

## REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY OF MUSLIM SICILY: History, Politics, and Nineteenth-Century Sicilian Historiography

The theme of re-reading history, of re-reading the pages of history relating to the presence of Islam in Europe during the Middle Ages and during the modern period, of new historiographic approaches, has been for some time at the centre of a stimulating debate involving orientalists as well as intellectuals and scholars of western history. Given the complexity of the theme, and particularly in light of the fact that the its political resonance can be analysed from various points of view,<sup>1</sup> we will limit our observations to the scope that has been set by the organisers of this issue of *Scripta Mediterranea*, making reference to exemplary moments in Sicilian historiographic production of the first half of the nineteenth century. These writings, little known outside the region, made use of the results generated by the research of Arabists in general, in order to grant crucial space to the “problem” of the presence of Islam in Sicily during the Middle Ages —one of the diverse factors that contributed to the formation of the idea of “Sicilianism”<sup>2</sup>— during an epoch of transition and of political and institutional restructuring on the island. In this context, forming a judgement on the scientific value of the aforementioned historiographic production is of no interest. It must rather be taken into consideration as a phenomenon intimately linked to the development of ideas and of sentiments, impossible to break down or to isolate without running the risk—as has been justly noted— of undervaluing or impoverishing it.<sup>3</sup> What is of interest is the fact that modern Sicilian historiography, positioning

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<sup>1</sup>See B. Scarcia Amoretti, “La storiografia arabistica italiana di fronte alla questione della presenza islamica nel mezzogiorno medievale,” in *Il mezzogiorno medievale nella storiografia del secondo dopoguerra: risultati e prospettive*, Atti del IV Convegno Nazionale A.M.I. (Bari, n.d.), 113-21.

<sup>2</sup>Interesting in this regard is G. Trovato, *Sopravvivenze arabe in Sicilia* (Mon-reale, 1949). Trovato notes, among other things: “among the various dominating nations that occupied Sicily in succession, none enjoys more popular memories than the Saracens; the memory of this occupation has retained great currency in the popular imagination.”

<sup>3</sup>F. Brancato, *Storiografia e politica nella Sicilia dell'Ottocento* (Palermo, 1973), 39.

itself in relation to the “problem” (as well as the *study*) of the presence of Islam in the largest island of the Mediterranean, and positioning itself in relation to the processes of historical and political re-composition that engaged the European and Italian nineteenth century, came to represent a phenomenon that was complex, original and anti-conformist in respect to the historiographic tendencies dominant in Europe during the era. This must be pointed out, whether in the interests of analysing other European experiences of the same epoch, or in the interests of considering the Sicilian historical research of our own age. Even that Sicilian historiographic production properly termed “Arabist” —like the work published by Amari at the mid-point of the nineteenth century— does not seem, at least for the moment, to constitute an appropriate object for reconsideration: quite the opposite of the situation of contemporary Hispano-Arabists, who have taken up the specific “question” of the presence of Islam in the Iberian peninsula.<sup>4</sup>

Canard held that “on ne peut guère ajouter que des brouillies à l’immortelle *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that many have called implicitly for a re-thinking of the history of Islam in Sicily, beginning with a re-reading of the sources Amari used: a broadening of the field of investigation; the identification of new materials and sources; re-examination of the “problems,” in an attempt not only to enrich that which is considered cultural history, but also to clarify conceptualisation of the political history relevant to the presence of Islam in Sicily, in relation to broader Mediterranean developments.<sup>6</sup> The sequence of events with which the traditional Arabo-Muslim sources have familiarised us, as they were recorded by Maghribi Muslim historians who lived during a later epoch than the facts they wrote about, and as Amari collected and analysed them, can appear to the researcher to be definitive fact. But these very historico-political judgements in truth were, between the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, at the centre of the historiographic polemic and political discourse that surrounded the “Sicilianist” debate.<sup>7</sup> Recent archaeological discoveries (in the area of Trapani and in the very city of Palermo); new and important socio-economic studies; the publication of Arabo-Islamic sources, among them

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<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., P. Chalmeta, *Invasión e islamización, la sumisión de Hispania y la formación de al-Andalus* (Madrid, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>M. Canard, “Quelques notes relatives à la Sicile sous les premiers califes fatimites,” in *L’Expansion arabo-islamique et ses repercussions* (London, 1974), 569.

