



***The Bourbons in Sicily and the British
Protectorate. An Account of Events
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Abstract: Britain's policy toward Sicily evolved through various phases under successive London governments, alternating between advocating for the annexation of the island and at others desiring to make the island a protectorate. In addition to the political and military interests at play, there was a concurrent desire to export a constitutional model that sharply contrasted with the one established during the French Revolution. In this context, Sicily emerged as a potential catalyst, a model from which other Italian states could draw inspiration. The article examines the historical period defined by the Bourbon dynasty's rule in Sicily, addressing the unique conditions that distinguished the island, as well as the political and financial challenges faced during the reign of Ferdinand IV and Maria Carolina of Bourbon. Both royal figures, deeply entrenched in dynastic beliefs, were often compelled to relinquish significant control over governance. Amidst this delicate situation, Lord William Bentinck was tasked with navigating the complex intrigues of the Bourbon court, particularly with the king, queen, and crown prince. The queen, in particular, is portrayed as embodying the dynastic pride and dignity that remained central to her actions, despite the prevailing historical narratives that have long regarded her as a controversial and ostentatious figure. Through strategic interventions and decisive measures, Bentinck was able to successfully implement the project of a Sicilian Constitution.

Keywords: British policy; Sicily; British protectorate; Sicilian Constitution; Ferdinand IV; Maria Carolina of Bourbon; Lord William Bentinck; Bourbon dynasty.

In the eighteenth century, the British presence in the Mediterranean has been marked by significant territorial acquisitions, including Corsica, Elba, Malta, Sicily, and the Ionian Islands. However, it was during the revolutionary period, particularly the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815), that the possession of these key Mediterranean islands became crucial for Britain. During the Revolutionary Wars (1792–1802), Britain focused on preventing French expansion, seeking to maintain the balance of

power in Europe. Yet, during the Napoleonic Wars, the stakes grew higher as Napoleon's ambitions for domination posed a direct threat to British interests. Control of strategic islands became vital for securing British naval routes, projecting power, and countering French influence in the Mediterranean, which was seen as a crucial theatre of the broader conflict. British interests in the islands were not only geo-strategic and economic, but also political and ideological. Indeed, after 1789, the "ancient" model of constitutionalism, represented historically by the British constitutional system, was contrasted by the "modern" French model, which was imposed on various countries occupied by French military troops during the Napoleonic period.¹

Unlike other islands, Sicily—ruled alongside Naples by the Bourbon dynasty in a personal union—was never subjected to direct control by Great Britain. However, despite the rule of the Bourbon dynasty, the British were able to establish a protectorate during the so-called "British Decade" from 1806 to 1815.²

In those years, several projects—which were discussed in military circles—were proposed regarding the annexation of Sicily by Britain. The foreign policy draft recommended by the Ministry of All the Talents in 1806–1807 would make Sicily one of the main British hubs in the Mediterranean regarding warfare and trade. As can be seen from his political writings, Gould Francis Leckie, who lived on the island for almost seven years, supported the annexation of Sicily.³ In 1813, Lord William Bentinck also told the crown prince, the future Francis I, that the annexation of the island was a proposal that should be taken into consideration.⁴

A turning point occurred in 1798 when, after having started the second anti-French coalition,⁵ Britain's attention to the Mediterranean area intensified.⁶ The Treaty of 1798

¹ See McIlwain, *Costituzionalismo antico e moderno*, 24–25.

² On the British decade in Sicily, see D'Andrea, *If Sicily Should Become A British Island*; D'Andrea, *Nel decennio Inglese 1806–1815*; D'Angelo, Lentini and Saija, *Il «decennio inglese» 1806–1815 in Sicilia*.

³ See on this regard D'Andrea, *Gould Francis Leckie e la Sicilia: 1801–1818*, especially the chapter "Da Londra a Siracusa," where the author examines Leckie's activities on the island during that period.

⁴ D'Andrea, *If Sicily Should Become A British Island*, 15; Novarese, *Costituzione e codificazione nella Sicilia dell'Ottocento*, 35.

⁵ The First Convention was signed in 1793. Under this agreement, the king of Naples and Sicily and the king of Great Britain committed themselves to joint military and naval action. The convention provided for the end of all trade with France. See Salemi, *I trattati antinapoleonici dell'Inghilterra con le Due Sicilie*, 21.

⁶ In 1796, the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily signed the Peace of Paris with France and returned to their original status of neutrality, but in 1798 hostilities resumed.

was essentially identical to that of 1793 with regard to military and naval cooperation and the opening of the ports of Naples and Sicily to British ships for supplies and services. It also closed the same ports to all French ships, prohibited trade with France and agreed on mutual benefits once peace had been secured. However, the agreement differed from the previous one by a clause stipulating that the parties were obliged to cooperate even after peace, with a provisional commerce treaty that was equally useful to both countries.⁷

However, the participation of the Bourbons of Naples in the War of the Second Coalition ended in 1799 with defeat and the establishment of the Neapolitan Republic,⁸ in the wake of Jacobinism which also affected Italy.

