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Sicilian Mediaevalism: The Refashioning of the Sicilian Vespers during the Risorgimento and the Contemporary Age

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Abstract. The article addresses the complex issue of Sicilian medievalism as it relates to the reinterpretation of the Sicilian Vespers during the Risorgimento. From a historiographical perspective, this phenomenon is of particular interest, as it allows for an examination of how the Sicilian ruling and revolutionary classes during the uprisings of 1820, the 1830s, and 1848 reappropriated and instrumentalized the medieval past to serve their political aims. The historical works of nineteenth-century Sicilian intellectuals thus contributed to the construction of a romanticized image of medieval Sicily – variously portrayed as the island of powerful emirs, a realm of peace and religious tolerance under the Normans, or the site of miraculous popular uprisings such as the Vespers. These historiographical interpretations, imbued with strong patriotic and identity-forming overtones, have significantly shaped twentieth-century historical discourse and continue to exert influence today, both in popular historical narratives and in the broader collective imagination.

Keywords. Sicilian Vespers, Medievalism, Sicilian Independentism, 1848.

1. Sicilian mediaevalism: an introduction

This article analyzes how the phenomenon of political medievalism evolved in Sicily during the nineteenth century. The Middle Ages were refashioned both by monarchical aristocrats, who used them to support the absolutist claims of the Bourbons, and by intellectuals, poets, artists, and Risorgimento patriots, who reinterpreted them from an anti-Bourbon and separatist perspective. The article illustrates how the 1282 Vespers revolt was reimagined by Sicilian historians and politicians, who, from 1848 onward, adopted its emblems and motifs in the symbolic construction of the Sicilian nation. Later, during the Wars of Italian Independence and Garibaldi's Expedition, the Vespers came to be seen as a heroic precedent for the triumph

of the Italian nation over the Bourbons and Austrians. After 1861, it became central to the project of constructing a new Italian identity, providing a shared historical foundation for a people newly unified under a single flag. Since the 1940s, the Vespers have assumed a renewed significance in connection with Sicilian independence and separatist movements.

The Vespers, in its outcomes and consequences, was a revolutionary event of both Mediterranean and European significance. The revolt drew in the most powerful kingdoms and political entities of the time: the Kingdom of Aragon, the Papal States, the Kingdom of France, the Byzantine Empire (threatened by the ambitions of Charles of Anjou), and the pro-Swabian Ghibellines of Italy. The first phase of the War of the Vespers, between Frederick of Aragon and Charles II of Anjou, began in 1282 and concluded with the Peace of Caltabellotta in 1302. It reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Mediterranean. This conflict marked the Aragonese entry into a broader naval, territorial, and commercial arena, and established the Kingdom of Trinacria (later known as Sicily), characterized by political and institutional autonomy – including a parliamentary monarchy and the Apostolic Legation – distinct from that of Naples, ruled by the Angevin dynasty.

The epic of an oppressed people – who, despite their numerical and military inferiority, rose up against their tyrants in defense of liberty and honor, and ultimately prevailed – resonated strongly with nineteenth-century European public opinion and culture, which was captivated by Romantic and neo-medieval myths. Within this climate of medieval revivalism, the Vespers came to be regarded as a symbolic enactment imbued with didactic intent.

The Vespers constituted a paradigmatic historical event to which one could look as a model, as they marked the birth of an independent kingdom ruled by a royal dynasty – the Aragonese of Sicily – under a form of monarchic-parliamentary government. This polity endured until 1412, when the kingdom became a viceroyalty. As such, the medieval episode readily lent itself to political instrumentalization in Risorgimento-era Sicily, particularly as a counter-narrative to the absolutist Bourbon monarchy, which sought to reduce Sicily to the status of a province subordinated to Naples.

The study of this complex historical and cultural phenomenon, which implicates diverse segments of society, can only be effectively conducted by examining a wide range of heterogeneous primary sources. These include not only historiographical and literary materials, but also material (e.g., architectural), artistic, and oral sources. Of particular note are the collections of Sicilian folk traditions compiled by Giuseppe Pitrè and Tommaso Cannizzaro between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The cross-analysis of

sources of differing typologies allows for a more comprehensive reconstruction of Sicilian medievalism as it relates to the Sicilian Vespers, considered in all their multifaceted complexity.

2. The Three Great Myths of Medieval Sicily: The "Golden Age" of Islamic Sicily, the Epic of the Normans, and the Revolt of the Sicilian Vespers

During the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages were reinterpreted and reworked by many intellectuals, historians, writers and artists, transforming this period into a political instrument, an emblem of the aspirations of peoples rebelling against foreign domination and a symbol of the 'small homelands' united in the struggles of the Risorgimento. The protagonists of the revolutionary uprisings of 1820-21, the 1830s, 1848 and the wars of independence, traced the ethnic origins of the nations and peoples of the Modern Age back to the communal institutions, the encounters/clashes between victors and vanquished, and the emergence of languages and popular traditions in the Middle Ages. Moreover, the Romantics also evoked the Middle Ages as an idyllic golden age, an elsewhere in which to take refuge from the evils of modernity, war, and industrialisation: for instance, the heroic, Arthurian Middle Ages that animates the painting of the Pre-Raphaelites, or the neo-Gothic and Christian impulses of Ruskin (GIROUARD 1981; CANTOR 1991; BORDONE 1993; ISIME 1997; SERGI 2005; ALEXANDER 2007; CARPEGNA FALCONIERI, FACCHINI 2018).

This diversified phenomenon of taste, with its many aspects and variations, is known as mediaevalism, that spread throughout Europe, with original historical, artistic, architectural and political outcomes, and also penetrated Sicily.

