The Persistence of a Muslim Sicily

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ex
post
facto
Sicily has been a contested place for the whole of recorded human history. Arguably, it continues to be a cultural battleground. This Mediterranean island plays a critical role as a primary entry point into Europe for countless immigrants from Africa and elsewhere, and its very existence in the modern Italian nation causes recurrent debates on autonomy, development, corruption and racism. The island has both celebrated and suffered the consequences of millennia of conquest and domination, upheaval and displacement. Such turbulence produced a unique Sicilian culture, in which one may still find identifiable strands of Roman, Greek, Muslim, and Germanic traditions beneath the contemporary Italian mass culture. These varied cultural roots blended together in a fiercely indigenous expression that can only roughly fit into a singular cultural category. Part European and part North African, Sicily’s Catholicism retains Orthodox features, and its people and places seem in some ways as remarkably Arab as they are Italian.

Each successive conquest has in its turn suppressed previously-dominant cultural features in Sicily. For example, when the French and Spanish seized the Island from the Normans and Muslims, the new conquerors squelched Muslim culture. Despite the displacement and painful readjustment to a new orthodoxy, did the Muslims really disappear? Also referred to as Moors, Saracens, Arabs and Africans, the Muslims of Sicily came from many different places. However, they can be difficult to isolate from each other, particularly because they shared a common culture: Islam. In considering this multiethnic Muslim presence and influence in Sicily, Islam offers the right blend of specificity and inclusivity. A brief review of centuries of Sicilian history and a consideration of its contemporary population and culture reveals abundant evidence for the persistence of a Muslim Sicily to this day.
Muslim Sicilians had forbears called the Phoenicians — another Semitic ethnic group originating in the eastern Mediterranean. Archaeologists have dated Phoenician graves in western Sicily back to the seventh century BCE. Thucydides maintained that they controlled the whole island.1 Early Greek colonists shared the island with Phoenicians from Carthage who founded cities like Motya, Lilybaeum, and Ziz (Palermo) that became important Islamic centers in later centuries.2 The situation changed when the Romans arrived, expelling the Carthaginians in the series of Punic Wars from 264 to 146 BCE.3 Yet, Greek endured as a dominant language and culture through the centuries of Roman rule.4 After the fall of Rome in 476 CE, Sicily became the western frontier of the Byzantine Empire.5 Muslim armies began conquering the island in 827 CE, and while they took Palermo as their capital almost immediately,6 the entire Island was not under Muslim rule until the year 902 CE.7

Muslims plundered Sicily as early as 669 CE.8 The rapid emergence of an Islamic empire precipitated a series of crises for the Byzantines, involving threats to Constantinople itself.9 Thus, while Byzantium did fight for its last western possession, Sicily had to fend for itself in the end. Islamic conquest in Sicily took a century in part because of the heterogeneous nature of its conquerors, the Aghlabids, in addition to other troubles in North Africa.10 Fierce resistance to Islamic rule in regions of the island also delayed the final consolidation of Muslim rule in Sicily, particularly in the culturally Greek northeast.11 Islamicization was much more thorough in western Sicily, corresponding to the old Carthaginian sphere of influence.12 Once established, Muslim administrators imposed a tax, called the dhimma on non-Muslim monotheistic communities in exchange for the right to exist.13 A relatively tolerant act by the standards of its time,14 the tax was a common Islamic administrative procedure.15

Due to Muslim conquest, Sicily participated directly in the zenith of Islamic culture that occurred during the Abbasid Caliphate and its immediate aftermath at the same time that most of the rest of Europe was at a nadir. Islam, for all of its political upheavals, provided a basis of unity and stability that stretched from India to Spain, encouraging trade, travel and academic discourse in its lingua franca, Arabic. Located within this east-west path, Sicily received many Muslim contributions in fields ranging from literature to architecture, agriculture to political science. Muslims brought the magazine, the cupola, and muslin,16 as well as tuna fishing and goats to the Mediterranean island.17 Scholars suspect Islamic cultural influence in the origins of dolce stil nuovo, a later Sicilian school of poetry and the first in an Italian vernacular, as well as in the poetry of Dante.18 Islam reinforced pre-existing traditions of scientific inquiry and multicultural tolerance and created new traditions.19

