

# H-Net Reviews

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**Sandro Carocci.** *Lordships of Southern Italy: Rural Societies, Aristocratic Powers and Monarchy in the 12th and 13th Centuries.* Translated by Lucinda Byatt. Viella History, Art and Humanities Collection Series. Rome: Viella Liberia Editrice, 2018. 622 pp. \$119.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-88-6728-773-4.

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Lucinda Byatt's translation of Sandro Carocci's *Signorie di Mezzogiorno: Società rurali, poteri, aristocratici e monarchia (XII-XIII secolo)* brings the case of southern Italy to the forefront of the international debate among scholars about medieval feudalism. Byatt handles the dense prose of the original Italian well, but Carocci has written an unapologetically complex and long historiographical essay. In this book, he traces the nuances of seigneurial rule in southern Italy from the time of the Normans to the early years of Angevin rule and attaches historical significance to words like "vassal," "lord," "fief," and "slave." Indeed, following in the footsteps of Georges Duby, Elizabeth A. R. Brown, Susan Reynolds, and Dominique Barthélemy, Carocci demonstrates the need to read the few surviving documents within their proper political, economic, and social contexts. *Lordships of Southern Italy* is, then, less a contribution to the history of European lordship and feudalism than a call for historians outside of Italy to consider the lands south of the Alps. This translation is timely because we are no longer as hindered by the destruction of the Angevin chancery as we were even two decades ago. It will be, however, of limited use to scholars who want to know more but have little to no Italian-language knowledge since most of the foundational texts Carocci cites have not been translated into English. Yet beginning graduate students might look carefully at the gaps in the scholarship pointed out by the author so that they can identify how best to orientate future research projects.

The foreword (new in the English edition) introduces a non-Italian audience to both the problems of feudalism

as history and Carocci's previous work on "local lordships," or, at the risk of oversimplifying a complex, multi-page definition, the exercise of non-public financial, judicial, and military power by (male) lay or ecclesiastical lords in conversation with a clientele and/or patrons who possess their own local systems of governance and solidarity (p. 22). Readers should pay close attention to "local lordships." This focus on local populations allows Carocci to return agency to those who did not inhabit the top of the social hierarchy and reminds the reader that power is, above all, personal and thus contingent on the setting in which it is exercised. Indeed, it reveals a fruitful topic for future research.

With his definition of lordship established, Carocci provides a brief background of the Mezzogiorno prior to the Norman conquest (999-1040s), focusing on the local exercise of power in the lands influenced by Lombard and Arabic rulers in chapter 2. Carocci then devotes chapter 3 to what continued and changed under the Normans, especially during the reign of Robert Guiscard (1015-85). Change happened at different rates. In Apulia, for instance, which had long been a Byzantine state, few local forms of power existed since they had long been overshadowed by the imperial bureaucracy. Here, the Normans replaced the previous rulers but kept the existing tax structures in place. In less-centralized regions, like Calabria, the Hauteville family encouraged the construction of military fortifications and populated them with men loyal to the Crown. From these bases, the Normans slowly infiltrated and tightened their grip on local peoples. It is worth noting at this point that ecclesiastics

did not possess the authority their counterparts in northern Italy or France enjoyed. Carocci stresses continuity through change, or the Norman appropriation of pre-existing social structures, which they then adapted and disseminated across their holdings but always while paying careful attention to each individual case and not drawing any generalized conclusions.

Over the course of chapters 4 through 13, Carocci breaks away from the chronological organization of these first few chapters and instead addresses various terms often associated with feudalism. These topics include monarchy and feudalism (chapter 4), clientelism (chapter 7), serfs and slaves (chapter 8), and the rural aristocracy (chapter 12). For each he emphasizes a gradual development from local authority toward central (royal) control over important power structures. He begins each chapter with a careful exploration of the current historiographical debates and then, depending on his comfort with the material, either defers to a particularly convincing authority or presents extensive primary source evidence for one argument or another (he seems most at home in chapter 9, “Seigneurial Justices”). But to what end? Carocci’s argument is hidden, allowing the sources to speak for themselves; it becomes clear by the end, though, that it was beneath our noses the entire time (alluded to briefly at the end of page 29): southern Italy, despite all the early modern and modern claims to the contrary, was not backward, and the kingships of the Norman and Staufen periods did not make the region a European backwater. To the contrary, Carocci claims, the Mezzogiorno seems, by the early fourteenth century, normal when compared to France or England.

This framework, that southern Italy is more normal by the end of the Middle Ages than historians currently contend, alludes to a problem with this line of inquiry. What do the Normans and Angevins have in common? They were foreign at the time of their conquest. If we are looking to explain how or why feudalism in southern Italy became more French—because that is what he means by normal—then we need to look at Jean Dunbabin’s *The French in the Kingdom of Sicily* (2011) and *Les Angevins de Naples* (1954) by Émile Léonard. Dunbabin outlines the French influence over the culture of southern Italy and Léonard showed how the Angevins implemented these changes. But we should exercise more caution when presenting the culture of Western Europe as normative; as Carocci himself demonstrates, the Arabic and Greek provided the conquerors with a solid foundation on which to build their dynasties. To forget this is to miss an important development in the region’s history as well as to imply that the Arabic and Greek traditions are backward, itself a misleading generalization.

Yet this book is, with the one problem aside, an excellent example of arduous historical research. Carocci provides the background and demonstrates that we should consider the case of southern Italy in the larger debate on European feudalism. This English translation should be useful to early-stage graduate students only just approaching the Mezzogiorno. This is a messy period for a region with a complicated historiographical tradition, and Carocci makes a strong claim for giving it more, and more careful, attention. Importantly, Byatt has done well to make this accessible to an Anglophone audience.

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