

## Widows in Early Modern Europe: Reconsiderations from Palermo

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Spring 2009

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For the past three years I have been doing research based heavily on notarial records from the city of Palermo, Sicily, beginning with scant holdings dating back to 1252 and on through the voluminous bundles of sixteenth and seventeenth century documents. My primary concern is with the role of women, especially widows, in the control and transmission of property. In spring 2006, following hard upon an intense but in some ways frustrating fall semester at the Archivio di Stato in Palermo I worked out an initial set of possible strategies for using these records to assemble a dynamic, statistically representative picture of just how women managed their property holdings. The core problem in historical demography specifically and socio-economic analysis more generally is that most of the work historians do in studying large groups of people rests on static documents, such as population censuses, tax rolls, last will and testaments, marriage contracts, and records of purchases, sales, and rentals. These records tell us what an individual held or how she disposed of her wealth at a given moment in time. Often we have multiple snapshots for the same individual, allowing us to know how holdings changed from point A to point B. But we cannot see exactly how and why the change occurred.

It is possible, as the pioneering work in France of Louis Henry and in England of Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Population Studies team showed several decades ago, to reconstruct families and then to connect these reconstructions to records on property. Such an approach goes a great way toward overcoming the static or snapshot knowledge

of most historical studies in favor of a more dynamic understanding of events over time. But the problem with familial reconstruction was evident from the outset, at least to those who engaged seriously in the method and were not blinded by the myth of giving agency to the voiceless little people. The approach would fall apart for a highly mobile population or a population of a size that made record matching unwieldy and unreliable. Once we got through a few centuries of uneventful lives lived entirely in sleepy villages in England and France, the method and its findings would fade in significance. That is exactly what happened, exacerbated by a general shift of historical interest away from the brute empiricism of counting events toward deconstructions of their meaning, if any. My original goals for Palermo included digitizing its notarial records on a massive scale, thereby allowing at least the partial reconstruction of families and their properties over several centuries. But such an endeavor would take an *équipe* of scholars and resources that would put a sizeable dent even in President Obama's stimulus package, so I must find a more feasible way.

A notable exception to the static quality of many archival records, of course, may be in those related to certain types of legal disputes, wherein the litigant routinely assembles the history behind the current snapshot at issue in order to win her case. Sicily is duly famous for its legal wrangles lasting centuries and a good number of these involve widows who recounted their sides of disagreements at length in depositions recorded by notaries. The advantage of this particular form of memorial account, which may run to dozens of folios, is that the woman is relatively free to cast things as she sees them, without juridical restrictions on testimony or the cursory nature of actual court judgments. There is always the danger of reading these highly self-serving, one-sided,

disputatious documents as if they represent normative behavior but in our current era of deconstructionist historiography that problem should be a piece of cake to resolve.

Furthermore, there are the laws themselves to be examined, especially fruitful for the city of Palermo in particular and for Sicily more generally because of the conflicting jurisdictions of royal, provincial, and communal authorities.

One never knows whether laws prohibiting certain behavior mean that the behavior was or was not happening, and whether injunctions requiring specific actions were or were not enforced but here we are dealing with ultimately intractable issues that have never inhibited historians from making sweeping generalizations and that are hardly likely to deter me from my work. In addition to the legal arena, there are accounts of powerful widows in manuscript and even printed family memorial books, not so numerous or well-known as those for Florence but significant nonetheless and waiting to be exposed to the light of modern scrutiny and taste. Finally, while notarized dowries, testaments, and account books are inevitably in the static snapshot mode, the individual records do tell us about fascinating and important things that actually happened, even if in truth no one can say how often or exactly why.

The moment is at hand, then, to do what is possible and get on with things, or is it? There are, alas, some major theoretical concerns that need to be addressed before starting to mine the documents. The field of widow studies has become a cottage industry in the two decades since Christiane Klaphis-Zuber published her famous “Cruel Mother” essay, the one that characterized all women’s activity in managing property as essentially serving the power and desire of early modern Europe’s patriarchy. Klaphis-Zuber conceded that for a time a daughter might possess and with restrictions dispose of wealth,

and a widow for a longer period if she behaved properly and did not remarry but in the end the goods went back to the men, some man, somehow. If every outcome in the long run supports continued male dominance, then there is little point in documenting women's activities or in ascribing agency to their actions, neither in Palermo nor anywhere else. Subsequent scholarship has nuanced this theoretical stance but it remains the prevailing view, expressed for example with great clarity in Christine Meek's recent collection of essays, that a portrait painted in the hues of misogynous defense of patriarchal power and privilege best captures the realities of early modern European property holding.<sup>1</sup> I intend in this paper to challenge that approach and to offer instead a model that returns us in new ways to the older emphasis on families, families in which daughters, wives, widows, and even grandmothers were key players. Misogyny, yes, but toward a goal of enhancing the power of families, not for the purpose of allowing clusters of men and boys to rule over women and girls. My return to the earlier model finds a parallel in Thomas Kuehn's most recent work on repudiations of inheritances among 15<sup>th</sup> century Florentines, although he quite properly centers his work less on gender than I do.<sup>2</sup>