Although Sicily had remained side-lined to these events until that point, it now played a central role, offering refuge to the court of Ferdinand IV as well as a base for military operations in the mainland part of the Bourbon Kingdom, which was occupied by the French. Therefore, the royal family withdrew in temporary exile to the island, arriving on board Lord Nelson's HMS Vanguard.⁹ The British admiral considered Sicily as a special British protectorate and, therefore, strengthened the royal Bourbon troops to prevent the French from crossing the strait.

Despite the hatred that Sicilians felt towards the French, there were signs of popular discontent towards the Bourbons on the island, most likely fomented by undercover officers of the French Republic.¹⁰ Therefore, it was necessary to reform the island's system of government in order to prevent the population from being attracted to the republican ideals which were rampant in the kingdom of Naples.

In 1802, with the prospect of Britain losing control of Malta, the British government had to reconsider its position in the Mediterranean. Bourbon-controlled Sicily became

⁷ D'Andrea, *If Sicily Should Become A British Island*, 28.

⁸ On the use of the term "Neapolitan republic" instead of "Parthenopean," see the contribution of Anna Maria Rao in Calaresu and Hills, *New Approaches to Naples*.

⁹ Lord Horatio Nelson's influence on internal affairs in Britain was largely owed to his status as a national hero. His victory at Trafalgar in 1805 elevated his political capital, indirectly shaping public opinion and national morale. Although not directly involved in politics, Nelson's close ties to figures like Prime Minister Pitt the Younger helped influence British policy, particularly regarding the ongoing war with France. His legacy significantly impacted British sentiment during the Napoleonic Wars. See North, *Nelson at Naples*.

¹⁰ North, *Nelson at Naples*, 30.

more and more important from a strategic point of view: if the French were to take possession of it, Britain would be excluded from the central Mediterranean.¹¹

However, Britain had no intention of abandoning Malta, leading the conflict with France to being rekindled in 1803, while at the same time the French occupied some territories belonging to the kingdom of Naples.¹² Subsequently, secret agreements between the British and Bourbon governments were reached: the British were concerned that the French may invade Sicily, while the Bourbons were interested in holding onto their control of the peninsular. Indeed, the government in London expressed its position very clearly: if it proved impossible to preserve both the kingdom of Naples and the kingdom of Sicily, the new British diplomat, Hugh Eliot,¹³ would do everything he could to safeguard the latter. Therefore, by 1803, the security and defence of Sicily fell clearly within the priorities and interests of Great Britain, which was compelled to confront the growing influence of French power across Europe, particularly as France expanded its territorial control. In response, Britain sought to reinforce its naval superiority, recognising that controlling the seas was essential to maintaining its global dominance and protecting its imperial interests. In 1805, a new phase of British foreign policy in the Mediterranean began: Britain, Russia and Austria signed a new treaty of alliance with an anti-French tone that

¹¹ See Gill, "The Relations Between England and France in 1802," 61–78. In March 1802, the Treaty of Amiens concluded peace between France and the Batavian Republic on the one hand, and Britain and Spain on the other. Britain retained some territorial acquisitions, but had to return others, including Malta; the Ionian Islands were placed under Russian protectorate. For historians of Britain, this peace has traditionally attracted little positive comment, and often provides little more than a convenient delineation between the wars of the Revolution and those of Napoleon. At best, Amiens has been viewed as a flawed attempt to conciliate a French regime whose ambitions knew few reasonable bounds, leaving Britain isolated and excluded from the continent.

¹² "The relations between England and France in 1802," 45.

¹³ Hugh Elliot (1752–1830) was a British diplomat and then a colonial governor. At the age of twenty-one, largely through his father's influence, he took up a diplomatic post as the British minister plenipotentiary to the duchy of Bavaria. Four years later, he was named as the British ambassador to Frederick the Great in Prussia. He developed a reputation as a great social wit, but worked hard to defeat the entreaties of American diplomats during the American Revolutionary War (including, allegedly, at one point stealing the American dispatch box and copying its contents). Elliot then served in Copenhagen between 1782 and 1791, during which time his reputation soared as he was credited for stopping war between Sweden and Denmark, and for helping Gustav III reintroduce absolutism in Sweden. In 1803 Elliot was sent to Naples, where he survived in tempestuous circumstances until his recall in 1806.

gave rise to the Third Coalition.¹⁴ Sicily was once more the primary objective of British policy and again the Bourbon government maintained an attitude of great ambiguity.