In Italy, mediaevalism is currently being addressed through increasingly rigorous in-depth studies. However, as far as the Italian manifestations of mediaevalism are concerned, analysis seems to be confined to the central-northern area, more specifically Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia Romagna, where political history is linked to the reinterpretation of exemplary figures and conflicts of the Middle Ages, such as the Green Count, the free communes of the thirteenth century, and the myth of King Enzo. Nevertheless, as will be seen, a unique form of mediaevalism also developed in Sicily, which contemporary historiography must necessarily take into account in terms of the political, cultural and intellectual influences of Sicilian revolts for

independence (1820-21; 1830; 1848), and national unification and, in general, of the genesis of contemporary Sicilian and Italian identity (GRÉVIN 2021: 155-184). It is also important to point out how in Italy mediaevalism always appears to be entwined with political and Risorgimento issues and spread in different forms and ways from region to region. This is – partly but not only – due to the lack of a unified statutory tradition and also to the profound institutional and governmental differences that characterise the country. The restored Italy of the Congress of Vienna (1815) presented itself as a fragmented collection of states, each with its own historical and cultural identity. Since 1735, the Bourbon sovereigns had reigned in the south, in Sicily, Calabria, Apulia and Campania; the Austrian House of Habsburg-Lorraine held possession of Lombardy-Veneto and exercised its control over the duchies of Modena, Lucca, Parma and Tuscany; the Papal State of Pope Pius VII (1742-1823) controlled Latium, Emilia-Romagna, the Marches and Umbria and was benevolently neutral towards the Austrians. The only state that could call itself fully independent was the Kingdom of Sardinia ruled by the noble House of Savoy (BANTI: 2010; 2011). Another reason why mediaevalism did not spread in Italy with homogenous, uniform and 'national' characteristics was undoubtedly the persistence of the classical tradition. The monarchies present in the peninsula made constant appeal to the myth of Imperial Rome and the ideals of order, balance, perfection and universalism represented by Neoclassicism, which had one of its most dynamic hubs precisely in Italy (CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2019; BOYLE 2023).

In this complex and variegated social and political climate, especially in the regions subject to Austrian rule or opposed to it such as Lombardy-Veneto and Savoy Piedmont, the political and instrumental use of the mediaeval past resulted in the mythologisation of the Longobard and municipal epics. This then evolved into recourse to a species of 'Middle Ages of the cities' that had given birth to famous personalities and symbolic events, often poised between legend and historical reality, but considered fundamental for having initiated the process of building Italian national identity as far back as the Middle Ages (DE FRANCESCO: 2013; BALESTRACCI: 2015).

In Sicily, on the other hand, in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna and the official establishment of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies on 8 December 1816, the Risorgimento revolts were not aimed at overthrowing an established order, as in the rest of Italy, but at reinstating and restoring it. For both the revolutionary and anti-monarchic intelligentsia and the Bourbon crown, the mediaeval models of reference were the innovations, institutions and undertakings of the Norman-Swabian and Aragonese monarchies,

both represented as the apex of the greatness of the Kingdom of Sicily, but interpreted differently depending on the requirements and political designs of one or the other party (CAVAZZA 2003; CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2013: 319-345).

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Sicily appeared anything but closed in on itself, and was very much open to intellectual exchange and European cultural ferments, such as Enlightenment reformism and Romantic sensibilities. Mediaevalism developed in the island, acquiring specific and peculiar characteristics that made it unique within the complex and varied European historical and cultural context. As already mentioned, both the revolutionary and independentist intelligentsia and the Bourbon dynasty were committed to exalting and reshaping the glorious age of the Norman *Regnum Siciliae*, with its architectural remains and its political and military conquests, especially those achieved during the reigns of Roger II and William II. The former group included Niccolò Palmieri (1778-1837), Giuseppe La Farina (1815-1863), Duke Domenico Lo Faso Pietrasanta di Serradifalco (1783-1863) and the abbot, Paolo Balsamo (1764-1816). It looked to the representative and avant-garde institutions founded by the Hauteville family – such as the Royal Parliament (1130) – to claim Sicily's autonomy and emphasise the powers and specificities of Sicilian institutions and political traditions (PALAZZOTTO 2020: 15-77). Conversely, the Bourbon sovereigns sought and emphasised in the Norman monarchy the foundations of royal absolutism and the centralising intentions of the Hauteville government, whose continuators and heirs they professed to be. Ferdinand II of Bourbon (1810-1859), for example, is portrayed in the costume of a Norman sovereign in the works of royal historiographers (PALAZZOTTO 2006: 98). In order to emphasise his role as the neo-founder of a powerful Mediterranean kingdom, the sovereign promoted an impressive programme of neo-mediaeval construction and restoration of the chief Norman civil and religious edifices in Palermo, i.e. those most representative of the power of the crown: the Royal Palace, the Palatine Chapel and Palermo Cathedral. These monuments epitomise the absolutist, centralist and royalist policy of Ferdinand I of Bourbon, and are an expression of the Sicilian neo-Gothic style that developed on the island with particular, exotic and often arabesque forms, unique in Italy (LONGO 2017: 135-170; ARMANDO 2017: 5-40). The main promoter of this neo-Norman cultural programme was undoubtedly the abbot and royal historiographer Rosario Gregorio (1753-1809) (GREGORIO 1831-1833). Gregorio's activities and works are aimed, on the one hand at extolling the characteristic features of the Kingdom of Sicily and its autonomous institu-

