

FREDERICK II AND THE REBELLION OF THE MUSLIMS OF SICILY, 1200-1224

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Ibn Jubayr, the Spanish Muslim traveller, has left us a valuable account of Muslim life in late twelfth century Sicily. Although his description has often been interpreted as affirming the existence of a tolerant multi-cultural society in Norman Sicily, most historians today would agree with Francesco Gabrieli that his outlook was pessimistic¹. He was "moved to pity at the agony of Sicilian Islam, which he said was exposed to the most painful vexations on the part of the Christian authorities and whose near total extinction shrewd observers already foresaw." Ibn Jubayr related an interview in Trapani with Ibn al-Hagar, in which the grand qā'id of the Sicilian Muslims longed to return to lands ruled by Muslims despite his exalted position in Norman Sicily. He ended with the story of a Muslim father who sent his son to one of those in the company of Ibn Jubayr to ask him to marry his little sister or even to arrange a marriage with another Muslim and take her to live in a Muslim land lest she be forced to become a Christian².

The final chapters in the history of Muslim Sicily were written less than fifty years later, during the reign of Frederick II, following a rebellion of the Sicilian Muslims in the twelve-twenties, which ended with the deportation of large numbers of them to Lucera in northern Apulia. After mid-century, there is hardly any further mention of Muslims in Sicily³. By the early fourteenth century, the Muslims of Apulia had been dispersed and gradually they, too, disappear from our view. Yet many questions about the Muslim

¹ Francesco Gabrieli, "La politique arabe des normands de Sicile," *Studia Islamica*, 9(1958), 83-96.

² Ibn Jubayr, *Viaggi*, in *Biblioteca arabo-sicula (Versione Italiana)* 2 vols. (Turin, 1880-81) 1: 177-8.

³ David Abulafia, "The End of Muslim Sicily," in *Muslims under Latin Rule*. James M. Powell, ed. (Princeton, N.J., 1990), pp. 103-33, esp. 128-31. Abulafia discusses the presence of imported Muslim slaves in Sicily in this period. See, also, his "Monarchs and Minorities in the Christian Western Mediterranean around 1300: Lucera and its Analogues," in *Christendom and its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000-1500*. Scott L. Waugh and Peter D. Diehl, eds. (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 234-263. Note his useful bibliography.

experience in Sicily in this period remain unanswered. Were they victims of religious persecution? What happened to the "tolerant" Normans and the "enlightened" Frederick II, as they were so often portrayed in earlier writings, that could lead to such drastic measures? What can we learn from this experience that will help us to understand better the relations between dominant and subjected groups in the Middle Ages?

Already in the mid-nineteenth century, the great historian of Sicily, Michele Amari, with his mastery of the then-known sources and his meticulous concern for detail, provided insights into the reasons for Muslim decline⁴. Although, as a man of his age, Amari was strongly inclined to make ethnic and religious conflicts the mainsprings of his interpretation, he noted that not all behavior was consistent with this view. His research launched the enquiry that, in the works of Francesco Gabrieli, Henri Bresc, David Abulafia, and Jeremy Johns, has shed considerable new light on the final century of Muslim Sicily⁵. Most recently, Hubert Houben has surveyed the limitations of religious tolerance in the Kingdom of Sicily⁶. Yet, despite their efforts, one lacuna noted by Amari remains largely unexplored⁷. Very little is known about the Muslim revolts under Frederick II, which led up to their deportation. Amari attempted to explore these events, but found that he met an almost total wall of silence in both the Arabic and Latin sources⁸.