We begin the historiographical challenge by turning first to a news item from Palermo a few centuries earlier. In the year 1112/13, Adelaide del Vasto, formerly the wife of the late Count Roger the First of Sicily, agreed to wed the crusader King Baldwin the First of Jerusalem. The widow Adelaide, now about to become a bride for the second time, and her future groom, despite the fact that he was still legally entangled with a barren wife who he had dumped in a convent, drew up a prenuptial agreement, a form of

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Meek, ed., *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (Portland, Or.: Four Courts Press, 2000), esp. the latter portions of Catherine Lawless's essay. Christiane Klapish-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kuehn, *Heirs, Kin, and Creditors in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

marital alliance with far more ancient traditions than some moderns might realize. The document incorporated two key conditions:

(1) She, Adelaide del Vasto, widow of Roger Hautville Count of Sicily, shall provide a generous dowry, sufficient to pay the king's extensive debts, incurred to his knights in the fight to capture Jerusalem.

(2) Should their marriage end without producing an heir, then the kingdom of Jerusalem shall pass to her son by her previous marriage, a mere lad but already touted as the future King Roger II of Sicily.

Standard accounts either ignore Adelaide del Vasto entirely or else dismiss her as someone whose only asset was her fertility but I want to re-examine the happenings a bit more deeply and see what might be said about her exercise of power. Surely there is more to her story than historian Gordon Brown suggested when he concluded that “considering that Adelaide’s prime qualification as Roger’s third wife had been her presumed fecundity, she proved to be a remarkably competent caretaker—the one possible caveat being the exceptional privileges granted to her family, the Alerami [Aleramico].”<sup>3</sup> Also a subject of my brief re-examination is the emphasis on fertility conveyed in a very modern source, Wikipedia, which currently informs the world of Internet scholars about her marriage to King Baldwin by writing that “Adelaide was already well into middle age and no new heir was immediately forthcoming,”

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon S. Brown, *The Norman Conquest of Southern Italy and Sicily* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2003), 194. A typically dismissive treatment – “The period of [Adelaide’s] regency appears to have been uneventful on the whole” – may be found in Aziz Ahmad, *A History of Islamic Sicily* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975), 55.

In her first marriage, at the age of fifteen, in 1089/90, Adelaide del Vasto had wed Count Roger I, conqueror of Sicily and progenitor of the Norman dynasty in southern Italy. He was nearly sixty at that time and none of his fourteen children from an extramarital affair and two marriages, ten of whom were daughters, proved to be entirely suitable as an heir. Their marriage was part of a complex alliance formed between Roger Hauteville's family of Norman origin and the Aleramici, a powerful noble clan based in the northern Italian regions of Liguria and Piedmont. In addition to Roger and Adelaide's nuptial, two of Adelaide's sisters were betrothed to two of Roger's surviving sons, the illegitimate Jordan and the soon-to-die Godfrey, and her brother Henry married one of Roger's daughters. The complex alliance between powerful families and political factions in Liguria/Piedmont and Sicily, of course, repeats itself in Italian history. In this arrangement of four interrelated marriage contracts, Adelaide del Vasto unquestionably was a pawn but one who became a queen, if you will excuse a bad pun and focus on questions of power and agency.

The newlyweds celebrated the births of their sons, first Simon, probably in 1092, and a year later of Roger, destined for greatness, with the aid of his mother. The couple probably also had two daughters who survived but they mattered little when dynastic crisis faced Adelaide on the occasion of her husband's death in 1101. Old Roger had been a conqueror, not an inheriting son, and there abounded mature male Norman in-laws who might usurp the tenuous rights of Adelaide's two boys, not yet in their teens. Especially dangerous was their cousin Roger Borsa, son of little Roger's dead uncle Robert Guiscard and his last wife, Sikelgaita, whose recorded deeds resemble something of a hybrid containing the traits of an Amazon warrior and Lucretia Borgia. As things turned out,

Roger Borsa was not up to the task of preserving his father's conquests, whereas Adelaide's boy became a huge success, something no one could have known for sure in 1101.

