
Joanna Drell’s *Kinship and Conquest* pursues three main areas of inquiry: the definition of nobility and the identification of the noble families in the kingdom of Sicily and southern Italy (known as the Regno); a description of marriage practices and how these affected the transfer and inheritance of property; and questions of who was viewed as belonging to a kin group and what kin felt about each other. Drell compares the picture gained from the charter evidence—especially the largely unpublished archive of the monastery of SS. Trinità at Cava dei Terreni—to an idealized view presented in contemporary historical narratives and integrates the results into the rich historiography on kinship and political power in western Europe. Drell makes no explicit use of feminist theory and provides no detailed analyses of the role of gender in the so-called “other Norman Conquest.” The charter evidence, however, adds perspective to the usual picture of dynamic male immigrants from France who intermarried with local Lombard women. Scholars interested in the role of ethnicity in identity formation will also find this rigorous and detailed study a point of comparison.

In the Regno, as in other regions of medieval Europe, nobility is far easier to recognize—by titles, entourages and exercise of lordship—than it is to define. The charter evidence of changes in the use and definition of titles of nobility suggests a considerable Normanization of the structure of the noble class. The title of count is the most frequently used designator of nobility. In Salerno, the title was honorary in pre-Norman times with no specific administrative function. After 1100, non-landed countships decreased, and the title was used in that sense only by Lombards who refer to distinguished ancestors. By the time of Roger II (r. 1105-54) the title indicated both a specific territory received from the king and a substantial military
obligation. Usage had changed to fit Norman conceptions. The title baron seems not to have been used before the Normans arrived and indicated military obligations that could be modest or substantial.

The documents of the Regno do nothing to clear up the problems presented by miles (here translated as “knight”), a word whose meaning changed over time from functional to social. References to milites in the Cava charters are rare before 1100, but when they do show up they are clearly not noble. As milites are moving toward noble status in other parts of Europe, in the Regno they seem to be outside of the charmed circle, but this may merely reflect that the function of a military retainer is seldom relevant to the matter at hand. A miles may have other functions or titles.

Marriage is the mechanism by which the Normans changed from conquerors to kinsmen thus creating the new nobility. The transactions recorded in the Cava charters can tell a good deal about the nature of the family and especially about the law of marriage, a seeming amalgam of customs, from which developed a rather flexible family structure. Drell notes what theoretically constitutes a legitimate marriage and then presents a lengthy commentary based on the charter evidence. For the writers of historical narratives—Geoffrey Malaterra predominates here—the shared nobility of the partners is paramount as is the public exchange of gifts signaling the families’ consent. Interestingly, a number of negative examples emphasizes the positive points (p. 59).

The customs of dowry (Roman) and morgengabe (Lombard) gave women control of property that their husbands could not alienate without their consent, even if the woman herself needed consent to alienate it, guaranteeing women a prominent role in the various gifts, bequests, exchanges and alienations recorded in the charters. Lombard law predominated in much of Salernitan territory, and the charters also show that women had many means of evading the control of their mundoalds, the male guardians required under Lombard law. The differences
between apparently contrasting customs such as dowry and morgengabe diminished over time. Presumably, the rate of inter-marriage between those professing different laws had something to do with this. The desire to avoid questions about the legitimacy of an advantageous union was a strong motive for the relatively few Normans to follow local marriage customs.

Marriage leads to the transfer and, eventually, the inheritance of property. The sheer number of the Cava charters reflects the importance that was attached to property transactions, a lengthy and sequential record for the entire Norman period. Wills tend not to record bequests made according to the prevailing customs; they provide examples of less routine bequests to siblings and nepotes (which can include nieces, nephews, or grandchildren), provision for natural children, or a son’s consent to a bequest to SS. Trinità of land that he would otherwise have inherited. Particularly interesting is what the charters reveal about the actions of women, especially widows. A widow’s share of her husband’s estate, at the least her quarta or morgengabe, could be crucial to a family’s patrimonial strategy, and a good number of charters describe transactions by widows involving such properties. Among the upper levels of the nobility, limiting the number of heirs became crucial, and the evidence shows that “noble families employed whatever means were necessary to control the devolution of their patrimonies” (113).

The section on kinship gives the impression that kinship, like nobility, is difficult to define precisely although much easier to recognize. The Cava charters usually specify the parentage of the principals and the family relationships among the parties involved. In general, male ancestors, like male heirs, are favored, yet female ancestors of sufficient importance, especially those of the Lombard princely house, are included. Distinguished Lombard ancestors were recalled in multi-generational lists until the late twelfth century. Norman ancestors were usually limited to the father’s name, and use of the identifier “the
Norman” increased in the first decades of the twelfth century, a time when many had dual ancestry. No doubt the choice of which ancestors to acknowledge had a practical basis as well, but “ethnic memory” is an identifiable feature of this vast archive. Drell uses the term “flexible” so often that one could wonder how flexible a structure can be and still exist. Like gold, kinship can apparently be stretched very thin indeed and still remain golden.

A few minor instances of Murphy’s Law do not affect the conclusions of the book, and the potential for confusion is negligible compared to the complexity of the materials presented. The immediate audience for this book will be those ready to brave the denser genealogical thickets of removed relations of the same name and approximately the same age (difficulties that reduce the usefulness of the index). Even students with limited foreign-language skills can profitably begin with the bibliography, which is thorough and current. The unpublished translations of G. A. Loud that Drell uses have since become available online, something that will make references such as “(trans. p. 32)” more useful.¹

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