Laidlaw Scholarship Report

Sicily and the dār al-Islām: investigating multiculturalism in the pre-crusading Mediterranean

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Laidlaw Scholars

Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme

In 2018, I was awarded the Laidlaw Scholarship of Undergraduate Research for my proposed project on medieval Sicily under the supervision of Harry Munt from the Department of History at the University of York. In addition to conducting academic research for my project, I received special leadership training which culminated in a Chartered Management Institute level 5 qualification in Leadership and Management.

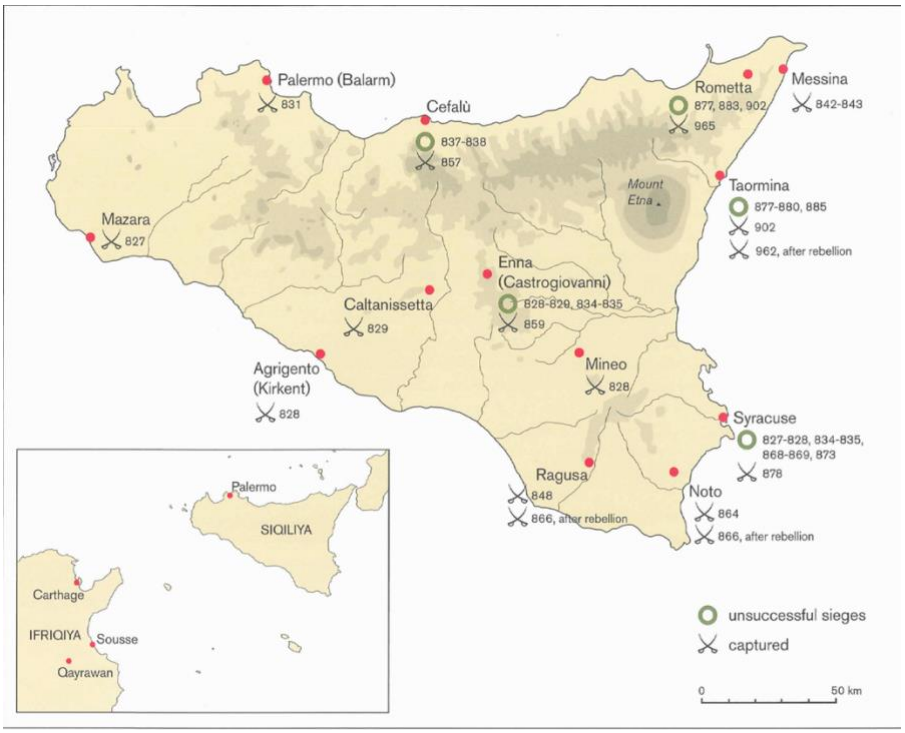
My decision to investigate Muslim Sicily is principally motivated by my interests in medieval Islamic history and the Mediterranean. More specifically, in this paper, I attempt to assess the extent to which the rich diversity present on the Sicilian island could be accommodated within the Islamic world. By exclusively looking at the reports of contemporary Arab travellers and geographers, I want to prevent my analysis from being influenced by the opinions of later Arabic authors who knew of the eventual loss of Sicily and nostalgically looked at the past in which it was still under Muslim dominion. Through this investigation, my aim is to shed some light on the understudied topic of Muslim Italy and on the significance of the medieval Muslim world for the history of the Mediterranean.

A Short History of Islamic Sicily

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean. It was described by Goethe as the soul of Italy[1]. However, already long before the unification of Italy or the current immigration crisis that saw the rise of right-wing politicians such as Matteo Salvini, Sicily occupied the function of gateway between Europe and North Africa. Throughout the Middle Ages particularly, the island was a highly contested territory disputed between Byzantine, Muslim and Norman forces. From the ninth to eleventh centuries Sicily found itself under Islamic dominion and integrated into the dār al-Islām (the Abode of Islam). In the context of this paper which will examine the particularities of Sicilian life under Muslim dominion, it is important to acquire some general knowledge about the situation on the Mediterranean island during those centuries so as to be able to better understand what was said of it. Only few contemporary Arabic sources have come down to us from the tenth century; this study will focus on the three of them.

Figure 1- Map of Muslim Sicily

[1] Dirk Booms, and Peter Higgs, *Sicily: Culture and Conquest* (London: The British Museum Press, 2016), 5.



Interactions between Sicily and mainland Italy, North Africa, Greece and other Mediterranean islands always were part of the island's day to day reality. It is believed that already in the seventh century, only a short time after the Muslim conquest of North Africa, Sicily was frequently raided by North Africans. However, it is only around 827 that the Arab conquest of Sicily is said to have begun with the taking of Mazara. The invading forces, mainly composed of North African Berbers and a minority of Arabs and Persians, battled for dominion against the local Byzantine rulers capturing Agrigento in 828, Palermo in 831 and finally their capital Syracuse in 878. They acted under the command of the Aghlabid rulers of Qairawan. The Aghlabids were the ruling dynasty of ninth-century Ifriqiya acting on behalf of the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad. They enjoyed a large degree of autonomy, which was nevertheless restricted due to incessant power struggles between aspiring leaders[2]. More specifically, they were

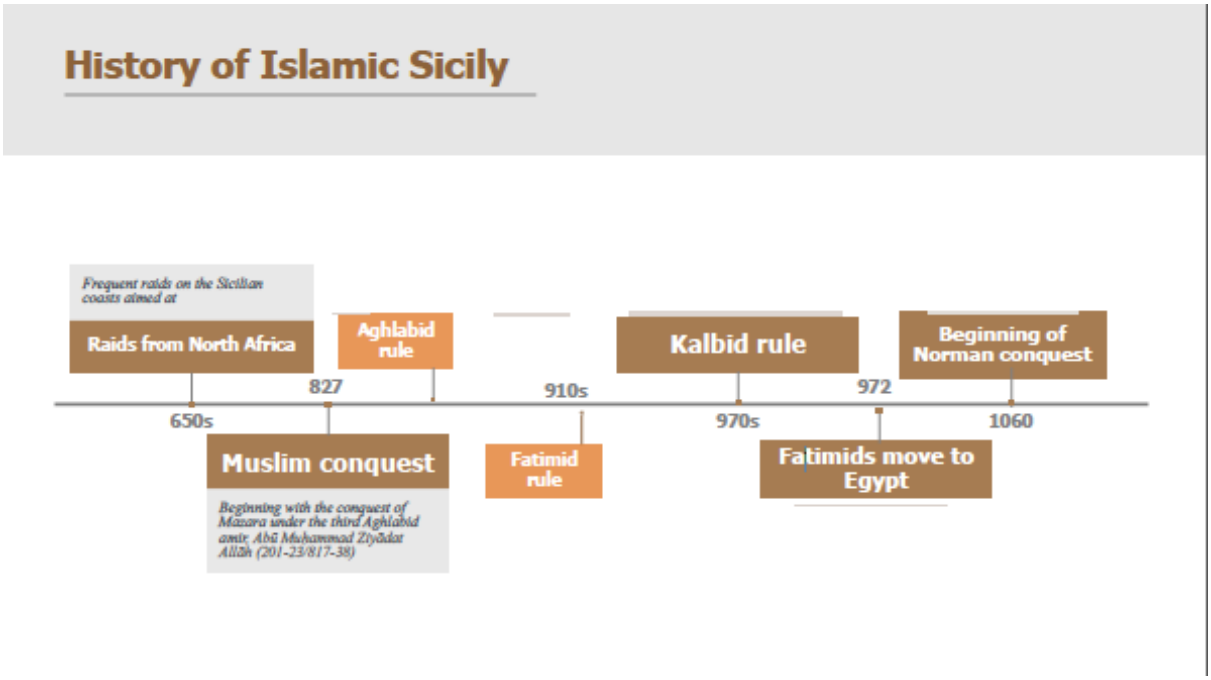
[2] Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 26.

subjected to ethnic and religious tensions centred around and fuelled by the capital's religious scholars[3]. These men, generally coming from the east and highly esteemed by the people of Qairawan, publicly denounced the lavish lifestyle of the Aghlabid princes and their disregard for Islamic tradition[4]. As underlined by G. Marçais and J. Schacht, the conquest of Sicily, which occurred during the reign of Ziyādat Allāh (817-838), can certainly be considered to have been a political action designed to consolidate Aghlabid power by diverting the fervour of religious opponents towards the goal of holy war[5]. In fact, the history of Islamic Sicily is marked by its relationship with *jihad*. As a borderland of the of the dār al-Islām, zealous orthodox Muslims could flock to its shores fulfilling their alleged obligation to wage war against the Infidels and protect the lands of Islam. However, the reality of Sicilians appears to have been significantly different from what was prescribed by religious orthodoxy. This issue will be investigated in more depth later on in this study.