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Over time, Muslim political power in Sicily factionalized. The Normans, responding to a request for military aid from one of the competing factions, conquered the island in 1060.20 However, the Norman victory did not displace the Muslims. The Normans instead retained many Muslim administrators throughout their nearly 200 year rule on the island.21 The Normans reversed the dhimma, placing it on Muslim communities for Christian ends — a situation that horrified Muslim visitors.22 Norman rulers at times appeared to be as much Muslim caliphs as Christian kings.23 This “Christian Caliphate” again suggests an avant-garde multiculturalism, captured in the awkwardness of the descriptive phrase “Norman-Arab,” as well as the unease such a phenomenon caused in a Europe on the verge of Crusades against the Muslim infidel.24 The Papacy also had geoterritorial concerns of being surrounded when Sicily was annexed to the Holy Roman Empire.25 The crisis came to a head during Frederick II’s reign, when a series of Popes crushed the ruler and placed another in his political office, despite his military victory in a Crusade.26

The French arrived as Papal-sanctioned successors to the Normans and quickly reduced Sicily to a vassalage of absentee landlords and tax collectors, as it had been under Rome.27 The resulting rebellion, called the Sicilian Vespers, transferred political control of Sicily from the hated French to the hands-off-Spanish.28 Sicily nevertheless declined into a backwater for the next several centuries. The island remained so mired in poverty and ignorance that Garibaldi’s 19th-century Italian unification movement came and went without meaningfully altering feudalistic Sicilian social relations. In fact, even in more recent centuries, Sicily has remained an officially autonomous region within Italy since World War II,29 reflecting an ambivalence that Sicily and Italy feel and sometimes still express in their relations.

Islam had a profound historical impact on Sicily, for better and worse. Both good and bad are now buried together underneath intervening centuries’ worth of experiences. Comparable to archaeological ruins, these experiences remain present in physical detail, yet without much narrative integrity in the contemporary culture of Sicily.

People interpret these ruins in order to unearth evidence of Sicily’s Muslim cultural past. A distinct and measurable Muslim genetic legacy remains in Sicily, though such studies tend to focus on geographical origins. It would be a mistake to infer too much specificity about culture from geographical origins or vice versa as populations migrate naturally over time. However, genetics can still be a strong indicator of relations between populations.30 Recently, geneticists produced several studies specific to Sicily. One of these studies concludes that the modern Sicilian population is genetically as closely related to Iran as it is to Northern Italy.31 Another noted that “Arab domination seems to have had a very strong genetic impact” in Sicily, leaving measurable genetic proximities to populations in

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Egypt and Morocco. A third study found that the populations of Sicily, Calabria, and Greece are not only geographically clustered, but are also demarcated from the other European populations examined. The study attributed these facts to “the impact of people of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern ancestry on the island.” A fourth study contends that a Near Eastern genetic contribution to Sicily “appears unquestionable.”

Language also provides evidence for the persistence of a Muslim Sicily. Arabic enriched both the Sicilian dialect and modern Italian. One may see this in Sicilian proverbs, folk songs, and the names of the Island’s locales. Italian grammarians acknowledge that the standard Italian words for orange, lemon, artichoke, eggplant, spinach, sugar, and cotton all derive from Arabic, which also indicates the origins of those crops. Italian likewise borrowed its words for customs/duty, warehouse, manufacturing defect, tariff, arsenal, wharf, and hemp rope, again implying contributions in maritime trade. Arabic also gave Italian algebra, algorithm, cipher, zero, nadir, and zenith, as well as chemistry terms like alchemy, elixir, camphor, t alc, alkali, and borax. Arabic supplied Italians with words for chess and checkmate, blue, porter, and boy — everyday words implying the breadth and depth of linguistic and cultural contributions. Scholars of Arabic likewise concede that “the Sicilian dialect of today reveals lexical remnants of the Siculo-Arabic in a large inventory of Material Cultural terms.” Linguistic impact is also visible in Arabic surnames which persist in the Sicilian population. Researchers maintain there is a correlation between surname distribution and gene distribution.