On the Bourbon kingdom, D'Andrea writes:

On the one hand, on 10 September, [the Bourbon kingdom] made a secret alliance with the Russian ambassador in Naples, which included sending an Anglo-Russian contingent to the kingdom of Naples, effectively sanctioning its adhesion to the new coalition against Napoleon's France. On the other hand and at the same time, on 21 September, through its representative in Paris, the Marquis de Gallo, the government of Naples stipulated a new neutrality treaty with France, with which it undertook to close the ports of the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily to the ships of the emperor's enemy governments, obtaining in exchange from the French the withdrawal of their army from the Neapolitan territories occupied up to that time.¹⁵

The second Bourbon sojourn in Sicily was very different from the first. It did not last months, as the first one, but years: 1806–1815.¹⁶ Life in Palermo made things worse for the royal couple: more than ever, the king lacked any value. Having received a basic education and showing little interest in political wrangling, Ferdinand IV let the burden of ruling fall to his wife; the weight of all the important decisions was on her shoulders. Since her entry to the Neapolitan Court, Maria Carolina had shown a strong character and an ability to take over the reins of the kingdom, overshadowing King Ferdinand. She had no other thought than returning to Naples, restoring the sovereign power and prestige, driving out the invaders, and punishing the Liberal traitors.¹⁷ The Sicilian court, however,

¹⁴ On the Third Coalition, consisting of Great Britain, Austria, Russia, Prussia and Sweden, see Lynn, "International Rivalry and Warfare."

¹⁵ D'Andrea, *If Sicily should become a British Island*, 64.

¹⁶ The first stay of the royal couple in Palermo had lasted eight months, from 31 December 1798 until 8 August 1799, when they had escaped from Naples due to the advance of French troops. On this event, see North, *Nelson at Naples*, 58–59.

¹⁷ The queen was animated by a strong spirit of revenge because the shame of exile had been inflicted on her and her royal dignity trampled upon. She faced with her sorrow for the fate of her sister Marie Antoinette, the suffering for the loss of two of her children, and so she strongly hated the executioners. Hints of cruel revenge are recorded in the correspondence of Queen Maria Carolina with Marzio Mastrilli, Neapolitan ambassador in Austria. See Weil and Somma Circello, eds., *Correspondance inédite*. Most biographies on this Neapolitan queen date back to the twentieth century. The biographies continue to be remarkable for their wealth of information, contextualised with a large number of archival sources, such as Corti, *Ich, eine Maria Theresias Tochter*. In recent years, efforts have been made to re-evaluate, thanks to the re-opening of new historiographical visions, the figure of Maria Carolina through a study of new, unpublished sources. In this regard, see the studies carried out by Recca, *Sentimenti e politica*; Ead, *The Diary*

was indifferent. It was delighted to have the sovereigns in the insular capital and have the opportunity to take advantage of their presence.

Meanwhile, times had changed: a policy shift was underway, a change which the sovereign and his court were not aware of. However, the barons understood and asked to participate in the government.¹⁸ This change turned out to be quite significant. It was a way for King Ferdinand of Bourbon to effectively reign in Sicily.

For many centuries, Sicily had been under the sovereignty of foreign kings, starting with the Norman King Roger II in the twelfth century, then the Aragon dynasty followed by the Spanish, through a delegation of power to a Sicilian viceroy. This way of ruling did not foster the idea of a state among the Sicilian population, in whom a sense of autonomy had developed over the years.¹⁹

All of this took no account of King Ferdinand and his way of ruling. Although this period had been defined as enlightened absolutism, it was increasingly perceived—by contemporaries as well as by later historians—as a manifestation of unconditional power.²⁰ In any case, the absolute ruler was obliged to take into account the real conditions that reigned in the country. In fact, Ferdinand did not feel like the king of Sicily, but rather the king of Naples. Although he had moved to Sicily, his stay on the island was always considered transitional. The relationship between the court and Sicilian society was almost non-existent. The Bourbon royal couple ruled a country that did not appreciate them and did not believe that the local barons constituted a ruling class. Maria Carolina thought they were incapable of governing without experience and culture.²¹ But she had forgotten that for centuries, the baronage had been able to keep Parliament alive as an organ of political

of Queen Maria Carolina of Naples; Sodano and Brevetti, *Io, la Regina Maria Carolina d'Asburgo-Lorena tra politica, fede, arte e cultura*; Sodano and Brevetti, *Io, la Regina II. Maria Carolina d'Asburgo-Lorena e il suo tempo*; and several essays in the monographic volume of Gottsmann, *Römische Historische Mitteilungen*.

¹⁸ In this regard, an essential document is the *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, edited by Johnston, who—on the basis of strong evidence—argues that the text was written by the queen herself.

¹⁹ Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 18: “The State was the sovereign, and the sovereign did not live in Sicily. Sicily, in turn, represented by the Parliament and the Deputation of the Kingdom, enjoyed the right to impose and collect taxes, and this right was defended with unquenchable tenacity.”