tions, and on the other at celebrating the Bourbon monarchy as the sole legitimate heir to the Norman-Swabian and Aragonese crowns and highlighting the monarch's superiority over Sicilian barons and feudal lords. More specifically, Gregorio was responsible for the rediscovery and analysis of the royal sepulchres of Palermo Cathedral found during the restoration of the cathedral by Ferdinando Fuga and Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia (1781-1801). His descriptions were included, with some modifications, in Francesco Daniele's monumental work, *I regali sepolcri del Duomo di Palermo riconosciuti e illustrati* (1784). With the explicit aim of celebrating the Bourbon monarchy and the doctrine of royal absolutism of Norman origin, Gregorio also became an intelligent and cultured patron of paintings with a historical-mediaeval background. It was he who dictated to Mariano Rossi the iconography of the frescoes in the presbytery of the cathedral: the *Assumption of the Virgin* and *Robert and Roger, the Norman brothers who restored the church to Bishop Nicodemus*. (PALAZZOTTO 2006: 100). These operations were intended to evoke parallels between the crusader character of the Norman conquest of Sicily, the alliance forged between Robert Guiscard and Roger and the Pope and the profound Christianity with which their mission and government was imbued, and the government of Ferdinand I of Bourbon, characterised by a policy of rapprochement with the Papal State and respect for the institution of the Apostolic Legateship. But above all, while expounding the alienability of fiefs in Sicily through a careful reading of the provisions and chapters of the Aragonese age, Gregorio firmly upholds the absolutist policy of the Bourbon kingdom in opposing the baronial interpretation that Count Roger was a 'first among equals' and hence implicitly the alleged carving up of Sicily with his comrades in arms, a thesis on the contrary supported by the feudal and centrifugal Sicilian aristocracy (PALAZZOTTO 2006: 100; MAGGIO 2020: 236).

Another pivotal element through which Sicilian mediaevalism unfolds is the reconstruction of the history of Arab Sicily: the invention of the myth of Islamic Sicily can be traced back to the forger Giuseppe Vella (1749-1814), who represented it as a Mediterranean garden of delights, home to philosophers, scholars and avant-garde politicians who came to the island not as ferocious conquerors but as liberators. This portrayal emerges from the two historical forgeries of the Mediterranean Middle Ages, the *Codice diplomatico di Sicilia sotto il governo degli Arabi* (1789-1792) and the *Council of Egypt* (1793), almost a counterpoint to what was happening in Northern Europe with Macpherson's *Ossian* poems. Neither the *Codex* nor the *Council of Egypt* are devoid of precise political objectives: Vella wished to invent an imaginary

and fantastic Arabic origin for feudalism – actually introduced in Sicily by the Normans – to favour the position of the Sicilian barons, but also to underline the substantial divergences and the different historical and political experiences of Sicily compared to the Kingdom of Naples and the rest of Italy (SIRAGUSA 2019; MAGGIO 2020: 224-227).

In the Sicilian historiographic tradition, the mythical and innovative image of Arab Sicily was to be taken up by Michele Amari (1806-1889) in his *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia* (1854-1872). Although this work is based on rigorous philological analysis and criticism of the sources, it is pervaded by an intrinsic political spirit and patriotic ideal: Amari's objective is to stress the fundamental role played by the Arabs of Sicily in the formation of the nascent Italian people, in its becoming a nation starting from the island. The work is therefore a manifesto of the unitarist and annexationist ideas that Amari arrived at after the failure of the Sicilian independence revolution of 1848, which he had initially supported with the publication of the first two editions of the *War of the Sicilian Vespers* (1843) and his direct participation in the uprisings and initiatives of the parliament of the independent kingdom. The process of nation building, in Amari's vision, was completed with the Norman conquest: the germs of Italian national unification are to be found precisely in the arrival of the Normans on the island. In fact, the conquerors from northern Europe brought with them people from southern Italy and the Lombards, 'the Italic people' following the leaders Robert Guiscard and the Great Count Roger (FALLETTA 2018). Mixing with the Sicilians, who were related to them by 'reasons of lineage' and retained their distinctive ethnic and religious characteristics, these Italic peoples gave rise to the first nucleus of the future Italian nation through this ethnic, cultural and blood union (AMARI 1854-1872; WOLF 2019: 285-312). The Arab-Norman myth was also fuelled by a large group of European travellers who came to Sicily. The Sicily of Goethe, Schinkel, Viollet-le-Duc and Dufourny, became the land of contrasts, a delightful site of the exotic and of artistic, cultural and religious syncretism, a bridge between West and East. In the descriptions and engravings of the travellers on the Grand Tour, the Zisa and Cuba palaces, the Cathedral of Palermo and the Cathedral of Monreale, are the symbolic monuments of this at once felicitous and idealised productive encounter between Islam and western Norman culture (MALLETTE 2010). They inspired imaginative new constructions, such as the neo-Moorish and eclectic style villas in Palermo, of which Villa Pignatelli Aragona Cortes (later Domville), built in 1827, and Villa Serradifalco all'Olivuzza (1829) built by Duke Pietrasanta, are two of the most striking and original examples (PALAZZOTTO 2006: 104).

However, the quintessential heroic antecedent that had marked the birth of Sicilian national consciousness and paved the way for the independent Kingdom of Sicily under the Aragonese (1302-1410), was the Vespers revolt that broke out in Palermo in the courtyard of the Church of Santo Spirito on 30 March 1282. Since the late Middle Ages, this symbolic rebellion has been described, glorified and idealised in the island's historical, antiquarian and artistic culture. However, while from the sixteenth century, the Vespers episode was seen and represented from a predominantly moralising perspective as a symbol of the specificities of the Kingdom of Sicily, of the uprising of the Sicilian people against the oppressor for justice and freedom, it was only from the end of the eighteenth century that the mediaeval episode came to be reinterpreted in an antagonistic key, first in an anti-Napoleonic sense and then for anti-Bourbon purposes.

