, Robert and Frederick agreed to a truce that each felt was humiliating.[1]

This episode from Speciale's history resonates with meaning. His portrayal of "Sicily" as a ruined beauty is particularly apt, for by the early fourteenth century the kingdom was indeed in a frightful state of decline. It had been one of the wealthiest states in Europe in the twelfth century and its rulers had controlled the central Mediterranean, or had at least bullied people into thinking that they did. The royal palace had played host to an exceptionally lively troubadour and scientific court culture, while the realm's commercial life had been enviably varied and profitable: to the rich agricultural produce of the land (grains, citrus, olives, and wine, chiefly) were added cotton and silk manufactures, dyeworks, alum mining, and a prominent role in the lucrative slave trade. But hard times had fallen on the island since then. Hohenstaufen rule, a combination of rigid authoritarianism and careless neglect, gave

[1] Nicola Speciale (Nicolaus Specialis), *Historia sicula in VIII libros distributa ab anno MCCLXXXII usque ad annum MCCCXXXVII*, in *RGBS* I, see bk. II, ch. 4–6. See also Salvatore Romano, "Sulla battaglia della Falconaria e sull'assedio di Trapani nel 1314," *ArchStSic*, 2nd ser., 25 (1900–1), 380–95.

way in 1265, by papal fiat, to seventeen years of detested Angevin control. Under both of these dynasties local challenges to the increasingly centralized monarchy had been suppressed with a heavy hand. Charles I of Anjou, for example, had ordered the torture and execution of the entire population of Augusta after its inhabitants joined a rebellion against him. Landholdings had been confiscated from Sicilian barons and awarded instead to the foreign nobility. The underdeveloped but cherished communal institutions of the coastal cities had been suppressed everywhere. Manufacturing had slowed as a result of the chaos in the cities; and whatever profits did accrue had been largely siphoned off in order to fund first Hohenstaufen adventures in the Levant and later Angevin campaigns on the Italian mainland and in Greece.

Life changed dramatically for the Sicilians, if briefly, with the arrival of the Catalans in 1282. Under kings Peter (1282–5) and James (1285–95) an impressive recovery began, aided by the sudden availability of Catalan arms, organizational skills, and cash. By the time the so-called War of the Vespers ended in 1302 – with James's younger brother Frederick on the throne, after six years of energetic campaigning – the future looked promising. The Treaty of Caltabellotta, signed in that year, confirmed Frederick as the legitimate "King of Trinacria" (an anachronistic title designed to keep alive Angevin claims) for the rest of his life; henceforth the popular war hero could turn his energies to rebuilding his realm. And, indeed, for a decade after Caltabellotta the Sicilians enjoyed a surprising improvement in their fortunes, both commercial and cultural, that would have seemed impossible twenty-five years earlier. Freed from hated French control, they were, if not independent, at least under the governance of a reasonably friendly foreign regime that had sworn to preserve all local privileges and customs and to institute a regular parliament that would possess a measure of real power. The Catalans also offered a network of commercial contacts that spanned the Mediterranean, and they were committed to religious revival and reform, both of which Sicily sorely needed.

Moreover, a military alliance with Catalonia, furtively arranged after Caltabellotta, protected them from renewed Angevin attack and seemed to ensure the new government's ability to put an end to the unabated infighting of Sicily's belligerent inland barons. Within a few years of the war's end the government managed to

standardize and liberalize the kingdom's burdensome tariff code and to restore most of the lands and goods confiscated by opportunistic barons and grasping clerics during the war. Scores of new churches, schools, hospitals, and monasteries sprang from the ground or were rebuilt from ruins and generously reendowed. Frederick, true to his promise, convened an annual parliament and, remarkably, gave it final authority over foreign policy. For the first time in years, almost beyond the memory of anyone then alive, Sicilians believed that a measure of peace and prosperity had come, or would soon come, to their long-troubled land.