<sup>6</sup>See *Del nuovo sulla Sicilia musulmana*, Atti della giornata di studio, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Fondazione Leone Caetani) (Rome, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>The relevant considerations expressed by Amari in *La guerra del Vespro siciliano* (Palermo, 1842) can be considered paradigmatic.

the Shiite and Ismailite sources, until recently largely unknown, which Amari himself did not know, and which still have been used only in part, represent new developments which challenge previously held definitions of the role of Sicily in the context of the *dār al-Islām*, as “border land” (*thaghr*) and “land of *jihād*.”<sup>8</sup> Definition of the relations between the most important island in Muslim hands and the Fatimite imamate during the tenth century, with regard to political and cultural history, to the structure of institutional systems, to society, to juridical and doctrinal tendencies, is a matter of no minor import. The “Biography” of the *ustādh* Jawdhar has cast new light, as has now been amply recognised, on the role of the first *‘ummāl* of the Banū Abī'l-Ḥusayn, or the Kalbites of Sicily, and on the relations between these governors and the *‘ubayad* caliph-imams.<sup>9</sup> The historical and historico-exhortative work of the Fatimite *qāḥīl-quḥāt*, Qāḥī al-Nu‘mān, who died at Fustat in 973, and that later work written by Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn, the Ismailite *dā‘ī* who lived during the fifteenth century, add no new details of importance to that exposition of events already known to us. Still they provide for the scholar a clearer historico-political frame within which the pages of history relative to Islamic Sicily might be placed, and they offer to the scholar points of reflection on the fundamental question of the relations between the governors and the governed, between *khāssa* and *‘amma*, between partisans of the true faith and *munāfiqīn*, in relation to the particular politico-ideological system edified by the Shiite caliph-imams in Ifrīpyyah.<sup>10</sup> The information provided by the authors named here regarding the rebellion and/or *nifāq* of Ibn Qurhub (913-16), a member of the family of the Banūl-Aghlab, the “corrupt” governing Sunnis, to cite a single, significant example, emerges as noteworthy in this respect. The general sketch that emerges of the renowned Palermitan’s rebellion tends to illuminate the role of the *akābir* and/or the rich urban nobility, and of Ibn Qurhub himself, whom Amari, perhaps a bit too romantically, had considered “sincere and loyal ... a noble citizen, orthodox, affectionate toward the Aghlabites, a Sicilian (*sic!*) ... (he initiated the revolt) not

<sup>8</sup>I have attempted to accomplish this in recent publications, such as “The Historical-ideological Framework of Islamic Fāṭimid Sicily with Reference to the Works of the Qāḥī l-Nu‘mān,” in *Al-Masāq* 7 (1994): 111-163, and *I Fatimiti e la Sicilia (sec. X)* (Palermo, 1997).

<sup>9</sup>See my “Qualche nota relativa ai Banū Abī'l-Ḥusayn,” In *Azāār: Studi arabo-islamici in memoria di Umberto Rizzitano* (Palermo, 1995), 157-75.

