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The Convents of Palermo in the Middle of the Fifteenth Century*

Patrizia Sardina

The history of the Sicilian convents in the Middle Ages is almost unknown due not only to the lack of traditional sources like tabulari (archives containing original parchments), but also because in the past little attention has been paid to the history of women. Apart from the tabulario of the Benedictine convent of Santa Maria della Martorana, Di Giovanni’s essay on the Basilian convent of San Salvatore of Palermo, and Garufi’s studies on the female Benedictine Order in the Norman epoch, mention should be made of the well documented and very interesting book San Benedetto di Catania. Il monastero e la città nel Medioevo, written by Maria Luisa Gangemi in 1994. This indicates that until today historians have focused their attention on the convents belonging to the old and rich Benedictine Order, which were linked to royal power and the nobility. The history of the female mendicant orders therefore still needs to be investigated and reconstructed by using all kinds of archival sources, not just traditional ones.

The aim of this article is to investigate the finances of eight convents in Palermo, with a total number of 158 nuns, from September 1443 to August 1444, when Pope

* In Sicily the standard unit of currency was the golden oncia; one oncia was worth thirty tari, and one tari twenty grani.

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Abstract: This article investigates the finances of eight convents of Palermo in the middle of the fifteenth century, based on archival work conducted on unpublished documents. Nicolò Tudivco, archbishop of Palermo between 1435 and 1445, took part in the Council of Basle and supported the antipope Felix V. In 1443 Pope Eugenius IV levied a tax of 20,000 florins on the Sicilian Church without exempting the convents, which prompted their procurator to appeal. By comparing the tithes of these eight convents we find out that the richest of them was Santa Caterina of the Dominican Order, whose prioress, Maria Alaymo, had been dismissed in 1440. As a consequence of the tithe imposed by Callixtus III in 1456, the economic situation of Palermo’s convents had changed, but Santa Caterina remained the most important of them.

Keywords: city, convent, economy, papacy, Sicily, tax, women
Eugenius IV levied a tax of 20,000 florins *di camera* (the currency of the Apostolic See) on monasteries, convents, priories, cathedrals, churches, hospitals, houses of canons, prebendaries, and beneficiaries in the kingdom of Sicily *ultra Farum*. In Palermo’s Cassaro quarter the convents were San Salvatore and San Giovanni di Richono (or Origlione) of the Basilian Order, Santa Maria del Cancelliere, Santa Maria della Martorana, and Santa Maria delle Vergini of the Benedictine Order, Santa Caterina controlled by the Friars Preachers, and Santa Chiara belonging to the Minorites, and in the Conceria quarter of Palermo there was Santa Maria di Valverde (Fig. 30). Religious controversies affected the life of the nuns because between 1435 and 1445 the archbishop of Palermo was Nicolò Tudisco, Benedictine abbot of Santa Maria di Maniace, doctor of canon law and great protagonist of the Council of Basle (1431–45). Sent by Alfonso V to the Council as an ambassador, he supported the antipope Felix V, who in 1440 appointed him cardinal. While the archbishop was staying in Basle, his nephew Giacomo Tudisco became vicar.2

As Gabriella Zarri has pointed out, it is necessary to establish a connection between the history of Italian convents and their geographical position in order to highlight regional differences.3 Consequently, if we wish to understand the socio-economic role of the aforesaid convents in the city of Palermo, we must briefly trace their foundation, development, and relations with urban life, and outline the situation when Eugenius IV imposed the tax on the Sicilian Church.

The Basilian convent of Santo Salvatore was founded by Robert Guiscard, duke of Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily, in 1073, after he conquered Palermo. It was richly endowed by Roger II, king of Sicily, in 1148, when the Basilian nuns of the convents of San Matteo, San Teodoro, and Santa Maria dell’Oreto moved to San Salvatore. It was later that Emperor Frederick II decided that the nuns of Santa Maria della Pinta should settle at San Salvatore.4 Between 1312 and 1426 San Salvatore collaborated with the city of Palermo by taking care of its archives, where the city seal, the *consuetudines* (customs), and the privileges were kept. In the thirteenth century San Salvatore received three *cafisi* (a measure of weight equivalent to 7,934 kg) of olive oil from the *universitas* (legally recognized community) of