But the reemergence of hostilities with Naples signalled the end of the brief ascendancy. At the midpoint of Frederick's reign a wide variety of factors – of which the struggle with Robert was merely one, and not necessarily the greatest – catalyzed to bring about a startling unraveling of Sicilian life. Speciale's narrative suggests, with the aid of hindsight, that this decline was in full swing as early as 1314; but a case may be made for pushing that date forward to 1317 or even 1321. Nevertheless, by Frederick's death in 1337, fully a decade before the arrival of the Black Death, Sicily was a ruin of poverty, violence, and bitter discontent. A severe demographic decline, one that would eventually reach staggering proportions, had begun, leaving villages, farms, monasteries, and some whole towns empty and lifeless and their buildings in decay. A crippling burden of illiteracy still weighed down the populace that remained. Angevin armies, having renewed their attacks in 1317 and 1321, by 1325 had penetrated the hinterland and laid waste vast stretches of farmland; scores of villages were razed, and at least a handful of larger towns raided, before the attackers were finally driven from the island by the king's few remaining loyal troops. In the wake of this campaign, a round of civil wars, between vendetta-driven baronial families on one hand and between ersatz native patriots and the dominant Catalan caste on the other, erupted; these conflicts would not be wholly resolved until well into the fifteenth century. The central government, as a result of its inability to control all of this fighting, was increasingly hated and powerless. And on the social level Sicilian life fared no better. Religious life suffered from the despoliation of churches and monasteries, a severe shortage of qualified clerics to guard their flocks, popular confusion over widespread heterodox and heretical teachings, and long periods of ecclesiastical interdict. A xenophobic cultural

isolation gripped all levels of society; foreigners of any sort were distrusted, resented, and increasingly subjected to vituperation and physical attack. The alliance with Catalonia had long since been broken and was replaced by two useless pacts with the northern Ghibellines that brought the islanders nothing and in fact only added to their misery by further entangling them in peninsular affairs. The economy, which had indeed rallied in the immediate post-war years, stagnated around 1317–18, and entered a sharp decline after 1321. Cities already groaning under severe financial difficulties and high levels of crime and disease were choked with peasant refugees from the fighting and poverty of the upland territories. And a proto-Mafia, with its distinctive mentality and violent methods well established, already controlled the interior of the island.

It is challenging enough to summarize such chaos; but to explain it presents special difficulties. The greatest of these is the relative paucity of sources. Sicily's archival holdings are meager for the medieval period, compared to other Mediterranean regions. Centuries of invasion, rebellion, earthquakes, and fires have exacted a heavy toll on the extant documents and have consequently obscured our view of this complex society at the point of one of its worst crises.[2]

The narrative sources provide a vivid if unreliable chronological framework. These works focus inevitably on the political and military events of Frederick's reign and are decidedly partisan (either in favor of the Sicilians as opposed to the Catalans, in general, or in favor of one region or city over all others). As a rule, their unreliability is in direct proportion to their partisan zeal. In addition to Nicola Speciale's chronicle there is the *Historia sicula* of Bartolomeo di Neocastro (as patriotic a son as Messina ever produced), yet another work of the same name by Michele da Piazza, and an anonymous *Chronicon Siciliae*. Two short works in Sicilian dialect survive, the better known of which – a fifteenth-century work known as *Lu rebellamentu di Sichilia* – provided the plot for Verdi's opera. Our knowledge of the rogue Catalan–Sicilian

[2] On the Sicilian archives and chancery, see Adelaide Baviera Albanese, "Diritto pubblico e istituzioni amministrative in Sicilia," *ArchStSic*, 3rd ser., 19 (1969), 391–563; Baviera Albanese, "La sede dell'Archivio di Stato di Palermo," in *La presenza della Sicilia nella cultura degli ultimi cento anni* (Palermo, 1977), pp. 721–36.

seizure of the Athenian duchy comes chiefly from Ramon Muntaner's *Crònica*, a fascinating work by one of the more colorful figures of the age. These narratives, with the exception of Muntaner's, are unique since they represent the first histories of Sicily to be written by native Sicilians rather than by scribes for a conquering foreigner; consequently what they have to say is important even when they are incorrect.[3]

More important is the documentary evidence. This book utilizes several thousand records that survive in a series of patchwork registers and portfolios (*tabulari*, in Italian) of scattered parchments. These, plus a handful of extant notarial registers and fragments (*spezzoni*), are housed in the state archives in Palermo. A large number of documents dealing chiefly with diplomatic matters are located in the Crown of Aragon archives in Barcelona. But apart from these two collections little remains.