3. The Myth of the Sicilian Vespers: From the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century

3.1 The Vespers in the Sicilian ecclesiastical historiography of the eighteenth century

Throughout the nineteenth century, the epic of the Sicilian Vespers lent itself to different interpretations depending on the political, cultural, and social context of reference (BENIGNO 2007: 131-150). Certain aspects recur, for instance, in eighteenth-century Sicilian ecclesiastical historiography, with a pro-monarchical slant derived from the scholarly tradition, but concerned with preserving the autonomy of the Kingdom of Sicily and the privileges of the island's church. prominent exponent was the royal historiographer Vito Maria Amico (1697-1762), author of *Catana illustrata* (1740-1746), and Francesco Testa (1704-1773), a jurist and historian active during the reign of Charles III of Bourbon. In *Catana illustrata*, a scholarly work of an ethnocentric character, Amico criticises Angevin rule and instead extols the Aragon dynasty of King Peter and Frederick II (III of Sicily).

> With the consent of King Charles, the French wielded power in Sicily through robbery, avarice and lechery, and the Sicilians endured their abuse for seventeen years, until with admirable consensus they unanimously conspired against them with massive slaughter throughout Sicily and in a few days set them to flight (AMICO 1989-1990: 107).

In the "massacre of the French" following the revolt that broke out in Palermo "at the hour of Vespers, on the second day of Easter, in the piazza of the Spirito Santo", Amico identifies the reasons for the unity of the Sicilian people, while Frederick III of Sicily, "designated by destiny" and by the will of the Sicilians, became the champion of the Sicilian national kingdom. The text is, moreover, also a eulogy of the historian's birthplace, Catania, which on 12 January 1296 hosted the Royal Parliament in Castello Ursino, where Frederick was proclaimed sovereign of Sicily and where, according to Amico's hypothesis, Giovanni da Procida himself was buried (AMICO 1989-1990: 110-112). The Vespers was represented with similar intentions by Francesco Testa, head of the ecclesiastical branch of Parliament and member of the Deputazione del Regno. Although close to the Crown, he opposed the reformist attempts of Charles III's government in *Capitula Regni Siciliae* (1741-1743), while in his second work, *De vita, et rebus gestis Federici II Siciliae regis* (1775), the Palermo revolt was extolled as paving the way for the good government of Frederick II of Aragon, seen to represent an autonomous Kingdom of Sicily and a baronial class with inviolable rights and prerogatives, but nonetheless subject to the superior will of the sovereign (TESTA 1775: 16-20).

In any case, the tradition of the Vespers was vitally present in Sicily not only among the intellectual ruling class and the upper classes, but also in popular culture (PITRÈ 2019). This was demonstrated by risings and protests of the people of Palermo in response to the decision of Viceroy Domenico Caracciolo (1715-1789) – who was widely disliked – to build a city cemetery near the church of Santo Spirito, the church that had been "the chief backdrop to the Vespers, where the bones of foreign enemies and oppressors lay" (LA LUMIA 1868: 213). Caracciolo's political choice was considered disrespectful to the memory and traditions of the Sicilians, especially since the construction was initiated on a Monday in April 1783 that coincided with the anniversary of the "famous massacre of the Vespers" (DI MARZO 1886: 10).

3.2 The revolt of 30 March 1282 during the "English Decade"

Later, during the "English Decade" in Sicily (1806-1815), there was no shortage of references to the Vespers from an anti-Napoleonic perspective in the proclamations of the British armed forces and the newspapers active on the island. For instance, in his attempt to incite the people to take arms against Napoleon's French armies, General Stuart accused the latter of "wanting to spill the blood of the Sicilians, abuse their women, squander their substance, destroy their religion and treat them like slaves in revenge for the

Vespers" (BIANCO 1902: 10-11). A similar appeal was launched in 1810 in the *Gazzetta Britannica*, a biweekly published in Messina that circulated in the main cities of the island between 1806 and 1814: in the *Appel des Siciliens*, the Vespers revolt was couched in terms of redemption and revenge to spur the citizens of Messina to resistance against Joachim Murat (ANONYMOUS 1810; MAGGIO 2020: 312). While the French of Napoleon and Murat were the new Angevins in the nineteenth-century version of the Vespers, from 1816 the new tyrants, guilty of the same "evil seigneury" as King Charles, were the Bourbons, starting with Ferdinand I. Through the Fundamental Law of the Two Sicilies, Ferdinand had unified the Kingdom of Naples and the Kingdom of Sicily, permanently annulling the powers of the Sicilian parliament and effectively decreeing the end of the independence of the island kingdom (that had been maintained uninterruptedly for seven centuries). Ferdinand moved the capital of the single monarchical entity from Palermo to Naples, transforming the city previously the seat of the court and the king into a provincial administrative centre in the dominions on the other side of the strait of Messina. This coup de main stirred up the old animosities of the ruling class and the barons towards the ruling dynasty, breeding new tensions and protests. The Sicilians were later to rebel for a return to the constitution of 1812 established with British support. Despite being aristocratic in character it was ahead of its time and an early example of a liberal constitution providing for the abolition of feudalism, censorship, and torture, as well as guaranteeing the autonomy of the Kingdom of Sicily and the representative power of the kingdom's deputies (D'ANDREA 2008).