⁴ Michele Amari, *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia*. 2nd ed. by C. Nallino. 3 vols. in 5 parts. (Catania, 1933)

⁵ F. Gabrieli, "La politique arabe,"; Henri Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen. Économie et société en Sicile, 1300-1450*. 2 vols. (Paris, 1986), David Abulafia, "End of Muslim Sicily," his "Ethnic Variety and Its Implications: Frederick II's Relations with Jews and Muslims," in *Intellectual Life at the Court of Frederick II Hohenstaufen*. William Tronzo, ed. (Washington, D. C., 1994), pp. 213-224, and his *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor* (London, 1988); Jeremy Johns, "The Muslims of Norman Sicily," Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Oxford, 1983. Donald Matthew has given us an overview of the kingdom in his *Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Cambridge, 1992), which has a valuable bibliography.

⁶ Hubert Houben, "Möglichkeiten und Grenzen religiöser Toleranz im normannisch-staufischen Königreich Sizilien," *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 50:1 (1994), 159-98. Houben has noted most of the extensive literature on this topic.

⁷ Michele Amari, *Storia*, 3:2, p. 612.

⁸ Among the Arabic sources, the usual pattern focuses almost entirely on Frederick's crusade. For a further discussion of the meaning of this material, see my "Frederick II and the Muslims: The Making of an Historiographical Tradition," in *Iberia and the Mediterranean World of the Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Robert I. Burns, S.J.* 2 vols. (Leiden, 1995), 1: 261-69. For the sources in translation, see M. Amari, *Biblioteca*. The only Latin sources for these events are, Ryccardus de Sancto Germano, Niccolo Jamsilla, Saba Malaspina. These have been printed in various editions. See *Cronisti et scrittori sincroni della dominazione normanna*

The best he was able to do was to report what he found in scattered mentions without being able to produce a fully coherent account. Those who have followed in his footsteps have largely avoided the problem by limiting their focus to the Norman period or by taking up the events after the twelve-twenties with emphasis on Lucera. The present paper attempts to provide a more adequate explanation of the critical importance of events during the twelve-twenties for our understanding of the fate of the Sicilian Muslims under Frederick II.

But first it is necessary to dispel the exaggerated picture of an Arab golden age in Norman Sicily, as it was presented in works like that of Aziz Ahmad in his *History of Islamic Sicily*⁹. The Norman conquest of Sicily had a devastating effect on the Muslim population of Sicily in the late eleventh century. It deprived the mass of the agrarian populace of their leaders and left only a remnant of the commercial and military aristocracy on the island. Professor Benjamin Kedar has recently referred to the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem as a fragment, because it lacked the essential elements needed to provide the foundation for a viable and creative society¹⁰. The term also fits Arab Sicily both before and after the Norman conquest. Muslim Sicily never became a significant cultural or economic center. Under the Normans, it remained a way-station of Arab culture. It was a stopping place for travellers. The geographical work of al-Idrisi, dedicated to King Roger II, was probably inspired by the interests of its Muslim upper class, who seem always to have kept close ties with North Africa. Likewise, the Muslim bureaucrats who staffed needed offices in the ports and in the court were never numerous enough to have a major impact on cultural life even in Palermo. From the mid-twelfth century on, there is some evidence that mosques were being converted to churches and little of new construction¹¹. The main picture that emerges is of a fragment, largely agrarian, increasingly subjected to Latins, though continuing to maintain a community religious and political identity.

nel regno di Sicilia. Giuseppe del Re, ed. 2 vols. Naples, 1845-68). The account by the Cistercian monk, Alberic of Three Fountains, is discussed below. Ryccardus notes that the Emperor defeated the Muslims but gives no details beyond the mention of their leader.

⁹ Aziz Ahmad, *History of Islamic Sicily* (Edinburgh, 1975).

¹⁰ "The Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem -The First European Colonial Society? A Symposium." In *The Horns of Hatun*. B. Z. Kedar, ed. (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 341-366. See, also, Houben, "Möglichkeiten," pp. 163-88.

¹¹ Donald Matthew, *Norman Kingdom*, p. 92.