²⁰ This refers to the period of King Charles and Bernardo Tanucci. On this regard, see Tufano, *La Francia e le Sicilie*; Rao, “Napoli borbonica (1734–1860)”; Rao, *La questione feudale nell'età tanucciana*, 77.

²¹ What damaged the Sicilian baronial class was the lack of historical memory of the great political, cultural, artistic, and scientific figures: the inability to conceive and embrace tradition. Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 49–50.

representation in Sicily,²² and the Deputation of the kingdom had preserved its managerial authority.

There remained one main problem, however: the royal family were reluctant to live in Palermo. They always dreamed of going back to Naples. The intent was to put the army corps on a war footing, increasing its strength from 8,000 to 20,000 men, to be ready to cross the strait of Messina when circumstances allowed.

Perspectives of a “British” Sicily

In 1806, the so-called “British Decade” began, which deeply marked the subsequent history of the island. British troops remained there for almost ten years until 1815, preventing the French, who were on the other side of the strait, from taking possession and depriving them of the opportunity to exercise real control over the Mediterranean. As early as the end of the eighteenth century, British merchants had established a commercial base in Sicily, developed their businesses and offered a viable market to the underdeveloped economy of the island. Indeed, for the Sicilian economy, particularly on the eastern coast, the British presence represented a market for local products such as wine and sulphur, as well as remnants of its textile activities. In a political and cultural context, the British model became familiar to the island.²³ The pro-British political movement, which reached its height between 1811 and 1812, had come from a more general attitude of interest and sympathy for the British and their culture. Likewise, for the British, a political and military interest soon manifested itself towards Sicily, especially when the direction of the war against the French Empire forced Britain to treat Southern Europe and the Mediterranean in a particular way.²⁴

In order to defend its economic and commercial interests, the British military presence in Sicily grew considerably. Indeed, it increased as the situation in Europe worsened and became more and more unstable as a result of the advance of the Napoleonic forces.

²² Politics was not a popular profession among the aristocracy, nor was a cultural education encouraged. There were few rich barons who sent their sons to learn about the continent. However, some barons like the prince of Castelbuono had travelled to Europe, had a respectable general culture, were of firm character and had serious intentions. Renda, *La Sicilia nel 1812*, 20.

²³ Ricotti, “Il costituzionalismo britannico nel Mediterraneo”; Romano, *Il modello costituzionale inglese e la sua percezione*; Sciacca, *Riflessi del Costituzionalismo Europeo in Sicilia*.

²⁴ Sciacca, *Riflessi del Costituzionalismo Europeo in Sicilia*, 36.

Since 1806, the island had been protected from invasion by British naval power. This force included a British garrison of 10,000 men in Messina and the southern areas, about 10,000 Neapolitans and foreigners under the control of the court in Palermo as well as a Sicilian militia, which had been gathered by landowners and armed and trained by the British.

This new policy towards the island was adopted by the new British government known as the Ministry of All the Talents, formed by a Tory-Whig coalition that was in power between February 1806 and March 1807, which brought together William Grenville, Charles James Fox and Viscount Sidmouth (the former Prime Minister Henry Addington).²⁵ The Ministry of All the Talents adopted a new policy that aimed to consolidate the British presence in the Mediterranean and, in this context, to reinforce the prospect of a “British” Sicily.

During British occupation, British merchants discovered Sicily as a market for industrial and colonial products. Likewise, it was seen as a market to refuel the necessary raw materials to British industries.²⁶ The discovery of Sicily as an alternative market coincided with the political changes that the new Grenville-Fox government were implementing regarding foreign policy.

Along with several other islands, Sicily was one of the few areas in the Mediterranean that had not yet fallen into French hands. From 1806, Sir John Moore was officially the adjutant-general of the British troops in the Mediterranean, but Henry Edward Fox was the actual commander in chief.²⁷

Amidst a complex political situation on the island and a growing climate of hostility between the Bourbon court and their British allies, in 1807, Moore, like other observers,

²⁵ D’Andrea, *If Sicily Should Become A British Island*, 80.

²⁶ D’Angelo, *Mercanti inglesi in Sicilia, 1806–1815*, 31–32.