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4. Fazello, *Storia di Sicilia*, 1, 383–84; Di Giovanni, *La topografia antica*, pp. 209–20; La Duca, *Architettura religiosa*, pp. 69–70. The convent was abolished in 1866, and on its site was built the Istituto Magistrale Regina Margherita; today remains of the Norman convent can be seen in the wall facing *via Protonotaro* and in some rooms of the school.
Palermo as *angaria* (direct tax), and in the fifteenth century they were given half a *cantàro* (measure of weight equivalent to eight and a quarter *cafisi*), used to feed oil lamps, which were needed because of the work the nuns carried out by night and day when city officials entered the convent to have documents sealed.\(^5\) In fact, *Ancien Régime* convents were closely linked with cities.\(^6\) In 1437 San Salvatore experienced hard times because Abbess Fiordaliso Spatafora, who had been in charge of the convent since 1400, was removed by Archbishop Nicolò Tudisco and by the viceroy Ruggero Paruta, who in her place nominated Pina Chabica, a relative of the viceroy. She remained in charge until her death in 1448.\(^7\)

The convent of San Giovanni di *Richono* was founded some time before the fourteenth century on the remains of a monastery of Hospitallers.\(^8\) In the fifteenth century the number of nuns was small throughout, for example in 1406 only one nun and the abbess, Cristina de Chamirichio, lived in the convent.\(^9\) Twenty years later Abbess Cristina was so old and sick that the charge of prioress was given to Agnese de Balleccto, a nun of Santa Maria dell’Itria of Sciacca, considered *idonea vita, scienza ac moribus decorata et in etate legimina constituta* (suitable because of her life, adorned by her learning and her manners, and in her majority). She was confirmed by the archbishop of Palermo, Ubertino de Marinis, who allowed her to manage the convent’s properties.\(^10\) Abbess Cristina died between April 1434 and May 1437, when the new abbess, Caterina de Ursone, was put in charge.\(^11\) In 1445 Caterina Ursone died and there were only three nuns in the convent — Maria de Michaele, Costanza, and Antonella de Castiglono. They elected Maria de Michaele as abbess, because she was the oldest of them.\(^12\)

The Benedictine convents of Santa Maria del Cancelliere and Santa Maria della Martorana were built in the Norman era. The former was founded in 1171 by Matthew of Ajello, great chancellor of William II, in memory of his first wife


\(^6\) Zarri, ‘Monasteri femminili e città (secoli XV–XVIII)’, pp. 359–60.


\(^9\) Asp, Sn, 42, fol. 9.

\(^10\) Asp, N, i, 605, fol. 9v–r.

\(^11\) Asp, N, i, 1076, fol. 35v; Asp, N, i, 831, fol. 297v.

\(^12\) Asp, N, i, 829, fol. 329v–r.
Figure 30. Map of Palermo in the fifteenth century. Map by Roberta Sardina.
Sica, and called Santa Maria dei Latini. He endowed the convent so richly that it could maintain not only the abbess, Marotta, and twenty-four nuns, but also a great number of beggars. The core of the convent’s real estate was the casale Curibichi (Curbici hamlet), in the territory of Camporeale.\(^{13}\) There were also gardens, vineyards, almond trees, and lands on the outskirts of Palermo, as well as cattle, precious icons, many vestments, and sacred vessels.\(^{14}\) Of course, a rich estate was a fundamental starting point to guarantee a convent’s long and peaceful life, but the revenues could vary a lot depending on the skill of lay or ecclesiastical procurators to whom the management was entrusted. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the best procurators of Santa Maria del Cancelliere were notaries, such as Antonio de Chagio, who carefully administered the convent estate between 1373 and 1376, and recuperated contested real estate, unpaid income, and precious objects that had been pawned.\(^{15}\) Priests were less reliable. For example, in 1418, under the abbess Letizia de Iorlando, Simone Rubeo, canon of the Palatine Chapel of San Pietro, and Paolo Rubeo, notary and new procurator of the convent, charged the priest Pietro de Bizino, procurator of the convent from September 1394 to October 1408, with not having paid back all the money he had received.\(^{16}\) The priest carefully replied to all the allegations from the archiepiscopal court of Palermo. In the first place, he denied having kept a part of convent’s income. Furthermore, he stated that he had not received the rents of the houses situated in the Cassaro, in the vanella (alley) of the convent, because they were usually collected by the abbess and the nuns. Next, he specified that he had been collecting the income of the fief Curbici for nearly four years. He also said that he had not been able to receive all the fees, annuities, and income the convent had in Palermo and its territory; as far as he could ascertain ex quaternionibus (from the books) these fees did not amount to 36 oncie but only to 34. The priest claimed that he had not received wheat and barley as terratico (tax paid on the land) for the fief Curbi ci and the lands situated on the outskirts of Palermo, in the contrata Richarduni (contrada Ucciardone). Finally, he denied that eleven oncie and twenty-four tari were missing, and rejected the audit of the previous two years’ accounts carried out by commissioners. In spite of his careful

\(^{13}\) Maurici, *L’insediamento medievale*, p. 79, no. 84.