The twenty-six-year-old widow Adelaide took precisely the right symbolic first step, ordering a canopy made of porphyry, usually reserved for the Byzantine emperor, to be placed above her husband's sarcophagus. Shortly thereafter, local barons tested her mettle when they broke out in rebellion throughout Calabria and Sicily but according to one chronicler she crushed them "like earthenware dishes." She chose her counsel carefully and wisely. The story that Adelaide poisoned a son of the Duke of Burgundy who perhaps overstepped her wishes in his role as some sort of advisor or tutor to her son may be only a monk's exaggeration but there is reasonably reliable evidence to support the conclusion that the widow relied on local Sicilian talent in educating her boys and getting herself through the regency period. Quite notably, she successfully handled the setback of Simon's death in 1105 at the age of twelve, leaving all her hopes to rest on her only surviving son, his younger brother Roger. During the years of her regency, Adelaide employed two extremely shrewd strategies in solidifying power for little Roger, and for herself of course. Firstly, she relocated her headquarters from Troina, a fortified hilltop town deep in the interior mountainous Madonie region that had suited nicely her dead husband's warrior activities, to Sicily's northern coastal centers, initially to Messina and then to Palermo, where her obvious abilities at political survival through effective diplomacy better held sway. [SEE MAP] In both these urban strongholds, she nurtured the island's Greco-Byzantine cultural inheritance, shunning both envious Norman in-laws and interfering papal representatives. She also took great care to preserve and nurture

Sicily's rich Islamic traditions, its economic practices, and its commitment to Arabic scientific advances in medicine, engineering, and architecture. Secondly, she invited her natal familial relatives and other northern Italian power holders to settle in the central Sicilian regions of Paternò and Butera, thus driving a Christian wedge between Moslem strongholds to the west and southeast and introducing feudalism to the island as a whole. The Arabic language section of a charter from 1109 refers begrudgingly to Adelaide as "the great female ruler, the *malikah* (meaning "sovereign" or "queen") of Sicily and Calabria, the protector of Christian faith."<sup>4</sup>

A decade of strong, successful regency by Adelaide allowed her son Roger to reign in his own right beginning in 1112 but she was by no means ready to go into retirement. Instead, surely in consultation with her son, a consultation the dynamic of which can only be guessed at, she agreed to King Baldwin's marriage proposal, with its negotiated pre-nuptial stipulations. Now, at the age of thirty-seven, the factoid characterized by Wikipedia as "well into middle age," and after a decade of chaste widowhood, she was willing to invest some of her vast wealth in an adventurous life as a queen, perhaps with a second set of heirs to inherit her new husband's throne and, if not, with a pledge to have her mature son from her prior marriage take over the kingdom of Jerusalem. She and her son probably knew that although Baldwin had repudiated his second wife, he had not succeeded in obtaining a legal annulment. Nonetheless, Adelaide arrived for the wedding celebration in September 1113, bringing shiploads of weapons,

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<sup>4</sup> Hubert Houben, *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler between East and West*, trans. Graham A. Loud and Diane Milburn (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), provides all of the factual information and quotations in this brief account. Although Houben is more sympathetic to Adelaide than Brown and Ahmad, the interpretations here remain mine alone.

soldiers, provisions, and gold to the recently captured port of Acre. During the next three years she bore no children. Then in 1116/17 King Baldwin became ill, on his deathbed as it turned out. Local vassals and the Patriarch of Jerusalem, who feared that if Roger became king in accord with the nuptial agreement, he would curtail their extensive privileges, as his father had done so successfully with the local Sicilian nobility, pressured the dying king to repudiate Adelaide, reminding him that he was still legally married to his second wife. Baldwin obtained the necessary paperwork and suddenly Adelaide became an ex-queen, the helpless victim of an annulled marriage. Perhaps in further consultation with her son Roger, she apparently decided not to summon military support to back her rights. Instead she packed her bags and returned to Palermo, where she died just a year later. For the rest of his long and accomplished reign, King Roger neither forgot nor forgave the affront to his mother (as well as the lost opportunity to become ruler of Jerusalem) and he refused to provide any kind of support to the Crusader states. But in later charters written to grant him the title of King of Sicily, Roger referred to himself pointedly as the son of a queen.<sup>5</sup>

If we read the above facts through the theoretical lens offered by Klapish-Zuber and accepted widely in recent widow studies, we have the story of a teenage girl married by her family to a sixty year old man from a foreign country. It is not clear that they even spoke a common language. She provided him with four children, including a surviving son. But as soon as he became of age, the lad packed his widowed mother off to the Holy Land in a re-marriage alliance that failed to gain his territorial ambitions, at which point she was sent home, where she was left to die a year later, her fertility and usefulness

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<sup>5</sup> Houben, *Roger II*, 29.

