



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



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Abstract

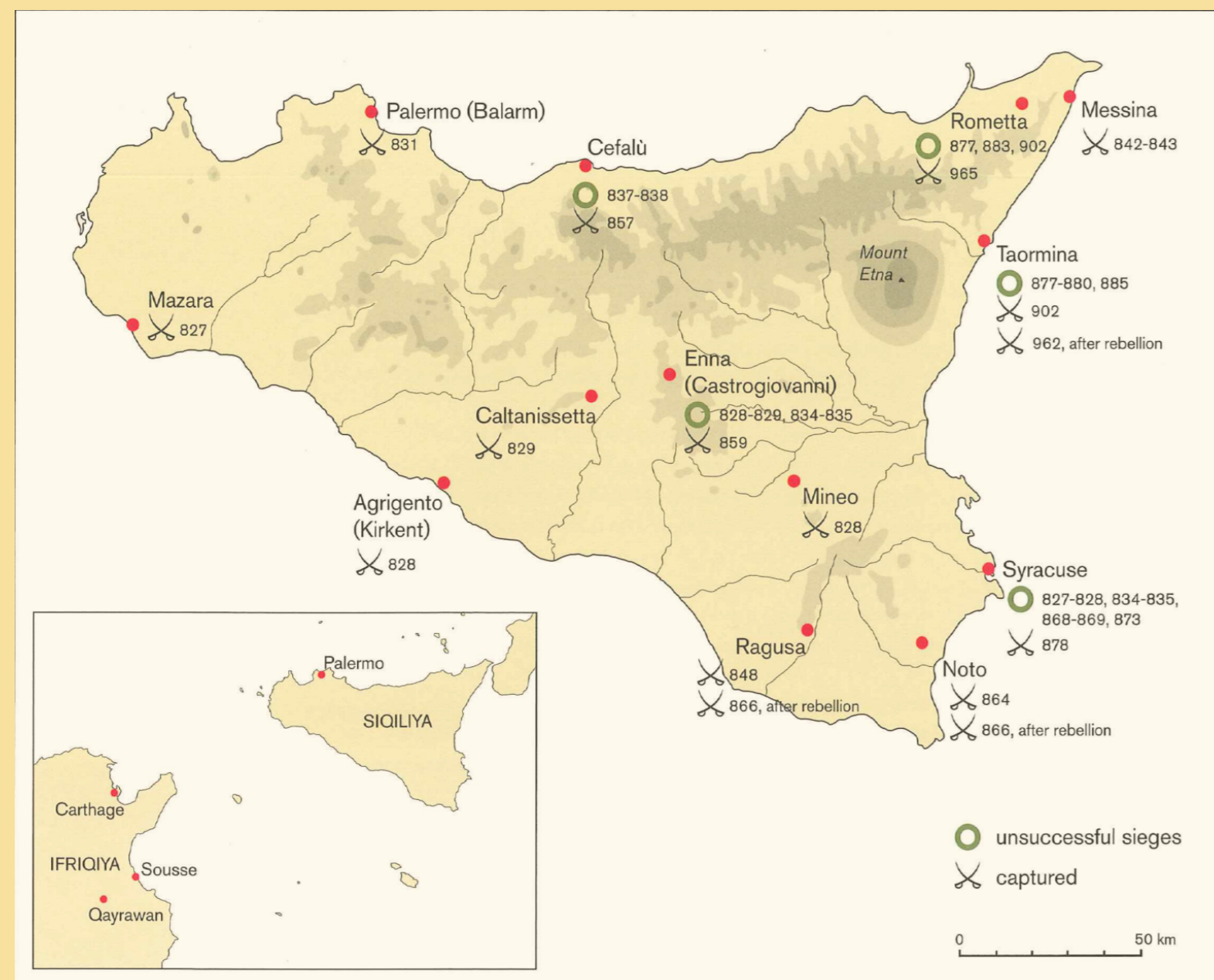
Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean described by Goethe as “the soul of Italy”, has always been the gateway between Europe and North Africa. Recently, it has attracted global attention due to its struggle with Italian nationalism and the immigration crisis. Yet, the general public tends to remain unfamiliar with the island’s multicultural history.