The Sicilian Muslims were not the only group to suffer decline in this period. The Greeks, who formed a substantial population in the northern and eastern parts of the island, as well as on the nearby mainland, seemed to have followed a similar course¹². Although some efforts continue to be made to demonstrate the vigor of Greek cultural and religious life, and there are certainly indications of continued vitality into the early thirteenth century, the main difference from the Muslims lay in the fact that Greek monasticism provided an anchor that slowed the process of decline. While the support of the Normans for Latin Christianity undoubtedly put pressure on Greek ecclesiastical institutions, we must also recognise that Greek culture in Sicily, like its Muslim counterpart, never produced the kind of vigorous intellectual and religious life that was to be found in Greece or in contemporary Spain¹³. If we are going to find an explanation for the pattern of development that led up to the total eclipse of Muslim Sicily in the early thirteenth century, we should keep in mind this common experience of decline and the efforts of these two societies to confront this crisis in their community life. It is in the differences in their response that we find the roots of their subsequent experience. By and large, the Greeks chose the path of accommodation and continued negotiation; the Muslims, a more compact and effective military force, chose to use their arms to gain advantage by supporting now one faction, now another.

This pattern began to emerge in the early eleven-sixties, when a riot broke out in Palermo that resulted in serious losses to Muslims. Although it has been characterised as an anti-Muslim pogrom, Amari puts it into the setting of the conspiracies against the principal minister of King William I, Maio of Bari, which is apparently where it belongs¹⁴. There can be little

¹² See Lynn White, *Latin Monasticism in Norman Sicily* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1938), pp. 69-70, on Benedictinization of Basilian monasteries in Sicily. The most thorough account is that of Michael Wellas, *Griechisches aus dem Umkreis Kaiser Friedrichs II* (Munich, 1983). For a brief note, see James M. Powell, "Frederick II's Knowledge of Greek," *Speculum*, 38(1963), 481-2.

¹³ On Greek monasticism in pre-Norman Italy and Sicily, see Silvano Borsari, *II monachesimo bizantino nella Sicilia e nella Italia meridionale prenormanne* (Naples, 1963). See, also, Hubert Houben, *Die Abtei Venosa und das Mönchtum im normannisch-staufischen Süditalien* (Tübingen, 1995), pp. 13-101, for an overall survey of monasticism in the South and in Sicily.

¹⁴ M. Amari, *Storia*, 3:2, 493-502. Bressi, *Un monde*, 1:14-15. On this rebellion, see, also, Léon-Robert Ménager, *Amirat - Amaras: L'Émirat et les origines de l'amirauté (XIe-XIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1960), pp. 56-61. Houben, "Möglichkeiten," p. 183, alludes only briefly to this

doubt that the Christian rioters were a part of one faction and that the Muslims of Palermo had supported another in hope of gaining an advantage. Most likely, this effort was ultimately successful because, from this time on, Muslims continued to play a significant role during all subsequent crises. Hiroshi Takayama has shown that one Muslim or ex-Muslim was often included among the royal familiars, *i.e.*, among the king's chief counsellors, from this period on¹⁵. Indeed, it is well to keep this pattern in mind when considering the dynamics behind the idea of tolerance in the kingdom. Tolerance, based on recognition of the rights of the subjected community, sought security in the exercise of power. It was this arrangement that was threatened and ultimately destroyed in the turbulence following the death of King William II in 1189¹⁶. The revolt of Abu-al-Qasim in that year apparently was aimed at supporting Matteo d'Ajello against the royal chancellor, Walter, Archbishop of Palermo. The object of the Muslim effort was to position themselves in the contest over the succession between Constance, wife of the German King Henry VI and aunt of William II, and Tancred of Lecce. Once again, the Muslims of Palermo were attacked, obviously at the behest of their opposition, and had to flee to the hills. There they found refuge among the Muslims subjected to the royal monastery of Monreale in the Val di Mazara by King William II. In the rapidly developing events after the death of Henry in 1194 and Constance in 1198, they shifted loyalties, allying briefly with Markward of Anweiler in his effort to establish his regency over the young Frederick II. For a time, Innocent III himself hoped to lure them to the side of the King¹⁷.