\(^{15}\) Asp, *Sn*, Gancia, 39N, fol. 17r; Gancia, 43N, fols 1r–3r.

defence the priest was condemned to pay all the money received within fifteen
days.\footnote{Asp, \textit{Cp}, 3995, fols 122$^{v}$–123$^{r}$.} Ten years later the notary Paolo Rubeo still appears as procurator of Santa
Maria del Cancelliere.\footnote{Asp, \textit{Cp}, 3998, fol. 12$^{v}$.} In 1442 the chapter consisted of the abbess, Eufemia
Ventimiglia, who belonged to a well-known noble family, and ten nuns.\footnote{Asp, \textit{N}, i, 782, fols 296$^{v}$–297$^{r}$. The nuns were Agata de Assanti, Caterina de Maniscalco, Margherita de Abbate, Agnese de Xacca, Venere de Magro, Benedetta de Raglano, Ilaria de Gayta, Gianna de Chiminello, Antonia de Xhamami, and Chiara de Monaco.}

The second Benedictine convent of the Norman period was Santa Maria
della Martorana, founded in 1194 by Geoffrey Martorana, master of Justice,
and his wife Aloisia, near the Greek church of Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio,
which had been built by George of Antioch in 1143. At the beginning of the
thirteenth century the convent received an income from the \textit{casale Calathanecta},
in the territory of Vicari.\footnote{Garufi, ‘Le Benedettine in Sicilia’, pp. 272–77. After the abolition of the religious corpo-
ration, in 1869 the School of Application for engineers was installed in the convent of Santa
Maria della Martorana (Burgarella, ‘Le pergamene del monastero’, pp. 55–57).} In 1392 the procurator of Santa Maria della Martorana
charged Guglielmo Ventimiglia, lord of Ciminna, of having illegally used \textit{mandras
seu marcatos} (pasture) in the \textit{fief} of \textit{Caltaniecta}, called \textit{La Marturana}, which the
convent had given to some inhabitants of Ciminna to sow and leave the land
fallow.\footnote{Acta Curie, i, ed. by Santoro, doc. 225.} At that time the abbess of the house was Margherita Ventimiglia, who
in 1400 was authorized by the chorister Giovanni Sebastian and the treasurer
Simone de Rubeo, canons, and general vicars of the cathedral of Palermo, to go
to Rome for a short while with two or three nuns during the Jubilee year declared
by Pope Boniface IX.\footnote{Asp, \textit{Tm}, perg. 100; Asp, \textit{Ma}, i, 269 ter, fols 9$^{v}$–10$^{r}$.} After the death of Abbess Margherita Ventimiglia in
1432 the chapter quickly elected Antonia de Chicalino, who was originally from
Agrigento, \textit{ne defectu pastoris lupus rapax dominicum gregem invaderet} (lest, due
to the absence of the shepherd, the ravenous wolf could invade the flock of the
Lord).\footnote{Asp, \textit{Tabulario della Martorana}, perg. 111.} Two years later the abbess was caught up in legal processes with Alamanno
de Siscar, chorister of the Palatine Chapel, who incorporated the church of Santa
Maria dell’Ammiraglio \textit{(in unum corpus reducta)}. Alamanno had entrusted the
celebrations of religious rites to some priests he considered reliable, and had also
given them some houses next to the church. Alfonso V of Aragon and I of Sicily, on
the other hand, had donated \textit{gracieose} (graciously) the church, the chapel of SS Simon

\begin{center}
\textbf{Patrizia Sardina}
\end{center}
and Judah, and the adjoining houses to the abbess and the nuns *usque ad regium beneplacitum* (until the king liked), provided that they were under the control of the chorister and his successors. After expelling the priests, the abbess and the nuns allowed some lay women to enter the church and to help during mass, and decided to demolish the houses with the purpose of incorporating them into the convent. Enrico de Arcucia, chaplain and procurator of Santa Maria della Martorana, confirmed that the abbess and nuns wanted to use the church, the chapel, and the houses *ad conservacionem et honestatem* (to protect the respectability) of the convent. The *universitas* of Palermo replied that the church was *unu preciusu jocali in toto Orbe* (a precious jewel all over the world), but if the poor convent of Santa Maria della Martorana was joined to the church it could not be restored and *veni a ruina et totali destructioni* (it would have been completely destroyed). The roof of the chapel of SS Simon and Judah was in very bad condition and at risk of collapsing. Therefore, in 1451, the city asked Alfonso V to give the chorister Alamanno de Siscar an equivalent or greater ecclesiastical benefice in exchange for the church of Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio, whose income had to be given to the convent of Martorana, to allow the abbess and the procurator to restore it.

