1091: A Diploma by Roger I on the Reorganisation of Sicily

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Abstract: After the Norman conquest of Sicily, Count Roger I founded the Benedictine Abbey of Sant'Agata in Catania in December 1091. To its abbot Ansgerius he entrusted, among other things, the rule over the city of Catania and its surrounding countryside as well as the Muslim population that once lived there. This article contextualises this foundation by reference to the administrative reorganisation of the island of Sicily after the end of Muslim rule and its integration into Roger's realm. At least nominally, Roger seems to have attempted to restore previous settlement structures which had been established under Muslim rule.

Source

Documenti latini e greci del conte Ruggero I di Calabria e Sicilia, ed. Julia Becker (Ricerche dell'Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma 9), Rom: Viella, 2013, no. 17, pp. 92-96, here pp. 94-95, trans. John Aspinwall and Theresa Jäckh.

Dedimus ego et uxor mea Adelixa et filii mei, Goiffredus videlicet et Iordanus, totam ipsam civitatem Cathanensium cum omnibus pertinentiis suis et cum omnibus posessi/onibus suis et cum omnibus hereditatibus suis, quas ipsa civitas tunc temporis habebat vel olim habuerat secundum suam nobilitatem (…) ut abbas et monachi huis monasterii ita haberent prefatam civitatem cum omnibus pertinentiis suis, sicuti Sarr/aceni eandem civitatem cum omnibus pertinentiis suis, tenebant, quando Normanni primum transierunt in Siciliam. Similiter dedimus prefato abbati et omnibus successoribus eius quod/dam castellum nomine Iatium cum omnibus pertinentiis suis.

I, my wife Adelasia and my sons, Geoffrey as well as Jordan, give the whole city of Catania with all its appurtenances, all its possessions and all its inheritances which that city has held since the oldest time or also had according to its nobility (...), and [we stipulate] that the abbot and the monks of this monastery shall thus have the said city with all its appurtenances, just as the Saracens (i.e. Muslims) of this city and all the lands they possessed when the Normans first came to Sicily. Likewise, we give to the said abbot and to all his successors that fort called Jato with all its appurtenances.

Et etiam concessi ego Rogerius comes abbati, ut ipse omnes illos Sarracenos accipet et per totam Siciliam, qui Sarraceni tunc temporis / erant in civitate Cathanensium, quando Normanni primum transierunt in Siciliam. Insuper omnes illos

Furthermore, I, Count Roger, grant to the abbot [the right] to recover all those Saracens across the whole of Sicily who, in the time of the Saracens , were in the city of Catania at the time the Normans first crossed to Sicily. Furthermore, I give to the

Sarracenos dedi prefato monasterio, qui nati fuerunt in quolibet loco Sicilie de illis / Sarracenis, qui tunc temporis erant in civitate Cathanensium et in castello Iatio, quando Normanni primum transierunt in Siciliam, et pro timore Normannorum inde ad alias partes fugerunt.	said monastery all the Saracens born of those Saracens of this place in Sicily who had been living in the city of Catania and in the fort of Jato when the Normans first came to Sicily, and who had fled to other parts [of the island] for fear of the Normans.

Authorship & Work

[§1] The quoted source passage comes from the foundation charter of the Abbey of Sant'Agata di Catania which was initiated by Count Roger I (r. 1059–1101) together with his wife Adelasia (d. 1118) and his sons Geoffrey (d. 1120) and Jordan (d. 1092). Issued at an unknown place, the document is dated to the 9 December 1091 and was thus completed shortly after the last Muslim stronghold of Noto had fallen to Roger I.

[§2] The individuals behind this legal transaction are to be contextualised briefly in chronological order: Between c. 1060 and 1091, Count Roger I led the piece-meal conquest of the island of Sicily which had been under Muslim control since the ninth century. His brother Duke Robert Guiscard (r. 1059–1085), who had nominally presided over the Sicilian enterprise and had appropriated strategically important territory during the early years of the conquests, had died in the meantime. His son and successor Roger Borsa (r. 1085–1111) resided mainly on the southern Italian mainland, where he was confronted with several rebellions. He received military support from his uncle Roger I who, in return, was granted shared rulership (*condominium*) in those parts of Sicily and Calabria which had previously been officially controlled by Guiscard. Where the shared territories are concerned, the charters of Roger I usually contain reference to this co-rulership with his nephew. The charter, from which we took the quoted passage, however, does not mention Roger Borsa. Rather, Roger I and his family appear as independent and assertive donors. In addition to the count himself, the record of the deed also names his third wife, Adelasia, as well as his sons Geoffrey and Jordan, whom Roger I had brought into the marriage together with nine daughters when he married Adelasia in 1089. It is unknown who the mother(s) of Geoffrey and Jordan was/were, which is why it is assumed that they both stemmed from an illegitimate union.