Recent accounts have usually subordinated discussion of factional alliances to explanations based on Christian/Muslim religious tensions¹⁸. In

outbreak and views it in the context of religious intolerance. The point made here is not aimed at denying the existence of religious enmities, but at providing a fuller understanding of the reasons for conflict.

¹⁵ Hiroshi Takayama, *The Administration of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Leiden, 1993), pp. 98-102. For the development of the office of admiral, see Léon-Robert Ménager, *Amiratus-Ameras*, pp. 64-7. Under Roger, the only example of an Arab commander of the fleet was Philip of Mahdia. There were no admirals of Arab origin under William I and William II.

¹⁶ M. Amari, *Storia*, 3:2, 556-559. The rebellion ended with the arrival of King Richard Lionheart in the Kingdom.

¹⁷ *Gesta Innocentii III*, in *PL*, 214, chap. 30.

¹⁸ See David Abulafia, "The End of Muslim Sicily," pp. 109-111. Donald Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, pp. 87-88. This approach has been fully developed by Houben, "Möglichkeiten," *passim*.

speaking of the roots of Frederick's difficulties with the Muslims, Donald Matthew says: "Saracen relations with the Christian population had probably deteriorated inexorably, though gradually, during the twelfth century, as the Muslims felt themselves increasingly pushed to the fringes of island society"¹⁹. However justified this view is, and I would accept its general tenor, it provides an incomplete explanation of the dynamics of the Muslim political role in Sicily under Frederick II. Matthew acknowledges this difficulty to some degree himself when he tells us how Markward of Anweiler recognized the "real power" of the Muslims and made an alliance with them to invade Sicily via Muslim-held Trapani. Our problem, then, is not to minimize religious antagonism, but to show how it was manipulated for specific political ends.

The years following the death of his mother, Constance of Sicily, in 1198, until Frederick's triumphant return to his Italian Kingdom as Holy Roman Emperor in 1220 have been rightfully called the "Time of Troubles." Virtually every group and faction represented in the Kingdom took advantage of the royal minority and, after 1212, the absence of the King in Germany to strengthen its position in the existing scheme of things²⁰. Even those most closely allied with the young King, such as the Genoese, the churches, and even the papacy were not above seeking gain at royal expense. Many leading nobles, especially in the north of the Kingdom, tightened their control over their own lands and even parts of the royal domain. The maritime powers, especially the Genoese, built important bases of power in the Kingdom against the vicissitudes of the future²¹. On his return to the Kingdom in 1220, Frederick promulgated a series of laws at Capua, including the famous "Lex de resignandis privilegiis," aimed at putting teeth into his re-assertion of royal rights²². There was great concern about Frederick among the Muslims because of the favor that he showed to

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 321.

²⁰ James M. Powell, "Frederick II and the Church in the Kingdom of Sicily, 1220-1224," *Church History*, 30(1961), 28-34. Houben, "Möglichkeiten," pp. 190-1, barely mentions the rebellions under Frederick and prefers to stress Frederick's close relations with Muslims. On this point, see my "Frederick II and the Muslims," pp. 261-9, which suggests the complexity of the problems in determining Frederick's views, given the manner in which the sources were produced.

²¹ James M. Powell, "Genoese Policy and the Kingdom of Sicily, 1220-1240," *Medieval Studies*, 28(1966), 346-54.

²² Powell, "Frederick II and the Church," pp. 29-30.

the Church of Monreale by confirming its rights over the Muslims on its estates in the Val di Mazara²³. They, too, had taken advantage of the "Time of Troubles" for their own benefit. During this same period, the Genoese were also beginning to feel pressure. The dismissal of the Genoese Count Henry of Malta as admiral of the Sicilian fleet, following the collapse of the crusade against Egypt in 1221, removed one of the stronger supporters of Genoa from the kingdom. Under the skillful direction of Henry of Malta in Germany in 1218, Frederick had renewed the extensive privileges of the Genoese in the Kingdom of Sicily in 1218²⁴. It was this renewal that now lapsed with the "Lex de resignandis privilegiis." Frederick deprived another Genoese, Count Alamannus, of the government of Syracuse. The Genoese Annals also reported that Guillelmus Porcus, Admiral of the Kingdom, a member of a distinguished Genoese family, who had accompanied Queen Constance and the young King Henry to Germany in 1215, fled the Kingdom in 1221²⁵.