²⁷ Lieutenant General Sir John Moore was born in Glasgow 1761 and died in La Coruña 1809. He distinguished himself in the first campaigns against revolutionary France. In 1796, he was sent to the Indies; the following year, he participated in the repression of the Irish uprisings. In 1799 he was in Holland and in 1800 in Italy, Spain and Egypt. Then, in 1806, he received a second commandment in Sicily and soon succeeded Henry Edward Fox in the command of the Mediterranean army. Finally, from mid-1808, he led forces in Spain from October 1808 until his death in January 1809. See J.W. Fortescue, “Introduction,” in Bunbury, *Narratives of some Passages in the Great War with France (1799–1810)*, ix. General Fox, who was ambassador to Palermo from July to December 1806, was the brother of the better-known Charles James Fox, head of the Foreign Office in the Whig-Tory Ministry of All the Talents.

came to affirm that Britain would continue to defend Sicily only by “declaring the island English, and providing the advantage of British legislation.”²⁸

The same opinion was echoed by Gould Francis Leckie, one of the most informed British men of the time regarding the “Sicilian issue.”²⁹ He was a Scottish farmer who owned property near Syracuse. In a work published in 1808, he described the current needs and the potential wealth of Sicily. Leckie hoped for a line of action, convinced that a liberal policy could proceed from Sicily to Italy.³⁰ He believed that the expansion of British power in the Mediterranean would favour British trade and, at the same time, prove to the world that “while France conquered to ravage, Britain conquered to do good.”³¹

The proposal to install the British system of government to oppose the French revolutionary and military one—in other words, to export the institutional British model to Sicily—placed Leckie at the head of a small but varied political group that, over time, began sharing his thoughts. For this reason, Leckie is considered to be the “first father of British intervention in Sicily.”³²

The idea of annexation was tempting to diplomats and even among military officials. However, such an intransigent direction did not respond to the guidelines of the British government, which was certainly more conciliatory.³³

In 1807, after the fall of the Ministry of All the Talents, the guiding principles of the new Tory government’s foreign policy, presided over by the Duke of Portland, changed. In this new context, Sicily became a minor component in British plans. In the spring of 1808, Sir John Stuart took office as adjutant-general of the British troops in the Mediterranean, replacing Moore.³⁴ He was a proponent of a line of military non-interference in Sicilian affairs. But Stuart, who was initially well-disposed towards the court of Palermo, eventually

²⁸ See Ricotti, “Il costituzionalismo britannico nel Mediterraneo,” 18.

²⁹ Rosselli calls Leckie “the first father of Britain’s intervention in Sicily.” Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck and the British occupation in Sicily*, 127.

³⁰ Leckie, *Historical Survey of the Foreign Affairs of Great Britain*, 67.

³¹ Leckie, *Historical Survey of the Foreign Affairs of Great Britain*, 68.

³² Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck e l’occupazione britannica in Sicilia*, 127.

³³ D’Angelo, “La «Gazzetta Britannica» di Messina e la costituzione siciliana del 1812,” 7–42.

³⁴ Sir John Stuart, Count of Maida (1759–1815), was a British lieutenant-general during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1807, the lieutenant-general received the Mediterranean command which he held until 1810. His operations were confined to Southern Italy where Murat, king of Naples, held the mainland whereas the British and Sicilian troops (along with some Neapolitan exiles) held Sicily for the Bourbon king.

lost patience and came to argue that the only thing for Britain to do was to either take Sicily or abandon it altogether.³⁵

Sir William Drummond, the British ambassador in Palermo, called for a “gradual upgrade” of the system of government of the island and, most importantly, believed that the main obstacle to reformation was the barons more than the monarchy.³⁶ At the same time, the British military in Messina argued for the need to introduce reforms, including the possibility to use of force, and considered the barons to be the natural allies of Britain. Around 1807, while this second alternative in Sicily was being formed, a more enlightened aristocracy was established within the “British party.”

Although Leckie and Moore continued to suggest extreme measures already proposed by the Ministry of All the Talents (such as the removal of the queen, a joint command of the British and Sicilian forces, the admission of Sicilian ministers to the British government in Sicily, constitutional reforms to limit the powers of the monarchy, and a tax reform), the official line of the British government was less intransigent. This led to the signing of the first Anglo-Sicilian treaty, on 30 March 1808, which strengthened the bonds of political alliance and granted the Bourbon court a yearly subsidy of £300,000 for the defence of the island.³⁷

The British perhaps over-estimated the people’s discontent towards the court and the aspirations of the educated classes to constitutional reforms. In actual fact, the Sicilians resented both the Neapolitan court’s and the British troops’ presence.

In 1808, Leckie’s departure from Sicily marked a setback to the demand for a stronger British intervention in the island’s political life and the possibility of more radical internal changes affecting Sicily. However, a few years later, in 1810, British interest on

³⁵ Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 19–20.

³⁶ Sir William James Charles Maria Drummond of Logiealmond (1769–1828) was a Scottish diplomat, member of Parliament, poet and philosopher. He was a friend of Pitt’s administration and, he later claimed, “always met with great notice and general civility” from Pitt to whom he “looked up” as his “guide in political opinions.” On 2 November 1797 he seconded the address, rhetorically attacking the consequences of the French revolution and defending the struggle against France. In 1800, being on good terms with Lord Grenville, he was sent to treat with Denmark, the commencement of an undistinguished diplomatic career. At the time of the dissolution in 1802 he was the envoy to Sicily, with a promise of Constantinople, and did not again sit in Parliament. Malcolm, *A Genealogical Memoir of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Drummond*, 133.