exhausted. Such a maudlin rendition of Queen Adelaide's life would fit well not only with Klapish-Zuber's theoretical stance but also with the Judeo-Christian patriarchal traditions her view incorporates, wherein daughters are possessions, to be bought and sold among fathers and sons-in-law. But the Bible also tells of so-called bad girls, and certainly of assertive women. If we pause to ask ourselves what might be the objectives of canonical patriarchal traditions and of the accounts that challenge these traditions, then there may be more place for mighty widows than the analytic framework suggested by Klapish-Zuber and others would allow. The evidence provided in "Cruel Mother" includes family trees with the female branches shorn off, dowries dissipated, lost, and stolen, mothers denied parental rights, and widows forced to remarry. Powerful though the documents are on first reading, they beg the question of why late medieval Florentine men did such horrible things to their women. Were their actions somehow akin to modern-day male bonding gone amuck, as in gender discrimination at golf clubs, cover-ups of sexual harassment at Madison Square Garden, and episodes of gang rape by rampaging soldiers or fraternity boys? Or, alternatively, was there some rational purpose among the men who wrote laws and engaged in practices that restricted women's behavior, especially single women and widows active in the public arenas of commerce, property holding, and legal tribunals? We might ask ourselves, for example, why it came to be that medieval Christians inverted the levirate law, Deuteronomy 25:5-10, which orders that the childless widow may be married to her dead husband's brother at his will, and instead absolutely prohibited such consanguineous arrangements. Certainly the levirate injunction is a powerful affirmation that none of a widow's property should return to her natal family or otherwise be consigned outside her husband's kinfolk. But

we would not conclude from Europe's reverse strategy that its patriarchs had become less overtly misogynous than their Old Testament ancestors. Rather, we are seeing at play a wonderfully ironic quodlibetal issue: what happens when two patriarchs are in dispute over the same piece of property, held for the moment in some way by a woman, indeed, by a widow with interests directed to her sons, perhaps to her father, and possibly to some future husband, but certainly not to her dead husband's natal family. There you have it – three, maybe four patriarchs all seeking control over the widow and what is hers, or perhaps not quite hers since ultimately it must pass to one or more of them.

If we agree to explore the question of how misogynous laws and practices reflect strategies beyond pure misogyny *in se*, we might usefully start by examining constraints upon the individual in Early Modern Europe, men as well as women. To this end, I have prepared a little diagram that may shed light on the purposes of misogyny, and possibly some escape paths from its snares. I begin by positing that the individual is constrained by three broad forces that are traditional subjects of historical inquiry: the (S) State, (R) Religion, and the (F) Family. One might immediately object that there is also the constraint of nature or biology but I am taking the view that although the consequences of nature, such as fertility and mortality rates, certainly must be included in the historian's gaze, nature itself is better left as a philosophical or theological concept than taken as a historical variable. Analogously, I include organized religion as a worthy subject of historical inquiry but exclude the force of God as a supernatural entity. So, the letters (R) and (S) in the diagram stand for organized Religion and the organized State(s), which make rules and regulations that govern the individual. I posit further that the Family, represented by an (F), is a third force that exercises rule over the individual and is an

appropriate subject for historical investigation. The simplest form of this triad applies to men, as shown in the triangle at the top of the diagram. Patrilineal family structures leave a man with undivided loyalties, at least in a linear sense. The (F) for Family is represented as a single angle.

For a married woman, by contrast, it is the case in most societies, certainly in Reformation Europe, that she has two very distinct family constellations, the one of her birth and the other acquired through marriage, as portrayed in the second geometric figure, now a quadrilateral. It may be, of course, that the husband takes on responsibility for his wife's family as well as his own, or that he distinguishes in meaningful ways between his natal family and the children of his married family. But some complications must be left to the anthropologists and this shall be one of them. The fact is that religion and the state in early modern Europe recognized widely and in a variety of ways the dual family obligations of wives but made no such distinction for husbands. Inevitably, laws addressing the conflicting familial ties and loyalties of women by constraining their choices were misogynous but equally certainly, they had a purpose and that purpose was not the advantage of all men but of particular men in specific familial constellations.

The third figure, containing two triangles joined at their apexes, represents the situation of the widow with children who chooses not to remarry. The (F) Family portion of the diagram now has expanded from a dyad to a triad, with her children at one angle, equidistant from the grandparents on either side. Through her children, she retains a vital link to her dead husband's family, one supported by the external forces of Religion (R) and the State (S). Both through them and in her role as a daughter, her connections to her natal family also weigh heavily.

The fourth and last segment of the diagram attempts to convey the situation of the widow with children who remarries, possibly to a man who brings with him children from his prior marriage(s), who are labeled C3. The newlyweds may have additional children and these I have designated as C2, setting them numerically midway between their stepsiblings on either side, who are shown to be as far apart as possible, a reality occasionally bridged by marrying each other, an inheritance strategy found with some regularity in Palermo's records and one of the most efficient ways of uniting property without violating consanguinity regulations. The core of my research looks at widows, both those who remarry and those who do not. Before turning directly to them, however, I want to say a few words about the other two angles in the diagrams: Religion (R) and the State (S).

The locus for my work is the city of Palermo in particular and island of Sicily more generally. In a fuller length treatment I will have much to say about the nature of Counter Reformation Catholicism in Sicily. For now, it suffices to assert without fear of contradiction that the practice of organized religion in Sicily was as interventionist, uncontested, and unrestrained as anywhere in sixteenth-century Europe, every bit as dominant as on the Iberian peninsula or in Rome itself. There were some curbs on Inquisitional attempts to grab land but such contests had little to do with spirituality, heresy, or any religious values as we normally understand the term. Fights over property engaged in constantly by the Church merely reflect its dual role as part of the State, or as a contestant for state power. My (R) for Religion looks instead to the successful imposition by Church authority of rules governing conduct, morality, family values, prescriptions and prohibitions on marital choices, and obligations to children and

spouses. And so I repeat, nowhere in Europe did Counter Reformation Catholicism reign more supremely than in Palermo.

