INTRODUCTION. THE FORMATION OF A NEW COMMUNITY AT THE END OF THE 13TH CENTURY

The chronological limits of this essay cannot be fixed with absolute precision, since they are determined by the type of perspective we choose to adopt regarding the “social” world of a great city. Our point of departure is, however, traditional. Despite the new lines of enquiry developed over the last twenty-five years, the Vespers, which by tradition serve to cut Sicilian history in two (before and after 1282), help us to impose order upon the phenomena with which we are concerned. Our destination is far less easy to pin down, and we therefore need to identify more than one: 1392, and the restoration of royal rule, and 1516, which saw the death of Ferdinand the Catholic (and the definitive, though very troubled, passage to a new, wholly “Spanish” epoch), are dates of crucial importance for the entire island; as was 1450 for the capital, on account of a revolt that reveals much about the social geography of the city midway through the 15th century.

The social processes that interest us here were not of course determined by the Vespers as such, indeed some important preconditions had been established earlier. In the latter half of the 13th century two discontinuities in the institutional context had occurred. We cannot tell exactly when, although it was probably after the middle of the century, the text of the customs was drafted, as a system of rules in some way produced by the community; later, in the Angevin period, a tendency arose, which after 1282 would become irreversible, to elect the city’s officials and not to have them be appointed by the royal court. We are concerned here with

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two very strong signals indicating the presence of a new form of community, contrasting with that of the cities in the Norman and Swabian periods. These discontinuities emerged gradually in the second half of the 13th century; and yet they seem to be borne out by a documentary “mutation” occurring in Palermo as late as the beginning of the 14th century, and involving the sudden appearance of acts produced by local officials (and of a rudimentary “archive” of the city as well).

The importance of the Vespers for my argument therefore lies in its major consequence, namely, in the formation, together with a new and smaller Kingdom, of a different institutional structure, in which the urban “peripheries” (amongst them many densely populated centres), took on a more prominent, and more independent function than in the past. This change concerned the demesne, that is to say, the space common to the Crown and to almost all the cities, and found expression precisely in the self-government of these latter. In this context Palermo’s location within the royal demesne is beyond dispute: in the sources, emphasis is often laid upon the specificity of the Palermitan urban space as demesnal space, distinct from feudal and ecclesiastical space alike. This institutional specificity was mirrored first and foremost in the rules for the election of officials, in which process protagonists from the feudal aristocracy could play no part.3

This essay is therefore concerned with the impact of the growing institutional autonomy of a great city upon the characteristic features of the wider society or, if you will, with the attribution of a clearer community status to one of the most heavily populated urban centres of the peninsula (between 40,000 and 50,000 inhabitants in 1277). One symptom of this transformation is evident in the change in the city’s form by contrast with the Norman-Swabian period. The macroscopic differences were twofold. Firstly, in place of a multi-ethnic, linguistically plural city we now find a centre homogenized under the sign of “Latinity.” Indeed, the spatial arrangement of the Norman city had served to distinguish between the inhabitants in terms of a complex series of criteria, first of all linguistic and religious, but the process of Christianization and Latinization (which, at the end of the 12th century, was already under way) had not yet defined clearly distinct spheres. At the end of the 13th century (so far as we