In the Middle Ages, particularly, Sicily was a highly contested territory disputed between Byzantine, Muslim and Norman forces. My research focuses specifically on the period of Muslim rule. Through the study of contemporary Arabic accounts, my aim is to investigate the way in which Sicily fitted into the larger picture of the dār al-Islām (the Islamic world), while avoiding the possible biases introduced in later texts which knew of the demise of Islamic rule in the Mediterranean.

As a **contentious borderland**, the socio-cultural situation of Sicily raises fundamental questions about the nature of Muslim rule and the coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups. Furthermore, it was regarded by Muslims as a prime location for the practice of jihad. Still understudied compared to its counterpart in Spain, Sicily remains a **unique example of Islamic history in Europe**, whose developments affect the “soul of Italy” to this day.

Dār al-Islām

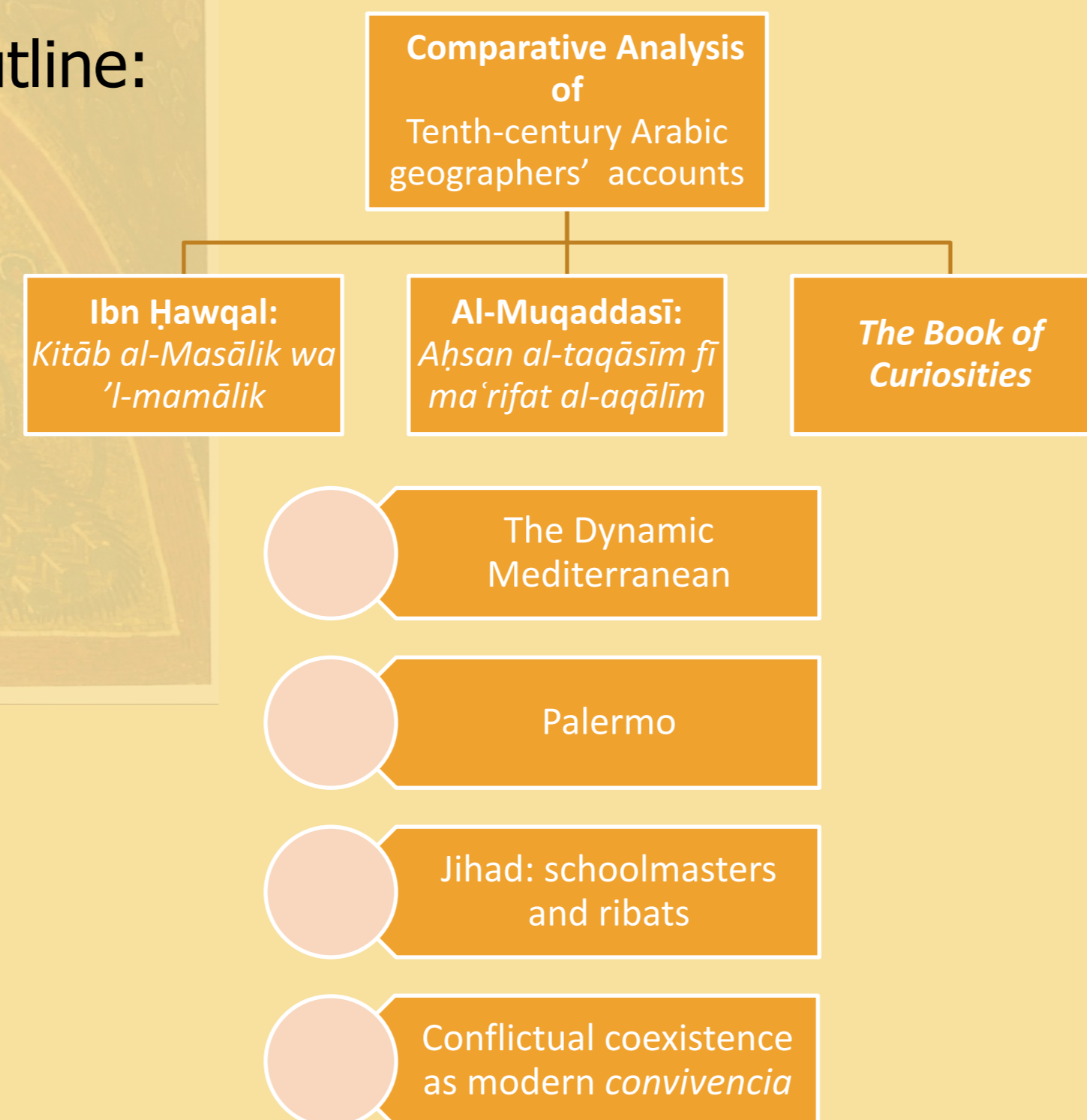
Dār al-Islām دار الإسلام : literally meaning ‘the abode or house of Islam’, it was first introduced by Islamic scholars to categorise territories and answer questions related to the practice of Outer Jihad and the application of Muslim law. In the context of my research, this will be the expression used to refer to medieval lands under Islamic rule.