<sup>10</sup>By Qadī al-Nu‘mān, see in particular *Kitāb iftitāḥ al-da‘wah* (Beirut, 1970) and *Kitāb al-majālis wa'l-musāyarāt* (Tunis, 1978). By Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn, *Ta’rīkh al-khulafā’ al-fāṭimīyyīn bi’l-Maghrib* (Beirut, 1985).

for frivolous reasons, not for vanity, nor inspired by the ambition ... of a generous spirit ... to liberate his homeland (*sic!*) at once from Africa and from anarchy... Ibn Qurhub aimed to create in Sicily a legitimate and stable government, with all that liberty that the orthodox Muslim might ever have imagined."<sup>11</sup>

If the judgements expressed by the Sunnite Muslim historians against the "abominable"<sup>12</sup> Shiite dynasty of the *Ubaydiyyin* are taken into consideration, the judgement of Amari — who had made reference to those historians in particular — appears comprehensible. The revolt of the Sicilian Ibn Qurhub, like the other important events that occurred during the early years of the Fatimite caliphate-imamate, can be traced to a common source, emblematically identified by an unknown author of the twelfth century, himself a sympathetic Fatimite and probably belonging to the Shiite *madhhab*: the crisis of the Abbasid caliphate, and the rupture of equilibrium within the world of Islam during the tenth century.<sup>13</sup> It was not by accident that Ibn Ḥawqal — at times underrated, often considered a propagandist *tout court*, serving the Shiite imams of North Africa — wrote during the tenth century on the political situation of Ikhshidite Egypt and on Byzantium's aggression in the eastern Mediterranean: "power (*mulk*) is non-existent; the lord (*al-mālik*) thinks only of his own interests; the man of science (*al-ʿālim*) devotes himself to robbery and is corrupt, and no one moves to stop him; the legal expert (*al-faqīh*) behaves like a famished wolf who knows how to manoeuvre when faced with any situation and profits from every opportunity offered him; the merchant is a patent liar, the most illicit transactions are permitted him; the territories and their populations are left at the mercy of enemies."<sup>14</sup>

Probably Ibn Ḥawqal, who never disguised his sympathies for the ʿUbayyad caliphs, strove to discredit the pro-Abbasid dynasty of Fustat. But the political crisis that rocked the Islamic world as, beginning in 937, dynasties and clans redistributed their own personal power (*mulk*), should certainly be considered the frame within which to place a more precise historico-political profile of the events that occurred in that century, in the Islamic world in general, and therefore in Muslim Sicily. For this reason, the passage relevant to the revolt spearheaded

<sup>11</sup>Amari, *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia*, ed. Carlos Alfonso Nallino (Catania, 1933-39), vol. II, 172-75.

<sup>12</sup>See, among other works, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Taʾrīkh al-khulafāʾ* (Beirut, 1988): the Fatimite dynasty is defined as "al-khabīṭa," p. 420.

<sup>13</sup>*Kitāb al-ʿuyūn waʾl ḥadāʾiq fī akhbār alḥaqāʾiq* (vol. IV, author unknown) (Damascus, 1972-73).

<sup>14</sup>*Ibn Ḥawqal, Ṣurat al-arḍ* (Beirut, 1963), 185-86.

by the Palermitan Ibn Qurhub, taken from a work justly held to be immortal, cannot but compel the scholar, in the light of the new information that has been noted here, to recognise the need of re-reading the history of Islam and, with specific reference to those pages of history relative to the presence of Islam in Sicily and to *Sicily in Islam*, to conduct this re-reading using the methodologies provided by new historiographic approaches. This must be taken into account, in particular, if one wishes to remain within the scope of traditional scholarly studies, for which any involvement with Sicily and Islam during the Middle Ages produces an investment that is in the last analysis negative: the pages of history relative to Islamic Sicily are to be considered, according to a certain contemporary vision, not only external, but even secondary, to be taken in consideration in support of theses of regionalist and/or provincialist autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