[§3] Jordan was the designated successor of Roger I: he had supported his father in his Sicilian enterprise since 1076 and appears to have been regarded as a skilful and trustworthy support. In order to reward his services after the subjugation of Sicily, Roger granted him control of Syracuse and Noto. Jordan is also mentioned in a later donation for Catania but died the following year – an event which is said to have caused great grief to Roger I. The most important narrative source for the period of the Norman conquest of Sicily, written by Geoffrey Malaterra, a monk of the Abbey of Sant'Agata di Catania, reports that Roger's grief over Jordan's death has even touched the Muslims who, he notes, were enemies of Jordan and Roger.[1] This statements needs to be contextualised by reference to the fact that Jordan's death was not only a personal tragedy for Roger I but also robbed him of a successor: Malaterra, who had known the count personally, records that Geoffrey suffered from leprosy (*morbus elephantinus*)[2] and, while he had been granted the rule over Ragusa, he was apparently not considered able to inherit power over Sicily.

[1] Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis*, ed. Pontieri (Rerum Italicarum Scriptores 5,1), lib. 4, cap. 18, pp. 97–98; for books 1–2, see the new edition: Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis*, lib. 1&2, ed. Lucas-Avenal.
[2] Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis*, lib. 4, cap. 18, p. 97.

[§4] Roger I's wife, Adelasia, who was from the noble family of the Aleramici in Savoy, would later have a formative influence on Roger I's legacy in Sicily and Calabria. Not only did she bear two sons and successors in the following years, Simon (1093–1105) and Roger (1095–1154), but she also took over the regency of the territory after her husband's death until Roger II came of age in 1112. Under her supervision, the administration of the county was run predominantly by Sicilian and Calabrian Greeks, who produced documents in both the Arabic and Greek language. In addition, she moved the court first from Mileto to Messina and then to the predominantly Arabic-Islamic east of the island. Here, they established Palermo as the centre of administration, representation, and rule of Norman Sicily and southern Italy. After 1112, Adelasia married Balduin of Jerusalem (r. 1100–1118)—perhaps in the hope of extending her son's rule into the Holy Land. Although the marriage was dissolved after a short time and Adelasia returned to Sicily, a later document possibly refers to this episode by calling Roger II a "royal son."[3]

Content & Context

[§5] In addition to the issuers of the document, the deed names a certain Ansgerius as the recipient, who was hereby to be installed as Abbot of St. Agatha. Our source excerpt, which comes from the constitutive part of the deed's *context*, transfers to him and his successors the rule over the city of Catania together with its lands, possessions, and inheritances. This would allow the abbey to levy taxes in the corresponding areas and over their inhabitants. The document also indicates that the boundaries of this Catanese territory should correspond to the old tradition and encompass the former influence of the city. Moreover, the abbey is granted the Muslim population (*Sarraceni*), together with their lands and possessions, within the boundaries that had encompassed their territories when the Normans first came to Sicily (i.e. when Muslim rule was still intact). In addition, the abbot and monastery received the stronghold of Jato (province of Palermo) with all its territories.

[§6] In the following section, these concessions are repeated with some interesting additions concerning the Muslim population: the abbot of Sant'Agata was to take into his territory all the Muslims who had belonged to the city and the lands of Catania when the Normans first came to Sicily. The document even goes further and states that the children of those Muslims from Catania and, moreover, from Jato (province of Palermo) should also be part of the abbey's property. As background information, the document adds that many of the Muslims had fled out of fear when the Normans came to Sicily and then spread out over the island. This is a rare reference to large-scale flight and displacement brought about by the thirty-year struggle for Sicily.