3.3 The Myth of the Vespers in Risorgimento-Era Sicily

Therefore, from the 1820s the reinterpretation of the Sicilian Vespers came to coincide with autonomist and anti-Bourbon sentiment: a special edition of the Palermo newspaper *La Fenice* dated 14 August 1820 expressed the symbolic link between the revolt of 1282 and the insurrectional and Carbonari uprisings of those years, aimed at abolishing the oppressive Bourbon regime. In an article by the liberal Sicilian exile Michele Palmieri di Micciché, published in the Parisian newspaper *La Natione*, the Palermo risings of 1820-21 were referred to as the "nouvelles Vêpres siciliennes" (MAGGIO 2020: 316). The first works of a more distinctly historical rather than scholarly character addressing the Vespers began to appear in the 1820s and 30s. In 1821, in the *Storia compendiata del Vespro Siciliano*, the abbot Francesco Paolo Filocamo expounded the causes and consequences of the historical event, glossing

over many aspects of the legendary tradition associated with the revolt. Then, in 1836, the *Storia del Vespro* was published by Nicolò Buscemi, referred to by Agostino Gallo as one of the first Sicilians to have written about the revolt with the intention of correcting the errors and inaccuracies of Filadelfo Mugnos's *Ragguagli storici del Vespro* (FILOCAMO 1821; MAGGIO 2020: 312).

Beyond its natural historical and geopolitical confines, the Vespers was repurposed, for instance, by Casimir Delavigne in the five-act tragedy *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* (1819), which achieved great public acclaim, whereas Mothe Langon published a historical novel about the Vespers, focusing not on French oppression but on the potential of a people in revolt when it becomes "terrible and implacable" as a result of deaf and corrupt foreign rulers (DELAVIGNE 1820; GATTO 1983-1984: 166-186).

In this way, the myth of the Vespers became the new paradigm for European peoples oppressed by the Restoration but, at the same time, it also entered the artistic culture and symbolism of Risorgimento Italy, beginning to acquire new patriotic and unitarian meanings and qualities. One example is Filippo Cicognani's tragedy, *Il Manfredi e il Vespro siciliano*, inspired by Delavigne and dedicated to Italy, in which the figure of Procida emerges as the avenger, not only of the Sicilians, but also of the death of Conradin and Manfred Hohenstaufen (CICOGNANI 1822). This tragedy also circulated in Palermo, where it was printed starting from 1821, enjoying considerable success. In 1817, on the other hand, the celebrated neo-Ghibelline Florentine playwright Giovan Battista Niccolini (1782-1861) wrote *Giovanni da Procida*, a tragedy steeped in liberal and patriotic ideals that consecrated Procida as the greatest conspirator and the mind behind the Sicilian Vespers. The backdrop to Niccolini's tragedy is the depiction of the spark of the revolt: the shameless assault of a French soldier (traditionally identified as a certain Drouet) on a young Sicilian woman, in the presence of her husband and in a sacred place, the church of Santo Spirito. The insolence of the Frenchman triggered a violent reaction from one of the Sicilians present, who grabbed a dagger and killed him, setting off the revolt against the French to the cry of "mora mora" (die, die). The aspect of a revolt triggered by defence of Sicilian women, wives, mothers and daughters – a metaphor for the mutilated Sicilian homeland – was later taken up by the Palermo historians Ferdinando Malvica and Michele Amari. Nevertheless, both criticise the downgrading of Giovanni da Procida from a "hero of the fatherland" to an avenger of "private offences". Amari went completely against the idea of a conspiracy organised entirely and almost single-handed by Procida to avenge a wrong to his family perpetrated by the soldiers of Charles

of Anjou (MALVICA 1831-1832: 140-143). Ferdinando Malvica criticised Niccolini's Italian and nationalist reinterpretation from a Sicilian perspective, objecting that "the Vespers was an exclusively Sicilian affair and in the interest of Sicily alone" (MALVICA 1831-1832: 143).

However, it was primarily Michele Amari who decreed the success of the Sicilian Vespers as a symbol of the liberation of the people from the tyrannical oppressors of all times. His *La Guerra del Vespro Siciliano* went through eleven editions in his lifetime, between 1842 and 1886. On the one hand, his work was founded on a strict empiricism and a rigid methodology of research that included the reading and analysis of mediaeval documentary sources, chiefly the Sicilian, Italian and Catalan chronicles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. On the other hand, it was pervaded by a moralistic framework, a deep Sicilian patriotic sentiment, and a strong anticlerical and anti-Bourbon spirit indicative of the author's personal life and experience, as well as the official positions of the "Sicilian Party" in the aftermath of 1815 (LEONARDI 2020: 22). Running against the tide of much of the Romantic historiography of the time, Amari's reading of the Sicilian Vespers did not ascribe the leading role in the unfolding of events to individuals poised somewhere between mythical heroism and reality (above all, Giovanni da Procida), but to the people of Sicily. He argued that it was the Sicilians who brought about the expulsion of the Angevins from the island in the months following the revolt in 1282 and were instrumental in the evolution of the events that followed the insurrection. The people, then, became a conscious community in Amari's Vespers, identifying themselves in a body of common values and laws. The offended honour of the young Sicilian bride, victim of the bullying and arrogance of a French soldier, became the honour of the common Sicilian homeland, to be defended, reestablished and affirmed even at the cost of death. Consequently, the actions of the Angevins were detrimental not only to the economic wellbeing of the Sicilians, but also to their customs, traditions and sacred values, and a fierce and bloody revolution was needed to restore them. The wretched political actions of Ferdinand II of Bourbon become a mirror of the same "evil seigneury" as Charles of Anjou (as Dante Alighieri called it in the 8th canto of Paradise). From the very first edition – published under the less specific and problematic title of *Un periodo delle istorie siciliane del secolo XIII*, so that he might hail the revolution "without censorship forbidding it" – Amari established parallels that appear all but forced between Ferdinand's reign and that of the Charles I (AMARI 1851: XI; LAMBOGLIA 2011: 90). Like Charles of Anjou, Ferdinand I was guilty of moving the capital of the kingdom from Palermo to Naples, nullifying the powers of the Royal Sicilian