³⁷ D’Andrea, *If Sicily should become a British Island*, 96; see further Romano, *Il modello costituzionale inglese e la sua ricezione nell’area del Mediterraneo*, 34.

the island was rekindled due to an attempted landing by Joachim Murat, king of Naples under Napoleon's rule, and a growing conflict between the monarchy and the barons. This discord, which was highlighted in the Sicilian Parliament the same year, culminated in the arrest of five of their members. All this provoked a reaction in the summer of 1811, and the government headed by Spencer Perceval sent Lord William Bentinck to Sicily to be responsible for turning around the "Sicilian issue."

The arrival of Lord William Bentinck

In the last days of July, Lord William Bentinck finally arrived on an English brig. His reputation had preceded him; his conduct in Madras, when he was governor, was well known and did not speak in his favour.³⁸

Lord William Cavendish Bentinck arrived in Palermo on 23 July 1811 as minister plenipotentiary and commander in chief of the British forces in the Mediterranean. His arrival coincided with the island's most crucial phase of the policy crisis, which was expressed by the opposition between the Bourbon monarchy and the barons' party regarding the role of the ancient Sicilian Parliament in fiscal and institutional areas.³⁹ Bentinck arrived three days after the arrest and deportation of the five of their number who signed the February proposal of 1811.

It was in that Sicily, which was represented by the more "enlightened" Sicilians,⁴⁰ that Bentinck hit on the structural problems of the "old" Sicilian issue, despite having to propose once again those solutions already envisaged and put forward several times by Fox, Moore and Leckie at the beginning of the British decade.

In Bentinck's vision, the "Sicilian constitutional laboratory" also had to refer to the wider Italian problem. Like Gould Francis Leckie, Bentinck was convinced that the creation of a constitutional monarchy in Sicily would create a model for other Italian states. In fact, according to Bentinck, the Italian population had long desired a constitution and was willing to fight for it, since it did not want to switch from one despot to another. Unlike

³⁸ Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 47: "Dans les derniers jours de juillet, on vit enfin arriver sur un Brick Anglais Lord William Bentinck, que sa réputation avait précédé ; on connaissait la conduite qu'il avait tenue à Madras, lorsqu'il en était gouverneur et elle ne prévenait pas en sa faveur." Passage translated by the author.

³⁹ Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 47.

⁴⁰ Sicilians belonging to the intellectual elite, such as Abbot Paolo Balsamo and Luigi Ruggero Ventimiglia Perpignano, Prince of Castelbuono, played a key role in the island's reformist milieu.

Leckie,⁴¹ who had had more time to understand the reality of the island, Bentinck was confident that the institutional structure of ancient Sicily would be able to process the change and that the barons, as a social class, were patriots in the noblest sense of the term. In other words, he believed—erroneously—that they were men able to give up their historical privileges and individualism to embrace an experiment that would provide them with a greater sense of freedom.

To fully understand Lord Bentinck's actions in Sicily, it is crucial to examine the context of his formative years, spent at the crossroads of high English politics and the allied military campaigns against Revolutionary France—initially in Flanders, followed by Italy, Egypt, and the Iberian Peninsula.⁴² In his youth, Bentinck was immersed in Whig political circles, with his father, the duke of Portland, playing a prominent role both as a leading figure and as the organisational head of the faction. The French Revolution divided the Whigs into two camps: one led by the Portland family in alliance with Pitt, and the other by Fox. Bentinck aligned himself with his father's faction, finding ideological guidance in Edmund Burke, for whom he harboured deep admiration.

The ideological contradictions inherent in their anti-French stance—namely, the assertion of freedom, individual liberty, and reform in opposition to Napoleon's absolutism—offer valuable insight into Bentinck's subsequent actions in Italy. The British pursuit of a strategy to incite uprisings in central and northern Italy against France, much like the Spanish resistance, held the potential for not only military success but also the creation of a unified and independent Italian state. Such a state could serve as a bulwark against both French and Austrian influence. This conviction was likely shaped by Bentinck's direct exposure to the Spanish resistance during his military-diplomatic mission to Portugal in 1808, where he witnessed firsthand the spirit, courage, and unity of the Spaniards in their opposition to Napoleon.

According to J. Rosselli, the experience of 1808–1809 was pivotal in shaping Bentinck's acceptance, two years later, of the proposal to lead a similar national revolt in Italy.⁴³ Concurrently, the Italian question resurfaced in the strategic deliberations of British political leaders. In February 1811, Lord Liverpool, the minister of War, and Lord

⁴¹ On Leckie's profound disagreement with Bentinck's foundations and actions, see "Extract of a Letter from Palermo, 26th August 1812," *The Morning Chronicle*, 10 October, 1812, 2.

