

Nuha ALSHAAR (ed.), *Muslim Sicily: Encounters and Legacy*,

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This work is part of the Advances in the Study of Islam series, published by Edinburgh University Press and edited by Abbas Aghdassi and Aaron W. Hughes. The project aims to present innovative interpretations of Islam's extensive history, encompassing various disciplines such as religious studies, legal studies, archaeology, and anthropology. It challenges traditional approaches and spans from late antiquity to the present, while also extending beyond the Arab world to promote interdisciplinary research. Specifically, the book *Muslim Sicily: Encounters and Legacy* originated from a conference organized by the editor, Nuha Alshaar, in December 2017, with support from the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA). It should be noted that to broaden the scope of the project, Alshaar also invited additional external experts to contribute.

The book is a collection of articles that explore diverse aspects of Muslim Sicily, offering a broad perspective on its cultural, political, and social history without adhering to a single topic or approach. Despite this diversity, the book can be described as a study of Muslim Sicily from a Muslim perspective, examining its connections to the wider Muslim world. It emphasizes, although not exclusively, the period of Muslim dominance, roughly from the early 9<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century.

Key topics include trade and artistic links between Sicily and the Islamic world, the political relationship between Fāṭimid Africa and the Kalbids of Sicily, and the island's appropriation of Arab-Islamic knowledge, philosophy, and language. The book also explores shared experiences, such as women's roles in textile production in both Fāṭimid Egypt and Norman Sicily, and the influence of the Fāṭimid court on Sicilian art and ceremony. Other topics include the poetic traditions, Muslim accounts of medieval Sicily, the linguistic evolution of Siculo-Arabic, and the interactions between Sicily's multi-cultural population in terms of language, religion, and social practices.

Nuha Alshaar, editor of *Muslim Sicily*, is an Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the American University of Sharjah and the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. Also, she has held positions at renowned institutions such as the University of Lisbon and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London). With a focus on Political Islamic thought, ethics, Adab literary traditions, and storytelling, Alshaar's research also covers the Qur'an's reception and the Hadith and Islam in Sicily. Her expertise makes her a fitting choice to edit a volume that aims to contribute to the history of Sicily, particularly in its connection with the Islamic world.

The history of Muslim Sicily has been relatively underexplored compared to other Muslim territories. Alshaar acknowledges recent research efforts but points out that much of this limited scholarship focuses on the Norman period. As a result, the Muslim influence has often been overshadowed by Byzantine studies of Sicily or interpreted through the Norman lens. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Italian historians have linked these topics to the development of southern Italy's identity and European Christian History, which has created an imbalance in the study of Sicily and hindered the understanding of this historical period.

Thus, this book aims to shift the balance between its two components, putting aside the Arabo-Norman interpretations. The main objective of *Muslim Sicily* is to generate space for research that gives predominance to the period of Muslim rule (before the Norman conquest) and that covers the Arabic and Islamic contributions to the history of Sicily. In sum, the aim is to bring a Muslim-centred perspective to the forefront by examining Sicily's Islamic past through a multidisciplinary approach integrating social, literary, intellectual, and cultural history with archaeology and art.

The book is structured into an introduction and four thematic parts, featuring a total of 13 chapters. Each chapter is written by a different scholar, with a few exceptions: The editor, Nuha Alshaar, authored both the introduction and chapter 10 while chapter 8 is co-authored by Ammar Abdulrahman and Alaa Aldin Al Chomari. The parts and their topics are as follows: Part 1, "Sicily and North Africa: Sociocultural and Political Links", which includes two chapters. Part 2, "Arabo-Islamic Philosophical and Intellectual Traditions of Sicily", which contains three chapters. Part 3, "Sicily and its Textile and Artistic Traditions", with three chapters as well. Finally, Part 4, "Sicily, Literature, Language and

Identity”, consists of four chapters. This thematic organization allows for a multidisciplinary exploration of Sicily’s Islamic past.

The introduction is flowing and smoothly written and at the same time achieves its goals of describing the historiographical traditions, the content chapters and what they offer to the debate. The first part introduces the current state of knowledge, presenting an analysis of the main authors who have dealt with the subject—from Michele Amari in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to Alex Metcalf in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—offering a critical view of traditional approaches to the history of Muslim Sicily. This section provides a justification for the book’s publication and its primary goal, which is to extend the research on the topic, preferably under a perspective that does not overshadow the Muslim history. The second part provides the historical context, primarily focusing on the period from 800 to 1092. However, the timeline covered is much broader, from 652, when the first attempts to invade Sicily occurred, to 1300, when Muslims were expelled from Lucera. The author has developed this section in an exceptional way; not only in helping readers who are unfamiliar with the period and context to understand the individual chapters, but also by incorporating commentaries on the content of each chapter throughout the narrative. This approach creates a smooth and enjoyable reading experience.