The third Benedictine convent was Santa Maria delle Vergini, also founded in 1368 by Agata, abbess and sister of Angelo Sinisio, who had founded again the Benedictine monastery of San Martino delle Scale in the territory of Palermo. Thanks to a monk of San Martino, in 1369 the convent was perpetually granted six *botticelle* (small barrels) of tuna from the Palermo tunny nets of San Giorgio and Solanto by Frederick IV of Sicily. In 1393 Martin I of Sicily added to this a further four *botticelle*. The link between Santa Maria delle Vergini and San Martino was always very strong, so the notary Manfredi La Muta, procurator of Santa Maria delle Vergini between 1404 and 1411, was also procurator of San Martino delle Scale. Some well-known Palermo citizens were very close to the convent, thus for example, in 1384, the jurist Leonardo de Bartholomeo left the convent a legacy of one *uncia* and fifteen *tari*, and in 1442 the noble Tommaso Crispo asked to be buried by his altar in the church of the convent.

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27 Asp, *Canc.*, 12, fols 293r–295r.
29 Asp. *Cp.*, 4855, fol. 17v; Asp, *N*, 1, 574, fol. 194v.
The foundation of Santa Caterina is linked to the very important role played in Palermo by the Dominicans, who at the end of the thirteenth century moved from the church of San Matteo in the Cassaro to the new monastery built in the Seralcadio quarter, thanks to Ruggero Mastrangelo, nominated captain of Palermo after the Sicilian Vespers. In 1310 Benvenuta, daughter of Ruggero and Palma Mastrangelo, widowed and without children, decided to found a convent in her houses situated in contrada San Matteo, and to endow it with her enormous properties. After the death of Benvenuta, Palma fulfilled her daughter’s will and donated all the family real estate for the foundation of a convent. The Dominicans dedicated the convent to St Catherine of Alexandria and entrusted it to a prioress elected by the nuns. The prioress could not by herself manage the convent’s estate, and was controlled and aided by a prior chosen by the Dominicans. Santa Caterina was situated next to the walls of the city and therefore, in 1314, the convent lent the universitas of Palermo fifty oncie to help the city defend itself against an impending attack from the Angevin enemy. At the request of the universitas of Palermo, in 1430, the viceroy asked Pope Martin V to transform Santa Caterina from a convent of the Dominican Order into a Benedictine abbey which, however, had to pay the Dominicans the usual annual fee. After a while the prioress, Maria de Alaymo, was dismissed. In 1434 Eugenius IV entrusted the archbishop of Palermo, Ubertino de Marinis, with the task of reforming the convent, which remained Dominican. Maria de Alaymo, who was prioress again between 1433 and 1439, insisted that she had been promoted to abbess by a papal bull obtained during the Council of Basle. In 1440 she was finally dismissed and Scolastica de Castellar was invested with the charge of abbess by Giacomo Tudisco, nephew and vicar of Archbishop Nicolò.  

31 Gulotta, _Le imbreviature_, docs 249 (15 February 1299), 408 (23 May 1299). Coniglione, _La Provincia domenicana_, pp. 23–24; Palermo, _Guida Istruttiva_, 1, 236–37. On San Domenico see Mongitore, _Storia delle chiese_, 1, 160

32 Asp, _Crs_, S. Caterina, 62, perg. On Mastrangelo family see Sciascia, ‘Per una storia di Palermo nel Duecento (e dei toscani in Sicilia)’.

33 _Acta Curie_, vi, ed. by Sciascia, doc. 31.

34 Asp, _Proton._, 31, fols 61r and 62r.


36 _Bullarum Ordinis Praedicatorum_, iii, 27.