The role of the State (S), by contrast, was deeply contested. There were two state authorities, actually three, in Palermo, often in conflict with each other. One was located far away in Spain, for all of Sicily remained under the dominion of a powerful Spanish monarchy. Especially among the high nobility, who left behind a disproportionately large share of the records I am studying, connections to Spain extended beyond the political and military to include family alliances. A second state authority was the Church but since we already have (R) Religion in our little diagram, I will simply note it here as an additional complication, one that becomes significant for widows in that they could and often did turn to the convent as a way of protecting their property from the rapacious hands of their dead husband's family. The third force in play is the local state, itself divided between the communal authority of Palermo and the Sicilian regional government, such as it was. Both played vital roles in organizing, defending, and constraining the family and its rulers. Sicily is famous for the complexity and length of its court cases, with disputes running over decades being quite frequent. In these proceedings, the legal interplay lasted so long by pitting the authorities of the several states against each other, regardless of the underlying dynamic and reality of the contested issue. The development of sound family law was sacrificed to procedural wrangling between competing states; then as now, there was no such thing as "family law" in the abstract.

One might ask, therefore, how it is that (F) Family belongs in our diagram at all as an independent variable. I take (F) Family to be an organizational structure with the

objective of acquiring and maintaining property and power, analogous to the clan, the partnership, the university, or the corporation. Just as with these other organizations, (F) Family relies on legally binding contracts, in this instance known as marriages, to perpetuate itself. However, to a greater extent than in these other organizations, (F) Family relies openly and proudly on biological reproduction, rather than on hiring and firing, for its propagation. My subject matter, therefore, is marriage contracts and the production of offspring. There is no room in these diagrams for love, non-reproductive sex, or individual desire -- emotions and urges that along with Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud I cast aside as disruptive factors more likely than not to undermine the primary objective of the (F) Family.

The general consensus among historians is that early modern Sicilian widows analyzed the possibility of remarriage in the same cold-hearted way that my diagrams portray the choices. The island is rich in land resources, the primary basis for the wealth, property, and power held by families. Sicily divides rather clearly between East and West, something captured even in our 1550 mapping, providing homes to what Gerard DeLille termed “families of the trees” and “families of grain,” although allowance must be made for variety even within this formulation. Intensive agriculture, requiring heavy use of water and a steady supply of manual labor to produce vegetables, is concentrated in the low-lying plains of the East, with the commercial center of this activity in Catania. True, Mt. Etna dominates the skyline but this is nonetheless a region of intensive farming. It is also the region that the Ancient Greeks and then the Byzantines most favored, again not withstanding some impressive Greek temples located in Agrigento and Segesta in the West. In eastern Sicily, widows were likely to remarry, as they needed a

man around to share in the daily farm work and supervise additional day laborers hired at a few key times each year.

In the West, by contrast, landholdings are extensive and although substantial manual labor is needed at critical times, on a day-to-day basis nature just does its wonders and produces a bountiful harvest of wheat, complemented by wine and olives. The economic center of this region is Palermo, with its fascinating residues of the Arab stronghold the city once was, and its surrounding citrus groves. So great was the region's wealth, and with so little spent on the needs of the peasantry, that commerce in luxury goods flourished. Opportunities to invest were ample -- in fishing ventures, military exploits, and construction projects -- or the elite simply indulged in profligate consumption, eventually piling up debts that would have required centuries to repay, which never happened, at least not in full. A widow in this region already had a place to live and to rear her children, perhaps more comfortably than ever with the old man now out of the way. She did not gain much of anything from acquiring another home, nor another husband, especially if she had to re-dower herself as part of the deal. Among the wealthy, supervision of the seasonal workforce was not a problem since her deceased husband never had done any such work either, leaving the task to exploitative leaseholders, known as *gabellotti*. Even among those of more modest means, getting the essential work done might better be accomplished by gaining the help of a brother or other natal family relative, obviously a smart choice for her kinfolk of course, than by going out and buying a new husband.