Parliament and taking away Sicily's independence. Again, the repressive and violent actions against the Sicilians perpetrated by the Bourbon ministers of police and lieutenants, Del Carretto and Luigi De Majo, were compared to those of the vicars and executioners of the Angevin kingdom, William of Estandart and Herbert of Orleans. Michele Amari wrote in 1851:

> Looking closely into the Vespers, the protagonist shrank, the people grew larger; the conspiracy and the treachery vanished; the massacre appeared as the beginning and not the end of a revolution: I found the importance in the reform of the orders of the State; in the moral and social forces that the revolution created; in the valiant men it drove forwards for twenty years between fighting and political negotiations: I saw the effects of the Vespers spread to other realms, being perpetuated in Sicily and perhaps even in the rest of Italy. (AMARI 1851: XI).

These are the main novelties of the Vespers: the people becoming the protagonists of events, being able to coalesce into the *Communitas Siciliae* in the aftermath of the revolt and to mark a turning point in events by offering the crown of Sicily to Peter III of Aragon, husband of Constance of Swabia. A ruler who was, therefore, an expression of the will of the Sicilians, legitimate and respectful of Sicilian political institutions, which he restored once the Angevins were driven from the island. The disagreements and differences of opinion between the cities that were the protagonists of the Vespers (Messina, Catania, Palermo, Corleone), between those who wanted greater autonomy and those who wanted the guarantee of a sovereign who would continue the work of the Norman-Swabian monarchy, were drowned out in Amari's version by the choral turmoil represented by the Vespers, while the Church of Rome rose to the role of major antagonist alongside its ally Charles of Anjou. Moreover, *La Guerra del Vespro* was coloured with a strong and stringent topical relevance: its call to arms was no longer aimed at instigating a generic revolt against the bad governments of the present, but at sparking a new Sicilian revolution against a specific enemy: the Neapolitans and the Bourbon crown (LAMBOGLIA 2011: 91). In view of these features, *La Guerra del Vespro Siciliano* was proposed to the generation of Sicilian revolutionaries and intellectuals of the 1840s as a "book of battle" imbued with both civil and political passion, capable of stimulating peoples to revolution, but above all of making popular insurrection legitimate and sacrosanct when conducted against despotic, vexatious governments that did not respect the secular *ordo naturalis* (AMARI 1843).

Amari's work thus became one of the "fiery libels" alongside Niccolò Palmieri's *Storia della rivoluzione del 1820* (with an introduction by Amari himself), the pictorial canvas dedicated to the uprising by Andrea d'Antoni of Palermo (1847), Ferdinando Malvica's articles published in the Palermo magazine *Effemeridi*: all undoubtedly among the works of a historical nature that had the greatest influence on the outbreak of the Sicilian revolution of 12 January 1848 (PALMERI 1847; LA MANNA 2015: 155-173). Not surprisingly, during the Sicilian revolution that led to the reconstitution of the Parliament and the birth of the independent Kingdom of Sicily (25 March 1848 – 15 May 1849), the symbols and mottoes of the Sicilian Vespers were restored, including the Triskelion with Gorgoneion placed in the centre of the Tricolour to emphasise a continuity, at once symbolic and political and legitimate, with the famous mediaeval revolt of 30 March 1282 (CRISANTINO 2010: 74-102). Amari himself exclaimed in amazement how "the similarity of the case of the Vespers with that of 1848 is incredible, not to say marvellous: few other historical facts compared with each other would prove more clearly the part that ancestry, topography, and the analogy of political institutions play in human events." (AMARI 1851: IX).

After "ten years and a revolution" the political aspirations and ideals of Michele Amari and his comrades in the Sicilian Party had changed: the watchwords of the new edition of the *Vespro Siciliano*, published in Florence in 1851, were no longer "independence and constitution" but "Italian unity and family." As Amari himself wrote in the preface to the 1853 edition, after 1848 in Europe it was no longer a matter of seeking "agreements between freedom and authority or, more precisely language, between freedom and the force that sustains authority", namely the monarchy, but of striving for a common end, the union "in a mighty bond" of Sicily like "every other Italian state"; this was the only way in which "the common fatherland, Italy" could be restored "to its ancient splendour" (AMARI 1852: X-XI).

The myth of the Sicilian Vespers also inspired Giuseppe Verdi, who on 13 June 1855 staged the great opera *Les vêpres siciliennes* at the Paris Opera House. Verdi's opera illustrates how, after the Revolutions of 1848, the Vespers revolt had become a hymn to the freedom from the foreign yoke of all European peoples indiscriminately, shedding its original political character as an exclusively or chiefly Sicilian revolt against the Angevin or Bourbon foreign oppressor (PALAZZOTTO 2021: 303-323). Indeed, the myth of the Vespers had already been exalted by the Italian poet and patriot Goffredo Mameli (1827-1849) who, in the fourth verse of his famous *Canto degli Italiani* (the Italian national anthem, also known as *Mameli's Hymn*), included

the famous rebellion of mediaeval Sicily as a revolutionary episode to stir the spirits of the Italians in the coming uprisings, and as a military episode to be celebrated as the prefiguration of a united Italy (RIDOLFI 2011: 33-39)[1].