37 Brp, _Tabulario di S. Maria La Nuova_, perg. 213; Asp, _N_, I, 833; Asp, _Crs_, S. Caterina, reg., 65, fols 170r–174r.
The economic role played by the Minoresses, present in Palermo since 1333, was less important. In 1341 Matteo Sclafani, count of Adrano, completed the convent of Santa Chiara, and in 1348 he also finished building his family chapel inside the church that was still under construction.\(^{38}\) In 1375 there were only the abbess, Esmeralda de Blasio, and five nuns in Santa Chiara.\(^{39}\) In 1390 Pope Boniface IX allowed Abbess Angela Chiaromonte, sister of Manfredi, vicar of Sicily and duke of Djerba, to resign and transfer to the Benedictine Order, because she was old and sick.\(^{40}\) In 1406 the abbess was Margherita de Metta, whose election in 1435 was confirmed by Eugenius IV and in 1437 by Alfonso V.\(^{41}\) Five years earlier the abbess had bought one hundred salme of lime to restore the convent (a salma was a measure of weight equivalent to c. 275 kg).\(^{42}\) After the collapse of San Michele’s chapel in 1442, the mason Lorenzo de Guastapani promised to return, within six years, the sum of six oncie received to restore the chapel and to demolish the dammuso (the vault) built in the chapel.\(^{43}\)

According to Pirro, the convent of Santa Maria di Valverde was founded in 1118.\(^{44}\) It followed the Rule of St Augustine and depended on the priory of Messina.\(^{45}\) Before 1304 Bonadonna refounded Santa Maria di Valverde.\(^{46}\) In 1315, Francesco d’Antiochia, archbishop of Palermo, exempted the prioress of Messina, Chiara Miglio, from diocesan jurisdiction to allow her to visit and govern the convent in Palermo.\(^{47}\) In 1401 Elisabetta de Iacobo was vicar and prioress of Santa Maria di Valverde of Palermo, and between 1411 and 1424 she was provincial of all the convents and churches of Santa Maria di Valverde in Sicily citra et ultra Farum, and she lived in Palermo.\(^{48}\) Margherita de Pisano, who in 1411 was a nun of Santa Maria di Valverde of Palermo, became provincial from 1428 to 1450.\(^{49}\)


\(^{39}\) Asp, N, I, reg. 83, fols 85r and 86v.

\(^{40}\) Fodale, Documenti del pontificato di Bonifacio IX, doc. xxxvi.

\(^{41}\) Asp, Sn, Catena, 42, 10v. Fodale, Alunni della perdizione, p. 89, no. 21.

\(^{42}\) Asp, N, I, 826, fol. 268v.

\(^{43}\) Asp, N, I, 827, fol. 223v–v.

\(^{44}\) Pirro, Sicilia Sacra, 1, 307.


\(^{46}\) Asp, Tm, perg. 418. Farsetta, La chiesa di Santa Maria, pp. 15–17.

\(^{47}\) Amato, De principe, book vi, chap. vi.

\(^{48}\) Asp, Cp, 3993, fol. 173v; Asp, N, I, 574, fols 96’–98’; Asp, N, I, 606, fols 33v–34v.

\(^{49}\) Asp, N, I, 574, fols 96’–98’; Asp, N, I, 605, fols 65’–66’; Asp, N, I, 783, fol. 111v.
Among the procurators of the convent, we should mention Marino de Iacoba, in 1443, because he belonged to the order of Preachers, who in the fourteenth century were closely linked to convents of the order of Santa Maria di Valverde.50 After recalling the history of the eight convents of Palermo, it will be useful to dwell on the reign of Alfonso V and its significance for the nunneries. In 1439 the Council of Basle designated Felix V as pope instead of Eugenius IV, whereupon the king seized the opportunity to persuade Felix to revoke the investiture of the king of Naples that had been conferred on René d’Anjou. Following negotiations Felix V promised to confirm the document issued in 1421 by Giovanna II, queen of Naples, to adopt Alfonso as her heir.51 From a military point of view, after twenty years of intermittent land and sea battles, in 1442 Alfonso V finally won the long war of attrition against the Angevins, thanks to the capitulation of Naples. But even though he had defeated René of Anjou, the king of Aragon had to keep his army in good condition.52 The cost of the so called Amprisia (‘Enterprise’) exceeded all expectations and impoverished Sicily, which, according to Corrao, was base logistica e militare per la lunga campagna militare di conquista (a logistic and military basis of the long campaign for the conquest) of the kingdom of Naples.53 Alfonso V’s ambitions were realised and in the 1443 parliament the barons requested to send a delegation to Eugenius IV. Thus, on 14 July 1443, King Alfonso V took a step backwards and concluded the Treaty of Terracina with Luigi Scarampo Paduano, cardinal of San Lorenzo in Damaso. The king recognized Eugenius IV as pope. Eugenius confirmed the king’s adoption, as her heir, by Giovanna II of Naples, crowned him king of Naples, legitimized his natural son Ferdinando, called Ferrante, and authorized him to succeed his father.54 After the unification of the kingdom of Sicily with the kingdom of Naples, Alfonso V thrice levied a subventio generalis or collecta (a general direct tax) in Sicily: in 1443 to defend the island from the enemies, in 1444 for the wedding between his natural daughter Eleonora of Aragon and Marino Marzano, count of Alife, and in 1445 for the wedding of his son Ferrante.55 Although the open papal bull allowed the levying of collecte on churches, monasteries, and clergy only in the rare cases contemplated

