



Manfredi committente. Fonti e opere. By Francesca Soffientino

Rome, Viella, 2021. 193 pp., 24 col. pls, 48 b/w illus. ISBN 9788833134710. €32 (pb)

Caroline Bruzelius

To cite this article: Caroline Bruzelius (2022): *Manfredi committente. Fonti e opere.* By Francesca Soffientino, Journal of the British Archaeological Association, DOI: [10.1080/00681288.2022.2104485](https://doi.org/10.1080/00681288.2022.2104485)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00681288.2022.2104485>



Published online: 05 Sep 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Manfredi committente. Fonti e opere. By FRANCESCA SOFFIENTINO. Rome, Viella, 2021. 193 pp., 24 col. pls, 48 b/w illus. ISBN 9788833134710. €32 (pb)

History is usually written by the victors. But sometimes, and perhaps hundreds of years later, another narrative can be reconstructed and written, a narrative painstakingly stitched together from the fragmentary and mutilated remains of texts and monuments. This is the case with Francesca Soffientino's book on the artistic patronage of King Manfred (c. 1232–66), illegitimate son of Frederick II, who, first as vicar and then as king, ruled south Italy from 1250 until his defeat by the army of Charles of Anjou at the Battle of Benevento in February 1266. Manfred's body, discovered three days after the battle, was buried ignominiously under a pile of rocks by the Liri river, and exhumed a few months later to be utterly and completely destroyed at the direction of the bishop of Cosenza, Bartolomeo Pignatelli. The *damnatio memoriae* extended beyond the body to many of the works that can be associated with this young, complicated and appealing ruler, one who had the misfortune to have inherited both his father's epic struggles against the papacy as well as a kingdom full of fractious barons and rebellious cities.

Soffientino has written a remarkable book about Manfred's patronage before and during his short reign. After Frederick II's death in 1250, Manfred, as vicar of the kingdom while awaiting the long-delayed descent of the emperor's legitimate heir, Conrad IV (1228–54), took on the rebels, including many on the island of Sicily, in Calabria and Naples. His constant and vigorous attempts to rein in the fractious segments of the Italian domains and to find an accommodation with the papacy was perhaps doomed from the start. The struggles with the papacy were exacerbated by Manfred's coronation after the death of Conrad in 1254, usurping the inheritance of Conrad's two-year old son, Conradin, who remained in Germany in the care of his mother, Elizabeth of Bavaria. As is well known, events were to end tragically for all concerned, especially, perhaps, for Manfred's own sons, who after their father's death remained chained in dark chambers of the Castel del Monte for decades, until, half-mad and blind, they were transferred to prison at Castel dell'Ovo in Naples, where the last of them died in the early 14th century. Manfred's wife, Elena of Epirus, was imprisoned in the castle of Nocera until her early death in 1271. His eldest daughter, Constance, married to Peter of Aragon, remained free, and in time this marriage was to bring Spain front and centre into the complicated affairs of Sicily and south Italy.

The book has five main sections. The introduction frames the many questions around Manfred as a patron of the arts, the historiography of his reign, a summary of his Norman and Frederician predecessors, the issue of the Angevin conquest, and an outline the author's proposed method for interpreting the evidence through textual sources, regional divisions, securely identifiable works that can be associated with Manfred and questions of style. The next section concerns Manfred's securely documented artistic, architectural and urban interventions in Sicily, in particular the painted beams of the ceiling of Messina Cathedral and the castle of Enna (Castrogiovanni). In the third section, Soffientino examines the

evidence for Manfred's projects in the rest of the kingdom (as defined by the nomenclature for the regions of the time): Naples, Sorrento and Salerno, and in Capitanata and Latina. A fourth section examines the works that have been associated with Manfred with greater or lesser certainty, not only the fortifications (Lucera, Brindisi and Enna again), but also illuminated books and other objects. The final section summarizes the evidence and considers Manfred not only as a patron, but also the role of his projects as political gestures that legitimized and reinforced his authority. The appendices include a list of sites and works of art commissioned by Manfred, those that can be securely associated with him as well as those for which there is only scant evidence. It concludes with a remarkably full and useful bibliography, and two indexes, one of names and the other of places.

As noted, in the final third of the book (the last two sections) the author takes on the attribution of miscellaneous works of art that have been associated with Manfred ('di epoca tardo-sveva'). Her approach is cautious and measured, and again deeply embedded in the historiography of each object as well as plain good sense. Soffientino does not push conclusions where none are plausible, and in her frank and open-minded consideration of all the evidence for each site or object, she is admirable in her equilibrated and sensible analysis. These questions are as complex as they are obvious, as the same artisans would have worked under Frederick, Conrad (insofar as that was possible given his early death) and Manfred, and indeed many went on to be employed by the Angevins or worked elsewhere in Italy.

There is one area of this volume that could have greatly enhanced the experience of the reader: the inclusion of ground plans for the various castles and fortifications discussed. It is true, of course, that these structures were changed many times, and that models and plans present innumerable challenges in the interpretation of the evidence, but the reader is nonetheless left somewhat adrift without them.

Soffientino's research is thorough and cautious, her conclusions well reasoned and the span of her interests and concerns are deep and wide. The most important contributions of the book include the 'restoration' of Manfred as an important actor in the visual and architectural cultures of south Italy, a topic that the author has rightly framed within the broad context of the multi- (or trans-)culturalism of the late medieval Mediterranean. Soffientino includes an important and considered discussion of the role of textiles, jewels and metalwork as essential components of royal representation. She also situates Manfred's patronage in the context of the baronial networks whose actions and patronage deeply conditioned the political and military events of his reign, for better or for worse. Several individuals, *famigliari e fedelissimi*, stand out in particularly high relief, such as Giovanni da Procida, whose name is engraved along with that of Manfred in the important dedicatory inscription of the foundation of the port of Salerno, and who, in a long and complicated career after Manfred's death, continued to play a central role in subsequent events, including the War of the Vespers.

It is perhaps rare that a reviewer has virtually nothing but superlatives for a volume, but in this case it is so. Francesca Soffientino has written a marvellously well-researched, intelligent and thoughtful book. I congratulate her.