⁴² In this regard, see Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck e l'occupazione Britannica in Sicilia*, 29.

⁴³ Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck e l'occupazione Britannica in Sicilia*, 29.

Wellesley, the minister of Foreign Affairs, offered Bentinck the dual office of command in the Mediterranean, an offer he accepted.

A significant factor behind Bentinck's appointment was the situation in Sicily itself. The British government was aware of growing suspicions of treason within the court of Palermo, especially following Murat's failed invasion the previous summer. Additionally, longstanding mistrust between the British and the Bourbon court had become acute, further exacerbated by dissatisfaction towards key British figures such as Lord Amherst, the British minister, and Sir John Stuart, the commander, both of whom had become disillusioned by the Sicilian royal court and its resistance to reform. Although the fiscal decrees, which severed ties with the constitutional party in the Sicilian parliament and triggered a political crisis, had not yet reached London, broader considerations of military strategy and domestic policy prompted the decision to appoint Bentinck.

Initially, Bentinck was interested in Sicily as a diplomatic and military problem to be solved. However, his Spanish and Italian experiences soon gave shape to an "ideal" solution, that is to a confidence in an anti-Napoleonic Italian movement directed towards the modernization of the country.⁴⁴

British support was crucial to defuse the island's discontent towards its own government. Therefore, Britain had to ask for joint command, which implied control of the subsidy, and a Sicilian administration reform aimed at stopping the feudal abuses in Sicily. Bentinck, like Leckie, thought of Sicily as a springboard for the liberation of Italy and recognized that this policy was equivalent to interfering in the domestic affairs of the island. However, it was justified and disinterested and would have four effects: to reinstate the king safely on the throne; to make an oppressed people happy; to make the island forever independent of French invasion; and to enhance the role of the British.⁴⁵

Bentinck's proposals were not completely accepted by Wellesley, and Perceval strongly opposed them. Despite everything, Bentinck accepted Wellesley's reasoning and agreed to carry out the instructions which the government considered appropriate to give him, and to make an attempt at mediation in the hope of achieving the same end in a cordial way and with the consent of the Court.

⁴⁴ Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck*, 50.

⁴⁵ Without the Sicilian administration, the queen's party would have never been kept in check; as for the reform, it could have been considered a "natural consequence of the change in administration." Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck e l'occupazione Britannica in Sicilia*, 68.

Bentinck's intervention

In July 1811, Bentinck arrived in Sicily when the political crisis of the island had reached its peak and the conflict between crown and parliament had merely shifted from the fiscal land tax to political and institutional matters.⁴⁶ Actually, the determination of the English to export the English institutional model into Sicily and not to pander to the Bourbons originated in London at the same time but irrespective of the recent events in Palermo. The instructions Bentinck had been given were based on news which dated back a few months, so much so that the crisis in Sicily coincided with a problem that involved the entire military-political chessboard of the Mediterranean. As Lord Wellesley, then Foreign Secretary, wrote to him on 30 March 1811:

You will particularly study the political views and inclinations of their Sicilian Majesties, and endeavour to make yourself as agreeable to them as possible... Your Lordship... therefore will direct your earliest attention to a full and distinct explanation of views of the British Government.⁴⁷

Regarding the British strategy, even the barons' apparent recognition of the claims had value on and off the island, in the light of the political effect that the participation of the island of Sicily in the political leadership could inspire among Italians on the mainland. The British tried to get King Ferdinand to collaborate to ensure that British actions in Italy would be under the cover of a legitimate Italian king to oppose the French usurpers.⁴⁸ But the developments of the situation in Sicily had taken a different turn from that expected in Britain, and the arrival of the British commander was certainly viewed with distrust and suspicion.

Lord Bentinck presented his credentials to the Sicilian government, but the court was unwilling and unable to do anything, refusing to even discuss the situation. He thought that the queen was the cause of this obstinacy: her obsession with Naples and mistrust of England would interfere with any chance of improvement until she had been ousted from the government.⁴⁹ All Lord Bentinck could do was return home to get new instructions,

⁴⁶ The governor issued three decrees imposing, by virtue of the king's authority alone, a 1% tax on all cash payments, the sale of church and state land, and a lottery. Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck e l'occupazione Britannica in Sicilia*, 62.

⁴⁷ Richard Wellesley to Bentinck, dated 30 March 1811, quoted in Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 48.

⁴⁸ Renda, *La Sicilia nel 1812*, 190.

⁴⁹ Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck e l'occupazione britannica in Sicilia*, 71.

which is what he did. When he returned to Palermo on 7 December 1811, the situation was no better than the one he had left. The entire month of December consisted of a series of moves and countermoves, by both Bentinck and the royal family, especially the queen.