51 Ryder, The Kingdom of Naples, pp. 34–35.
52 Ryder, The Kingdom of Naples, p. 258.
55 Sardina, Il labirinto, p. 47.
in the royal constitutions, Alfonso the Magnanimous declared that ‘tallage and collectae upon the clergy’ were mentioned in the ‘ancient constitutions’, probably referring to the Norman and Swabian constitutions.\textsuperscript{56}

In 1443 and 1444, Eugenius IV instructed the apostolic commissioners Paolo de Canaria, archdeacon of Ancona and papal cubicularius (chamberlain), and Giovanni Ventimiglia, archbishop of Monreale, to collect 20,000 florins di camera from monasteries, convents, priories, cathedrals, churches, hospitals, canons, prebendaries, and beneficiaries in the kingdom of Sicily ultra Farum. The commissioners had to receive exact information about income and expenses, solum Deum pre oculis habentes (having only God in front of their eyes), remembering that the poor could not be obliged to pay. Consequently they asked the abbesses, nuns, and procurators of the aforesaid convents for the iulianae, that is the account books recording revenues, income, and expenditure. The abbesses obeyed at once and made their procurators hand over the iuliane to the commissioners tamquam filii obedientie (like obedient children). In 1444, before Easter, the commissioners sent the convents the coupons containing the taxes they had to pay through their vice-delegates. Furthermore, the commissioners posted a letter on the doors of the cathedral of Palermo, threatening to excommunicate, interdict, and deprive of their charges and benefices, anyone who did not pay their share by St Mark’s Day (25 May 1444), in order to avoid delays in payment, requests for exemptions, or moratoria. The eight convents examined the coupons and considered the heavy economic sacrifices imposed by the pope excessive and unbearable. Thus they entrusted their procurator Giacomo de Chagio, a Palermo notary, with the task of setting forth their arguments in front of the apostolic collectors. By calculating the tithe of each convent we can deduce that the richest convent was Santa Caterina, which had to pay seventy-one oncie and twenty tari, followed by San Salvatore with less than half of the amount paid by Santa Caterina, that is, thirty-three oncie and ten tari. Santa Maria delle Vergini and Santa Maria del Cancelliere had to pay the same tithe, that is, sixteen oncie and twenty tari, Santa Maria di Valverde slightly less (sixteen oncie). The poorest convents were Santa Chiara, with ten oncie, and San Giovanni dell’Origlione, with only two oncie. The document does not include the tithe imposed on Santa Maria della Martorana. The procurator Giacomo de Chagio protested against the interdict, the punishments they were threatened with, and the heavy taxes imposed on the convents, because monasteria fuerunt et sunt miserabilia et inpotentes persone (monasteries were and are poor and powerless people), and their income was so low that they could not meet domestic needs.

\textsuperscript{56} Ryder, The Kingdom of Naples, pp. 36–37.
Santa Caterina’s income amounted to 235 oncie and 15 tari (900 florins), its ordinary expenditure to 994 florins, used to maintain twenty nuns, four young deacons, five chaplains, two procurators, and to pay the usual annuity to the Palermo monastery of San Domenico. But the convent had also paid two hundred oncie to the royal officers and run into debt pro marammatibus (for building).

In the convent of San Salvatore there were twenty nuns and an undefined number of officers. Annuities, rents, agricultural products, and grapes collected every year were worth eighty-nine oncie, twenty-five tari, and eight grani (354 florins), and ordinary expenses amounted to ninety-seven oncie and nineteen tari (372 florins). However, in the previous year San Salvatore had to scrape together 137 oncie (548 florins) to restore the old and crumbling monastic building propter temporis antiquitatem ad ruynam deventi (that was in ruins because of its antiquity).