To delineate in this sense and in this context a profile of the approach taken by Sicilian historians and intellectuals of the first half of the nineteenth century in relation to the phenomenon of Islam in Sicily during the Middle Ages can be a useful task. The act of defining the interpretative trajectory that characterised the most representative Sicilian historiography during the period between the end of the eighteenth century and the production of Amari the Arabist (the midway point of the nineteenth century) constitutes, in our view, a forum, with no pretext of completeness, for subsequent reflections regarding the details of the debate. And it illuminates the necessity of re-reading history, and of rebuilding, from a new foundation, the philosophical spirit of historical research, departing directly in this case from the historiographic production of past centuries.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, as is well known, the West undertook to perfect its historiographic techniques and methodology by focusing on a more accurate elaboration of historico-chronological and philosophical data; this process lasted until the middle of the eighteenth century. In Sicily a number of scholars made important contributions during this period: Tommaso Fazello (1498-1570), held to be the "father of Sicilian history," author of a *De rebus Siculis o Historiae Siculae (History of Sicily)*, considered history "lux veritatis,"<sup>16</sup> even when he treated the pages of history relevant to Islam in Sicily, though he incorporated obvious errors and traditional negative judgments; Giambattista Caruso (1673-1724), author of the *Bibliotheca Historica Regni Siciliae* (Palermo, 1723), which included a *Historiae*

<sup>15</sup>A worthwhile work to consult in this regard is the philosopher G. Gentile's *Il tramonto della cultura siciliana* (second edition, Florence, 1963), and in particular the preface.

<sup>16</sup>T. Fazello, *Storia di Sicilia* (Palermo, 1990 and 1992); introduction by M. Ganci, p. 6. The section dedicated to Islam in medieval Sicily is in the second volume, 347-385.

*saraceno-siculae varia monumenta*;<sup>17</sup> Antonino Mongitore (1663-1743), who also produced a *Bibliotheca Sicula*.<sup>18</sup> But it was without a doubt during the final decades of the eighteenth century that the diffusion of the new trends linked to the Enlightenment stimulated scholars and intellectuals in Sicily in the research of new historiographic approaches, designed to refine knowledge of the juridico-social dimension of the history of the “fatherland,” and not focused on erudition as an end in itself, which had characterised certain works from the previous era. Wishing to affirm his love of research and of history, the scholar strove to demonstrate an idea, a principle, an interpretation.<sup>19</sup> From this point of view, Sicilian culture articulated closer ties to English thought than to French “Encyclopaedism”: the work of David Hume (1711-1776) and in particular his *History of England* (1754-61), was recognised as a model of historico-critical methodology valid also for Sicily, whose history would be informed (like English history) by a substantial, secular unifying spirit, founded along precise juridical lines.<sup>20</sup>

However, it should be remembered that those studies from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that could be termed, strictly speaking, “Arabist” awakened the desire to acquire a new and less approximate knowledge of Sicily’s Islamic past. Thus they served to quicken a more dynamic interest and inspire more rigorous researches toward the rediscovery of the “great moment,” represented for Sicily by the Arabo-Norman era, whose crisis —especially the crisis of the state’s “autonomistic” organisation— would signal the beginning of the decadence of the largest island in the Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup> The most representative Sicilian historiographic production from the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries considered the arrival of Islam in Sicily in the ninth century to be a fundamentally positive event. The

<sup>17</sup>See U. Rizzitano, “Un secolo di studi arabistici siciliani,” from *La presenza della Sicilia nella cultura degli ultimi cento anni* (Palermo, n.d.), 54-55.

<sup>18</sup>See F. Brancato 53.

<sup>19</sup>A complete list of the historico-cultural works in which this approach is articulated would be too long. However it is valuable to cite as exemplary those works that we find most interesting: P. Lanza di Scordia (d. 1855), *Considerazioni sulla storia di Sicilia dal 1532 al 1759* (Palermo, 1836); A. Narbone (d. 1860), *Istoria della letteratura siciliana* (Palermo, 1856); vol. IV —358 pages— is entirely dedicated to Arabo-Islamic culture in Sicily; G. Picone (1901), *Memorie storiche agrigentine* (Girgenti, 1866): the fifth “memory” is dedicated to Muslim Agrigento (pp. 351-448).

<sup>20</sup>See F. Brancato 58.

