CHAPTER 5

Medieval and Modern Sicily and the Kingdoms of Sardinia and Corsica

Henri Bresc

Although their geographic proximity and similar circumstances might suggest a long history of connection between Sardinia and Sicily dating from antiquity, it was really only established much later. It was not until 1410–1411 that the two islands would become part of a single political ensemble—as dependencies of the Crown of Aragon—during the crisis that ensued after the death of Martin, the young king of Sicily, and the subsequent death of his father, Martin the Humane. From 1282 to 1392, the Sicilian Aragon dynasty was independent from Barcelona, which was sometimes its ally, but more often threatened by it. Thus, Barcelona sought to prevent the kind of annexation that had put an end to the independence of the kingdom of Majorca.

Sardinia and Sicily share fairly similar natural features and resources, but the two island nations were marked by two very different political experiences. This resulted in the two having contrasting institutions that exhibit little in the way of typological relations, and diametrically opposite ways of managing space, the habitat, and even their own insularity. One parallel common to both islands was their small populations, which made them places of immigration. However, in Sicily the immigrants were dispersed and rapidly assimilated, but in Sardinia and Corsica foreign inhabitants formed a coherent group with their own political goals.

The amount of manufacturing activity on all three islands was limited, which reduced their economies to the production of grains and basic materials. Such exports were extremely profitable in the climate of exchange of the

---

fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: the grains and cheeses of both Sicily and Sardinia were highly prized, and they monopolized the attention of producers and entrepreneurs. These parallel economic roles serve to explain the weak relations between the two islands; Sardinia and Sicily were not complementary countries. Rather, their relations with the centers of exchange—Pisa, Genoa, Barcelona, Venice—were similar, if not identical. As a result, their relations with one another were distant.

To the Sicilian observers, Sardinia presented itself as a country rich in silver mines, but inhabited by stubborn, ferocious, and barbaric peoples—veritable Africans. This is how the island was described by the geographer of the Palermitan palace, al-Idrisi, around 1158. But al-Idrisi’s lack of interest in expanding his understanding of Sardinia is astounding. Even though he had the documents of the fleet and the administration at his disposal, he knew only Gallura, Castelgenovese, and Cagliari; the rest escaped him.2

As mentioned above, the essential difference between Sicily and Sardinia is a political one. From the eleventh century, the two islands were subject to much the same claims. These started with the church’s ambitions, which were justified by the Donation of Constantine and applied by Gregory VII to all three islands. Sicily was made a royal vassal in 1130 and, subsequently, the kingdom of Sardinia and Corsica was established in 1297 for James, king of Aragon. The claims of the empire were equally extended to southern Italy and then to Sardinia under Frederick I “Barbarossa,” which culminated in the annexation of Sicily to the empire from 1194 to 1254. The state established in Sicily by the Hautevilles between 1130 and 1161 remained strong, leaving an apostolic legacy, whereas in Sardinia it was weakened and prematurely fragmented by foreign domination, without the empire or the papacy ever establishing direct control.

Unlike Sardinia, Sicily was able to resist the demands of the maritime cities, namely Pisa and Genoa, and preserve a strong political core. However, the kingdom did succumb when Sicily dissolved into a feudal system between 1350 and 1392. In Sardinia, the feudal migrants set up their own autonomous powers: Bas, Donoratico, Doria, Narbonne, Visconti, but in Sicily the marquises of Upper Italy maintained discipline and placed themselves in the service of the dynasty.3 Corsica was the only island that voluntarily offered itself up to a foreign power in the alliance between the king of Aragon and the great feudal families of the

---


3 The Sicilians were first Aleramici, then Lancia and Camerana, Saluzzo (named Peralta in Sicily) and Incisa.