Santa Maria delle Vergini, with forty nuns the largest convent of Palermo, had closed the balance sheet in deficit because it had collected seventy-two oncie and fifteen tari (210 florins) for annuities and rents, and spent ninety-eight oncie and fifteen tari (300 florins) to maintain the nuns and pay the salaries of the chaplain and procurators. Santa Maria del Cancelliere had received fifty-four oncie (216 florins) and spent forty-nine oncie and fifteen tari (189 florins) to maintain eleven nuns, five clergymen, and other officers, as well as forty oncie (160 1/2 florins) to restore the dormitory of the convent. The budget of Santa Maria di Valverde was quite balanced because the income amounted to forty-seven oncie and seven tari (199 florins), the expenditure to forty-six oncie and fourteen tari (186 florins), used to maintain fourteen nuns, one chaplain, and one procurator. Conversely, Santa Maria della Martorana had received forty oncie and seventeen tari in annuities and wheat, and had spent fifty-four oncie and twenty-three tari (241 florins) to support twenty-four nuns, seven young clerics, one chaplain, and one procurator. The annuities of the poor nunnery of San Giovanni dell’Origlione amounted to just seven oncie, and its expenses to twenty oncie. In fact, it was the smallest convent of Palermo whose only residents were the abbess, Caterina de Ursone, and three nuns.

The archbishop of Monreale ordered that his vicar commissioner Giovanni de Riffaldi, doctor in canon law, be sent the report on the budget of the eight convents; from this we can deduce that expenditure exceeded income, in some cases threefold. Therefore none of the budget sufficed for the ordinary expenses, and the convents had to be considered persone impotentes et inhabiles (powerless

57 Asp, N, I, 829, fol. 329r-rr.
and incapable people), who could not pay even a very low share, so abbesses and procurators could not raise money for the collecta. However, the convents declared that they would have remained faithful to the pope and, even though they would have liked to pay, ad impossibilia excusati sunt (they were excused because it was impossible).

In front of the only commissioner, Giovanni Ventimiglia, archbishop of Monreale, in the absence of the other commissioner, Paolo de Canaria, archdeacon of Ancona, Giacomo de Chagio, procurator of the convents, asserted that the tax heavily damaged the convents. So he appealed against the tax, the interdict, and the deprivation of charges and benefices threatened against convents, abbesses, nuns, and procurators. The procurator had to pay to send the appeal to the Apostolic See, and asked to stop the sentence while the lawsuit was pending. According to the procurator, the examination of expenditure and income would have showed that the nuns were so poor they could not sustain themselves without working, as we can easily deduce from the sentence si non esset quod de manibus propriis et laboribus reciperrint maiorem partem vitae eorum (if they had not received the greatest part of their living by working and doing manual labour), that clearly refers to the typical manual labour of the convents, that is, sewing, embroidering, and making sweets.

The archbishop of Monreale sent the report to the pope accompanied by a letter, but did not decide about the appeal because he preferred to wait for the return of the other commissioner to Palermo. When Paolo de Canaria arrived, he had his mandatum (order) posted on the doors of the cathedral of Palermo, ordering Palermo’s monasteries and churches to pay the tax within two days on pain of excommunication and interdict. On 1 July 1444 Giacomo Chagio, procurator of the convents, protested against Paolo de Canaria and appealed again to the Apostolic See, mainly because the pope wanted the convents to be exempt from taxes. Paolo de Canaria said that the appeal would have been admitted only if it was legal and the convents had not produced sufficient evidence to justify the exemption. To uphold his position the collector cited a letter the treasurer of Eugenius IV had sent him on 20 April 1444 that had been presented by Filippo de Amico, monk of San Martino delle Scale, to the archbishop of Messina and other people. In the letter the treasurer told the collector that the monks of San Martino had met the pope to complain about the tax, which they considered unbearable. The pope had not exempted the monastery in order to avoid that the other houses might ask for the same concession (ne aperta hac via plurimi idem

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petendi occasionem habeant), but he had exhorted Paolo de Canaria to be very careful, because many monasteries had low incomes and high expenses. On 5 June 1444 Andrea de La Pasta, professor of theology and prior of San Domenico, and Pietro de Benchivinni, bachelor and prior of Sant’Agostino, protested against the collecta on behalf of the four monasteries of the so called ‘mendicant tetralogy’ for the reason that mendicant orders had to be exempt from taxes. The economic situation of the archbishopric of Palermo was completely different, and in 1445 Angelo Abbas, apostolic collector, declared that he had received fifty oncie from the noble Giovanni de Crastono, tax collector for the archbishopric, as part of the money owed, through the bank of Pachio Russo and Marco Bonconti.