No less an obstacle is the problem of objectivity. Little enough has been written about Sicily in these years, but much of what has been published is no less blinkered than the fourteenth-century texts on which the modern works have been chiefly based. These biases are, to an extent, understandable. For many Sicilians the Vespers era, taken as the decades from 1282 to 1337, is the most romanticized period of their history after the gilded Norman kingdom of the twelfth century. It is, after all, the story of their great patriotic rebellion against foreign tyranny, a revolution initially triumphant but ultimately tragic in its outcome. Pathos and a kind of tired pride inform much of this sense of their past,

[3] Bartolomeo di Neocastro (Bartholomeus Neocastrensis), *Historia sicula ab anno 1250 ad 1293 deducta*, in *RGBS* I; Michele da Piazza (Michaelis de Platea), *Historia sicula ab anno MCCCXXXVII ad annum MCCCLXI*, ed. Antonino Giuffrida (Palermo, 1980), Fonti per la storia di Sicilia, vol. III; Anonymous, *Chronicon Siciliae ab acquisitione ipsius insulae per Graecos usque ad obitum Guillelmi ducis Friderici II regis Siciliae filii*, in *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, ed. Lodovico Muratori, 25 vols. (Milan, 1722–51), X; Anonymous, *Historia conspirationis quam molitus fuit Johannes Prochyta*, in *RGBS* I; Ramon Muntaner, *Crònica*, ed. Ferran Soldevila, in *Les quatre grans cròniques: Jaume I, Bernat Desclot, Ramon Muntaner, Pere III*, 2nd edn. (Barcelona, 1983), Biblioteca Perenne, vol. XXVI. Of the Sicilian works, Speciale's is much the most interesting and has received the most serious attention; see Giacomo Ferrau, *Nicolò Speciale, storico del "Regnum Siciliae"* (Palermo, 1974), Bollettino del Centro di studi filologici e linguistici siciliani, Supplementi, ser. mediolatina e umanistica, vol. II. On Muntaner, see Roger Sablonier, *Krieg und Kriegertum in der Cronaca des Ramon Muntaner: Eine Studie zum spätmittelalterlichen Kriegwesen aufgrund katalanischen Quellen* (Bern, 1971), Geist und Werk der Zeiten, Arbeiten aus dem Historischen Seminar der Universität Zurich, vol. XXXI; and R. G. Keightley, "Muntaner and the Catalan Grand Company," *Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos* 4 (1979), 37–58.

in a tradition that stretches from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century; and with some praiseworthy exceptions it still dominates much of Sicily's historical thought. In countless histories, novels, stage dramas, operas, even puppet plays, from Neocastro's chronicle to the fanfare that surrounds each new edition of Michele Amari's *La guerra del Vespro siciliano*, the Sicilians' noble struggle against the horrors of oppression has been told over and over again.[4] Modern research has added detail but has failed to alter the basic picture – indeed, it has all too often refused to alter it. And inevitably, from this viewpoint, the dramatic failure of Frederick's reign appears as tragedy, the ineluctable result of continued foreign enmity, oppression, and meddling, only this time by the once-friendly Catalans. The battlecry of 1282 "Morano li francesi!" ("Kill the French!") had become by 1337 "Morano li Catalani!" Except for the venerable king who had brought them victory at Caltabellotta and a few stalwarts like Simón de Vallguarnera, the Catalans were generally regarded at best as privileged outsiders who had unintentionally but decisively brought ruin upon the natives, and at worst as callous traitors to the trust Sicily had placed in them. This is a lachrymose and damaging tradition, one that portrays the Sicilian people as hapless victims of international greed, fated by geography to repeated plunder and colonization. And it has endured.

Conversely and perversely, a second historical tradition, represented chiefly by non-Sicilian historians, recognizes in Sicily's decline evidence of the islanders' fundamental ungovernability and truculence. The supposed tyranny of Hohenstaufen and Angevin rule, this view maintains, was instead a much needed attempt – justifiably stern by the standards of the age – to impose order on an inveterately disordered society. By this reasoning the Vespers war was less a heroic and ill-fated struggle than it was an incident of rationalized pack violence, a mere riot that succeeded only because it provided a convenient vehicle for Catalan expansionism. And the collapse that occurred in the last half of Frederick's reign resulted as much from innate Sicilian weaknesses

[4] Michele Amari, *La guerra del Vespro siciliano*, 9th edn. (Milan, 1886) established the definitive text; it was initially published, and promptly banned by the Bourbon government, in 1842. Now see the new edition in 3 vols. (Palermo, 1969), ed. Francesco Giunta.