<sup>21</sup>F. Gabrieli, “Un secolo di studi arabo-siculi,” in *Studia Islamica*, 2 (1954): 89-102; U. Rizzitano, *Storia e cultura nella Sicilia saracena* (Palermo, 1975); and by the same author, “Gli studi arabo-siculi: bilancio e prospettive,” in *Atti dell’Accademia di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti di Palermo* 35 (1975-76): 167-183.



coming of the troops under the leadership of the *qāḍī* Asad Ibn al-Furāt would open a new era: “the lasting international peace which the Sicilians enjoyed for 200 years was the gift of the Saracens,” wrote Scrofani (d. 1835). In support of this thesis he cited factors relevant 1) to culture: “(the Arabs) caused the fine arts and scholarship to flower again ... and promoted them more abundantly than ever before”; 2) to administration and juridical organisation: “they divided the island, providently, into a number of parts ... they introduced emirs, *alcaldi*, *gaiti*, and with these, new limits on ownership, on contracts, on private inheritance, and every other means of regulation, which the Normans would subsequently maintain”; 3) to economy and agricultural redevelopment through “tax on the lands of the new subjects ... new treaties (no longer vague and at the discretion of greedy lords).” Scrofani recognised, finally, in a note on this work in 1824: “although these sciences and arts were very far from those of the Greeks to which the West would one day come around, still they merit a distinguished position in history as an honourable effort of the human spirit, and as a flicker of that sacred fire, which prepared Italy and the world for a more favourable era.”<sup>22</sup>

Matters of government and juridical organisation were taken up, during this epoch of transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as worthy objects of interest and study, and exalted as the essential factors thanks to which Sicily would enjoy, according to the Sicilian historians of the era, a unique politico-institutional and cultural position. Although such factors were rooted in the period of Islamic presence during the preceding centuries, they were fully realised with the advent of the Norman monarchy. It redounds to the merit of Sicilian historiography of the moment, therefore, that historians recognised and stressed the fundamental weight of the customs derived from the presence of Islam in Sicily during the Middle Ages. Not by accident did a historian and intellectual like Gioacchino Di Marzo, in a work published in Palermo in 1858 under the title *Dell'incivilimento siciliano nell'epoca normanna e sveva, poche riflessioni*, while underscoring the fact that the genesis of Sicilian civilisation in the medieval epoch began with the Normans and came to fruition during the Hohenstaufen years, identify the historico-political and cultural origins of this process in the earlier Arabo-Muslim presence. Indeed, Di Marzo wrote: “we call a society ‘civil’ not only when it is infused with scientific knowledge, when virtue takes root in it, when the fine arts flower and every sort of industry finds vigorous expression within it; we require as well

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<sup>22</sup>S. Scrofani, *Discorsi due della dominazione degli stranieri in Sicilia* (Paris, 1824), 116-118; note, p. 242.

perfected social practices, which should constitute a civil government, a wise and just legislation, a public governing body capable of creating a sense of peace and security both within and without ... The Arabs, as everybody knows, created the most civil of the states which flourished during the Middle Ages ... they made every effort to pursue the progress of the sciences and the arts ... they were the most civil population that then populated Europe."<sup>23</sup>

Again, the reflections on history written by Niccolò Palmeri (1778-1837) in the preface to his *Somma della storia di Sicilia* are paradigmatic in this regard: "history is enumerated among the sciences; but it cannot be called such, until it is confined in the narrow limits of the bare narration of events. As the painter does men, the historian must portray people. The most rigid precision is required of both ... Except that, while the one depicts the man in a single attitude, the other must demonstrate the diverse aspects that time and the variations of fortune have bestowed upon nations. Nor with the simple exposition of facts can he work through his material. His craft requires him to proceed revealing bit by bit, with sober and sage discernment, from the facts themselves which he narrates, what were the political forms, with which peoples were governed; what were their civil customs; the religion; the number of inhabitants; the origins of public and private wealth; letters; sciences; arts; and all that which constitutes the essence of civil societies" (pp. iii-iv).<sup>24</sup>