Before turning from theoretical questions to the actual evidence, I want to note the ambiguity of one additional Sicilian practice. In accord with feudal law as written in

Sicily, royal land grants required that title to the property revert to the crown in the absence of a male heir. Women could not inherit lands that had once belonged to the king. This law governed, for example, the extensive grants made by Adelaide del Vasto to her Ligurian and Piedmontese relatives during her regency while Roger II grew to manhood. This was the very exercise of power I noted earlier as the target of historian Gordon Brown's disparagement of Adelaide for favoritism toward her natal family. Did Brown think she should have granted the territories to her Norman in-laws, or perhaps reserved them for her son Roger? However that may be, we may wonder how it could be that so many of the noble estates in central Sicily initiated early in the twelfth century by Adelaide's grants to her Alerami relatives, still remained in the core trunks of the same family trees four hundred years later. Whereas in England and northern Europe a daughter might inherit if there were no direct male heirs, the rulers of Sicily never made such a concession. Seemingly, given the demographic realities that must frequently have left a nuclear family without male heirs, royal properties should have been reverting to the crown or else been shifting laterally to very remote branches of family trees. But in fact no such thing happened because regional Sicilian law allowed an individual, represented in a tribunal by appropriate male relatives, to petition for a legal change of her gender. Thus, a sole surviving daughter, with the support of her father or more likely of her son, could obtain the legal status of being a male and therefore fully eligible to inherit property. One could certainly argue that this extra step of legal gender transformation, one that a woman similarly situated in England or Northern Europe did not have to take, constitutes evidence of patriarchal misogyny run rampant. I suggest, instead, that we should see the provision as a fine example of local Sicilian ingenuity in

making sure that what belongs to a family stays with that family. In terms of my earlier diagrams, it is an instance where (F) family trumps both the (S) state and organized (R) religion, in this instance by playing the regional state against the royal state.

If I have persuaded you of my conclusion that after duly noting the misogynous quality of laws and practices restricting single women and widows, there is value in examining the purpose and consequences of these restrictions, which I believe to be the strengthening of (F) family in its contestations for power against the (S) state and organized (R) religion, then you may be willing to read a little more as I briefly indicate the range of sources available for analysis from this perspective. I shall note only in passing the many books of family history, some printed but mostly available only in manuscript. While I know of nothing from Sicily to match the import of a collection such as the Florentine widow Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi's letters to her sons in exile, examples abound of accounts that record widows who exercised power. Agostino Inveges' 1651 history of fourteen noble Sicilian families of Norman, French, and Spanish origin includes two chapters on prominent widows. One, Isabella Chiaramonte, upon the decapitation of her husband for treason chose to enter a nunnery and bring his entire fortune with her, thus depriving his enemies of access to his goods by successfully pitting the Church against the State. The other, the widow of Prades-Cabrera, for two decades administered vast estates in Caccamo on behalf of her children, always with the legally required co-signatures of male "guardians," whose names changed frequently while hers remained constant. Upon her death, her wealth, now enhanced by her bold investments and vicious squeezing of maximum rents from her tenants, went entirely to her son, since she had already dowered her daughters, an outcome she ardently desired without ever

thinking, I would suspect, that she had fallen into the Klapish-Zuber trap of returning her wealth to her dead husband's heirs.<sup>6</sup>

A similar collection of family heroes and heroines features the Moncada clan and highlights connections between widows and the Church, including stories that go beyond great charity to suggest transfers of property intended to thwart rapacious in-laws. There is Elisena Moncada, the widowed Queen of Aragon who spent thirty years cloistered in the monastery she founded, although she never took formal vows. And further along we read about Luisa Moncada, Countess of Santa Gadea and Buendia. Even as a young girl, her parents called her "a little old lady" but what may have been seen as cute religious precociousness turned into familial warfare when her mother bribed her daughter's confessor to instruct the teenager that God intended her to marry in accordance with her parents wishes. Luisa prayed for a way out, and she believed God had granted her wish when her intended husband was killed in battle. But then her parents forced her to marry one of the dead warrior's brothers. The marriage went badly, as her lascivious husband blatantly brought home a string of mistresses and spoke openly about his disgust at Luisa's pox-marked face and pious ways but she continued to pray for his soul. Shortly after he died, Luisa brought her entire dowry to the Discalced Carmelite monastery she had sought to join ever since she had read about Teresa of Avila. Her cousin did much the same. After youthful study of Spanish noble family trees that made her the person to be consulted on any questions about consanguineous potential marriage contracts, she

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<sup>6</sup> Agostino Inveges, *La Cartagine siciliana* (Palermo: Giuseppe Bisagni, 1651), 369-400 and 457-76.

determined that she was improperly related to all possible suitors, so she took her dowry with her to enter the Monastery at Pedralbes in Barcelona.<sup>7</sup>

Other printed sources of interest are manuals for confessors and even for the general public that were published in Palermo, where printing presses were far fewer and under much tighter government control than on the peninsula. For the entire sixteenth century, a little over 18,000 editions were printed in Italy but only 437 appeared with Palermo as place of origin, ahead of Turin at 314 and only a little less than Naples at 491 but more than tenfold below the centers of Venice, Florence, and Rome. Of these 437 presumed editions, 162 are housed at the Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Siciliana, with the rest scattered in various monasteries and uncatalogued. A perusal of two printed bibliographies of the 162 items<sup>8</sup> reveals a local edition of the Spaniard Martin de Azpilcueta's manual for confessors, with extensive commentary on the rights and obligations of widows, especially in their role as executors of property on behalf of their children.<sup>9</sup> An item aimed as a wider audience, one printed originally in Brescia and then re-published in Palermo in 1590 is a Dominican advice manual on how to die well by living well, and it too is heavily directed at the behavior, financial and otherwise, of

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<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Agostino della Lengueglia, *Ritratti della prosapia et heroi Moncadi nella Sicilia* (Valenza, 1657).