[§7] The document continues to mention some other privileges before the *sanctio*, a threat of punishment in the case of infringement, follows. Here, the document makes extensive reference to Pope Urban II. (sed. 1088–1099), whom Roger I is said to have informed about his plans concerning the foundation of the Abbey. The Pope, it is stated, praised him for this (*sanctus papa peticioni laudavit*). Urban II subsequently even appears as the guarantor for sanctions. Whoever violated the content of the law would be excommunicated by the pope, cursed and expelled from the monastic order. The reason for the Pope's jurisdiction over the abbey can probably be explained by the fact that no bishop had yet been established in Catania. However, it was not much later that Roger I appointed Ansgerius to the highest ecclesiastical office in Catania who then functioned as both abbot and bishop.

[§8] The *eschatocol* which concludes the document contains an unusual dating system that refers not only to the pontificate of Urban II, but also to the reigns/ruling years of Duke Roger

[3] On the regency of Adelasia, see von Falkenhausen, Adelasia.

Borsa, King Philip I of France (r. 1059/60–1108), the Roman Emperor Henry IV (r. 1084–1105) and the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (r. 1081–1118). According to Julia Becker, this was added when the original document was copied in the middle of the twelfth century in order to locate the Sicilian county within the wider network of kings and emperors as early as the end of the eleventh century. However, there can be little doubt about the authenticity of the document in other respects.[4] The witnesses to the document include ecclesiastical dignitaries from the Calabrian and Apulian regions, the archbishops of Taranto and Cosenza, and an abbot of Sant'Eufemia, an outpost of Latin monasticism in Calabria, which was predominantly Greek. The count's close confidants who also appear in other charters are also documented here. The signature is that of Roger I and his wife.

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§9] After completing the conquest of Sicily, Roger I began to organise his new territories and distribute lands[5]—a process that lasted several years and can only be understood through detailed evaluation of the documentary record. Before the enterprise was fully completed, the count had keenly avoided granting lordships, thereby dividing the island into small territories, which is why he suppressed and severely punished any attempts to seize land (including one by his own son Jordan).[6] Only in places where there was strong resistance against the new rule, he appointed some of his most trusted people to assert control.[7]

[§10] The large-scale donations of the 1090s were then, one the one hand, aimed at rewarding his loyal fighters for their efforts. They were stationed in strongholds at strategically important points where they could control roads or rebellious towns. On the other hand, Roger I began to populate Sicily with bishoprics and monastic foundations. This would not only revive the territorial and organisational structures after the years of war but can also be interpreted as an attempt to Christianise the island or, at least, its institutions. The new ecclesiastical-monastic institutions were therefore granted particularly large territories and areas of land.[8]

[§11] The foundation charter of Sant'Agata di Catania is one of these early donations and documents the period of transformation and transition between Muslim and Norman rule in a particularly interesting way. As already mentioned, we firstly learn that Ansgerius was appointed as the abbot of Sant'Agata and the lord of Catania with all the associated lands. Ansgerius was from the Benedictine order and came from northern France. He probably knew Roger I personally and had been settled in southern Italy for some time. Before he was appointed at Catania, he served as the abbot of Sant'Eufemia near Lamezia. Like Sant'Eufemia in the Greek territories of Calabria, the new Benedictine abbey of Catania was to become a Benedictine bulwark, herein an area that had been profoundly influenced by the Muslim period. In this respect, the city of Catania and its surroundings were different from places such as Messina and the Val Demone, where Greek Christian influence had remained strong throughout the period of Muslim rule. Many of the monks who followed Ansgerius to Sant'Agata were also originally from France, and the abbey soon became a centre of Latin immigration.[9]

[4] *Documenti latini e greci*, ed. Becker, no. 17, p. 95. Prior to Becker's critical edition of the charter, Jeremy Johns had suggested that "it might well be a forgery" whilst at the same time conceding the legal content to be confirmed by other documentary material. See Johns, *Arabic Administration*, pp. 37–38, and below §14.
[5] Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis*, ed. Pontieri, lib. 4, cap. 15, pp. 93–94.
[6] Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis*, ed. Pontieri, lib. 3, cap. 31, pp. 76–77 (for the revolt of Ingelmarus) and lib. 4, cap. 16, pp. 94–95 (for a conflict with Jordan).
[7] Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis*, ed. Pontieri, lib. 3, cap. 20, p. 69.
[8] On this process see Becker, *Roger* I., pp. 77–93.
[9] Becker, Vita, pp. 160–161.