What matters at this point is to bear in mind the existence of the social, political and religious particularities specific to the island. Aghlabid rulers, who were under the authority of the Abbasid caliph, governed Sicily for ninety years before being replaced by Fatimid rulers around 910 following their rise in power in North Africa. By 970s, when the Fatimids took control of Egypt and established their caliphate's capital in Fustat, Sicily was handed in custody to the Kalbids, who gradually became independent from Fatimid sovereignty and dealt individually with the internal politics of the island. The situation began to deteriorate at the beginning of the eleventh century, throughout which the Kalbid rulers had to withstand three domestic rebellions

[3] Find quote (it exists in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* or other author)
[4] G. Marçais,, and J. Schacht, 'Aghlabids or Banu 'l-Aghlab', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman (Volumes X, XI, XII), Th. Bianquis (Volumes X, XI, XII), et al. Accessed August 9, 2019. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0024.
[5] Alex Metcalfe, The *Muslims of Medieval Italy*, 10.

and two foreign invasions[6]. That is the fragile political state that preceded the Normans' arrival on Sicily's shores in 1040.



[6] Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims*, 52.

Tenth-Century Islamic Geography

In the context of this investigation on contemporary perceptions of medieval Islamic Sicily, it is crucial to begin by casting a critical look at the authors and works that will constitute the reference points for this analysis. In chronological order, I will start with an inquiry about **Abū 'l-Qāsim b. ʿAlī al-Naṣībī Ibn Ḥawqal.** He is believed to have been born at the beginning of the tenth century in the city of Nuṣaybīn (Nisibis), a border town near the Islamo-Byzantine frontier now in modern Turkey. Very little is known about his personal life except that he was likely educated in Baghdad[7]. He set out early in life on a journey of endless travels, which appear to have ended with his death in Sicily around 980[8]. His major literary achievement to have survived to this day is his *Kitāb al-Masālik wa 'l-mamālik* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) or *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (Book on the Configuration of the Earth). There exist three medieval copies of his manuscript, two under the former title found in Paris and Leiden that do not include maps and a copy with the latter title found in Istanbul and dated from 1086 including twenty-one maps[9]. Epitomes of his work that also include maps are found in two other manuscripts in Paris and Istanbul. J. Kramers produced a useful edition of Ibn Ḥawqal's work which combines all those different texts. My analysis will rely on this recomposed translation, which exhaustively renders the narrative of the *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ.* In it, Ibn Ḥawqal sets out to recount the general state of the earth as well as the specificities of each region he crossed during his travels. He begins his book with an introduction that contains a detailed outline of the works content, beginning with a description of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, followed by

7 André Miquel, "Ibn Ḥawḳal," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* Second edition Online, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed July 25, 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3193.
8 Ibid.
9 Jean-Charles Ducène, "Ibn Ḥawqal," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, edited by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson, accessed July 25 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30810.

six distinct chapters discussing the five different Islamic regions of the Mediterranean (i.e. the Maghreb, Spain, Sicily, Egypt and Syria) and the Mediterranean Sea before moving to Upper Mesopotamia and Iraq. The second volume of Kramers's translation includes twelve other chapters on regions situated north and east of Baghdad. On the one hand, this *Book on the Configuration of the Earth* written around 960 owes greatly to the works of al-Iṣṭakhrī, whom Ibn Ḥawqal personally met, and the Balkhī school, whose geographers introduced the concept of the "atlas of Islam"[10]. By combining cartography and a systematic analysis of geographical regions identified as *iqlīm,* an entity derived from the Iranian tradition of *keshwars*[11] not quite close to our concept of country, tenth-century geographers were able to compile works of broad geographical scope that were very valuable for the administrative geography of an expanding empire. On the other hand, Ibn Ḥawqal brought great innovation to the burgeoning subject of Islamic geography by giving primacy to the information he had personally gathered over the cartographical analysis of the world. Notably, his accounts of Spain, the Maghreb and Sicily remain authentic to him. He lived through a time of major looming transition with the glory of the Abbasids starting to be overshadowed by the Fatimids. Some scholars have even suggested that Ibn Ḥawqal was writing this account as a report for Fatimid authorities in North Africa, curious to learn more about the social politics of Islamic rule in the Mediterranean[12]. Such reassessment of the world's geography centred specifically on the Islamic world is a great indicator of the contemporary debates that must have existed around the notion of 'belonging' to

[10] D.M. Dunlop, "al-Balkhī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* Second edition Online, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed July 31, 2018, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1157.

[11] A. Miquel, "al-Iṣṭakhrī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* Second Edition, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed July 25, 2019, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3673.

[12] Gaston Wiet,"L'importance d'Ibn Hauqal dans la littérature arabe," in *Configuration de la Terre*, ed. K. Kramers and G. Wiet (UNESCO Collection d'oeuvres representatives: Paris, 1964), xii.

that world. Looking at the author's own words disclosing the ambition behind his work, Ibn Ḥawqal announces the structure of his work which will discuss:

"the configuration of the earth, its stretch in longitude and latitude, the division of countries into regions, the distinction between ignorant lands and the inhabited lands, for the whole of the nations of Islam, with the nomenclature of the cities and the distribution of the general phenomena that differentiate them"[13];

as well as:

"everything that needs to be known about every region, that is to say the different sources of wealth, the taxation, the tithes, the land taxes, the distances in the itineraries, the exportations and the trading commodities"[14]

Such meticulous approach to the description of the earth and as he specifically announces the lands of Islam had never been envisioned before and was only to be surpassed by our next author, al-Muqaddasī. What is more, Ibn Ḥawqal goes on explaining that "this is a documentation that interests the ruling princes, the men of values and the chiefs, as well as the people from every class"[15]. As he introduces his manuscript, the tenth-century geographer is clearly aware of its primacy in terms of the extent of detail it is able to provide about such a variety of places. Nevertheless, although he may be extremely well-travelled for his own time, Ibn Ḥawqal only seems to have taken interest in discussing the lives of the class of foreign society fit to welcome a man of his rank abroad[16]. Interestingly, at the end of his brief commentary on the world's empires, he writes:

13 Ibn Ḥauqal, *Configuration de la Terre (Kitab Sural al-Ard)*, tome I, trans. J.H.Kramer and G. Wiet (Collection UNESCO d'oeuvres representatives, 1964), 2.
14 Ibid., 2.
15 Ibid., 2.
16 Ibid., 3.

"I have not mentioned the country of the Blacks in the Maghreb, neither of the Beja, nor of the Zenj, nor of any other group living in their vicinity [as they do not partake in wise government]"[17].

Here, the author offers the reader a very precious insight into his own conception of the dār al-Islām, which does not simply rest on the extent of the territorial conquest initiated by the followers of Muhammad three centuries earlier. The sense of religious and cultural supremacy that shines through this brief paragraph will be worth keeping in mind as we narrow down our focus to his discussion of Sicily. Overall, Ibn Ḥawqal seems to have had a very comprehensive view on his work, its precedence, its significance, and its scope within a set of boundaries defining what it is proper to consider as part of the dār al-Islām.