In 1456 Pope Callixtus III entrusted Miguel Isalguer, apostolic collector, with assessing ecclesiastical benefits in Sicily and collecting the tithe. In the Liber computorum by Miguel Isalguer, the abbesses of the eight convents of the diocese of Palermo declared their income: Santa Caterina: 212 oncie, San Salvatore: 88 oncie, Santa Maria delle Vergini: 84 oncie and 5 tari, Santa Maria del Cancelliere: 56 oncie, Santa Maria di Valverde: 53 oncie, Santa Maria della Martorana: 47 oncie and 6 tari, Santa Chiara: 40 oncie, San Giovanni dell’Origlia: 4 oncie, 24 tari, and 10 grani. Santa Caterina remained the richest convent, but its income had decreased by 10 per cent; in second place was San Salvatore, with a downturn of less than two oncie; in third place remained Santa Maria delle Vergini, whose income had increased by 30 per cent. The growth in Santa Maria del Cancelliere was lower (two oncie), and it remained in fourth place, followed by Santa Maria di Valverde and Santa Maria della Martorana, whose income had increased by 15 per cent. The second lowest convent was Santa Chiara, though its income had increased by almost 20 per cent; the poorest convent was still San Giovanni dell’Origlia, whose meagre income had decreased from seven to less than five oncie. On the whole the income of the eight convents had increased from 571 oncie, 2 tari, and 8 grani to 585 oncie, 5 tari, and 10 grani.

According to the jurist Baldo degli Ubaldi, in the thirteenth century poverty was so widespread that the bishop could give the convents bequests reserved to the poor and could not imprison the abbess should the house fall into debt. Between 1443 and 1456, poverty remained a pressing problem for the convents

59 Asp, N, I, 576, fol. 53r.
60 San Domenco had to pay fifty oncie, San Francesco thirty-six oncie and twenty tari, Sant’Agostino ten oncie, and Santa Maria del Carmine seventeen oncie (Asp, N, I, 577, fols 48r–49r).
61 Asp, N, I, 784, fol. 353v (28 April 1445).
63 Guerra Medici, ‘Sulla giurisdizione temporale’, pp. 85–86.
of Palermo due not only to various ordinary reasons, such as poor endowment, the administrative incompetence of the abbess, or the expenses of the salaries of the procurators and the benefices of the priests who performed religious services in the monasteries, but also to acts of war and natural disasters that could drastically reduce the usual income. In Sicily, moreover, the economic situation of the convents changed completely at the end of the fifteenth century, when there was a growing number of professed nuns who were literate; a growing number of convents started keeping ledgers, expense books of income and expenditure, lists of nuns and priories, and records of deaths.64

In conclusion, this study has pointed out different aspects of the Sicilian convents within the ecclesiastical framework of the middle of the fifteenth century, which were highlighted as a result of the Council of Basle where Nicolò Tudisco, archbishop of Palermo, supported the antipope Felix V. In the first place it must be stressed that the relationship between the royal power and the convents of Palermo remained very strong throughout the period. This article has also focused on the role played by the main noble families living in Palermo and the way in which this influenced the election of abbesses. Thus the Benedictine convents were linked to the Ventimiglia family; in fact Eufemia was abbess of Santa Maria del Cancelliere from 1428 to 1464, and Margherita, abbess of Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio from 1388 to 1432. Giovanni Ventimiglia, count of Geraci, was one of the viceroys who in 1430 asked Pope Martin V to transform the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina into a Benedictine abbey.65 Fiordaliso Spatafora, a member of another well-known Sicilian family, was abbess of San Salvatore from 1400 to 1437, when Archbishop Nicolò Tudisco removed her. Between 1476 and 1495 the abbess of Santa Caterina was Elisabetta Abbatellis, a daughter of Federico, lord of Cammarata.66

This article has moreover investigated the close links between the most important nunneries of Palermo and the city’s institutions. Indeed, the city’s archives were kept in San Salvatore, and before the new town hall was built the most crowded civic councils were held in the chapter house of Santa Caterina.67 In 1440, when Scolastica Castellar was invested with the charge of abbess in the church of Santa Caterina, the officials of Palermo and many citizens of both sexes were present at the ceremony.

64 Weaver, ‘Le muse in convento,’ pp. 257–58.
65 On Giovanni Ventimiglia see Cancila, Castelbuono medievale, pp. 101–60.
66 Ascp, N, I, 1755, fols 1480v–1482v.
67 Ascp, Atti del Senato, cassetta 24, fol. 21v.
Abbreviations

Asp = Archivio di Stato di Palermo
Brp = Biblioteca Regionale di Palermo
Canc. = Real Cancelleria
Cp = Corte Pretoriana
Crs = Corporazioni Religiose Soppresse
Ma = Miscellanea archivistica
N = Notai
Proton. = Protonotaro del Regno
Sn = Spezzoni notarili
Tm = Tabulario della Magione

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