As we noted earlier, when Amari attempted to tell the story of the revolt of the Sicilian Muslims under Frederick, he found that "the places, the times, the factions of the war undertaken by Frederick are almost unknown"²⁶. He went on to relate how Frederick in 1222 in his siege of Iato siezed the Muslim leader, Mirabet [also known as Benevet in the Latin sources], whose actual name was Ibn `Abbād, and his two sons, with Guillelmus Porcus of Genoa and Hugo Fer of Marseilles. He hanged Ibn `Abbād and his sons, but this did not end the war. Recent accounts have made little progress beyond this point. Gabrieli remarks: "We only know that it would be Frederick II himself, some twelve years later, who would obliterate entirely the Arab element from Sicily"²⁷. Though not entirely accurate, Gabrieli sums up the frustration of modern scholars in the field²⁸.

²³ J. L. A. Huillard-Bréholles, *Historia diplomatica Friderici Secundi*. 6 vols with preface and introduction. (Paris, 1852-61), 1:2, 800-801; 2:1, 149-52. Frederick gave strong support to Archbishop Caro of Monreale.

²⁴ H.-B., 1:2, 540-1. See, David Abulafia, "Henry Count of Malta and his Mediterranean Activities: 1203-1230," *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*. A. T. Luttrell, ed. (London, 1975), pp. 105-25, esp. 119-20.

²⁵ *Annali Genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*. 4 vols. (Rome, 1901-1929), 2: 171-2. See, also, Léon-Robert Ménager, *Amiratus-Ameras*, pp. 112-113.

²⁶ M. Amari, *Storia*, 3:2, 612.

²⁷ Gabrieli, "La politique arabe," p. 94.

²⁸ David Abulafia, *Frederick II*, p. 145, refers to the Muslims as thirteenth-century irredentists. Donald Matthew avoids the issue, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, p. 322. See, also,

If we are to understand the Muslim rebellion under Frederick and the events leading up to the deportation of 1224, it is important that we re-examine the key text that recounts the capture of Ibn 'Abbad. It is found in the chronicle of Alberic, Cistercian monk of the Abbey of Three Fountains, and was already known to Amari²⁹. Alberic was describing the Children's Crusade of 1212. He related how the children, thirty thousand in number, gathered and took ship from Marseilles to cross the sea against the Saracens. They were sold into slavery by two traitors, Guilelmus Porcus and Hugo Ferreus, called "merchants of Marseilles" by Alberic. The text is not without problems. While referring to the crusaders as *infantes*, Alberic says that 400 of them, all clerics, were sold to the Caliph. He also tells us that this Caliph, in disguise as a cleric, came to Paris and studied in the schools. Alberic gives as his authority a report by one of the clerics that the caliph had purchased. It is unclear, however, to what part of the account the cleric's testimony refers. It is possible that he was a source for events in Sicily. Alberic concludes with the following³⁰:

"Also, the two aforementioned traitors Hugo Ferreus and Guilelmus Porcus later came to the prince of the Saracens of Sicily, Mirabellus (sic!), and desired to enter into a traitorous relationship with him against the Emperor Frederick but the Emperor, by Divine gift, triumphed and Mirabellus and his two sons and those two traitors were hung on a gibbet, and after 18 years, the one who told this added that Mascemuch of Alexandria was still guarding 700, no longer children, but older men."

