

MALTA AND THE ARAGONESE CROWN: 1282-1530¹

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LATER medieval Aragon was a mountainous and completely inland region of the Iberian peninsula, which itself was partly cut off from Europe and all but joined to Africa. Its barren rocky highlands were broken by more fertile river valleys; it was hot in summer and extremely cold in winter. The economy was predominantly agrarian, and much of the population lived in a state of isolation which produced its own peculiar brand of insularity and stubbornness. The ruling elements were Christian, many of them conquerors and settlers, whose Aragonese tongue was similar to old Castilian and who lived side by side with large communities of Muslims and Jews. Their historical experience was of Moorish occupation, of frontier warfare and of the *reconquista*. In 1137 the King of Aragon gave his daughter Petronilla, together with his whole kingdom, to Ramon Berenguer IV, Count of Barcelona, and thereafter Catalunya-Aragon was governed by a single ruler as a federation in which Aragon was the lesser partner. As Counts of Barcelona the Count-kings of Catalunya-Aragon not only controlled the Catalan-speaking peoples south of the Pyrenees with their prosperous urban and mercantile classes, but had extensive dynastic connections and ambitions in Languedoc and Provence. After the defeat and death of Pedro II of Aragon at Muret in 1213 and the subsequent conquest of Languedoc by the barons of Northern France, these French pretensions were largely abandoned and the house of Aragon was restricted to its lands within the peninsula in Catalunya and Aragon. The result was expansion in other directions: the *reconquista* and *re poblaciòn* of Valencia to the south; the conquest of the Balearic islands from the Muslims; and in 1282 the seizure from the French of Sicily, which Pedro III of Aragon claimed through his wife Costanza, daughter of the last effective Hohenstaufen ruler of Sicily, Frederick II's son, Manfred.

The decades following saw a tremendous expansion of Catalano-Aragonese power in the Mediterranean. Thebes and Athens were conquered by the Catalan companies in 1311; Jaime II of Aragon married a Cypriot

¹ One difficulty in dealing with this subject is that while Aragon proper covered only a small part of the Iberian peninsula, its kings ruled in Catalunya, Valencia, Mallorca, Sicily and elsewhere. The term 'Aragonese' scarcely conveys this fact; 'Catalano-Siculo-Aragonese' is clumsy and still insufficient. It seems best to refer to the 'Aragonese crown' and its 'lands' — *los paisés de la corona de Aragón*.

princess in 1315; Ferran of Mallorca invaded Southern Greece and died there in 1316; Sardinia was conquered in 1324; and there were recurrent wars with the Angevins and Genoese in defence of Sicily and Sardinia. Catalan, Valencian and Mallorquin traders, slavers and sailors were active in the Levant, in North Africa and throughout the Mediterranean; they settled in Sardinia, Sicily and Greece. Behind these developments lay the commercial interests and initiative of the urban patriciates of Catalunya; Barcelona, for example, largely financed the conquest of Sardinia. There emerged a single economic and strategic unit, something like a Western Mediterranean common market, in which the merchants of Valencia, Barcelona, Palma and Perpignan could buy and sell in the Balearics, Sardinia and Sicily, while at the same time possessing in those islands the safe harbours they needed along their routes to even more lucrative markets in the Levant and in North Africa. The Catalans, with their limited naval and military resources, often preferred not to acquire extensive territories but to concentrate on the retention of certain essential bases and entrepôts, such as the harbours and castles at Cagliari and Alghero in Sardinia. They made diplomatic and consular arrangements which would allow them access to markets in Africa, Asia and elsewhere without involving costly administrative or military commitments. The expensive Southern Italian ambitions of Alfonso V of Aragon in the early fifteenth century and his pursuit of a grandiose crusading policy in the Levant ran counter to this general policy and to the real interests of his subjects, especially those of the Iberian peninsula.

Catalunya – the County of Barcelona – with its flourishing ports and industries stood at the heart of this community. Yet the Catalans not only needed Mediterranean markets but were often dependent on Sicilian grain. The various domains of the Aragonese crown were economically interdependent in many ways, and this fact was reflected in the political organization of the commonwealth. Its subjects were scattered around the Mediterranean, in Aragon, Valencia, Catalunya, Mallorca, Sardinia, Southern Italy, Sicily and even Greece; they spoke Aragonese, Catalan, Italian, Hebrew, Arabic, Greek and many dialect variations on these tongues. Only flexible arrangements based on a spirit of compromise could hold so many diverse elements together. The Aragonese crown did develop such institutions, which allowed it to exploit its subjects' common allegiance to a single dynasty but which also ensured that the crown itself responded rapidly to pressures from its subjects, especially when these were financial. The various kingdoms, counties and possessions of the crown had their own laws and their own *cortes*, representative assemblies with which the crown dealt separately in their own languages and which en-

joyed considerable powers, as did municipal institutions in towns like Barcelona. The kings themselves could not govern personally in all their lands, and so they developed a complex system of imperial administration, appointing governors-general or viceroys, often members of the royal family, to act for them in their domains, holding *cortes*, receiving homages, raising taxes and carrying out business of every kind.