3.4 Making Italians Through the Sicilian Vespers

In the aftermath of 1861, in Italy the Vespers lent itself to new functions and interpretations. Paintings on historic subjects have always played a pivotal role in the processes of building national identity, through the recollection and celebration of important historic events. Among the earliest and most celebrated painters to resort to the Vespers as a favourite subject was Hayez, who portrayed the bloody revolt in no less than three paintings (1822; 1835; 1844-1866), all animated by patriotic spirit and anti-Austrian sentiment (PALAZZOTTO 2021: 303-323). In Sicily, the Vespers was similarly employed in the exaltation of the glories of the Italian homeland and the symbolic representation of a newly achieved unified national identity, albeit at the expense of tensions and issues destined to linger over the years (the North-South divide, the birth of the southern question. One example is Luigi Lojacono's *Vespri Siciliani* (1860), containing an explicit reference to Garibaldi's enterprise in which Lojacono was an active participant. The paintings titled *I Vespri Siciliani* by Giuseppe Carta (1879) – in which the popular element is exalted – by Michele Rapisardi of Catania (1864-1865) and by Erulo Eruli (1891-1892), presented at the 1891 National Exhibition in Palermo, are more dramatic and symbolic and less committed and partisan than the pre-unification works, tending to cement national cohesion and the sense of unity, transmitting it didactically to the nascent Italian public (CRIVELLO 2011: 159-173; PAGANO 2013: 99-119).

Therefore, in the aftermath of national unity, in Sicilian painting the Vespers was characterised as a unifying revolt, a mediaeval revolutionary event that all Italian people could identify with in the inalienable and sacred values of freedom, of unrestrained struggle against oppression (indiscriminately), and of the defence of honour (which is family honour, hence national honour).

In this sense, the Palermo revolt of 1282 found new applications and instrumental meanings on the occasion of the sixth centenary of the Sicilian Vespers, celebrated in Palermo on 31 March 1882. Instigated by the organ-

[1] Fourth verse 'Dall'Alpi a Sicilia / dovunque è Legnano, / ogn'uom di Ferruccio / ha il core, ha la mano, / i bimbi d'Italia / si chiaman Balilla, / il suon d'ogni squilla / i Vespri suonò' (From the Alps to Sicily,/ Legnano is everywhere/ Every man hath the heart/ and hand of Ferruccio/ The children of Italy/ Are all called Balilla; /Every trumpet blast/ soundeth the Vespers).

isers, Francesco Crispi and Francesco Paolo Perez – who had been among the driving forces of the Sicilian uprising of 1848 and later supporters of national unification – the event assumed a strongly anticlerical, anti-Catholic and anti-French character. Indeed, in 1881 Italy had suffered the snub of the loss of Tunis to the French government; the same government had also been guilty of the Marseilles massacre, in which several Italian workers had lost their lives (ARNAUDO 1882: 1-7; MANCUSO 2012: 325-364). Crispi and Perez intended the event to perform a clear pedagogical function: directing the consensus of the people towards the construction of an Italian national identity, secular rather than religious, uniting the Italian brothers in the struggle against a common enemy: no longer the Bourbons but Jules Grévy's imperialist French government. Crispi's reading of the mediaeval revolt was echoed in a short piece written by Michele Amari for the occasion, the *Racconto popolare del Vespro siciliano*, which once again downplayed the characteristics of the conspiracy traditionally attributed solely to the 'divine' Giovanni da Procida, emphasising the free, spontaneous, secular revolt of a people united in defence of Sicilian – and hence Italian – identity and values (AMARI 1882). The speech Crispi delivered at the celebration was also symbolic: 'One tempers souls to great and generous deeds through the memory of the virtues of the ancestors. A people that forgets the splendours of patriotism is a people in decadence. The past marks the duties of the future' (DUGGAN 2000: 503).

While this was the tenor of the interpretation of the Sicilian ruling class – by then within the ranks of the unified Italian government – the perspective of the lower and working classes was different. Indeed, the experience of national unification was not positively greeted by Sicilian society. Proof of this are the Palermo riots of 1861-1862, the Seven and a Half Days Revolt (1866), the protests of the 1870s, and the Fasci Siciliani (1889-1894), leagues of workers set up to address the pressure of government taxes and levies. The risings of the 1860s and 1870s were sparked by a generation of scholars and young revolutionaries who set out to retrieve the 'warlike anger' and 'ferocity' of the Vespers to remedy the profound social, economic, political and health crisis that hit Sicily in the aftermath of 1861. The Sicilian newspapers of the time, such as the *Giornale officiale di Sicilia* and the Catania-based *Corriere di Sicilia*, bear witness to these parallels (MONFORTE 1997).

3.5 The Vespers in Twentieth Century Italy

Contemporary Italian politics also exploited the Sicilian Vespers to extol the homeland, memories of the Italian cities and the military strength of It-

aly going into the Second World War. Even before the Fascist period, in the Italian political and interventionist language of which Gabriele D'Annunzio was a leading exponent, the Fiume episode was referred to as the *Fiuman Vespers*. Mussolini's Fascist government (1922-1943) in turn made use of the image of the Vespers, for example by evocatively naming one of the Italian military submarines of the *Mameli* class after Giovanni da Procida, and one of the military divisions serving in Sicily against the Allies in 1943 'Centuria del Vespro'. Moreover, throughout the Fascist period, the revolt of 1282 was commemorated with pomp and ceremony every 31 March as a symbol of Fascist nationalism, on a par with other mediaeval battles, such as the Battle of Legnano (BERNARDI 2022: 485-490; FINCHELSTEIN 2022).