Various architectural treasures further illuminate a Muslim Sicily in both their visual splendor and their highly public nature. Sicily’s regional parliament resides in the famous Norman-Arab palace at Palermo. The building includes its own church, the Capella Palatina, which is similar to other Muslim-designed structures of the era, such as the San Cataldo church. Inside the Capella Palatina, one finds Islamic cultural elements woven into the architecture, including Arabic script on door handles and ceiling decorations, Islamic architectural elements, and elaborate floors that mimic Arab design motifs. The Capella Palatina once featured striking examples of Arabic script as highly visible decoration, including the name of the Norman king Roger II. The abundance of such evidence at Palermo makes sense, given the city’s former status as the capital of Muslim Sicily. As the contemporary capital of an autonomous Italian region, it is perhaps more surprising that the very seat of government is located in such a high-profile reminder of the island’s Muslim roots.

Other components of current Sicilian culture, and that of Italy more generally, reaffirm Sicily’s Muslim heritage. One particularly dramatic and colorful example is the tradition of “i pupi siciliani,” or Sicilian puppetry. Largely drawn from the Chanson de Roland and other similarly epic poetic traditions, the repertoire includes the battles between Christians and Mus-
lamps for dominion. The art form is important enough that UNESCO has declared it a world heritage resource. Francesca Corrao noted the simultaneous existence in Sicilian, Turkish and Arab cultures, of a series of folk tales regarding a sacred fool named Giufà/Nasreddin or Hoca/Guha. According to her, the differences among versions of the tales say as much about the related Arab and Sicilian cultures as their similarities.

Modern Italian schoolbooks tend to downplay Sicily’s relation to Islam. For example, Garzanti’s Italian junior high history text offers a lone statement on Muslim rule of Sicily, characterizing the territory as a base for piracy. The same Italian grammar text that lists the above-cited Arabic-derived Italian words, insists that “unlike the Germanic peoples, [the Arabs] never fused with the conquered population.”

Tourist literature in English tends to showcase Muslim Sicily. Lonely Planet offers seven paragraphs on Muslim and Norman-Arab rule, totaling one of its 26 pages of text dedicated to Italian history. At least three major tourist guides feature Arab sights to see in Palermo. One guide, specific to Sicily, emphasizes the point with no less than four color photos on the theme.

Yet, Sicily deems some tourists unwanted as many illegal immigrants from Africa reach the island’s borders each year. Because of geographical proximity, Sicily is the primary entry point for most Africans attempting to enter the European Union without proper documentation. This has aggravated already existing tensions in Italy between the North and South, as well as Italian relations with Europe. Italy’s old, unresolved question of disparate economic development between the North and South lurks below the surface of the debate, which has also been aggravated by racism. One result is xenophobic political movements such as the Lega Nord, one party in the coalition currently controlling the Italian government. In this context, it is little wonder that attitudes in the Italian South are ambivalent at best, to its own non-European roots, particularly its Muslim heritage. Nevertheless, the artifacts from a Muslim Sicily remain popular tourist destinations.

Contemporary Muslim communities face difficult racial and xenophobic attitudes in Italy. Arab.it, an online resource for Italian Muslims, lists about 158 Islamic Centers and Associations in Italy, nine of those in Sicily. The current Muslim population in Italy is between 800,000 and 1 million making Islam the country’s second largest religion. However, there are no official government representatives to or other relations between the Muslim communities and the Italian government, unlike many other religious groups in the nation. Lega Nord further exacerbates this situation through its official hostility to mosque-building in Italy.