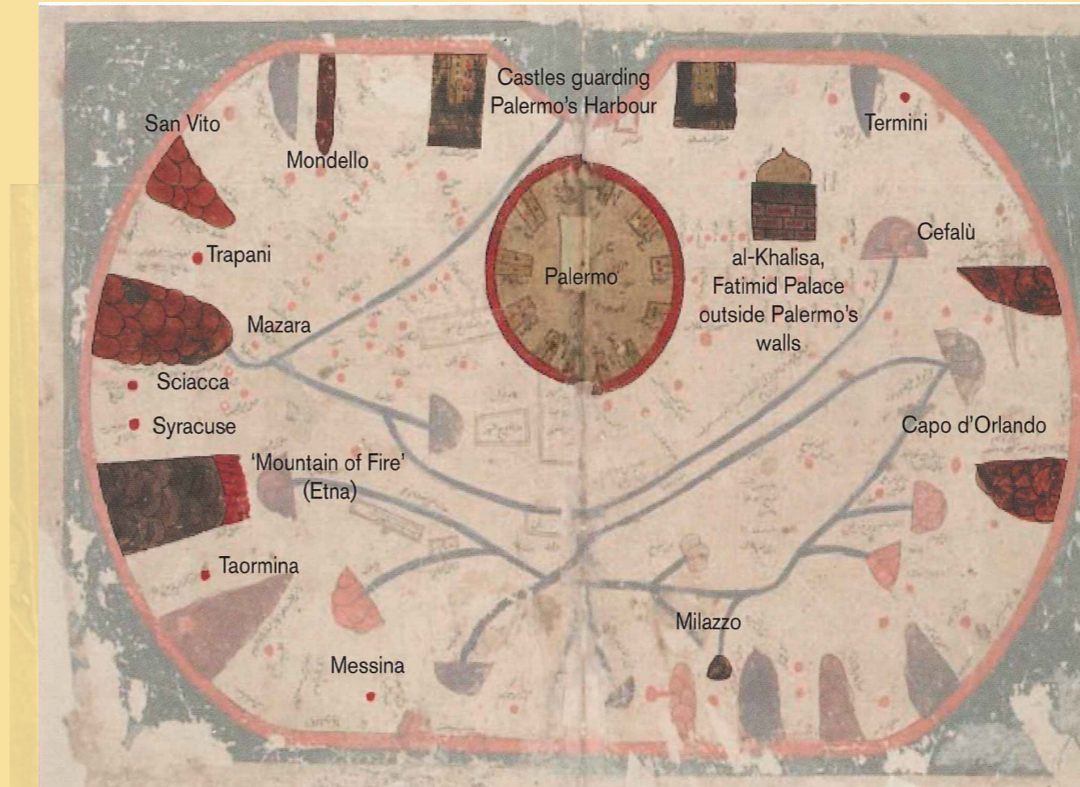
Timeline

- ❖ 7th c. AD: frequent raids from North Africa
- ❖ 827 (-925): Arab conquest
 - ❖ 827 Mazara
 - ❖ 828 Agrigento
 - ❖ 831 Palermo
 - ❖ 878 Syracuse
- ❖ 827 Aghlabid rule
- ❖ 841 – 871 Amirate of Bari
- ❖ 910s Fatimid rule
- ❖ 960s Kalbid dynasty
- ❖ 972 Fatimids’ move to Egypt
- ❖ 1061 Beginning of Norman conquest

Research Outline:



Palermo



Palermo was the **capital city** of Muslim Sicily, having supplanted Byzantine Syracuse. It occupied a **strategic location**, close to the western North African coast, and became the heart of the triangular **trade network** with al-Andalus and Ifriqiya. As the island’s new capital, the city presumably hosted a **diverse population** of Christians, Muslims and Jews, whose proportions are still subject to discussion.

My research highlights the discrepancies found in the narratives of tenth-century geographers, who came from the eastern part of the Islamic world and evidently had trouble conciliating their views with the reality of the newly conquered island. This fits into a larger debate around the **periphery** and **centre** of the Dār al-Islām. These authors also bear witness to a **major transition** in the Islamic world, namely the weakening of the Abbasid caliphate and the rise of the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt. This placed the Mediterranean at the centre of the Islamic world, where Palermo officiated as a major **trading centre**.

Conflictual coexistence



Ibn Ḥawqal’s account is particularly interesting when it comes to assessing **multicultural interactions** on the island. He is very critical of the locals’ poor level of Arabic and he is scandalised by the practice of certain Muslim men who marry Christian women. In fact, such things were unthinkable in his part of the world. Yet, rather than interpret his stance as the result of a cultural clash between east and west, his views might actually express the particularity of the Sicilian situation where there existed a **hybrid society**. What is more, conflict on the island was not simply characterised by a Christian vs. Muslim opposition; the Muslim community itself was significantly **heterogeneous**. The army that conquered Sicily was constituted mainly of Berbers, Andalusis and Persians making the Arabs into the **ruling minority**.