Working from similar assumptions, Carmelo Martorana (d. 1870) —intellectual and scholar of jurisprudence; first prefect of Palermo, then procurator in Messina for the king during the years of the restored Bourbon monarchy, to whom he considered himself a faithful servant— published during 1832-3 a voluminous work entitled *Notizie storiche dei Saraceni di Sicilia*. This study, the first complete history of Muslim Sicily produced by a non-Arabist, was conceived with the explicit purpose of casting light on the period of the Muslim domination, to that point little-known compared to other moments in Sicilian history. An Arabist like Vincenzo Mortillaro (d. 1888) felt compelled to emphasise on two occasions the value of Martorana's work, writing: "To tell the truth, to this day I have found no one who thought more effectively about our Saracens, or with greater accuracy, or with finer judge-

<sup>23</sup>G. Di Marzo 5-6 and 9-13.

<sup>24</sup>The pages from Palmeri's work dedicated to Islam in Sicily (chapter XVI) bear witness to the reflections considered above, although his comprehensive judgement on the Muslim domination was not flattering, since —Palmeri emphasises— it proves that "the domination of foreigners has always been pernicious for Sicily, no matter how cultured they might have been" (p. 119).



and is suitable only for legal specialists; rather, I comfort myself that I follow the fine example of Pietro Giannone and other great men, who, on the contrary, have done precisely that while narrating the history of many peoples."<sup>27</sup>

From this point of view, Martorana's work can be considered representative of a tendency common from the end of the eighteenth until the middle of the nineteenth centuries, designed to problematise and critique the impact of external factors on the affirmation of a "Sicilianism" (or the pretension of such) grounded in juridical organisation and autonomous administration. Not all intellectuals and Sicilian historians of the epoch thought in the same manner; the vision of Martorana, a faithful servant of the Bourbon monarchy which conceded nothing to the political movement of *sicilianismo*, constitutes an illuminating example. However, one fact common to all should be noted: Sicilian scholars, beyond the diversity of their individual political alliances, laboured towards the goal of defining, in the "good government" and "good laws" upon which first Muslim Sicily and then the Norman monarchy would be founded, the impact of a Mediterranean dynamic on Sicily, and Sicily's cultural specificity.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the influence of the events that unravelled after 1860, and despite the fact that the publication of the work of the great Amari would make our knowledge of the presence of Islam in Sicily during the Middle Ages more complete and more precise, the historiographic studies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries should be considered significant for escaping the impoverishment to which such debate would be confined in a unified Italy. Posing the historico-political and cultural problem of the impact of external factors on regionally specific formations, it had the merit of proposing and problematising fundamental historico-political and cultural themes, still today at the centre of debate between historians and specialists.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>C. Martorana, *op. cit.*, vol. II, chapter III, p. 123. Pietro Giannone (1676-1748), to whom the author makes reference, is considered one of the great modern historians, and was author of an *Istoria del regno di Napoli*.

<sup>28</sup>The case of Isidoro La Lumia (d. 1879) can be considered emblematic: though he laboured for unification, he is held to be the historian of most typically Sicilian character.

<sup>29</sup>It is interesting to note that Francesco Gabrieli, who recently passed on and who played such a crucial role in stimulating Siculo-Arabic studies, at times aligned himself in favour of the thesis that held that the Islamic presence in medieval Sicily would be characterised in the last analysis as episodic, a parenthesis concluded with the re-entry of the Mediterranean island "into the circle of occidental civilisation" (see F. Gabrieli, "L'eredità romana nell'Italia meridionale e le invasioni islamiche," in *Storia e civiltà musulmana* [Naples, 1947] 32. By the same author, see also *Pagine arabo-siciliane* [Mazara del Vallo, 1986]).

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