The existence and persistence of a Muslim Sicily therefore appears to be an inescapable conclusion. It is apparent through evidence such as history, population, language, material culture, popular culture, and politics. Islamic persistence in the face of all obstacles, however, has in turn

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required painful changes that have somewhat obscured the direct connec-
tions. Thus, we see Arab palaces and Crusader-hero puppet plays side-by-
side in contemporary Palermo. Sicily is a land full of Muslim agricultural
gifts and architectural gems, of which it brags to its guests in the same
breath as it proclaims its monolithic Catholicism. If modern problems
like illegal immigration leave Sicilians relatively unmoved, perhaps it is be-
cause the problem is both eternal and theirs alone. The island has always
been a transit point for masses of people headed somewhere else. Domi-
nant cultures come and go, each leaving behind a series of impressions
that refract like an Arabesque tile design down through the ages, playing
out in the faces, words, and material culture of the Sicilian people they
invariably leave behind. One gets this impression from the way in which
Sicily defends its honor against insults, insisting on its place at the Italian
and European tables while maintaining a sense of distance from both.
Indeed, Sicily insists upon its cultural difference. Beneath that insistence,
beats the heart of a permanently besieged people, quietly and stubbornly
continuing to be who they always have been, whatever the socio-political
order of the day might require. Given its location, Sicily will continue to
be contested for a long time to come, but through it all and come what
may, there will always be a Muslim Sicily, in spirit and in fact. All consid-
ered, how could it be otherwise?
NOTES


2 Striking geoterritorial similarities between Phoenician and Muslim areas can be seen by comparing the maps found in Herm, Phoenicians, 188 and Ira Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2002), 303.


5 Byzantine general Belisarius reconquered Sicily from the Ostrogoths in 535 CE; see Finley, Sicily, 180.


8 Finley, Sicily, 184. See also Aziz Ahmad, A History of Islamic Sicily (Edinburgh, 1975), 3-4. These raids included the capture of prisoners, according to Alex Metcalfe, Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily, Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam (London and New York, 2003), 10.

9 Ostrogorsky, Byzantine, 110-125, includes the history of an abortive attempt to move the Byzantine capital to Syracuse.


11 Metcalfe, Muslims and Christians, 11-12.

12 Ahmad, History, 22.

13 The dhimma, a sort of capitation/tribute tax that allowed non-Muslim individuals their land and other rights, and communities the right to a certain amount of collective self-rule; also known as the jizya, comparable to the Ottoman millet system, though different in the particulars of its implementation. Lapidus, Islamic Societies, 265; Johns, Norman Sicily, 23, 26-27; Metcalfe, Muslims and Christians, 11, 34-37; Ahmad, History, 22; Hourani, Peoples, 35.

14 For examples, compare Byzantine disputes such as iconoclasm, Ostrogorsky, Byzantine, 160-165, 171-175. For monophysitism Ostrogorsky, Byzantine, 64, 78, 107-109. For the rise of feudalism due to a lack of circulating currency or security, as well as a discussion of the continuing effects of the barbarian invasions and western Roman collapse, no so much a sign of intolerance as of the utter social atomization generally characterized as a "Dark Age" see George Holmes, Oxford Illustrated History of Italy (Oxford, 1997), 34-36 Garzanti Editorie, Il libro Garzanti della storia, volume primo (Milan, 1980), ch. 31.

15 Hourani, Peoples, 30. In fact, disputes over such taxes and their application to converts to Islam played a large role in the overthrow of the Umayyad and rise of the Abbasid Caliphates; Lapidus, Islamic Societies, 51-54.

16 Ahmad, History, 93.


18 Ahmad, History, 93-96.

19 See Ahmad, History, which discusses "Intellectual Activity During the Muslim Period." Of course such activity was far from unknown to the Greeks although Byzantium was moving away from that tradition.

20 Johns, Norman Sicily, 31-33. It's particularly ironic that this was exactly how the Muslims came to the island themselves. See also Ahmad, History, 6-7.