At this point, it is interesting to note how the legacy of the Vespers was taken up, between the mid-1940s and the twenty-first century, by a large body of Sicilian political movements and parties campaigning for Sicilian independence and autonomy. One of the most incisive was certainly the Movement for the Independence of Sicily (MIS), active between 1942 and 1951, led by Andrea Finocchiaro Aprile (1878-1964), supported by a fully-fledged paramilitary organisation, the Volunteer Army for the Independence of Sicily (EVIS), set up by the university lecturer and socialist from Catania, Antonio Canepa (1908-1945). The EVIS flag deliberately adopted the emblem of the winged Trinacria, with ears of wheat replacing the serpents of the Gorgoneion, against a blue background, with the inverted red and yellow stripes of the official flag of the Kingdom of Sicily established by Frederick III (1296) and in force until 1816. It was a clear reference to the independence and Mediterranean role that the *Regnum Siciliae* ought to play in the present (CANEPA 2021; CARRARA 2021: 1-49).

More recent, less militaristic but not less militant, is the action of the I Nuovi Vespri movement, one of the most active on the Sicilian political scene. The movement's exponents refer to the anti-Angevin revolt in name and in symbolism, adopting the flag of 1282, and in ideals, in the political action to be conducted against the new "evil seigneuries", as we read in the explanation of the name of the movement on its website:

> Because of all the seditions, revolts, rebellions and uprisings that have marked the tragic and turbulent history of our island, the revolution of the Sicilian Vespers of 1282 is the one that most closely resembles the objectives and contents of these New Vespers: to put an end to the evil seigneury that suffocates our lives, to drive out of our land the colonisers who have through their askari humiliated and impoverished Sicily,

betraying its conquests. (WEBSITE https://www.inuovivespri.it/chi-siamo/ 2023)

Also, very active in Sicily is the ANTUDO movement, which has among its aims the self-government and self-determination of the Sicilian people; its symbol is inspired by the Vespers flag bearing the Trinacria and a Gorgoneion with particularly accentuated snaky locks in the centre. Also worth mentioning are the movements for the Freedom and Independence of Sicily, the direct heirs of the separatist MIS and EVIS, adopting the same motto ("un'jsula, un populu, na nazziuni", literally: one island, one people, one nation) and symbolic Triskelion. Finally, there is the Siciliani Liberi political movement, one of the best organised and structured in Sicily, also present at the last regional elections in 2017, which has as its party symbol not the Trinacria (which appears during demonstrations and cultural events, etc.), but a stylised Sicily with two golden Swabian eagles and in the centre the colours of the Vespers flag, red and yellow (PELLERITI 2023).

Conclusion

This was the innovative reading proposed by Michele Amari, whose 'interpretative line' on the Vespers has been taken up by eminent historians such as Steven Runciman and Salvatore Tramontana, who have analysed and thoroughly investigated the revolt.

In the same way, the historical recasting of the Vespers, which has its driving force in Sicily, has had an international resonance, flowing into the arts, theatre, opera, and works of history throughout Europe. From a local myth it has been transformed into a supranational myth, capable of universally representing the struggles of all European peoples oppressed either by tyranny, foreign invaders, or dictatorial governments. Hence a manifesto of a people finding itself and, united for a shared purpose, becoming a nation and defining itself after reacquiring the honour, freedom and virtues that had been trampled upon and usurped by illegitimate rulers (whether French, Austrian, or Bourbon). The revolution of 1848 that broke out in Palermo – inspired by the Vespers in its forms, symbols and modes of action – in its turn sparked uprisings throughout Europe. It brought the Sicilian situation to the attention of the major European states, paving the way for political agreements and initiatives for Italian national unification (1860-1861). Therefore, far from being limited to the local, island, or Bourbon kingdom context, Sicilian

mediaevalism – of which the repurposing of the Vespers is one of the most evocative and interesting examples – took on a European dimension during the nineteenth century. This is an aspect that historiography dealing with mediaevalism must take into account.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that in Italy historiography has long been aware of the scientific, historical and cultural importance of the mediaevalism phenomenon. Today, mediaevalism is considered a discipline in its own right, well on its way to having its own scientific statute thanks to the activity of renowned Italian mediaevalists including Franco Cardini, Umberto Longo, Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, Francesca Roversi Monaco and Marina Montesano. This surge of interest and focus led in 2019 to the foundation of the mediaevalism study centre of the ISIME (Italian Historical Institute for the Middle Ages) on the initiative of Carpegna Falconieri, Longo, and Roversi Monaco. Nevertheless, mediaeval studies in Italy still appear to favour central-northern Italy as the object of investigation, focusing chiefly on reinterpretations of the age of the late mediaeval communes, neglecting analysis of mediaevalism in Sicily and the south. The opposite is true of historians of art and architecture, who have been engaged since the early twentieth century in analysing the phenomenon of neo-mediaeval stylistic revivals on the island and in southern Italy. In this sense, in addition to emphasising the utilisation and historical, artistic, and cultural representation of the Sicilian Vespers as a means of building local and national (Sicilian and Italian) identities, this contribution aims to stimulate greater attention from contemporary historiography towards the study of Sicilian mediaevalism. Such analysis is crucial to grasping and fully understanding the historical, political, cultural and economic changes that affected Sicily, and hence Italy as a whole, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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