The first part includes chapters “Sociocultural Links between Sicily and Ifrīqiya in the Middle Ages” and “The Kalbids of Sicily: Stalwarts of Fāṭimid Ifrīqiya”. The first chapter, written by Mohamad Hassen, examines the relations between Sicily and Ifrīqiya from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, focusing on three aspects: shipping routes, key actors in this relationship, and dialects. After reconstructing maritime routes for trade and migration, the author highlights cultural links through various lineages from the Maghreb and identifies common elements in the dialects. Hassen concludes that, despite regional differences, the Mediterranean served as a meeting place for cultures under a Fāṭimid conception of this unified sea. The second chapter is written by Shainool Jiwa, an established scholar and expert on Fāṭimid studies. This is a fascinating chapter as it addresses the influence of Sicily and its ruling dynasty, Kalbids, in the Fāṭimid Sultanate. Jiwa states that the Kalbids of Sicily came from a military background and even though they resided on the island, they remained present and retained their influence in the core of the Fāṭimid State, especially in their role as Guarantors of the Succession since Fāṭimid imām-caliphs had a custom to privately inform their successors to

their closest and most trusted advisors, ahead of the public pronouncement. The author concludes that Sicily emerged as an important province within the Fāṭimid empire, with the Kalbid dynasty holding significant influence over the Ifriqiyan mainland. Their role and importance were second only to that of the Fāṭimids themselves.

The second part starts with chapter “From Averroes to Dante: A Mediterranean Encounter between Philosophy and Religion” written by Massimo Campanini. The section examines the intellectual life in Palermo and the influence of Arabo-Islamic philosophy during the reign of Frederick II of Sicily, emphasizing its impact on 13<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. It also demonstrates how Dante was influenced by Islamic culture, particularly in areas such as astronomy, cosmology, and philosophy, with a special focus on the legacy of Averroes’ theories and their effect on his work. It should be noted that the editor made corrections to the article after the revision as Campanini passed away during the editing process. The second chapter, written by Patrizia Spallino, is titled “Two Examples of Arabic Texts in Sicily, between Linguistics and Philosophy.” This contribution aims to analyze two texts that exemplify the cultural connections between Sicily and Islamic civilizations. The first is *Guide on the Language and Fertilisation of the Spirit*, written by Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī; and the second, written three centuries later, is a collection of letters exchanged between Emperor Frederick II and the Andalusian Sufi philosopher Ibn Sabīn. After examining the texts and demonstrating how Frederick II strategically employed Islamic culture and knowledge, particularly in his conflict with the papacy, the contribution concludes that both works exemplify the exchange of ideas in medieval Sicily. However, it also notes that many Islamic documents from Sicily remain to be analyzed and integrated into this complex historical puzzle. The last chapter, “Psychological and Epistemological Concepts in Ibn Sabīn’s *Al-Masā’il al-Ṣiqilliyya* (The Sicilian Questions)” by Beate Ulrike La Sala, argues that medieval Sicilian intellectual culture was heavily influenced by Arabic philosophy, as evidenced by Latin translations of Arabic works. However, the chapter primarily focuses on Ibn Sabīn’s life and writings, linking them to Islamic debates on the soul and immortality. After describing the four parts of the soul (the vegetative, the animal, the philosophical and the prophetic) and the Muslims and ancient Greek influences in his thought, the paper concludes that Ibn Sabīn’s attempts to merge Aristotelian epistemology with religious thought, particularly while describing the prophetic capacities of the

rational soul. Unfortunately, the author does not use the opportunity to fully relate her work to the book's central topic and only makes a brief hint of Ibn Sab'īn's connection to Sicily on the last page.

The first chapter of the third Part named "Common Threads: Women and the Making of Fāṭimid and Norman Textiles" by Delia Cortese, aims to explore the broader Mediterranean context of textile production in Sicily under Islamic rule, later adopted by the Normans. However, the chapter primarily focuses on the role and conditions of women workers in the textile industry and how this contributed to the positive relations between the Normans and Fāṭimids. Uniquely, the chapter focusing on the Norman period is based on secondary sources. It effectively identifies the shortcomings and challenges faced when studying this topic, concluding that women—whether as workers, consumers, or symbolically associated with textiles—were key yet overlooked figures in an industry that generated much of the wealth for both the Fāṭimid and Norman regimes. The second chapter, "Architectural and Numismatic Traces of Arabic Cultural Exchange between Sicily and Greater Syria" by Ammar Abdulrahman and Alaa Aldin Al Chomari, appears as two unrelated sections merged for publication purposes. The first part discusses architectural influences in Sicily from Phoenician and Umayyad Damascus periods, as well as Syrian elements during the Norman era. The second part focuses on Sicilian coins found in the Levant, particularly in Antioch. It explores how coin inscriptions retained Arabic phrases until 1220, reflecting Frederick II's conflict with the papacy. The chapter would benefit from a stronger coherence of the two topics in both content and style.