as from the king's bungling attempts to manage an impossible situation.[5]

In any situation as polarized as this, there is something to be said for each side. The war that the Angevins forced on Sicily by refusing to relinquish their claim clearly left the Sicilians with no choice but to fight back and to devote to that struggle resources that were desperately needed elsewhere. By the time peace finally came, in 1437 under Alfonso the Magnanimous, both Sicily and southern Italy were devastated and cripplingly impoverished; the gulf that separated them economically and socially from the more prosperous north, and still separates them, here makes its first tentative appearance.[6] Moreover, the Catalans, like their German and French predecessors, indeed conspired to control the most profitable trades passing through Sicilian ports, just as they came

[5] Leonardo Sciascia, "Il mito dei Vespri siciliani da Amari a Verdi," *ArchStSicOr* 69 (1973), 183–92, discusses various interpretations of the Vespers period during the Risorgimento. An interesting, idiosyncratic survey of responses to the Sicilian problem is Salvatore Tramontana, *Gli anni del Vespro: l'immaginario, la cronaca, la storia* (Bari, 1989), Storia e civiltà, vol. xxv. Two examples of the contrasting scholarly traditions are Antonino de Stefano, *Federico III d'Aragona, re di Sicilia: 1296–1337*, 2nd edn. (Bologna, 1956), with its paeans to "la grande anima del popolo siciliano"; and Denis Mack Smith, *Medieval Sicily, 800–1715* (London, 1968), a splenetic work that sees incompetence and corruption at every turn. The larger debate over the *Mezzogiorno*'s economic underdevelopment in relation to the northern Italian regions (a phenomenon that is variously dated from the first century BCE to the advent of industrialism) has received considerably more and better attention from scholars than the forty-year period examined by the present book. The best overview is Giuseppe Galasso, "Considerazioni intorno alla storia del Mezzogiorno in Italia," in his collection *Mezzogiorno medievale e moderno* (Turin, 1975), pp. 15–59; see also the introductory chapter to the excellent new work by Stephan R. Epstein, *An Island for Itself: Economic Development and Social Change in Late Medieval Sicily* (Cambridge, 1992), Past and Present Publications, pp. 1–24.

[6] This is not to say that Sicily's economic backwardness, in relation to northern Italy or the rest of Mediterranean Europe, was established permanently at this time. Recent studies have shown that the Sicilian economy recovered from the crises of the fourteenth century (which were experienced at any rate by all of western Europe) to enjoy a wide-ranging expansion of productivity and trade in the fifteenth. See Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, ch. 8. Epstein's thesis, admittedly tentative, that Sicilian underdevelopment did not become permanently entrenched until the general European crisis of the seventeenth century, is intriguing but needs further study. Such research would need to examine not only the extent of Sicilian trade, whether foreign or domestic, and the productivity of manufacturing, but also the distribution of the wealth created by that trade – something that Epstein was not able to examine in his fascinating book. Certainly a Val Demone weaver or taverner of the sixteenth century would have disputed any claims that he was doing as well as his compeers on the continent. While agreeing with Epstein that Sicily staged an impressive economic recovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this book contends that there are more factors to consider than just the economic in assessing the overall Sicilian crisis. Indeed, it is significant that Sicily, in the early modern period, continued to lag behind the rest of Europe in so many aspects despite its economic recovery.

to hold more and more of the leading political and ecclesiastical positions in the realm, especially in the latter half of Frederick's reign.

Nevertheless, the Sicilians magnified their own misery in important ways. Rather than capitalizing on their brief peacetime prosperity by investing in new manufactures or developing a carrying trade, for example, they sank their money into a vain consumerism that was perhaps understandable, given their wartime privations, but which in fact left effective control of non-domestic commerce in the hands of merchants from Genoa, Pisa, Venice, Marseilles, and Barcelona. Rather than using the proffered royal parliament to establish a sense of communality and shared interests, they remained intensely and unshakeably local in their concerns, willing to obey the central government or to serve it whenever doing so offered them a chance to wield power or earn money, but never willing – as at Trapani in 1314 – to sacrifice for it. Curiously, however, this stubborn localism never evolved into a positive spirit of independence. We see one aspect of this in the demesne cities, where the high degree of personal mobility that evolved out of the collapse of serfdom in the thirteenth century created large municipalities made up of nuclear families and isolated individuals; the sudden absence of extended family networks, or of corporate structures such as trade or artisan guilds, might have led, under different circumstances, to the creation of an atmosphere of independence. But as the economic and social problems of Frederick's reign deepened, the urban populace sought refuge instead in quasi-paternalistic customs and institutions such as joining the *comitiva* (an inchoate and ragtag group of followers or hangers-on) of a member of the urban elite.[7] Divided into factions of "Catalanists" or "Latinists," of Ventimiglia supporters or Chiaromonte champions, the people of the fourteenth century increasingly sought to escape the misery of their lives by seeking security in their local *consuetudines* or, in more dangerous times, in the protection of the emerging grandees (Latin *meliores*, Italian *migliori*, in our sources).[8]