In certain cases the links were comparatively weak. Mallorca, Cerdagne and Roussillon were held by an Aragonese prince as a vassal kingdom for several decades until their reconquest and reincorporation into the crown by Pedro IV of Aragon in 1344. The Sicilian crown was granted to Alfonso III's brother Jaime, but the Aragonese connection remained strong and on Alfonso's death in 1291 Jaime became King of Aragon; then in 1296 the Sicilian kingdom passed to a third brother. On the death of Federigo III of Sicily without a male heir in 1377 the Sicilian crown and the Duchies of Athens and Neopatras reverted, after a period of confusion, to the King of Aragon and the Sicilian kingdom was incorporated into the *corona de Aragón* in 1409. Alfonso V added the Neapolitan kingdom to the domains of the crown, and although on his death it passed to his bastard son Ferrante it remained within the Aragonese orbit. The lands and peoples of the confederation were bound together not only by these formal connections but also by unusually sophisticated sentiments of allegiance to the crown and of political interdependence and responsibility. The doctrine of *pactisme*, the notion of a constitutional contract between the ruler and the leading elements among his peoples, of respect for the king who respected his subjects' rights and customs, was strong above all in Catalunya. When in 1410 there was, for the first time, no direct male heir of the house of Catalunya-Aragon, the Catalans insisted on a peaceful settlement of the succession crisis and on the preservation of a strict legality. The constitutional formulae followed in 1412 when representatives of the *parlaments* of Aragon, Valencia and Catalunya chose one of the six candidates for the throne, helped the Catalans to accept the election of Fernando of Antequera, Regent of Castile, to whom they were strongly opposed and who had in fact been forced upon them. Fernando in his turn had to recognize the liberties of the Catalans. He was also accepted by the Mallorquins whose representatives had been excluded from the election, and by the Sicilians who were not represented in it.

The *paises de la corona de Aragón* thus constituted a political, economic and cultural world with a considerable unity of its own. Internal and external factors continually changed the balance of power within the community. Rebellion in Valencia and Aragon was suppressed by the crown with Catalan help in 1348; after the collapse of the Barcelona

banks in 1381 Catalunya was in serious decline while Valencia grew in wealth and importance; then in 1412 the Aragonese and Valencians imposed a semi-Castilian dynasty upon the Catalans. Fernando of Antequera's son and successor Alfonso V was interested in the Italian sections of the commonwealth rather than in his peninsular domains. In fact, each ruler had his own difficulties to face and his own particular ambitions and tastes, and each had to recognize the special problems and circumstances of his various domains. Yet while these *paises* were considered to have separate identities of their own the king often thought of the peoples of these lands as his subjects, his *naturales*, rather than as 'Aragonese', 'Catalans' or 'Sicilians'. In many cases it would have been difficult and confusing to do otherwise. A number of Sicilian barons, for example, were Aragonese or Catalan in origin and had ties of kinship and felt equally at home in various of the *paises de la corona*. They spoke, or at least understood, several languages and tended to build a palace or a church in the same style in Catalunya or in Sicily. In both countries they lived in a Western Mediterranean world with comparable geographical conditions and a similar background of Muslim occupation and Christian Latin culture, so that in their arts, in their institutions, in their habits of life and thought, many of the peoples of the Aragonese crown had much in common with each other.²

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Malta and Gozo, two small and comparatively barren islands set in the sea between Sicily and Africa, were always at the mercy of a strong power anxious for a base in the central Mediterranean. Their rocky soil and limited water supply meant that they were usually unable to feed their own population. Carthaginians, Romans, Muslims, Normans, Hohenstaufen and Angevins all held Malta and the Maltese were influenced by them in many ways, but the isolation and smallness of their islands helped the islanders to preserve strong characteristics of their own.