The court had decided to resist to the bitter end. The king believed that it was better not to get involved, and from Ficuzza where he was hiding out, he wrote a letter in which he stated that he was determined to abdicate. The queen, who distrusted not only Bentinck but also the crown prince, was convinced that the British wanted to take possession of Sicily and therefore rejected any argument or fact that opposed her opinion, refusing repeated assurances by the British commander. Renda writes:

For in the British initiative, despite formal assurances to the contrary, there was a threat, indeed proof, that England wanted to oust the ruling house. Maria Carolina had convinced herself that her family was really in a position to face the threats of the French and the English, and that the only difference lay in the tactics: the French acted brutally and explicitly, whereas the English proceeded methodically and unhurriedly, but the aim was the same: to dethrone the king. It was at this point, moreover, that the so-called question of the correspondence with the French exploded, from which the queen and the entire court came out politically and morally discredited under the accusation or suspicion that they had come to terms with Murat to drive the British troops out of Sicily.⁵⁰

The prince openly expressed his disagreement with his mother. He was convinced that by behaving in this way, the Bourbon family would lose the crown of Sicily as well as the kingdom of Naples. He proposed the abdication of the king as the only way out, clashing with the most determined opposition of the queen, who did not conceive that such a measure was even debatable.

Bentinck presented the court with a formal ultimatum, but before that he asked to meet with the crown prince for decisive clarification which until then he had not been able to obtain from the queen. During the conversation, the reasons for the British interference in the political affairs in Sicily were reiterated.⁵¹ Nevertheless, even after the clarification meeting with the crown prince, the queen remained firm in her convictions and this was the reason why she was definitively discredited. This time Bentinck, considered to be authorized to take “more drastic measures” with his new appointment, contemplated his

⁵⁰ Renda, *La Sicilia nel 1812*, 197–204: “However, there was no actual exchange of letters, as all correspondence was solely from the Neapolitan side with the obvious purpose of political provocation.” See further Capograssi, *Gli inglesi in Italia durante le campagne napoleoniche*, 48; Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck and the British occupation in Sicily*, 39.

⁵¹ Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 97–98.

new instructions.⁵² Consequently, he suspended the subsidy, obtained the release of the barons and the command of the Sicilian army, dismissed the court and imposed a change of administration. It was on this last point that the court objected more than to any other request.

Bentinck believed that the exiled barons would be the best ministers, but after the court announced a government reshuffle, which Bentinck was absolutely against, he decided to use force: he ordered part of the British garrison in eastern Sicily to set sail for Palermo. Faced with this threat, the court collapsed. On 16 January 1812, the King announced that his poor health forced him to temporarily cede power to the prince, who would bear the title of general vicar for Sicily and act as his alter ego. The prince immediately repealed the 1% tax and released the barons. British troops surrounded Palermo, the king remained at Ficuzza and the queen took refuge in a nearby villa.

After the collapse of the absolutist regime, a new state arose: the independent kingdom of Sicily. Bentinck had received a delegation of authority that he had not asked for, but was not able to get a change of cabinet. He had a good impression of the character and intentions of the prince, but perhaps had not realized how little actual power the king and queen wished to delegate to their son.

After his three-year stay on the island, Bentinck—the younger son of the Duke of Portland, aged thirty-six and already experienced as governor of Madras from 1803 to 1807—embodied the best traditions of British liberalism and supported Gould Francis Leckie's ideas on the importance of the ideological struggle against France, found himself to be the leader and advocate of those institutional reforms which culminated in the Sicilian constitution of 1812, based on the British constitutional model.⁵³

In the complex process that led to the transformation of the island's monarchy, in a constitutional sense, and the abolition of feudalism, the role of Bentinck, who was deeply involved in the problems of the island, often fell outside the limits imposed by his office, spilling over into that of "referee" or "dictator," depending on one's point of view.⁵⁴

The constitutional model that took shape in Sicily in the first decade of the nineteenth century was aimed at excluding the hegemony of the aristocratic class from the

⁵² Johnston, *Mémoire de Marie Caroline Reine de Naples*, 99–100.

⁵³ The Sicilian constitutional text of 1812 was, in fact, modelled "more on its spirit than on the letter of the English Constitution": Sciacca, *Riflessi del costituzionalismo*, 115; see further Sciacca, "Sicilia, Francia, Inghilterra: modelli costituzionali del Parlamento siciliano."

⁵⁴ Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck e l'occupazione britannica in Sicilia*, 207–232.

entire political system of the island. This aristocracy was faced with two dangers, one external, the other internal. The former was formed by the interference of a monarchy prone to centralisation and authoritarian reforms; the latter by the progressive deterioration of its barons' economic position. One eroded the legality of Sicilian feudalism, the other threatened to gnaw it from the inside. Consequently, the attempt to create a political conscience or an alternative force to these people, who were mostly lawyers and members of the clergy, remained almost useless in a country where land ownership conferred the highest prestige and tended to take away all the possible wealth from industry or trade.

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