



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



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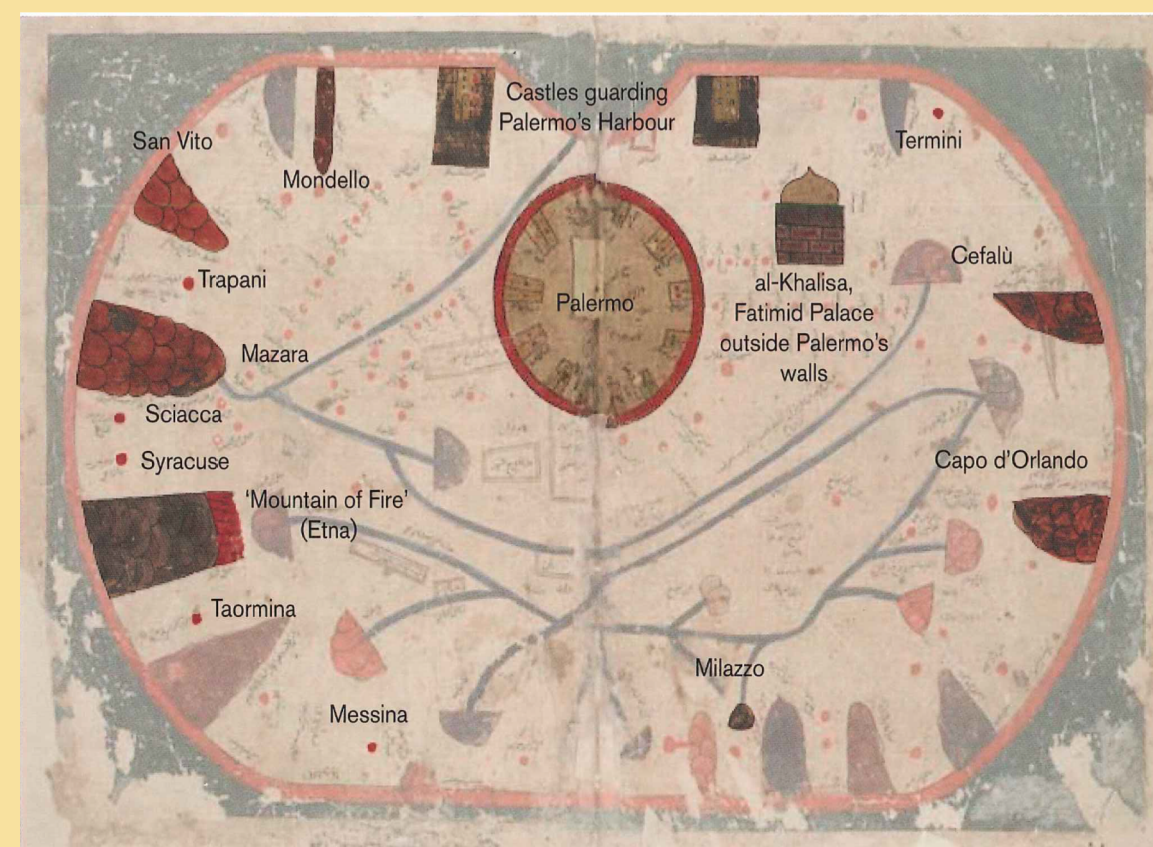
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## Abstract

*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 Empire), 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 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.



## Palermo

This city, located on the north-western side of the island, was originally founded by the Phoenicians in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BC. It retained a moderate significance under the Romans, Germanic tribes and Byzantines. It is only under Arab rule that it came to occupy the role of capital city, supplanting Byzantine Syracuse.

Palermo occupied a strategic location, closer to western North Africa. 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. In fact, the identification of Palermo’s inhabitants is an important and delicate task, as the analyses of textual and archaeological evidence ought to be combined before drawing conclusions. The emergence of a hybrid culture, more explicitly represented under the patronage of the later Norman kings, testifies to the high level of multicultural influences in the city.

## 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.

## Arabic Geography

The 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries are considered the Golden Age of Arab geography. The term **geography** - الجغرافية - is not to be understood in the scientific modern sense, but 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:

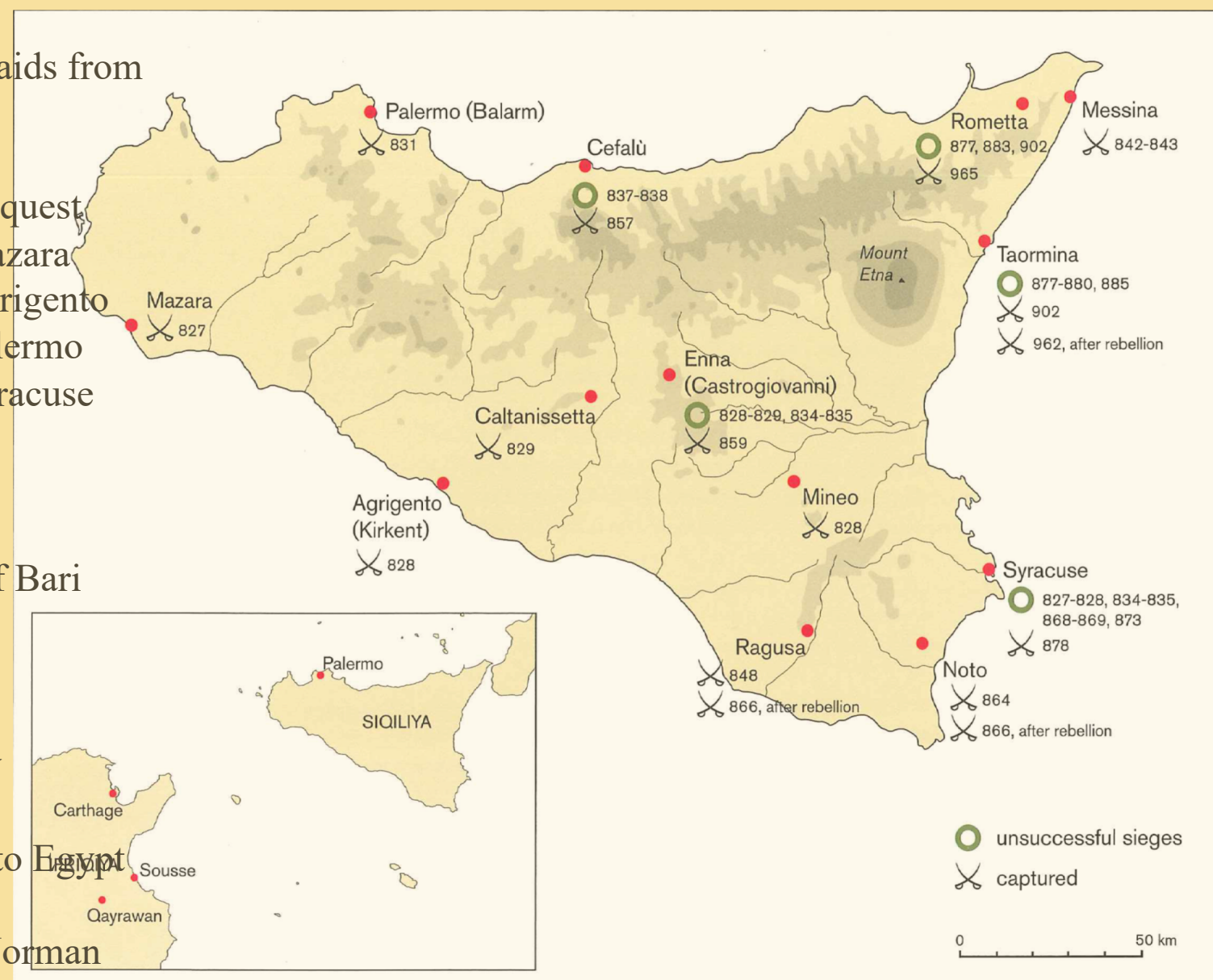
- Focus on the Abbasid empire: administrative geography (*Masālik wa l-Mamālik*)
- Focus on the lands of Islam: Mecca, urban centres (*Kitāb Šūrat al-ard*)

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.

I must also emphasise the importance of **cartography**, which although being closely related to geography remains a distinct subject calling for its own interpretative methods. It remains complimentary to the primary source material employed by this study, in showing the gradual importance acquired by Sicily in Muslim eyes.

## Timeline

- ❖ 7<sup>th</sup> 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



## Multiculturality on the Island

- ❖ Population before the invasions: Christian Greek, Lombards
- The invading army, composed of Arabs, Berbers, Andalusians and Persians from Kurāsān
- Jewish immigration increased under Muslim rule
- Slaves, part of the Islamic empire (*Saqaliba* neighbourhood in Palermo)
- Political refugees from North Africa (political dissidents)
- ❖ Religious differences: Christian (Eastern Western), Jews, Berbers’ beliefs, Muslim (Sunni, Shia)
- ❖ Linguistic diversity: Arabic, Berber language, Greek, Latin, Hebrew

### What type of interactions took place on the island?

The government was primarily controlled by Arabs. Debates surround the extent to which Sicily depended on the central government found in North Africa as well as the speculative independence of the island’s regions, whose population was mainly Berber or Byzantine.

I posit that urban centres were significantly ‘Islamicised’ by the proliferation of religious institutions, which played a consequential part in Islamic societies. Mosques were not only a place for prayers but they encouraged the coming-together of the whole community. Thus, excluding Christian citizens and increasing the pressure for their conversion.

Trade networks linked the island to the western part of the Mediterranean and North Africa. Written communication ran between Italy and mainland Europe, North Africa, Byzantium and Sicily.

Conflictual relationships evidently existed in Sicily. It took the Muslims more than a century to subdue the entire island. Located on the border of the Islamic empire, it was an ideal location for the pursuit of jihad. However, the new conquerors quickly realised that drawing economic treaties with the Byzantines was more profitable than to rely on a plunder economy. Thus, the Arabic geographer, Ibn Hawqal, observed condescendingly that Sicilian men preferred to sell their obligation to wage the holy, becoming schoolmasters rather than soldiers, and sometime married Christian women.

## References

- Booms, Dirk and Peter Higgs. *Sicily: Culture and Conquest*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2016
- Ibn Hauqal. *Configuration de la Terre (Kitāb Sural al-Ard)*, tome I. Translated by J.H. Kramer and G. Wiet. Collection UNESCO d’oeuvres représentatives, 1964.