[7] *Acta curie* I, docs. 21 (29 Dec. 1311), 69 (26 Aug. 1312).

[8] Henri Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen: économie et société en Sicile, 1300–1450*, 2 vols. (Palermo, 1986), p. 737 cites what seems to be the first appearance of the term *migliori*, in reference to the dominant figures in the cities (referring here to Calascibetta). In Messina these

For both of these traditions, as for the compromise position this book will argue, Frederick's reign holds a crucial place in the larger debate. His forty-one years on the throne mark the most critical decades in medieval Sicily's agonizing transition from modest prosperity to deep-rooted poverty and social divisiveness.

He came to the island with his father's armies in 1283 and spent his adolescence in the raucous capital of Palermo. Unlike his elder brothers, who viewed the place as little more than a useful addition to the growing Catalan hegemony, Frederick loved Sicily. The troubadour culture of the royal court was much faded by that time, compared to its heyday in the earlier part of the century, when poetry from the so-called "Sicilian School" inspired mainland poets like Guinizetti and Cavalcanti and eventually Dante himself; but even in its decayed state that culture exerted a powerful influence on the young Frederick. His father's campaign to wrest the kingdom from Angevin control struck young Frederick as an exciting and chivalrous quest. The heady atmosphere of a successful revolution in an exotic new realm of bustling, crowded cities, pleasure gardens, and majestic churches had a strong effect on him. He was a young man of emotion and impulse – a sensualist, not a man of thought.[9] The conviction that his life was destined for some divinely sanctioned adventurous purpose never left him, and this accounts in part for the uncanny consistency of his life-long devotion to lost causes, and for his woodenheaded inability to compromise. There was, however, no doubt of his bravery or of his affection for his realm – and herein lies the secret of his continued popularity with his subjects, even after the Sicilians had begun to resent the Catalan presence in general.[10] To Sicilian eyes,

figures were described as *nobiles* even though they were not in all cases members of the aristocracy; see Enrico Pispisa, *Messina nel Trecento: politica, economia, società* (Messina, 1980), Collana di testi e studi storici, vol. I, pp. 98–9.

[9] In his younger years, he had a well-deserved reputation for sexual indulgence and headstrong anger, even cruelty. Even allowing for a Neapolitan bias, Boccaccio knew his man when he provided a thumbnail sketch of Frederick in *Il Decamerone* 5.6.

[10] In the last years of the fighting, from 1296 to 1302, Frederick delighted in his personal command of Sicily's forces, organizing sieges in Calabria, constructing war engines, leading small reconnaissance squadrons, and marshalling troops in open battle, all with great brio. For a summary of these exploits, see Amari, *La guerra del Vespro siciliano*, ch. 15–16; Neocastro, *Historia sicula*, ch. 119–124; and Speciale, *Historia sicula*, bk. II, ch. 18–19; bk. III, ch. 5–7, 10–11, 15, and 18. Shortly after the battle of Falconaria in late 1300 Frederick defeated Prince Philip of Taranto, the son of Charles II of Anjou, in single combat and held him prisoner for two years at Cefalù; see Muntaner, *Crònica*, ch. 192; and Speciale, *Historia sicula*, bk. V, ch. 10.