The second work of contemporary Arabic geographic literature that I will examine is the one of **Shams al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Bannāʾ al-Shāmī al-Muqaddasī**. Referred to by André Miquel as "the best representative of Arab geography in the second half of the 10th century"[18], he was also a contemporary of Ibn Ḥawqal. He is thought to have been born around 945 in Jerusalem, as emphasised by his name, and to have died around the year 1000[19]. From his writings we learn that he belonged to a middle-class family who had emigrated to Jerusalem from a likely Persian background[20]. His many references to previous works of geography and religious treaties show that he was a well-educated man. Similarly to Ibn Ḥawqal , he set out very early on a life of voyages, which took him across the Islamic world from east to west. He too compiled his accounts into a work of geography grounded in the Balkhī tradition and its vision of an atlas of Islam. His book *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm* (the Best Division for Knowledge of the Regions, BDKR) is conserved in two

17 Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 10.
18 André Miquel, "al- Muḳaddasī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed July 31, 2018, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5451.
19 Basil Collins, "Introduction," in *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions,* xxii
20 Ibid., xxiii

manuscripts found in Berlin and Istanbul. The latter is believed to be an early version composed in 985 approximately two years before the former. Both manuscripts contain around 17 maps illustrating the different regions discussed by al-Muqaddasī, although experts do not know if these were added later to the manuscripts[21]. Both texts have been made available into English by Basil Collins's recent translation, which successfully points out the differences between the two versions. This will be the version of the text I will be referring to. The work is divided into four parts; two introductory ones discussing the world's natural geography and detailing the process of compiling this work. The two other sections discuss the world's geography divided between regions belonging to "the empire of Islam"[22] and the "regions of the non-Arab people"[23]. Looking into al-Muqaddasī's BDKR, it clearly stands out from the achievements of previous geographers. The ambitious author sets out to establish a new "science"[24] of geography based on a specific methodology designed to categorise and describe the Islamic regions of the world. Notably, he takes back the concept of *iqlīm* and develops it much further than al-Iṣṭakhrī, compiling a specific vocabulary to categorise all the different components of a province. This singular approach contributes to the forging of a worldview, where provinces were interconnected and belonged to a supposedly unified entity. Al-Muqaddasī's ambition to produce a new and more useful type of geographical treatise is clear from his own words, as he refers to al- Balkhī observing that he failed to "mention the interesting particulars [or] give any useful information"[25]. Regarding the audience targeted by his work, al-Muqaddasī interestingly dedicates a small chapter at the very beginning of the BDKR to the "use of jurists […] who wish to learn the metropoles of the Muslims"[26] and have been asking him for this extract so as to be spared having to read the

[21] Ibid., xvii
[22] Ibid., 59.
[23] Ibid., 215.
[24] al-Muqaddasī, The Best *Divisions for* Knowledge of the *Regions = Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Mar'rifat al-Aqalim*, trans. Basil Collins; reviewed by Dr Mohammad Hamid Alta'i (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2001), 1.
[25] Ibid., 4.
[26] al-Muqaddasī, The Best *Divisions for* Knowledge of the *Regions = Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Mar'rifat al-Aqalim*, trans. Basil Collins; reviewed by Dr Mohammad Hamid Alta'i (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2001), 46.

manuscript in its entirety. The author also stresses that "this is a work travellers and merchants cannot do without and that it is indispensable for devout and upright people"[27]. Religion and more particularly the words of the Qur'an play a significant role in this work of geography where the versed author offers clarifications for various geographical claims made by the religious text. What is more, he himself explains that the sole focus of the BDKR is

> "the realm of Islam; we do not bother ourselves with the countries of the unbelievers, because we did not enter them, and we see no use whatever in describing them: of course we mention those areas among them where Muslims are settled. We have divided the real into fourteen regions, treating separately the regions of the non-Arabs as distinct from those of the Arabs"[28].

The specific focus put on the lands of Islam announces the interest behind the author's mind, which is to recount the wonders of his people's world and not another. Yet, the attention paid to every detail and particularity of these provinces brings forward a more nuanced picture of the various regions of the Muslim world, where political administrations, cultural practices and religious beliefs could largely differ.

The third work that I will refer to in this analysis **is *Al Kitāb Gharāʾib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-ʿuyūn*** (The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eyes)**.** This manuscript represents the most recent discovery benefitting the work of historians of the medieval Islamic Mediterranean. The book, which contains an incredible set of early Islamic maps, was acquired by the Bodleian Library in 2002 and its complete texts, maps and study was published in 2014 by Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith. In the course of their investigations, they concluded that this was a manuscript most likely elaborated in twelfth- or thirteenth-century Egypt, as indicated by the book's seemingly dedication to a "Fatimid Imam-

[27] al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions for* Knowledge of the *Regions = Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Mar'rifat al-Aqalim*, trans. Basil Collins; reviewed by Dr Mohammad Hamid Alta'i (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2001), 2.
[28] Ibid., 8.

Caliphs"[29]. This is considered to be the earliest complete version of later copies found in Oxford, Damascus, Milan, Cairo, Gotha, Algiers and Mosul[30]. *The Book of Curiosities* is a treatise divided in two parts; the first one on 'The Heavens' contains observations about the stars and interpretations about their terrestrial influence, while the second part is concerned with the geography of the Earth. The author of the work remains unknown. Their unique style is said to stand out in comparison to the members of the Balkhi school. For example, al-Andalus and the rest of Europe barely appear on the manuscript's maps. What is of particular interest to this study is the map concerned with the Mediterranean Sea and its 118 islands as well as the map of Sicily, both unique in their level of unprecedented details. From the author's detailed accounts of the cities of Tinnīs, al-Mahdīyah, and Palermo, Savage-Smith derives the conclusion that they must have been very familiar with these commercial centres[31]. In her 2010 article, she is rather careful to identify this as proof of the existence of an Egyptian Fatimid trading network before the Norman invasion, quickly adding that the focus on foreign/non-Muslim harbours might as well betray some sort of "military or strategic motivation"[32]. This invitation to form pertinent and more subtle assumptions when considering the purposes behind the writings of early Islamic geographers is very true for this case study on Sicily. Yet, since the publication of the *Book of Curisoties* 's complete study in 2014, its underlining illustration of a Fatimid trading network in the Mediterranean has appeared more clearly. This reinforces one of the main arguments of this work, which aims to reassess the importance of the Muslim Mediterranean and Sicily's function in it.

[29] *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities*, trans. Emilie Savage-Smith, and Yossef Rapoport (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), 32.
[30] Ibid., 2.
[31] Elizabeth Savage-Smith, "The *Book of Curiosities*: An Eleventh-Century Egyptian View of the Lands of the Infidels," in *Geography and ethnography: perceptions of the world in pre-modern societies*, ed. Kurt Raaflaub and Richard Talbert (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 298.
[32] Ibid., 302-305.

‘Discourse of Place’: Contemporaries’ views on tenth-century Sicily

Now that we have learned more about the authors and works at the centre of this study, it is useful to reflect upon the interest behind studying works of geography to tackle questions related to multiculturality in Islamic Sicily. In 2012, Zayde Antrim coined the term “discourse of place”[33] in her monograph addressing the significance of geography and considerations about land in the early Islamic Empire. Her overall argument states that “texts in the discourse of place did not simply reflect or explain territoriality; they produced it”[34]. It is precisely in view of their power to influence the way Muslims thought about and perceived their world that one ought to consider the primary texts selected for this analysis. It is crucial to understand the scope of such geographical works, which influenced “not only […] intellectual endeavours, but also […] everyday debates about political and religious authority” [35]as specified by Antrim. In fact, the implications of having Sicily represented in works of the ‘Atlas of Islam’ tradition openly point out to its belonging to the dār al-Islām. In his entry for *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration,* Adam Silverstein insists that early Muslim authors’ “interest in geography was intrinsically related to the expansion of Islam”[36] and thus the scope of this work will not be to question Sicily’s adherence to the dār al-Islām itself but rather to produce a more accurate image of its unique situation within the Islamic world and Mediterranean. Interestingly for us, Antrim also refers to the description of regions, such as Sicily, invisible to people’s eyes but tangible in geographical works, where they are put in relation to a bigger overarching entity that could be

[33] Zayde Antrim, *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.
[34] Ibid., 3.
[35] Ibid., 6.
[36] Adam Silverstein, “Arabo-Islamic Geography,” in *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration,* ed. D. Buisseret (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007), 59.

clearly identified in the mind of readers[37]. In between this play of fragmenting and uniting the Muslim world, tenth-century geographers were able to produce detailed representations of their world and communicate a sense of their connectedness and heterogeneity. In the following sections, it will be question of exploring these representations of different elements of Sicilian society and contrasting them to the broader picture of the dār al-Islām in order to shed some light on the rather obscure history of the complex dynamics of the Islamic Mediterranean.