² On the 'geo-political' context, see F. BRAUDEL, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949), and J. HOUSTON, *The Western Mediterranean World: an Introduction to its Landscapes* (London, 1964). The standard political history is F. SOLDEVILA, *Historia de Catalunya*, rev.ed., i-ii (Barcelona, 1962). The more modern ideas outlined above largely derive from the many works of J. VICENS VIVES; see also F. ELIAS DE TEJADA, *Las doctrinas políticas en la Cataluña medieval* (Barcelona, 1950), and F. GIUNTA, *Aragonesi e Catalani nel Mediterraneo*, 2 vols. (Palermo, 1953-1959). Two recent and important books not in Castilian or Catalan which summarize part of this extensive new work are P. VILAR, *La Catalogne dans l'Espagne moderne*, i (Paris, 1962), and J. ELLIOTT, *Imperial Spain: 1469-1716* (London, 1963). *Indice Histórico Español*, i- (Barcelona, 1953-), provides a complete annual bibliography.

Their Christian heritage survived through centuries of Muslim rule, and after the *reconquista* of Malta by the Norman rulers of Sicily in the eleventh century the language of the Maltese on the whole continued to resist the influence of the Latin tongues of their Christian rulers. In 1282 Malta and Gozo were predominantly Christian islands, governed by the Angevin Kings of Sicily and enjoying a measure of prosperity as a commercial outpost of Genoese and other traders.³

The conquest of Sicily by the Aragonese crown in 1282 illustrated the strategic position of Malta and demonstrated once again that it was most easily dominated from Sicily, on which it largely depended for its food supply. The Maltese recognized the new regime in December 1282. Charles of Anjou attempted to use Malta as a base for the reconquest of Sicily but his forces suffered a major and decisive defeat in a great sea-battle in the harbour at Malta in 1283, and the Aragonese crown eventually completed the conquest of Malta and Gozo. Ramon Muntaner, a Catalan who had been the King of Sicily's governor of Djerba, an island off the Tunisian coast, described how the Aragonese displayed their joy when they heard rumours of the fall of the castle at Malta, adding: 'and so they should have, for the castle is right royal and beautiful, and that castle and the island are to the island of Sicily as the stone is to the ring'.⁴ The new rulers undoubtedly recognized the islands' importance for the retention not only of Sicily but also of their influence in North Africa. In 1287 Jaime of Aragon, then King of Sicily, insisted that he should hold not only Sicily but also Malta, Pantelleria, the Lipari islands and the joint Siculo-Catalan fonduk at Tunis,⁵ while in 1292 as Jaime II, King of Aragon, he gave instructions from Barcelona for the castle and garrison at Malta to be strengthened.⁶ Neither the Venetians nor the Genoese made any very serious attempt to capture Malta during the period of domination by the Aragonese crown, perhaps because Malta did not lie directly on their routes to the rich markets of the Levant, while Venetian

³ In the absence of any satisfactory history of medieval Malta, the fundamental works are G. ABELA, *Malta Illustrata*, expanded by G. CIANTAR, 2 vols. (Malta, 1772-1780), and the articles and documents published by A. MIFSUD, in *Archivium Melitense*, ii-iv (1914-1920), and R. VALENTINI, in *Archivio storico di Malta*, v-xiii (1934-1942), and *Archivium Melitense*, ix (1935). P. DE JOVE Y HEVIA, *Indagaciones acerca de la dominación de España en Malta de 1285 a 1530* (Madrid, 1863), is brief and seriously outdated.

⁴ *The Chronicle of Muntaner*, trans. Lady Goodenough, i (London, 1920), 190-195, 224, 243-244.

⁵ F. GIUNTA, 'Sicilia e Tunisi nei secoli XIV e XV,' in his *Medioevo mediterraneo; saggi storici* (Palermo, 1954), 153, n. 60.

⁶ G. LA MANTIA, *Codice diplomatico dei re aragonesi di Sicilia*, ii (Palermo, 1956), 309, 327-318.

shipping bound for Spain and the Atlantic usually passed to the north of Sicily.⁷ Venice was often in alliance with the Aragonese crown, and the Genoese presumably realized that they would find it hard to capture or retain Malta while Sicily was in Aragonese hands. For the subjects of the Aragonese crown the fact that their resources were insufficient for the acquisition and maintenance of colonies in the Levant gave their trade at Tunis and elsewhere in North Africa a particular importance. Malta and Gozo therefore had a special value, which was emphasized again early in the fifteenth century when the islands were raided by the King of Tunis. These incursions were tantamount to an assault on the whole community of the Aragonese crown, and Alfonso V of Aragon went personally to Malta in the course of the counter-attack he launched against Djerba in 1432.