Arabic Geography

The 9th and 11th centuries are considered the Golden Age of Arab geography. The term **geography** - الجغرافية - is understood as a broad category encompassing the works of authors who started to write about the places and peoples surrounding them. The two main developments which occurred during this period and are particularly compelling for my research are presented here:

- Focus on the Abbasid empire: administrative geography (*Masālik wa l-Mamālik*)
- Focus on the lands of Islam: Mecca, urban centres (*Kitāb Šurat al-ard*)

Zayde Antrim proposed the notion of *Discourse of Place* to underline the relationship between texts and the construction of an Islamic geography, heavily influenced by political ideas. Following this thesis, one should acknowledge **the role played by these geographical works in giving shape to a common world view in the Islamic empire**. Yet, it is also important to recognise the scientific character underlying these geographical endeavours.

Conclusions

Islamic Sicily is a striking example of the **interconnectedness** of the Mediterranean throughout the medieval period. It is also a powerful reminder of the significant Muslim presence in what is now Europe. Far from being simply the latest addition to the largest empire at the time, Sicily resonates in the words of contemporary geographers as a vibrant multicultural space, where people had their own ways to adjust to **the tumultuous reality of the borderland**.

Although some modern critics still perceive that the Arabic ‘civilisation’ was completely supplanted by Christianity on the island, **Muslim rule** of left indelible marks on the fabric of Sicilian civilisation and it is fundamental to recognise them. Particularly in the arts and architecture, but even in the language and cuisine, Islamic elements were incorporated by the Normans, who recognised at the time the **significance of the Muslim administration and knowledge**. In the same way, modern scholarship should not fail to recognise **the impact of the Muslim influence in the later development of Sicily’s history**.

References

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Images

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