The Dynamic Mediterranean

As we learned from the lives of our two tenth-century geographers, they both came from the eastern part of the Islamic world, centred around the caliphate's renowned capital of Baghdad. What is more, it was briefly pointed out above that these authors were traveling at a major time of transition in their world, a time which saw the rise of a new caliphal power in North Africa and the decline of Baghdad's authority. I contend that this context is essential to understand the complexity and place of Sicily in works of geography and reassess the history of the Mediterranean. A similar endeavour was undertaken by Christophe Picard, who argued that the Mediterranean acquired a "preeminent place"[38] in geographical descriptions of the dār al-Islām as its western part was now home to two distinguished caliphates. After considering the work of Ibn Ḥawqal , he states that he was the first "Eastern geographer of the Abbasid generation to truly free himself from the mental borders that separated the East from the Islamic West"[39]. Drawing from his conclusion, one ought to note the shift of perspective that occurred already subtly in the works of Ibn Ḥawqal , al-Muqaddasī and more distinctly in the *Book of Curiosities.* For instance, Ibn Ḥawqal was the first geographer to produce an original account of the Mediterranean and

[37] Zayde Antrim, *Routes and Realms*, 87.
[38] Christophe Picard, *Sea of the Caliphs : The Mediterranean in the Medieval Islamic World*, trans. Nicholas Eliott (Cambridge, MA : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 21.
[39] Ibid., 92.

the western Islamic regions of the Maghreb, Spain and Sicily based on his own experience traveling there. The fact that he could travel across those lands and was the first one to find an interest to do so in his exploration of the world of Islam can be seen to attest to a shift in Muslims' consciousness about the significance of Mediterranean regions in their worldview. Only few years after Ibn Ḥawqal , al-Muqaddasī explicitly states "that Baghdad was formerly a splendid city, but is now falling into ruin and disorder, its splendour departed. […] Fustat of Misr is today as Baghdad was of old; and I do not know in Islam a town more splendid than it"[40]. Through this chiasmus, the author plainly expresses the quasi-interchangeability of the two caliphal capitals and the new superiority of Egypt. On another note, *The Book of Curiosities* is believed to have been made in Egypt[41] and the unique maps it contains do convey a strong focus on the Islamic Mediterranean and its vast network of communication. As seen on its map of the Mediterranean (Fig. …), the author insists on the connectivity of the body of water, where all the islands are represented as having the same surface and arranged in symmetrical lines across the oval shape. This introduction of a more western focus on the lands of Islam allowed for more meticulous examinations of the Mediterranean and its active exchange networks, which in turn allows us to produce a more conscientious image of its history and inform our understanding of Islamic Sicily in a non-dichotomic way that does not stand in opposition with its Christian history.

Now, looking more precisely at the geo-political situation of Sicily during its Muslim years, one can observe that at the time of its conquest the territories of Islam had been expanding for two centuries already. In the process, they had encountered one of their fiercest opponents; Byzantium. The contested frontiers between the Byzantine empire and the Abbasid caliphate in the eighth century extended over the territories of modern Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Italy and the major Mediterranean islands such as Sicily, Cyprus and Crete. Even though the caliphate

[40] Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Division*, 32.
[41] *The Book of Curiosities*, 1.

secured major victories in the eighth and ninth centuries, Byzantium remained a major threat to Islamic rule throughout the following centuries. The sense of Byzantine presence in the Mediterranean is indeed very present in the writings of both Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Muqaddasī. The former dedicates an entire albeit short chapter of his work to the Bahr al-Rum [sea of the Romans]. In it, he directly challenges the perception that Muslims have of the Byzantine empire as this mighty foe, who actually is in a "precarious state […] its territory having been reduced by half"[42] and is regularly devasted by "Berber armies"[43]. However, this encouraging paragraph is quickly followed by the author's disappointment with the disunited forces of Islam "who allow the Byzantines to get their hands on what was previously kept from them"[44]. This paves the way for Ibn Ḥawqal 's warning regarding the absence of a united Muslim response to the Byzantines' attacks in the Mediterranean, where "the land elevates its complaints to God against its masters"[45]. This pleading conclusion to his chapter offers an important insight into the declining might of the Muslim Mediterranean. Similarly, al-Muqaddasī mentions the declining state of the "one hundred sixty-two"[46] Mediterranean islands, except Sicily, Crete and Cyprus, after "the Muslims invaded them and ravaged them"[47]. This observation about the results of fragmentation of power in the Bahr al-Rum is followed by the following assertion:

> "They [the Romaneans] and the inhabitants of Sicily and al-Andalus are the most familiar with this sea, its confines and its gulfs, because they constantly journey over it, raiding the lands on the opposite side."[48]

This testimony of the dynamic interactions between the coasts of Byzantium, Sicily, al-Andalus and we can add North Africa is significant both in the way it attests to military enterprises

[42] Ibn Hauqal , *Configuration,* 195.
[43] Ibid., 195.
[44] Ibid., 195.
[45] Ibid., 200.
[46] Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Division,* 13.
[47] Ibid., 13.
[48] Ibid., 15.

crossing the Mediterranean before the crusades and in it way it reinforces the hypothesis according to which the Mediterranean sea served in fact as an interconnecting territory rather than as a border.

This brings us back to the map of *The Book of Curiosities* described above, where there is little or no sense of borders. In his work on Islamic-Byzantine frontiers, A. Asa Eger reminds that medieval frontiers were not like we imagine them today; he notably explains how geographers used distances and natural elements to describe their world perhaps hinting at the shifting character of borders at the time[49]. One aspect of Sicily's geographical location was certainly its position on the border of the world of Islam and its implication of being an ideal place for *jihad*, which will be discussed in further depth later. On the other hand, whereas the fault of many present works of scholarship on the dār al-Islām is to leave out Sicily, the mistake of most histories of Islamic Sicily is to leave out considerations about the island's larger context within the Mediterranean Sea and the Islamic world[50]. This dichotomy was not present in the eyes of contemporaries. While Ibn Ḥawqal wrote separate chapters to discuss Sicily and the Mediterranean, Al-Muqaddasī incorporates his description of Sicily within the region of al-Maghreb, including al-Andalus and North Africa. In his examination of the lands and their customs he observes that the same weights and measures as well as coinage are used in the whole region as the ones used in Baghdad. This display of a globalised world and Sicily's affiliation with it underlines once again the island's position within the dār al-Islām. Yet, what is of particular interest is how this affiliation did not exclude the simultaneous existence of communication networks with other parts of the world. This was recently addressed by Sarah Davis-Secord, who argued that Sicily's shift within the sphere of the dār al-Islām after its Muslim

49 A. Asa Eger, *The Islamic-Byzantine Frontier : Interaction and Exchange among Muslim and Christian Communities* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2014), 10.

