Chapter One:

Sicily from Peter III to the Catholic Monarchs

The Jews of Sicily spent the last two hundred and ten years of their presence on the island under Aragonese and (towards the end) Spanish rule. Briefly, the main events in Sicily were the following: In the wake of the popular uprising in Palermo on Easter Monday of 1282 against the French Angevin, later termed ‘Sicilian Vespers’, King Peter III of Aragon landed at Trapani at the end of August of that year. That turned out to be only the beginning of the conquest of Sicily by the Aragonese, which dragged on in one form or another for a century. First there were the attempts of the Angevin to drive out Peter and his successors, followed by the rebellions of the barons aimed at wresting effective government from the Crown.¹

The Aragonese seizure of Sicily has to be viewed also in the wider context of the struggle between Empire and Papacy. The contest between Ghibellines and Guelfs, which after the death of the last Hohenstaufen in Italy appeared to have been decided in favour of the Holy See, was far from over. Papal attempts at investing the English and later the French with the Sicilian feud failed dismally. Other elements to be reckoned with were the Aragonese ambitions of expansion in the Mediterranean, after Aragon emerged from the trauma of the *reconquista*; aspirations in which military and economic motives supplemented each other. Last, but not least, the French, at this stage allies of the Papacy, sought a

permanent foothold on the Italian peninsula. The Angevin emerged from
the reshuffle of 1282 as masters of the continental half of the Kingdom of
the Two Sicilies, and held on to Naples until their expulsion at the hands
of Alphonso the Magnanimous.

Mediterranean power politics made the Aragonese hold on Sicily hang
in the balance on more than one occasion. Thus, when James II, who had
succeeded his father King Peter III (I) in Sicily, became King of Aragon, he
was made to relinquish Sicily to the Pope (Treaty of Anagni, 1295) in return
for the title to Sardinia. But Boniface VIII’s plans failed on the ground in
Sicily when Frederick, James’s younger brother, was proclaimed King of
Sicily by the parliament in Palermo (1296). Half-hearted attempts by James
to unseat his brother came to naught. In the end, the pressure of papacy
and Angevin on James II became too much for him, especially when his
expansionist ambitions became focused on Sardinia. James gave the title
to Sardinia precedence over that to Sicily, although the Catalan invasion
of that island did not take place until 1325. In the treaty of Caltabellotta
(1302), Frederick was confirmed as king of Sicily, while James agreed to
the reversion of Sicily to Anjou on Frederick’s death. By the time that
occurred in 1337, all the other participants of the deal had died and the
situation had changed.

Warfare continued after Caltabellotta. Robert of Anjou invaded western
Sicily in 1314 and lay waste large tracts of the coastal area between Palermo
and Marsala. While his campaign came to nought, Frederick’s enemies
multiplied after he struck up an alliance with the Ghibellines in the person
of Emperor Henry VII. Thereafter invasions and internal strife increased
until the end of his reign. These, particularly the struggle between the
Crown and some of the barons, as well as the intermittent warfare
between the latter themselves, especially between the Chiaramonte and
Ventimiglia, but also between the Sicilians and Catalans, became the bane
of the country and continued throughout the fourteenth century. To the
insubordination of the barons and the ever-present danger of invasion
from abroad must be added the increasing piracy off and on the shores of
the island, resulting in the destruction of life and property. Last but not
least, there was the increasing urban lawlessness and rural brigandage,
almost universal, which made life well-nigh unbearable in fourteenth
century Sicily. So when Frederick died, the country was on its knees,
politically, militarily and economically.

Under Frederick’s immediate successors Sicily fared no better. The
period following Frederick’s death, starting with the reign of Peter II, has
been aptly described as one of civil war, verging on total anarchy. There