Frederick was the first king since the Norman era who was unquestionably loyal to the island, a ruler who – unlike Frederick II of Hohenstaufen or either Charles I or II of Anjou – viewed Sicily as an end in itself and not merely as a geographical base or financial resource for pursuing grander schemes elsewhere. He had a gift for languages, wrote a good deal of troubadour verse as a young man (although only one poem survives), and could speak to his subjects in their own tongue. His cocky, idealistic manner inspired strong emotions. His contemporaries outside of Sicily certainly found him a compelling figure, although not so compelling that anyone rushed to his aid when serious trouble with Naples began again. According to one tradition Dante, grateful for Frederick's devotion to Henry VII, considered dedicating part of the *Commedia* to him; Ramon Muntaner once endured torture at Angevin hands for his loyal service to him; and both the heretical leader Fra Dolcino and the heterodox mystic reformer Arnau de Vilanova believed him to be the "God-elected king" who would lead the final reform of Christendom before the advent of Antichrist. A more sober judgment came from Pope John XXII, to whom Frederick was simply "an evil man who would be even worse if he had the ability."[11]

The kingdom he ruled was a fractious and turbulent island where life had never been easy and where sharp contrasts existed between the economic and cultural development levels of the various population groups. Sicily's strategic location accounted for much of

[11] Antonino de Stefano, *Federico III d'Aragona, 1296–1337*, 2nd edn. (Bologna, 1956); see also Rafael Olivar Bertrand, *Un rei de llegenda: Fréderic III de Sicilia* (Barcelona, 1951); and the very old Francesco Testa, *De vita et rebus gestis Friderici II Siciliae regis* (Palermo, 1775), which is still useful for some of the transcribed documents it contains. Frederick III (sometimes referred to as Frederick of Aragon) was actually only the second of his name to rule the island, and this has created a small though irritating degree of confusion among historians and bibliographers. The Hohenstaufen ruler Frederick II was the first Frederick to govern the island, but his numerature remained defined by his German imperial inheritance. Since the Catalan Frederick regarded himself as the ideological as well as the chronological heir of the Hohenstaufen Frederick, and since the majority of the records of his time describe him as the Third, this book uses the citation "Frederick III" throughout, although the reader should be aware that many of the archival sources and secondary materials utilized are inconsistent in their taxonomy. Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (London, 1976), pp. 45–9 (Fra Dolcino); ACA Cartas James II, no. 9944 (Muntaner's torture), and no. 3286 (John XXII's comment): "Verum est, quod dominus Fredericus est malus homo, et esset peior, si haberet potestatem." General context can be found in Corrado Mirto, *Il regno dell'isola di Sicilia e delle isole adiacenti dalla sua nascità alla peste del 1347–1348* (Messina, 1986).

what was best and worst in Sicilian life, for as Muntaner (who understood such matters) wrote, "Whoever wishes to control the Mediterranean must control Sicily." And throughout the centuries many peoples, desiring the larger goal, had achieved at least the lesser. What attracted these successive waves of invaders – Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Goths, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Germans, Angevins, Catalans – was an island of approximately 25,000 square kilometers (9,800 square miles), moderately rich in resources but desirable above all for its position at the nexus of the twin basins that make up the Mediterranean. To this extent, for Sicily at least, geography is history. Merchants or soldiers moving from east to west, or vice versa, had to pass by the island, making it a natural port of call. The preferred route passed through the narrow Strait of Messina, so that sailors could take advantage of the large, inviting harbors along Sicily's northern and eastern shores while avoiding the Tunisian pirates operating further to the south. It was the desire to control these harbors and the agricultural and mineral produce of their hinterland that spurred such endless conquest and colonization. These incursions seldom were successfully turned back since the Sicilians were never able to mount a unified resistance to invasion. In fact, nothing at all about the realm was unified, owing to a dizzying variety of geographical and cultural factors that combined to keep the people poor, uneducated, backward, and as often as not hostile toward one another.

The landscape is dominated by mountains. Rising in some places right from the coast, these mountains are broken into four distinct chains that divide the island into discrete regions. From the Strait of Messina the Peloritani chain stretches to the south and west, reaching altitudes well above 1,200 meters (4,000 feet). In the Middle Ages only its lowest reaches were cultivated, and even then only on the southern and eastern sides of the chain; its long northern coastal plain had no arable land, except for a small region near Milazzo. Conifers covered the middle level, providing one of the most densely forested areas on the island. This region provided the timber for the busy shipbuilding industry in the Val Demone. The upper reaches, however, had little or no vegetation and were scarred by rapid currents that frequently produced flash floods during the heavy rains of late autumn and winter. Further to the west stand the Nebrodi and Madonie chains, climbing still higher to