In a small way, therefore, Malta belonged to the Aragonese common market, and though on occasions the Maltese met high tariffs in Sicily, at other times the customs duties there were lowered in their favour. Catalan, Sicilian and other merchants settled in Malta, and a number of Catalans gained control of the export of the cotton grown there. But Malta's real usefulness was not as a market or a source of raw materials but as an entrepôt and a safe harbour on the routes to Beirut and Alexandria, and above all to Tunis and other African ports. There had long been Catalan vice-consuls at Malta and Gozo by 1345,⁸ and ships from Sicily and from the Iberian peninsula must have called there frequently; in May 1479, for example, three biremes captained by the Catalan Fluviá were in the harbour.⁹ One item of trade was slaves from North Africa, though the nearby island of Pantelleria was probably a more important centre of the slave-traffic than Malta. The slaves may not always have been Africans; in 1454 one Ludovicus Johannis, a native of Malta, was sold as a slave at Marseilles.¹⁰ Malta's position and its commercial importance also kept it in touch with distant parts of the Mediterranean world and beyond. Thus in 1377 Milos Gunjevic, a merchant from Dalmatia, sold in Malta a cargo of wood he had contracted to carry from the Adriatic to Tripoli in North Africa; later he seems also to have transported some cotton from Malta to Tripoli on behalf of a Jew of Malta.¹¹ In 1457 there

⁷ A. LUTTRELL, 'Venetians at Medieval Malta,' *Melita Historica*, ii, no. 1 (1960).

⁸ A. DE CAPMANY Y MONPALAU, *Memorias historicas sobre la marina, comercio y artes de la antigua ciudad de Barcelona*, rev.ed., ii, part 1 (Barcelona, 1962), 232.

⁹ E. LEOPARDI, 'Transactions of the *consiglio popolare* during the year 1478-1479', *Melita Historica*, ii, no. 2 (1957), 132-133.

¹⁰ C. VERLINDEN, *L'esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale*, i (Bruges, 1955), 404-418, 756-758.

¹¹ B. KREKIC, *Dubrovnik (Raguse) et le Levant au moyen âge* (Paris, 1961), 217,

was even an English ship, the *Katharine* of Bristol, near Malta, where it was attacked by the Genoese.¹²

The form of Malta's relationship with the Aragonese crown varied considerably. Whether or not the Aragonese and Sicilian crowns were united in the same person, Malta and Gozo were always part of the Kingdom of Sicily, the language of government was Sicilian or Latin, and the Maltese and Gozitans were subjects of the Sicilian crown and, in that sense, Sicilians. While Sicily was ruled as an independent kingdom by a cadet branch of the house of Aragon during the fourteenth century the formal constitutional link with the crown of Aragon lapsed. When Sicily itself was governed directly by the Aragonese crown through a royal lieutenant or viceroy, Malta was sometimes an integral part of the demesne of the Sicilian crown, and as such was ruled from Barcelona, Zaragoza, Palermo, Messina or Naples through royal officials sent from the peninsula or from Sicily, while on other occasions it was granted or even sold as a county to cadets of the Aragonese or Sicilian royal houses or to Sicilian nobles. Rule by these noble counts, who were often Sicilians of Catalan or Aragonese extraction such as the Moncada or the Alagón, usually led to the exploitation of the islanders and their demand for perpetual reincorporation into the royal demesne. The Maltese did not enjoy all the privileges of the inhabitants of Sicily for their position was obviously a special one. None the less Malta and Gozo both had representative institutions of a communal type which had considerable local powers of self-government. The *università* of Malta was respected by the Aragonese crown and, to some extent, able to bargain with it. The crown was well accustomed to accepting local privileges and institutions and, if at times the Aragonese kings overrode, neglected or even bargained away the rights of the Maltese, on other occasions they recognized the obligations of the crown and proceeded in accordance with the constitutional formulae of *pactisme* with which they were so familiar. From time to time the Maltese were involved in civil strife, in resistance to their overlords or in attempts to assert their constitutional rights, but they shared these experiences with all the other lands of the *corona de Aragón*.

Malta's connection with the Aragonese crown remained strong during the fifteenth century despite the serious economic decline, the civil wars, the depopulation and the piracy which afflicted Catalunya in particular and were reflected in similar conditions on Malta and Gozo. After their alienation to various Sicilian nobles, the islands were reincorporated into

223. The merchant Guglielmo de Malta who was near Dubrovnik in 1409 (*ibid.*, 255) may have been a Maltese.

¹² E. CARUS-WILSON, *Medieval Merchant Venturers* (London, 1954), 71.