The closing chapter of this part, "On the Artistic Culture of Medieval Sicily" by William Tronzo, examines the artistic exchanges between Norman Sicily and the Fāṭimid court in Cairo, highlighting how the Normans borrowed elements of art, architecture, and ceremonial practices from the Fāṭimids, as had the Byzantines before them. Despite the influence of Islamic art in Norman Sicily, particularly seen in the muqarnas ceilings of the Cappella Palatina, Tronzo argues that Islamic contributions were seen especially in the margins, serving as decoration rather than a central component. He also mentions the decline of Islamic influence under Frederick II who isolated the Muslim population in Lucera during the 1230s, signaling a shift in artistic and cultural priorities in Sicily.

The fourth part focuses on the interplay of literature, language, and identity in medieval Sicily. Chapter 10, "The Poetic Traditions of Sicily

under Fāṭimid” written by Nuha Alshaar, explores the rich poetic traditions cultivated under Fāṭimid and Kalbid rule, emphasizing the role of the Kalbid rulers in promoting a vibrant literary and intellectual culture. Poetry was a key tool in expressing social, political, and cultural identity, with poets often borrowing from Andalusian and Abbasid traditions. Chapter 11, “Arab-Muslim Accounts of Medieval Sicily and the Qur’ān: An Intertextual Reading” by Nesma Elsakaan, conducts an intertextual analysis between Muslim accounts of Sicily and the Qur’ān, showing how Islamic texts shaped depictions of Sicily’s landscape and people. This connection helped Muslim travellers resonate with their audience through religious language and imagery.

Chapter 12, “Consequences of the Reconquista in Greater Sicily for the Core Vocabulary of Maltese” by Geoffrey Hull, investigates the linguistic consequences of the Reconquista on Maltese, highlighting its Arabic roots and evolution. Maltese preserved elements of Siculo-Arabic, particularly from the Maghreb, although it later became heavily influenced by Sicilian and Romance languages. Finally, Chapter 13, “Trinacria: Three Worlds in One Island (Christians, Jews and Muslims)” by Giovanna Summerfield, examines the multicultural society of Sicily, where Christians, Jews, and Muslims coexisted but also experienced conflict. In spite of cultural exchange evidenced by shared language and customs, tensions existed, especially during the Norman and later periods. The created alliances were pragmatic and often masked underlying divisions.

While the text is worth reading as it contributes to the growing scholarship on the Sicilian Muslim period from various academic perspectives, it has three major shortcomings. Firstly, the book lacks in cohesion. Most chapters, including the introduction, dedicate substantial space to historical context, which may feel redundant and unnecessary. Additionally, except for Chapters 5 and 6, which address Ibn Sab’īn and his work, the chapters are quite vaguely interconnected and there is hardly any meaningful dialogue between the individual topics. However, it should be noted that the authors may not have intended to write this book as a single cohesive text—such intention is not mentioned in the commentary and there is no general conclusion to help the reader identify a common thread or overarching idea. We also have to take into consideration the quite high number of contributing authors.

The second problem is that several chapters deviate from the editor’s stated objectives. For instance, the first four chapters can be seen

as traditional historical narratives, while Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 9 discuss relationships with the Christian/Norman context, diverging even further from what the book claims to address, and Chapter 6 only briefly mentions Sicily at the very end. Despite this, it is important to recognize that this book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of an overlooked period, fulfilling its objective of gathering studies about it and paving the way for further exploration. The lingering impression after reading each chapter is that there are still more questions than answers, suggesting an opportunity for further investigation. The editor acknowledges this from the outset and encourages new scholarship on this fascinating period.

Finally, the third problem is that it generally presents a perspective which omits struggles or contradictions and instead overrepresents harmonious relationships between cultures and a fluid interchange among them. This view appears to align with the editor's vision, as expressed in the concluding part of the introduction, where Nuha Alshaar states: "People from different ethnic and religious communities integrated and produced one of the world's finest civilizations. Sicily's legacy is an example of how human creativity can flourish when different cultures respect each other and look beyond race and religious boundaries." While inspiring, this idealized perspective may overlook the complexities and conflicts that also shaped Sicily's history—such as power struggles among Al-Andalus, North African powers, and Sicily; tensions in the coexistence of Greeks, Jews, Muslims, and Christians within Sicily; Frederick II's strategic use of Muslim knowledge; the exile to Lucera; the participation of Muslims in the Sicilian Vespers; among other.

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