<sup>8</sup> Silvana Barreca and Piera Casile, eds., *Edizioni del XVI secolo: Edizioni Siciliane* (Palermo: Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Siciliana, 1986). Carlo Pàstena, Angela Anselmo, and Maria Carmela Zimmardi, *Bibliografia della edizioni palermitane antiche BEPA*, vol. 1: *Edizioni del XVI secolo* (Palermo: Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Siciliana, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Petro Giuvara, *Compendium Manualis Navarri: Ad commodiorem usum, tum confessoriorum, tum poenitentium confectum* (Panormi apud I. Antonium de Franciscis, 1591).

widows.<sup>10</sup> Less useful for my purposes but still to be acknowledged as a presence on the local publishing scene are religious books in praise of virginity that address widows.<sup>11</sup>

Turning now to manuscript documents and picking up on the Moncada family, an unusually informative bundle records the activities of Luisa de Luna e Vegha, widow of Francesco Moncada. Her property included her original dowry, several large estates assigned to her by her husband in tutelage for their children, and further holdings beyond her dowry that her father had left her as his only surviving child. When her daughter married and gave birth to a son, Luisa de Luna became a grandmother, actively and knowingly involved in making sure that her wealth would pass to her grandson while preventing her son-in-law from getting his hands on anything. To accomplish this goal, she declared her own daughter to be incompetent and therefore continued to rely on the signatory power of one of her dead husband's brothers to retain unfettered personal management of her property. She was still in a court battle over what amounts to power of attorney against her son-in-law when she died, leaving her grandson to successfully defend what was now his patrimony against the designs of his father.<sup>12</sup>

Also richly illustrative in the same Moncada family archive is a memorial by Contessa Caterina Branciforti recounting her legal contest stretching from 1570 to 1605. Seemingly everything was in dispute and the self-serving style of these notarized memorials makes it hard to develop any historical compassion for the greedy women in question but the nub of the issue does ring true. Caterina's father had reneged on payment of the dowry contracted upon her marriage into the Moncada family, a rather common

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<sup>10</sup> Bartolomeo D'Angelo, *Ricordo del ben morire, dove s'insegna a ben vivere, & ben morire* (Palermo: Gio. Antoni de Franceschi, 1590).

<sup>11</sup> Giovandomenico Candela, *Del bene della S. Verginità. Discorsi XIII* (Palermo: Gio. Battista Maringo, 1599).

<sup>12</sup> Moncada, Buste 1899, 1900, 1932, 1985, 2279.

practice among elite Sicilian landowners. In her suit to obtain her dotal promises, Caterina was joined by her husband but he died early on in the contest, leaving her to care for their son Francesco and to pursue the action against her father on her own. More trouble came when the Moncada family tried to take little Francesco into their home. When Caterina resisted, they cut off funding for the lad. Caterina then turned around and filed suit to gain control over the portion of her dead husband's estate that he had assigned to his son, and modified her suit against her father to exclude the Moncadas from any part of any claim she might win.<sup>13</sup>

A good example of the most complex of my little diagrams, the one involving a widow's remarriage, is found in the Valdinà archive, where we learn that Giovanna Notarbartolo, upon the death of her husband Vincenzo Gianguercio before they had any children, contracted a second marriage in 1638 with Cristoforò Papè, protonotary of the Kingdom of Sicily and resident in the city of Messina on the other end of the island. By 1637 she was in court to recover her original dowry, which in turn she had promised to her new marriage. The case dragged on and became further complicated by Inquisitional claims against the property in question but eventually she won, and when her second husband died in 1666 his last will and testament duly stated that he had in fact received all the dowry according to their original marriage contract and that his wife should therefore get her property back upon his death.<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, the legal regulations concerning Palermo's widows remain to be explored. The task is formidable, as an earlier book by Thomas Kuehn, *Law, Family, and Women*

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<sup>13</sup> Trabia Serie I (Branciforte), 9. Moncada 41, 42. And see "Le carte Trabia nell' Archivio di Stato di Palermo," *Archivio Storico Siciliano*, Serie IV, vo. 3 (1977)

<sup>14</sup> Valdina 181, Camporeale 183. Also see "L' Archivio private gentilizio Papè di Valdinà," *Archivio Storico Messinese*, vol. 79 (1999).