What strikes us is the clear statement that Ibn `Abbād was allied to Hugo and Guillelmus, depicted as a couple of unsavory desperadoes. That there was such an alliance seems quite true, but the personages were none other than the Admiral of Sicily, Guillelmus Porcus, the Genoese who had escorted Frederick's Queen and son to Germany, and Hugo Fer, who was in

John P. Lomax, "Frederick II, his Saracens, and the Papacy," in *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays*. John Toland, ed. (New York, 1996), pp. 175-97.

²⁹ *Chronica Alberici Monachi Trium Fontium, MGH.SS.*, 23: 893-4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23:804. "Duo quoque supradicti traditores Hugo Ferreus et Guillelmus Porcus postea venerunt ad principem Sarracenorum Sicilie Mirabellum [Ibn 'Abbad], et cum eo traditionem imperatoris Frederici facere voluerint, sed imperator de eis dante Deo triumphavit et Mirabellum cum duobus filiis et istos duos traditores in uno patibulo suspendit, et post annos 18 huius expeditionis -addidit qui hoc reulit- quod Mascemuch de Alexandria adhuc bene custodiebat 700, non iam infantes, sed fortioris etatis homines."

fact a member of one of the leading families of Marseilles, which had for some years been closely allied to Genoa³¹.

The account presented by Alberic of Three Fountains, though no doubt garbled, may have been designed to cover up the real cause of the Muslim rebellion, their alliance with the merchants of Genoa and Marseilles who had been seriously injured by Frederick's attack on their privileges and status. We need not view this as an effort to overthrow Frederick. It was most likely aimed at a much more limited end: forcing Frederick to reverse his confirmation of the grants to Monreale and to restore the privileges of the merchants. While previous Muslim participation in factional revolts and the direct reference to a conspiracy in Alberic's chronicle support this interpretation, there is further evidence from the Genoese Annals that suggests that their author may have been aware of these events. He tells us that Frederick desired to capture Guillelmus, but he "escaped from his hands"³². He omits the reason why Frederick wanted to capture him. But the annalist goes on to make the case that Genoa was Frederick's supporter in his time of need, which suggests that he was trying to defend the actions of Guillelmus Porcus. Furthermore, the Genoese notarial and diplomatic materials from this period make it clear that the period immediately after the rebellion brought on a crisis in the relations between Genoa and the Kingdom³³. The Genoese may have avoided Sicilian ports in this period.

The rebellion of the Muslims continued as a war of attrition and desparation³⁴. Deprived of all allies, they were at the mercy of Frederick. The decision to deport them to Apulia was his way of putting an end to the role that they had played in the politics of the Kingdom since the eleven-sixties. It meant that they would never again be in a position to influence factional

³¹ On the role of Guillelmus Porcus, see H.-B., 1:2, 483-5, and note. For Hugo Fer, cf. *Histoire du commerce de Marseille*. 5 vols. (Paris, 1949-56), 1:145; 198; 297-8. On relations between Genoa and Marseilles, see, 1:188-91.

³² *Annali Genovesi*, 2: 171-2. "Willielmus Porcus scilicet admiratus cum ipsum capere vellet, sicut diuine placuit voluntati, manus eius aufugit, et a liminibus regni, coactus indebite, separauit."

³³ Powell, "Genoese Policy," pp. 349-351.

³⁴ For an interesting Muslim account, see E. Lévi Provençal, "Une héroïne de la résistance musulmane en Sicile au début du XIIIe siècle," *Oriente moderno*, 34(1954), 283-88. This account describes the effort of Ibn `Abbād's daughter to carry on the war from the castle of Entella. It is chiefly valuable in providing a Muslim point of view, and, though probably containing some truth, appears to be considerably embellished to create a hagiographic image.

politics in Sicily. At the mercy of the crown, they served as a check on Frederick's enemies in the north of the Kingdom. Finally, they remained useful, a source of income to the crown, as they had been in Sicily. It was not religious tensions so much as it was the dynamics of political factionalism that put an end to Muslim Sicily.