the royal demesne at the end of the fourteenth century, and the change of dynasty in 1412, which was accepted in Sicily, made no fundamental difference to this relationship. Fernando de Antequera who was chosen King of Aragon in 1412 was a prince of Castile, but he was also a grandson of Pedro IV of Aragon. He and his successors ruled the Aragonese confederation much as their ancestors of the house of Catalunya-Aragon had done. Even the marriage between Fernando, King of Sicily and heir to the throne of Aragon, and Isabella, the heiress of Castile, in 1469 did not bring Malta into dependence on the crown of Castile, for the subsequent union of the two crowns in their grandson, Charles V, was a personal one and only very gradually led to the unification of the Spanish kingdoms. In many respects – legally, administratively, economically and politically – the Aragonese and Castilian crowns and their lands still remained almost entirely distinct in 1530.¹³ After 1479 Isabella's husband, Fernando II of Aragon, who was often known as the 'old Catalan', continued Alfonso V's policies with renewed interventions in the Italian wars, while in the Mediterranean the campaigns during which his forces, including some Maltese, captured Tripoli in 1510 represented a fusion of Aragonese interests with the Castilian ideal of the *reconquista*. The sixteenth-century expansion of the Ottoman Turks, especially into North Africa, and the events which led to the Hapsburg Charles V becoming not only King of Aragon and Castile but also Holy Roman Emperor in Germany and ruler of a world-empire with lands in Africa as well as in Europe and America, resulted in a widening of the struggle; they also left Malta as much as ever on the frontier of Christendom and dangerously exposed to Muslim attacks. Charles V opted for an inexpensive way of defending Malta and Tripoli when he granted them to the Order of St. John in 1530, but he did so as King of Sicily; Malta and Gozo remained, technically at least, a fief held from the Sicilian crown. When the crisis came in the great siege by the Turks in 1565 it was again to Sicily and the Iberian peninsula that Malta had to look for support.

Malta's political and economic links with the Aragonese crown led to other contacts. Bureaucrats and soldiers, nobles who received lands and privileges, priests and merchants arrived in Malta from Sicily and the Iberian peninsula. They often settled there, and came in the course of time to live and think like Maltese. There were other more unusual visitors, such as the Jewish cabbalist scholar from Aragon, Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia of Zaragoza, who spent a few years in exile on the little

¹³ There is very little justification for the accepted and thoroughly misleading assumption that a 'Castilian' period of Maltese history opened in 1412; Malta was more 'Aragonese' during its so-called 'Castilian' period than before it.

island of Comino between Malta and Gozo, where from 1285 to 1288 he wrote his *Sefer ba-Ot* – The Book of the Sign.¹⁴ The lands of the Aragonese crown in Malta, Sicily and the peninsula shared a heritage of Muslim tastes and traditions. The language, folklore, architecture and customs of the Maltese were clearly influenced from the Iberian peninsula and even more from Sicily. But as all the *paises de la corona de Aragón* formed part of a single cultural world, and Sicilian fashions and customs were themselves affected by Sicily's links with the Aragonese crown and its peninsular lands, it was often hard or even impossible to judge the movements of trends and influences.¹⁵ The process of expansion was also one of assimilation, and just as the aristocratic ruling classes, the commercial affairs and the political quarrels and alliances of these *paises* were inextricably blended and entangled, so were their cultural and political borrowings and exchanges. When Charles V granted Malta to the Order of St. John in 1530 there was still, practically speaking, no such thing as 'Spain', and even Machiavelli did not define the 'Italian state' in such a way as to include in it the Kingdom of Naples.¹⁶ 'Sicily' existed as an island and as a kingdom, and Malta and Gozo were part of that kingdom, a rather distant and particular part of it enjoying a special relationship with its crown. Like the people of Aragon, like the Catalans, the Mallorquins and the rest, the Maltese preserved their own particular characteristics, and their own ways of life and speech and thought. They were neither 'Italians' nor 'Spaniards'. Between 1282 and 1530 they were subjects of the house of Aragon, and Malta and Gozo formed part of that great Western Mediterranean confederation, *los paises de la corona de Aragón*.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Jewish Encyclopedia*, i (New York, 1901), 141-142.

¹⁵ Cf. J. WARD-PERKINS, 'Medieval and Early Renaissance Architecture in Malta,' *Antiquaries Journal*, xxii (1942), 169-170.

¹⁶ F. CHABOD, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance* (London, 1958), 71-76, *et passim*.

¹⁷ This is not to deny that strong 'influences' came from Sicily and Italy, but to emphasize that during this period they functioned within the 'Aragonese' context. Maltese history has too often been interpreted by scholars steeped in Italian history rather than in the wider complexities of the medieval Mediterranean world. A brief paper can do no more than offer hints and crude generalizations about a whole series of developments and problems which remain to be worked out in detail in Maltese, Sicilian, Spanish and other archives, as well as in other areas of research, such as folklore. An excellent start has been made with the as yet unpublished lectures delivered by Professor L.H. Butler in Valletta in 1962.