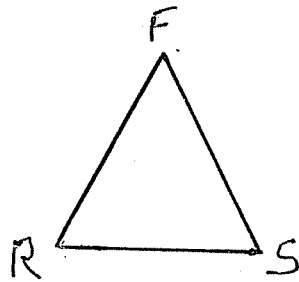
should remind us. Suffice to say without fear of rebuttal that the legal environment in Sicily makes the Florentine scene look quite transparent and logical, providing a sturdy foundation for Kuehn's anthropological approach to figuring out what actually went on. For Palermo and Sicily it would be foolhardy to try to map out the regulations with the idea that these would then reveal normative behavior. The rules are contradictory from the outset, meant to be that way, and therefore can only reveal options and possibilities, not actual outcomes. At present I'm trying a different approach, inspired by a now relatively unknown but in its day significant six-volume compendium by Cardinal Giovanni Battista de Luca first published in 1673 in Rome and still being reprinted two centuries later. Its title in translation is *The Vernacular Doctor or A Compendium of All the Civil, Canonical, Feudal, and Municipal Laws, with Moral Commentary in Italian for the Instruction and Usefulness of this Province*.<sup>15</sup> In these volumes, nicely indexed to address the problem at hand, the widow trying to hold onto what was hers, could read De Luca's bold advice setting aside narrow constructions of law in favor of sweeping arguments in support of social stability and justice. The widow should give her dead husband's heirs time, six months to a year, to assemble the cash value of dowry to be returned to her but usufruct over dotal property should begin immediately in her favor. If the original dowry was never clearly assessed, then she gets whatever property and goods were in it, including accrued gains and improvements but if the dowry was legally assessed then she only gets back that amount, without interest since that would be usury. And so on for hundreds of pages. Since these tomes deal with all of Christendom they lack specificity for understanding Palermo but the approach seems useful to me as a

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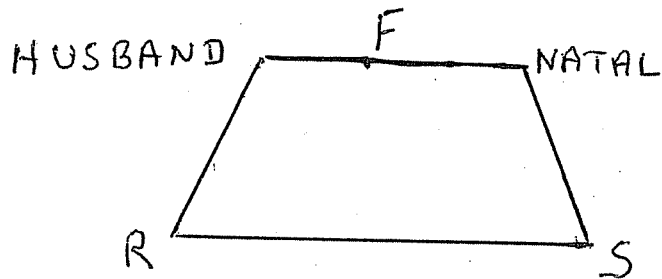
<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Battista de Luca, *Il dottor volgare, ovvero il compendio di tutta la legge civile, canonica, feudale, e municipale...moralizzato in lingua italiana per istruzione e comodità di questa provincia* (Roma: Stamperia de G. Corvo, 1673). Reprinted in 1755 in Cologne and in 1839-43 in Florence.

historian. Emphasis needs to be placed less on law as promulgated and more on law as practiced. The documents show that in practice Palermo's widows were notably successful in exercising dominion over their wealth. Together with their husbands, sons, and daughters, they were cornerstones in efforts by families to defend their interests against both Church and State.

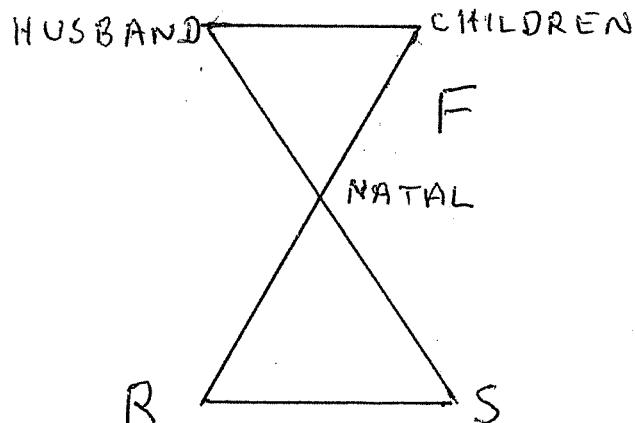
(F) FAMILY  
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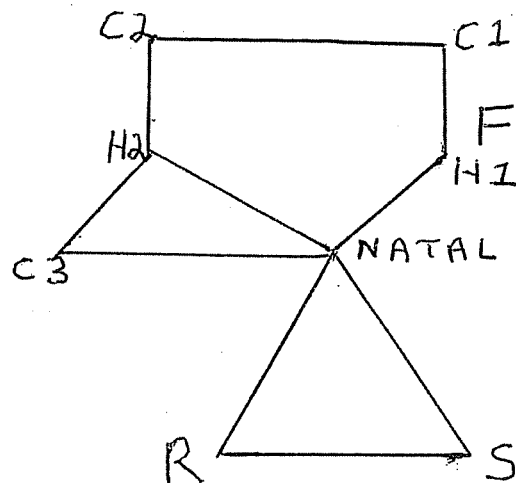
HUSBAND



WIFE



WIDOW  
 NOT REMARRIED



WIDOW  
 REMARRIED

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De Italia  
**SICILIAE INSVLAE**  
atque totius regni eius descriptio,  
secundum uariam eius habitudinem.