[§12] Catania's new position was further strengthened when the city was endowed with more extensive grants and elevated to a bishopric in the year following our founding charter.[10] The cathedral was built in the style of a fortified church (*ecclesia munita*), which might reflect its potentially vulnerable position in a city that has only recently been conquered and was still majorly Muslim. In March 1092, Pope Urban II confirmed the elevation of Catania to a diocesan seat as well as the appointment of Ansgerius as bishop, making it clear in his letter that this was a re-establishment, and not a new foundation, since the bishopric had already appeared in Gregory the Great's register.[11] There is indeed evidence of a pre-existing Catanese episcopal see and Agatha as the chosen patron saint of the abbey and cathedral is linked to the pre-Islamic history of the city: The cult of St Agatha of Catania was already present in Palermo and Catania in the early Middle Ages and, according to 12th-century sources, she was even respected, if not venerated, by the Muslims of Sicily as a protector against disasters.[12]

[§13] Our document of 1091 furthermore illustrates the desire to restore a *status quo* from the time before the turmoil of war in stating that Catania should be restored to its former size – an expression that perhaps alludes to the ancient *latifundia* of Sicily, of which it is assumed that some of their boundaries probably continued to exist under Muslim rule.[13] In addition, all Muslims who had lived in the territory of Catania under Islamic rule but had been dispersed across the Sicilian countryside were to be reassigned to these territories along with their descendants. The founding document for the Abbey of Sant'Agata thus testifies to the fact that Roger I not only had to create new administrative structures for the stabilisation of the county, but also had to ensure that abandoned lands were to be resettled and cultivated.

[§14] If we consider the later donations for the bishopric of Catania alongside the document discussed here, we can discern the new legal status of this rural Muslim population under Norman rule. In 1095, Bishop Ansgerius received from Count Roger I a privilege written in Greek, which was followed by a list of names written in Arabic. This list of the names (Arab. *ǧarīda*) mentions 525 "people of Catania;" a second list mentions 390 Muslim families in Aci Castello, near Catania.[14] With these lists, the recipient of the privilege receives the Muslim population as a sort of property that is assigned and fixed to his specific territory. Moreover, the people mentioned there are obliged to pay religiously-based taxes and levies. Interestingly, the lists of names seem to have been regularly checked, as is shown by cases in which ecclesiastical dignitaries approached the count's administration over concerns if one of their men (*servi*) had gone missing.[15]

[§15] It is not possible to establish whether there was a real connection between the hundreds of men in the lists of names from 1095 and those who had fled the territories in the decades before, i.e. whether these were the same families or groups of people who settled in Catania before the conquest. However, what the Arabic lists of 1095 do appear to suggest is that the administrators of Roger I drew on templates from the Islamic administration when compiling these documents. This would indicate that at least some traces of the pre-Norman administration had survived the change of rule and that the count's administration (some of them of the Arabic-speaking Greek population) took orientation from some of the administrative traditions and practices of their predecessors soon after the conquest.[16] Under King Roger II. (r. 1130–1154),

[10] *Documenti latini e greci*, ed. Becker, no.†23, pp. 114–116.
[11] Enzensberger, Kirche pp. 27–29; *Italia Pontificia*, vol. 10: Calabria–Insulae, ed. Girgensohn, no. 19, p. 290.
[12] Oldfield, Medieval Cult.
[13] Metcalfe, Landscapes, pp. 97–98.
[14] *Documenti latini e greci*, ed. Becker, no. 50, pp. 200–201; Johns, *Administration*, pp. 57–58; Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 112–121.
[15] Von Falkenhausen, Testo.
[16] Johns, *Administration*, esp. pp. 39–62.

the Arabic-speaking administration, which was unique in Latin Europe, was reformed for representative purposes and redesigned based on Fāṭimid models.[17]

[§16] For the period of the late-eleventh century, the charters for Sant'Agata di Catania provide unique information and important insights into the process of the territorial, institutional, and administrative-legal reorganisation of Sicily, which, in many ways, marks the end of the Norman conquest of Sicily and the beginning of a long-term and fundamental transformation of the political and religious order on the island.

Edition(s) & Translation(s)

Documenti latini e greci del conte Ruggero I di Calabria e Sicilia, ed. Julia Becker (Ricerche dell'Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma 9), Rome: Viella, 2013, no. 17, pp. 92–96.

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[17] Johns, *Administration*, pp. 115–143.

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