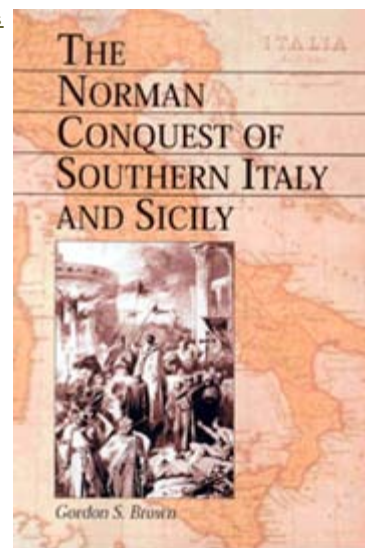


Gordon S. Brown

The Norman Conquest of Southern Italy and Sicily

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While it has received more attention recently, the Norman insertion into Italy and Sicily is often neglected even in basic texts concerning Western Civilization. Yet this "other" Norman invasion had profound affect on the political and cultural development of the Mediterranean. Gordon S. Brown follows the rise of the Normans through the exploits of the eight sons of Tancred of Hauteville from their arrival until the death of the most famous one, Robert Guiscard.

The Normans arrival in southern Italy was not an invasion as much as a slow accumulation of young mercenary knights looking for opportunities denied them at home. Initially hired by the Lombards to help in their revolt against the Byzantines in 1017, they soon sold their services to either side. More importantly, they began to seize towns and carve out fiefs for themselves. Often too small in number to directly assault well-defended towns, the Normans proceeded to raid and raze the outlying areas and farms, slow stripping the target of both food and commerce until it capitulated. They even went as far as to start fires and then demand payment before allowing them to be put out. The Normans systematically used intimidation and terror to rapidly gain land in Apulia and the area north of Naples. These tactics would allow them to set themselves up as barons in the region in less than seventy years.

Yet while the Normans often acted as little more than robber-barons pursuing their own interests, they could show remarkable cohesion and foresight when required. Even when squabbling among themselves, they could rapidly drop their quarrels to confront a perceived threat. This ability to subsume internal differences for the greater good of the group was one of the primary reasons for their success. It also helped that their adversaries, be they the pope, Muslims or Byzantines, continually underestimated the capabilities and tenacity of the Normans. Never superior in numbers, the Normans used their heavy cavalry in a remarkably coherent manner to outmaneuver their opponents and seize fleeting opportunities. When Pope Leo IX came south with an army in 1053 to deal with the Norman predations of church property, he soon found himself their virtual prisoner following the crushing defeat at Civitate. Yet in a paradox typical of the Normans, they showed the Pope extreme respect and negotiated a settlement with him that confirmed their holdings. The Normans under Richard of Capua would continue to insert themselves into papal politics as when they invaded Rome and placed Nicolas II on the throne of St. Peter in 1059.

While the Normans were actually divided into two groups, the author focuses on the Hautevilles and particularly Robert Guiscard, who arrived in Italy in 1047. Initially only in control of malaria ridden lands in Calabria, Robert soon expands his holdings and after helping install Nicolas II he was invested with Apulia, Calabria and Sicily as a reward. The fact that Sicily was held by the Muslims and portions of Apulia were still under Byzantine control seems to have mattered little to Robert or his younger brother Roger. Typical of the Norman tactics, they launched a reconnaissance in force into Sicily. They returned in 1061 to capture Messina using diversions and sheer audacity. It would not be until 1086 though until Roger captured Syracuse and sealed the fate of Sicily.

While in the early years the Normans had been focused on territorial expansion and the accumulation of wealth, as their holdings increased they were inevitably forced to deal with the issues of governance. The author provides an interesting contrast between how Roger developed the Sicilian government compared to the system that evolved in southern Italy under Robert. Because other Norman families had established significant fiefs in Apulia, Robert was continually confronted with revolts from his vassals who perceived the Hautevilles as having overstepped their authority. Yet despite continual turmoil in his lands, he persisted in trying to expand his holdings into to Illyria right up to his death in 1085.

In contrast, Roger was extremely careful in assigning land in Sicily and held much it for himself, thus preventing any family from developing a power base. He also showed remarkable foresight in his government organization by retaining many of the administrative techniques that had evolved there from the Byzantine and Muslim traditions. Holding court in Sicily and Calabria, Roger developed a centralized government that saw the rise of trade and culture to new heights in his territory. His death in 1101 marked the closing chapter in the heady days of conquest and expansion that had begun just over eighty years before.

Gordon Brown has produced an excellent overview of this turbulent period in medieval history. While the author claims that he has produced "no remarkable research breakthroughs" (2), nevertheless the work is an interesting read even for those well versed in this history. The author's background as a retired diplomat and ambassador clearly comes through in his analysis of Norman behavior and he consequently offers some interesting insights. His use of the sources is thoughtful and he often uses those favorable to the Normans to highlight their less desirable traits, while using their detractors to show why they were both feared and respected. The bibliography is not extensive, but it does contain the important classic and modern works for those desiring further reading of both primary and secondary sources. The book also contains a useful chronology and

genealogy. It is unfortunate the book was not well served by its editors. There are typographical errors scattered throughout (35, 71, 151, 152, and 175 for example) and in this reviewer's copy the printing was faint on several pages (51, 82-83).

However, these problems can be overlooked. While the work may not provide anything particularly new for those familiar with this period of history, it is an excellent introduction to this portion of Norman and Italian history. It would also be a useful textbook for an undergraduate course. Most of all, this well-written work is an interesting read for anyone who desires an example of what can be accomplished through sheer tenacity, perseverance, cunning and audacity.



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