50 cf. Leonard C. Chiarelli, *A History of Muslim Sicily* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2018) and, Salvatore Tramontana, *L'isola di Allāh: luoghi, uomini e cose di Sicilia nei secoli IX-XI* (Einaudi, 2014. Ebook).

conquest completely altered and expanded its communication networks rather than isolating it[51]. Regarding her opinion on tenth-century Sicily and the works of tenth-century geographers, I disagree with her perception of a "dearth of comprehensive representations of Sicily"[52]. In fact, this work endeavours to demonstrate how Sicily gradually acquired a significant place in the dār al-Islām as its centre started to shift between Baghdad and Cairo, how its peripheral character eventually became central to the Islamic Mediterranean world and had a significant impact on its socio-political and economic development. Ultimately, this paper seeks to demonstrate how a more accurate understanding of the island's shapeshifting history can inform our own perception of the medieval Mediterranean. By enquiring into the history and representation of the Siculo-Muslim capital of Palermo, my aim is to acquire a more accurate understanding of the tensions that could exists within the Islamic world and its periphery as well as a sense of the evolving significance of the Mediterranean for the dār al-Islām.

[51] Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean* (Cornell University Press, 2017), 73.
[52] Ibid., 127.

Palermo

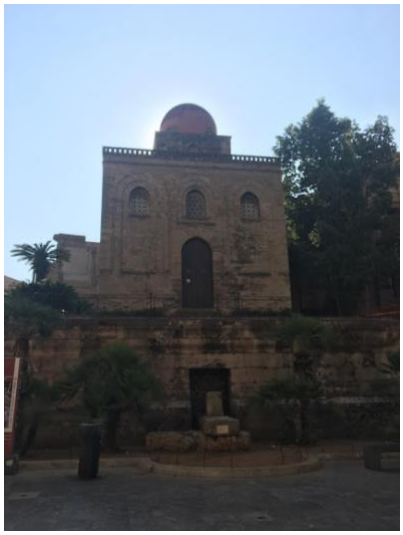
Today, Palermo is the capital of the island of Sicily and the fifth largest city in Italy. In 2015, its Arab-Norman architectural monuments were declared part of the UNESCO world heritage sites[53]. Since then, the number of tourists is said to have increased by 20% and in 2018 the number of people visiting the city is estimated to have been more than a million[54]; to be compared with the five million inhabitants of the island. On the other hand, immigration to Italy often transits through Sicily coming whether from North Africa or Eastern European countries; geographical proximity and criminal networks being the main vectors channelling every year around 343'000 people to the island[55]. It is worth noticing that Palermo welcomes today a fairly strong Muslim presence, embodied by 25'000 immigrants mainly from Bangladesh and

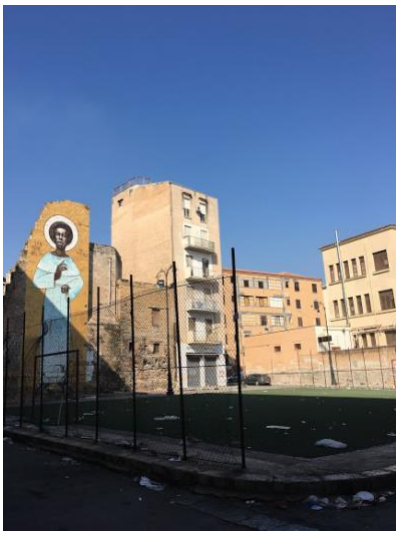
[53] "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalú and Monreale," *UNESCO*, UNESCO Paris, 2015, accessed Sep 11, 2019, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1487/.

[54] "I primi 50 comuni italiani per numero di presenze turistiche," *time2marketing*, Dec 12, 2018, accessed Nov 12, 2019, https://www.time2marketing.com/news/i-primi-50-comuni-italiani-per-numero-di-presenze-turistiche/.

[55] "International mobility and international migrations," *Instituto Nazionale di Statistica* (Istat), Rome, Dec 13, 2018, accessed Nov 12, 2019, https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/224957.

Nigeria[56], although it does not seem to be a concern to the local Italian population. In a recent article by Aljazeera, it worth noticing how the imam of Palermo talk about feeling welcomed in this city filled with Muslim heritage. What is more, he refers to the mutability of its religious monuments as he mentions that "every church here used to be a mosque which used to be a synagogue which used to be a church which was a mosque"[57]. This recalls Eva Hoffman's argument about the portability of objects, which will be discussed in further details later on. Overall, I consider bearing in mind the current socio-demographical Sicilian situation to be a valuable intellectual exercise to do while retracing the city's medieval Islamic history.





[56] Savin Matozzi, "Sicilians have affinity for the Islamic world in their DNA," *Aljazeera*, May 13, 2019, accessed Nov 12, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/affinity-islamic-world-dna-190512201601854.html.
[57] Ibid.

58

The city of Palermo, located on the north-western side of the island, was originally founded by the Phoenicians in the 8th c. BC. It retained a moderate significance successively under the Romans, the Germanic tribes and the Byzantines. It is only under Arab rule that it came to occupy the role of capital city, supplanting Byzantine Syracuse. Scholars have long speculated over the starting date and the process of transition that must have occurred to transform this lesser city into a major Mediterranean capital. Reflecting upon Palermo's first Muslim conquerors, Annliese Nef claims that the city must first have been nothing more than a military base for the Aghlabids, who were looking to expand their governance to the entire island[59]. Eventually, she

58 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strait_of_Sicily#/media/File:Strait_of_Sicily_map.png

59 Annliese Nef, "Islamic Palermo and the dār al-Islām : politics, society and the economy (from the mid-9th to the mid-11th century)," In *Les dynamiques de l'islamisation en Méditerranée centrale et en Sicile : nouvelles propositions et découvertes récentes = Le dinamiche dell'islamizzazione nel Mediterraneo centrale e in Sicilia :*

reflects, the Aghalbids must have settled on Palermo so as to keep sufficient distance between them and the eastern – more Byzantine – part of the Island[60]. On the other hand, Salvatore Tramontana puts forward as the city's major asset its strong capacity of being independent and its "gravitation towards the Orient"[61], in other words its close proximity to North Africa and the Aghlabids' territory of Ifriqiya. Both arguments ought to be acknowledged as instrumental in the edification of Palermo as the new capital of the "most splendid [and] prosperous"[62] Muslim island. It is also worth bearing in mind that it was not uncommon for Muslims to move the centre of political power of newly conquered territories. Nonetheless, the 'Muslim revolution' of Palermo must have had a quite an impact as the city has been deemed the island's capital ever since. In addition to the *Book of Curiosities,* our two authors are the main contemporary sources upon which scholars rely to establish Palermo's status under Muslim rule. I would argue that their accounts suggest more than just the city's administrative function, they offer precious insight into its role as a Mediterranean multicultural capital. What is more, I advance that their silences on other parts of the island can be even more revelatory than their detailed statements about Palermitan life.

Ibn Ḥawqal is the first and most comprehensive author to have written about Sicily. At the very beginning of his description of the island, he singles out Palermo as the "only famous and renowned town"[63] on the island. In the following descriptive paragraph, he mentions the formidable city walls, the impressive "mosque-cathedral"[64] as well as the town of Khalisa, which hosted the ruler and its court. The translated term 'mosque-cathedral' refers to the building size

nuove proposte e scoperte recenti, edited by Fabiola Adrizonne and Annliese Nef (Roma : École française de Rome ; Bari : Edipuglia **,** 2014), 41.
60 Ibid., 41.
61 Salavatore Tramontana, *L'isola di Allāh: luoghi, uomini e cose di Sicilia nei secoli IX-XI* (Einaudi, 2014) Ebook edition, I. 21 p.246.
62 Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Division*192.
63 Ibn Hauqal , *Configuration,* 117.
64 Ibid., 117.

and main function rather than to the previous history of this religious space, which was converted after the arrival of the Muslims. The Arabic words مسجد الجامع should actually be translated as 'main mosque'. However, the translation offered brings about an interesting element to consider when imagining the landscape of Palermo, namely its homogenous heterogeneity. In the field of Art History, Eva Hoffman has famously published an essay entitled "Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century" in which she examines the "role of portable monuments"[65] in intercultural encounters between Muslims and Christians. The mosque, and we can assume a number of other buildings, reflect the existence of this active interchange between cultures in the city, where, as the "identity [of an object] is relational"[66] to its surroundings, new meanings were created to accommodate a multicultural reality. Furthermore, Ibn Ḥawqal 's description alludes to two other peculiar instances pertaining to Palermo's singular heritage. The first one regards the suspended sarcophagus of Aristotle, an alleged site where Christians came to pray for a miracle[67]. The second one, the Slavs quarters, is worth noticing as the Slavs were known in the Islamic empire for their role as slaves (indeed that is where the name comes from) predominantly in the army and at court. They came from eastern Europe at the confine of Asia. Thus, their presence or something that could refer to it in Palermo very likely indicates the existence of a strong trading network between the island and mainland Europe.