21 Ahmad, History, 59, 66-7; Metcalfe, Muslims and Christians, 41-4; Johns, Norman Sicily. Johns argues that initial convenience was later reinforced by adoption of Fatimid Egyptian administrative norms as generally the best available.

22 Ahmad, History, 66; Johns, Norman Sicily, 34-39; Metcalfe, Muslims and Christians, 34-36.

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Ahmad, History, 63-65; Johns, Norman Sicily. Johns argues for some of the social and political uses of maintaining such an image aside from administrative function.

On a heterogeneous Norman-Arab Sicily see Clifford Backman, The Worlds of Medieval Europe (Oxford, 2003), 204-205. See Holmes, Italy, 50 on how this was as opportunistic as idealistic. Backman speaks of the profusion of issues and their multifarious effects in the tensions between church and state in Sicily during the reign of Frederick III, in The Decline and Fall of Medieval Sicily (Cambridge, 1995), particularly 186-7.

Holmes, Italy, 52.

On Papal intrigue against Norman regime in Sicily, see Backman, Worlds, 270-1 and 293-6. Extensive detail on the terse summation of events presented here may be found in David Abulafia, Frederick II, A Medieval Emperor (London, 1988), 340-407.


Runciman, Vespers, 277-9.

Holmes, Italy, 202-5, for both the nineteenth and twentieth century situation in Sicily. For an even more concise summation, see Privitera, Sicilian, 5-6.

John H. Relethford, Reflections of Our Past: How Human History Is Revealed in Our Genes (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2003), 101-22, offers an excellent discussion of the science involved in the genetic studies upon which the following four citations are based, and the use of such data in considering probable relations between discrete populations.


Alan Lomax, “Cialomi (Tuna Fisherman’s Chants),” Italian Treasury: Sicily, Rounder Records, Rounder 11661-1808-2. Also, track three notes in the accompanying booklet, by Sergio Bananzinga et. al.


All specific words from Maurizio Dardano and Pietro Trifone, Grammatica italiana, terza edizione (Bologna, 1995), 643. While the cited text is in Italian, the vocabulary is presented here in English for convenience.


William Tronzo, The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Capella Palatina in Palermo (Princeton, 1997) extensively discusses the Palazzo dei Normanni as a work of Arab architecture. For locating San Cataldo as another example of Arab-Norman architecture, see the City of Palermo website at http://www.comune.palermo.it/English/old_city.htm. Palermo also discusses the relation of Arab architects and Norman building projects at http://www.comune.palermo.it/English/crossroads.htm.


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Garzanti, Storia, 14-16. The text does offer a sidebar, entirely dedicated to a Muslim writer’s description of Palermo as a beautiful place.

Maurizio Dardano and Pietro Trifone, Grammatica italiana, terza edizione, 642. The text goes on to credit the Arabs’ scientific vocabulary to their “Greek and Indo-iranian cultural patrimony;” compare this to its handling of Germans as a related set of peoples on page 641, at times as “disciples of the Romans” and later as having a “highly developed culture.” Also compare its citing on page 642 of such as the Crusades and monastic orders (among others) as bases of Italian-French relations, all the more interesting as the Normans are given full credit for their two centuries in the south in this context. The Greeks, however, are likewise minimized on page 641, and words of obviously Greek origin are actually credited to French on page 644.

I would thus maintain that there is an obvious propaganda function involved an attempt to distance Italy from the Mediterranean and draw it closer to Europe.

Damien Simonis et. al., Lonely Planet: Italy (Oakland, 2002), 27-9.

See also Andrews and Brown, Rough Guide, who give the Muslims three paragraphs and the Normans ten, for over two of its fourteen pages of history text, 428-432. This would seem proportionate; however, Penelope A. Carter et. al., Let’s Go Italy 2000 (New York, 2000), 10, merely mention the entire period in a subordinate clause.


Arie, “Italian MPs Plan Control of New Mosques.”

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