On another note, Ibn Ḥawqal also lists twenty-four commercial activities taking place in the town and his figure for the number of people fitting in the mosque, namely seven thousand people, reveal an estimated population of several thousand people actively engaged in religious activity. While the specific role of religion on the island will be discussed separately, the

65 Eva Hoffman, "Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century", in *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World,* ed. Eva Hoffman (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 317-349, 317.
66 Ibid., 337.
67 Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 117.

significance of Palermo for Sicily's religious landscape has to be pointed out. First, in relation to the Islamisation process brought about by the Muslim conquest, Tramontana makes the following comment: " i meccanismi dell'occupazione musulmana, […] non esprimevano solo la volontà di un impero, ma di una civiltà"[68]. Therefore, Ibn Ḥawqal 's text appears to point out precisely such a reality in which society was being Islamised through the effusion of religious institutions. In addition, to the 'mosque-cathedral', Ibn Ḥawqal counted three hundred mosques in the city and specifically recounts four occasions on which he met with local religious men, who all managed to leave him a poor impression. Different opinions exist to explain Ibn Ḥawqal 's disdain for Sicilians. I contend that this is one of the instances, where it is crucial to bear in mind Ibn Ḥawqal 's origins from the eastern part of the empire, the original home of Islam. In comparison, the recently converted frontiers of the empire must have seemed home to Barbarians, as can be noted with the author's paragraph dedicated to express his despair for the mispronunciation of Arabic by local figures who mistake the nominative for the accusative, the active for the passive and admit not to pay any importance to such matters[69]. Furthermore, in Sicily, Ibn Ḥawqal is also confronted with a local reality which does not echo the principles he has been taught at home. His dismay notably appears in relation to the locals' disinclination to practice jihad, a matter that will be discussed further later. Overall, it is particularly compelling to observe that Ibn Ḥawqal is comfortable or at least open to convey an image of heterogeneity when describing Sicilian society. One last note on his account pertains to its apparent exclusive focus on Palermo and the area surrounding it. While Ibn Ḥawqal 's text conveys a strong sense of Islamisation in Sicily, it is important to underline the fact that he leaves most of the island out of his description. Thus, one should be careful to take his words as accounting for the entire Sicilian situation.

[68] Salavatore Tramontana, *L'isola di Allāh*, III. 2, p.452.
[69] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration*, 126.

Writing at a later date, al-Muqaddasī provides less information on Palermo than his predecessor. The city is not being singled out as a singular place. The following short description is found among the long list of cities described within the region of the Maghreb:

> "Balerm (Palermo) is the capital of Sicily; a maritime town situated on an island, it is bigger than al-Fustat, but much more dispersed. The buildings, of stone and mortar, are red and white. Surrounding it are fountains and stands of rattan; a river named Wadi 'Abbas irrigates it, and in the centre are mills. Fruits, agricultural products, and grapes are here in abundance. The sea-water laps the surrounding walls. This city has an interior city in which stands the chief mosque, while the markets are situated on the outskirts. Another walled settlement outside is named al-Khalisa, with four gates: Bab Kutama, Bab al-Futuh (triumphs), Bab al-Bunud (troops), Bab al-Sinaa (maritime arsenal); here also is a Friday mosque, and markets."[70]

For the author, Palermo deserves the attention paid to a region's capital but nothing more. Interestingly, as it is described in the book's region on the Maghreb, we can identify an underlying statement about the connectivity of Al-Andalus, North Africa and also Egypt, whose chapter precedes this one. Echoing the comment on Ibn Ḥawqal 's description, Al-Muqaddasī does not adopt an exclusive focus on Palermo. In fact, his chapter mentions fourteen other towns, all situated on the island's coasts and that might reinforce the previous statement about the author's perception of Sicily as part of an active Mediterranean trade network.

The strategic position of Palermo and its harbour are also underlined by the recent discovery of the *Book of Curiosities* and its maps. As presented by Emily Savage-Smith, the second book displays a strong emphasis on the cities of Palermo, Mahdiyah and Tinnis, which likely points out to the existence of a significant trading network between those regions. The description of the map of Sicily contains a significantly long description in comparison to other chapters. It bears striking similarities to Ibn Ḥawqal 's account, mentioning that the city has "approximately one hundred and fifty butcher's shops, and many mosques"[71]. Again, there is an

[70] Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Division, 191*.
[71] *The Book of Curiosities,* 457.

emphasis on exposing Palermo as a thriving commerce centre, with a "Jewish Quarter"[72], despite the Sicilians' "inborn nature to be rough and intellectually depraved"[73]. In spite of the likeliness to Ibn Ḥawqal 's account, it is believed that the author must have travelled to Sicily himself to get the knowledge to produce such a detailed map[74]. This hypothesis alone testifies to the mobility that could exist in the Muslim part of the Mediterranean.

Ultimately, it appears that Palermo had a privileged position in the description of tenth-century geographers, who came to envision this city as a major centre in the Mediterranean; rich in history, in economic ties and reflecting the cultural dynamism of the region. Their interest can also be perceived as underlining the growing importance of the western dār al-Islām, where the Fatimids recently inaugurated their caliphate, thus transforming the notion of periphery and centre previously held under the Abbasids. In view of this, Palermo's shifting position within the Mediterranean also strengthened its place within the dār al-Islām, where it inscribed itself as a new centre of Islamic culture.

Jihad: schoolmasters and ribats

When investigating Sicily's Islamic history, it is important to realise what place the island did occupy within the dār al-Islām. Visually, it appears clearly that it stood at its border at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. One can also see that Sicily belonged to the Arabo-Byzantine frontier, which, in the tenth century, extended from the territory of modern Turkey. In his ground-breaking monograph on the Islamic Mediterranean, Christophe Picard refers to the Byzantine frontier and

[72] *The Book of Curiosities*, 459.
[73] Ibid., 458.
[74] *The Book of Curiosities*, 32.

explains how it quickly became "the primary scene of the jihad"[75] shortly after the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate. This could seem to validate the theory presented by Alex Metcalfe according to which the invasion of Sicily followed a declaration of jihad by the Aghlabids, who used holy war to establish their sovereignty[76]. Picard develops this argument further describing the growing intertwined relation between the caliphs and war, which was instrumentalised through the work of jurists who came to redefine the term of *jihad* to make it fit their "strategic and ideological"[77] stand. Thus, war was used as an instrument for political power and martial discourse witnessed a revolution under the Abbasid caliphate, which created the obligation of waging war at the frontier. With particular regard to our two Arab authors in this research, one ought to take into account their origins in this particular cultural setting.

In the few words that al-Muqaddasī dedicates to describing Sicily, the first ones he uses are: "Isqiliyya (Sicily), the profitable island, of which the inhabitants are continually engaged in the Holy Strife"[78]. Similarly, the *Book of Curiosities* begins its description of the largest island in the Mediterranean with this statement:

> "The island of Sicily is the largest of the Islamic islands and the most honourable on account of its continuous military expeditions against the enemy—may God forsake them!—and the perennial efforts of its people and governors in this respect."[79]

That war should be such a defining trait of the frontier zone, especially in the eyes of a foreign audience, is an interesting takeaway from these introductory remarks. Ibn Ḥawqal is the author who goes into further depth to describe the local complexities related to this military-religious obligation. Yet, before even mentioning the question of Holy War, he writes a paragraph on what Kramers and Wien translated as "military convents"[80] or just leaving the Arabic term of ribat.

[75] Christophe Picard, *Sea of the Caliphs*, 42.
[76] Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims*, 10.
[77] Ibid., 77.
[78] Al-Muqaddasī, *The Best Division*, 183.
[79] *The Book of Curiosities*, 457.
[80] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration*, 120.

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, after the period of the first caliphate once new modalities of war had been established and precisely in the tenth-century geographical context of our authors, the term *ribāṭ* might have come to define either an edifice or a place where the *ribāṭ,* implying defending one's home against foreign enemies, was practiced[81]. In the *Kitab Surat al-Ard,* Ibn Ḥawqal clearly refers to "buildings"[82] as he denounces these places as being "full of scoundrels"[83], using of their hypocrisy to take advantage of "the virtue of honest women"[84] who give them alms. He comments on these men's motivation for coming there, which is to live a life of idleness to ultimately undergo a tragic fate, which according to him they brought upon themselves by going against "the authority of the prince"[85]. From this first glimpse into the frontier zone, we find again in Ibn Ḥawqal 's description a sense of inferiority in the Sicilian people, who do not actively practice jihad, as well as a resentment for anarchist behaviour. Yet, his words might shed some light on the actual role of ribats in Sicily. So far, Tramontana has expressed the hypothesis according to which, at the time of Ibn Ḥawqal, ribats were abandoned military structures where exiled people could take refuge from society[86]. On another hand, Picard has claimed that in the tenth century "the practice of ribat [transformed] into a form of passive resistance to Shiite power"[87]. Both hypotheses need to be considered, I will add the need to pay attention to the author's derogatory attitude towards his subject of study, which can be as revelatory of the tensions at that time of religious change as his description on the decadence of the institution of ribat.

[81] J. Chabbi and Nasser Rabbat, "Ribāṭ," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, accessed November 12, 2019, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ribat-COM_0919?s.num=1&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.cluster.Encyclopaedia+of+Islam&s.q=ribat.

[82] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration*, 120.

[83] Ibid., 120.

[84] Ibid., 120.

[85] Ibid., 120.

[86] Salvatore Tramontana, *L'isola di Allah,* III. 6.

[87] Christophe Picard, *Sea of the Caliphs*, 105.

Few pages later, Ibn Ḥawqal takes his toll on the Sicilian schoolmasters, whose motivation for their profession comes from "their aversion for military expeditions and their desire to avoid the holy war"[88]. The author describes Palermo as:

> "a stand against Europeans, a land which faces the enemy: the holy war is pursued there continuously and the call to arms resounds there constantly since Sicily has been conquered."[89]

Hence, in his worldview, there could be nothing worse than someone forsaking this holy duty. He is even more distraught by the fact that the island's inhabitants consider these men their wisest representatives. Despite this aside comment on what the author perceives as a lack of cultural development in a peripheral centre such as Palermo, it is significant to question the reluctance of these Sicilian men to go to war. Drawing on *The Chronicle of Cambridge*, an anonymous Sicilian chronicle believed to have been written by a Christian author in Arabic around the tenth and eleventh centuries, Metcalfe observed that often Sicilian rulers preferred to draw "truces with the Byzantines [which] provided leading families with material compensation for not being able to raid or conduct the jihad"[90]. I suggest that their reluctance to engage in local war can also be interpreted as an indicator of locals' sentiment towards their neighbours. In fact, the aggressive policy of jihad always seems to have been carried out more strongly by "Maghreb emigrants"[91] than by the inhabitants themselves; which can be explained by the former's lack of ties with the local reality as it can be seen in the writings of our geographers. What is more, despite its initial phrase on holy war in Sicily, *the Book of Curiosities* presents a 'borderless' representation of the Mediterranean, where its territories are identically represented without any visual distinction between Byzantine or Islamic territory. This would sustain the hypothesis that what mattered

[88] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 125.
[89] Ibid., 125.
[90] Alexander Metcalfe, *The Muslims,* 53.
[91] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 198.

most to the author were the trading links that united the Mediterranean and that could be extended to the Sicilian population as well.

On another note, Ibn Ḥawqal 's and al-Muqaddasī's remarks would appear to demonstrate that the ideology of frontier jihad was closely tied to the identity of medieval caliphates, particularly more so if, for instance, *The Book of Curiosities* is to be considered the product of the newly established Fatimid caliphate in Cairo. From a more subtle perspective, the call to jihad might also appear as the last resort for Muslims in the Mediterranean, who suffered from a lack of military support. This can be clearly seen in Ibn Ḥawqal 's passages discussing the situation in the Mediterranean, where

> "the disorder, the frequency of revolts and rebellions, the internal struggles in which Muslims lose their time, make way for the Byzantines and allow them to put their hands on what was until then kept from them and to have ambitions that were up to then forbidden"[92].

In view of the disunity of Muslims in the Mediterranean, Ibn Ḥawqal 's words sound as a plea to summon international support for a region, whose "inhabitants have fallen prey to the enemy"[93]. Holy war, more than a religious obligation, becomes a political argument to unite the Muslim world against a predicted downfall in the Mediterranean. Ultimately, the term jihad and its significance for tenth-century Muslims is hard to pin down. What is certain is that Sicily was viewed as a prime location for waging holy war by foreign Arab geographers due to its position on the borderland. What is more interesting is that the local reality differed from the guidelines established by the ruling centre of the caliphate. The apparent dissonance between the

[92] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 195.
[93] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 200.

expectations of our authors and Sicilian life is worth investigating into and will be discussed in the next section.

A unique island: conflictual coexistence / modern *convivencia*

Focusing more specifically on the socio-cultural landscape of Sicily under Muslim rule, there appears the question of how did people live together; for the island was inhabited by a majority of Christian Greeks and Lombards before the arrival of the Muslim army. That army comported different ethnicities itself. Tramontana conducted further research into the composition of the troops that first washed on the shores of Sicily in 827. He comments that then "l'armata militare non era piú costituita da arabi, ma anche da berberi"[94]. In fact, he explains that the process of Islamisation, which had spread not only to North Africa but also to Persia and regions bordering Greece, allowed these different people to come together in the conquest[95]. Hence, how can we account for the diversity of people that must have coexisted on the island, bearing in mind some major emigrations and also immigration of the Jewish population notably, even when an eminent writer such as al-Iṣṭakhrī wrote in the tenth-century that alongside the Muslims in Sicily lives a small community of Christians in the same way as it is seen in many Muslim countries[96]. This remark brings about one of the most controversial term in the study of Western Islam, the word *convivencia*. It was first pinned down in its idealistic form by Américo Castro, who confidently identified Spanish medieval people's "self-consciousness"[97] about participating in an active exchange with people of different ethnicity and religion. This vision has been strongly rejected by current historians seeking to recognise the existence of conflictual

[94] Salvatore Tramontana, *L'isola di Allah,* 135.
[95] Ibid., 135.
[96] Michele Amari, *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula* Volume 1 (Torino; Roma: Ermano Loescher, 1880), 5-6.
[97] Thomas Glick, "Convivencia: An Introductory Note," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain,* edited by Vivian Mann, Thomas Glick and Jerrilynn Dodds (New York: George Brazillers, 1995), 2.

and competitive dynamics between different religious groups, who certainly coexisted but did not inherently cooperate altogether. In his work entitled *Convivencia*, Thomas Glick insists on keeping using this term, he nevertheless does so only after removing the idea of self-conscious interactions from it and replacing it alternatively with intentional tension and normalised cooperation[98]. More recently, in her review of the scholarship on *convivencia*, Maya Soifer suggested abandoning using the term in favour of a word such as 'coexistence', so as to account for the impact had by power relations between the different faith in al-Andalus[99]. In our present case, I will alternatively make use of the words 'convivencia' and 'coexistence' to refer to the living together within a complex framework of power dynamics of Muslims, Christians and Jews in medieval Sicily.

First, looking at multiculturalism from the beginnings of the dār al-Islām, Giovanna Calasso and Giuliano Lancioni observed in their study of territories and people that "for more than three centuries Muslims were not the majority within the countries under Muslim rule"[100]. This is an important point to bear in mind, as the integration of a region within the dār al-Islām did not imply its immediate and complete Islamisation. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the army that led the conquest of Sicily was composed by a minority of Arabs and a majority of North African Berbers. That is to say, that even within the Muslim population we find fragmented communities. Drawing on the scholarship of al-Andalus, where a similar Muslim population ruled, the work of Nicola Clarke discusses the social status of Berbers, who were referred to by Arab authors as "the non-Arabs who most resemble the Arabs"[101]. Clarke denounces the 'othering' process to which Berbers have been exposed to through the only surviving sources that

98 Thomas Glick, "Convivencia," 5-6.
99 Maya Soifer, "Beyond convivencia: critical reflections on the historiography of interfaith relations in Christian Spain," *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 1, no 1 (2009): 19.
100 Giovanna Calasso and Giuliano Lancioni, *Dār al-islām / dār al-ḥarb: Territories, Peoples, Identities,* Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017), 5.
101 Nicola Clarke, "'They are the most treacherous of people': religious difference in Arabic accounts of three early medieval Berber revolts," eHumanista 24, (2013): 510.

we have, the Arabic ones. Being ethnically, linguistically and for some part religiously different than the ruling minority, Berbers in Sicily must have seemed odd to the foreigner's eyes. That explanation could enlighten Ibn Ḥawqal 's disdain for Sicilians, who cannot speak a proper Arabic. What is more, it was already mentioned in his short biography that the tenth-century geographer deliberately chose not to mention "the Blacks in the Maghreb"[102] in his work, confirming his derogatory character.

More clearly than ethnicity, religion is also a point of contention in the descriptions of tenth-century geographers. In fact, regarding the matter of religion and Qur'anic schools in Sicily, Ibn Ḥawqal claims to have written a book divided into ten chapters, that is now lost, discussing in detail the ignominy of Sicilian people and their heterodoxy[103]. In that same paragraph, he especially refers to having observed a sect

> "different from every other sect in Islam. These are bastards. The majority of the inhabitants of the strongholds, the rural domains and the villages sustain the opinion according to which it is allowed to contract marriages with Christian women with the condition that the boys born out of this union should follow the bastard status of his father while the girls born out of this unions should remain Christian like their mother."[104]

The *Book of* Curiosities adds the specification that "some of them (Muslims) intermarry with their neighbours amongst the Greeks (al-Rūm)" [105]. This peculiar comment on a religious practice, which seemed widespread enough to have been noticed by the author, shows light on the tensions that must have existed between the religious expectations formed in the eastern part of the Islamic world and the reality of its western counterpart. Intermarriage had always been a preoccupation for Muslims, who began extending their territory while still remaining a religious minority in the territories they conquered. Yet, by the ninth-century and in the eastern part of the

[102] Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 10.
[103] Ibid., 128.
[104] Ibid., 128.
[105] *The Book of Curiosities*, 458.

dār al-Islām more particularly, Muslims had become the ruling majority and we see that such questions as intermarriage surprised travellers such as Ibn Ḥawqal when they came to newly conquered lands such as Sicily. Turning again to the scholarship on al-Andalus, Janina Safran analysed the relationship between Muslim law and the dhimmis (the population of the 'protected people', i.e. the Christians and the Jews) and its evolution in Muslim Spain. Thus, she states that an evolution can be observed in legal texts, whose "shift of […] opinion away from treating non-Muslims as physically impure as a category presents a striking example of accommodation to practice"[106]. More importantly, she comments on the later situation of Muslim society in Spain, where "interfaith marriage and conversion generated social differentiation and the multiplication of close and legally complicated relationships between individual Muslims and individual dhimmis"[107]. The situation in Sicily can be assumed to have been similar to the one of al-Andalus. Thus, Ibn Ḥawqal 's comment might betray the author's unfamiliarity with the world of convivencia that could be found in the western dār al-Islām. However, considering that he had travelled to Spain, where he observed that the "Spanish preferred to seek alliances for their children [by the Franks rather than] by the Galicians"[108], it is probably in the way Sicilians negotiated with religion, allowing for hybrid unions, that the author found reason to be upset. The sense of absence of civilisation and difference between Sicily and Baghdad, which remains the comparison point for Ibn Ḥawqal throughout the work, could bring about one of those big debates regarding the opposition of the central order and the anarchy of the peripheries. I deem it necessary to nuance this image, for there are significant limitations to the interpretative model of convivencia and clash between east and west. In fact, the existence of what I would call a hybrid society is something to be regarded as an established state not simply a transitional one. What is more, our authors' vision should not be reduced to their mention of differences. Sicilian

106 Janina Safran, *Defining Boudaries in al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Islamic Iberia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 215.
107 Ibid, 516.
108 Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration,* 110.

society is still considered part of the whole dār al-Islām and its status as such is never questioned in our geographers' work. This complex picture provides the cultural frame of Sicilian society, which certainly differed from its counterpart in the eastern dār al-Islām. Nevertheless, this was a world that prospered through accommodating differences under the banner of religion and Sicily was never an exception.

A Curious World: Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that for tenth-century Muslims the world was a curious place, especially for travellers such as Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Muqaddasi. In fact, while the heart of the dār al-Islām was beginning to experience its 'golden age' after years of stable rule, the western part of the Islamic world was undergoing major political changes. Most notably, the rise of the Fatimids in North Africa brought about significant instability in the established emirates around the Mediterranean such as the one to be found in Sicily. Overall, this study has pointed out the relative complexity of the socio-cultural situation in Sicily, where the fragmentations within society were not limited to Muslims vs. Christians but were divided along ethnic, social and religious lines. The words of our three authors are particularly revealing, even more so sometimes regarding the questions they are not addressing, such as Ibn Ḥawqal's exclusive focus on Palermo in his discussion of Sicily or al-Muqaddasi's extensive survey of place names but lack of details regarding them. What is more, the uneasiness expressed by Ibn Ḥawqal at Sicilian society for instance should not come as a surprise. The dissonance between a Muslim's obligations as expressed in the East and the lack of the practice of *jihad* in Sicily is one of the main examples attesting to the complexities of frontier lands in the dār al-Islām. Such newly conquered territories required rulers to adapt to a multicultural reality that was not to the liking of everyone, as can be seen with Ibn Ḥawqal's comment on interfaith marriages and the mastery of the Arabic language in Sicily. While the Sicilian socio-cultural environment puzzled and somewhat disappointed the

authors analysed in this paper, it is important to bear in mind the crucial role of Sicily and Palermo in the lucrative Mediterranean trade. In fact, the economic importance of Sicily is attested by both historical and archaeological evidence testifying to the rich flow of material culture from one corner of Europe to the other. The nature of the examined accounts and more evidently the maps contained in *The Book of Curiosities* strongly highlight the connectivity of the Mediterranean at the time. Thus, it is intellectually rewarding to enquire over the history of the Mediterranean through the lenses of Islamic history as it reveals a rich and complex network of communication reaching far beyond the sea's borders. Although we might never know the real extent to which Sicily differed from the rest of the dār al-Islām, this analysis has helped to reveal the existing tensions with contemporary geographers, whose accounts ought to be considered with appropriate critical awareness by scholars. On another note, this serves as a reminder that Palermo remains still today the vibrant multicultural capital of the island, whose Muslim past might be in ruins but whose Muslim community remains active.

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