

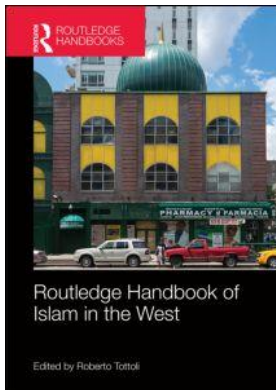
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Muslims and Islam¹ in Sicily from the mid-eleventh to the end of the twelfth century

Contemporary perceptions and today's interpretations

Annliese Nef

There is a tendency in the Mediterranean countries of Europe to forget or to ignore, more often than not, the Islamic past of a noticeable part of the region. This is true for Spain and al-Andalus, but even more for Sicily,² Malta, or the southern Italian mainland (as we are reminded by Marazzi 2007; Metcalfe 2009 is still focused on Sicily), let alone when it comes to the important Muslim presence in medieval Europe which has been recently underlined and is increasingly being investigated (Dakhliya and Vincent 2011; Dakhliya and Kaiser 2013). Fortunately, these conceptions are slowly changing, but in a certain way, and paradoxically, for Italy the precursory researches were made on what has been usually called “Norman Sicily,” an expression justly criticized (Metcalf 2002: 289; 2003: 24–5), rather than on the previous period of its history. Even more, the interest of the Sicilian political authorities in this “Islamic” past and its promotion have been focused predominantly on eleventh- to twelfth-century Sicily rather than on ninth- to eleventh-century Islamic Sicily.

Since Michele Amari (1806–89), who gave birth to the first scientific and systematic approach to the history of what he called “the Muslims of Sicily” from the ninth to the thirteenth century (Nef 2010a), and until the recent evolution we just recalled, the main historiographical current has presented the Hautevilles’ period predominantly as one of insertion in the European context for Sicily. For a long time, the history of medieval Sicily has thus seemed to begin with the twelfth century, while the high Middle Ages have long been forgotten (Nef and Prigent 2006). Nonetheless, since the 1990s a few researchers, among them Adalgisa De Simone, Jeremy Johns, and Alex Metcalfe, have drawn attention from distinct points of view to what has been considered the Islamic dimension of the Hautevilles’ elaboration (De Simone 1996, 1999a, 1999b; Johns 2002; Metcalfe 2003). This evolution was the first manifestation of a renewed interest in the “Islamic” dimension of Sicily’s medieval history.

We will tackle two questions here: What do we know about the evolution of the Sicilian Arab Muslim population during the eleventh and twelfth centuries? And how were the elements of this period which are today considered Islamic, or even Muslim, perceived by the Hautevilles' contemporaries? What makes this question difficult is that Sicily experienced Islamic domination immediately before the period examined here. At the heart of the debate have thus often been, in one way or another, the possible continuities between the two epochs. We will suggest that this is not the most effective way to approach eleventh- and twelfth-century Sicily from a methodological point of view.

Sicily in the mid-eleventh century: needing original solutions

In order to understand better what is at stake, it is necessary to describe the Sicilian situation when the Hautevilles first set foot on the island. We will thus see what problems they faced and the limits which informed the solutions they promoted. Let us insist, in these liminary lines, on the fact that "the Hautevilles" here refers to the milieu that elaborated the eleventh- to twelfth-century State in Sicily rather than to the members of the dynasty, who could not have done much on their own.

In the 1040s, the Kalbid emirate which administered the island in the name of the Fatimids, an Ismaili Shi'i dynasty, imploded and gave birth to autonomous political entities centered around the main Sicilian cities (Palermo, Syracuse, Catania, Agrigento, Mazara) which have been compared to the contemporary Andalusian *tayfas* (the small political entities born after the end of the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba). The tensions between these Sicilian units were recurrent. One of these episodes incited Ibn al-Thumna to seek help against his adversaries on the continent, where groups of mercenaries of Norman origin had established an earldom, whose capital was Mileto. His choice suggests that contacts between the two banks of the Messina straits were maintained all through the Islamic period and even later, in spite of the emergence of a Norman authority in Calabria.

Once on the Sicilian side, and after the death of Ibn al-Thumna, Robert Guiscard and Roger, two brothers and members of the Hauteville family, began to conquer the island, sustained in their enterprise by the pope, though from a distance. This conquest was not an easy task: it required their efforts from 1061–2 to 1092. It thus took the shape of a slow takeover. Moreover, since before the Islamic conquest the island had been a Byzantine province between the sixth and the middle of the ninth century, the idea of a *Reconquista* was absent in the enterprise led by the Hautevilles. Even if the papacy could see in this intervention the opportunity to get back the lands it owned and which were confiscated by Constantinople in the mid-eighth century, the pope was on too bad terms with the Normans to really nourish this dream (Loud 2002). As for contemporary texts describing the conquest, they contain almost no allusion to holy war (Bresc 2003) and present themselves rather as the celebration of an elected people: the Normans (Nef 2011: 53–61).

In order to apprehend better what happened in twelfth-century Sicily, it has to be remembered that the historical insular context was at this time characterized by a unique conjunction, which would then become a little more familiar in Europe and in the Levant. It was the first time a Latin, very minority, group of conquerors took control of a majority Muslim population. Whereas the presence of the Muslims who evolved in medieval Europe was as a minority and temporary, that of non-Muslims in the *dar al-islam* (the regions administered by governments which defined themselves as Muslim) was stable and as the majority for several centuries. Thus, unlike the Muslims did for the *ahl al-dhimma* – the non-Muslims whose presence was accepted in the Islamic world, mainly Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, although they were subjected to

an inferior juridical status and were taxed more heavily than the Muslims – and even if the elaboration of this status did take some time in the Islamic world, the Christians of the Latin world, although they accepted a Muslim presence, temporary more often than not, did not give a specific juridical status to the Muslims in Europe before the Sicilian experiment. The problem was indeed not a simple one since the Christians considered Islam a heresy, but in contrast to Judaism, which had preceded Christianity, did not interpret it as a witness of the Old Alliance.

The difficulty was all the more true as the Normans were themselves considered good Christians neither by the inhabitants of south Italy who had to put up with their exactions nor by the papacy they did not obey. Their refusal to participate in the First Crusade could not but reinforce this general suspicion. Moreover, the Hautevilles themselves were considered *parvenus*, adventurers, and certainly not future kings (Houben 2002: 11–12).

In this context, the specificities and obstacles we just evoked are easily explained, although they do not induce in a mechanical way *one* solution, which is why the Hautevilles had to be inventive in order to benefit as much as possible from Sicily's prosperity and strategic position in the Mediterranean.

Taxes and law: a reinterpretation of the Islamic State by the Hautevilles

The solution they imagined was indeed original: rather than developing a feudal monarchy and the seigneurialization of the Sicilian countryside, they chose to develop a fiscal state. Contrary to what might be thought, and as Jeremy Johns has shown (Johns 2002), this policy was neither conceived nor realized as the prolongation of an anterior system. The preceding administration had been shaken by the disappearance of the Kalbid emirate and a thirty-year conquest. Thus, the Hautevilles were inspired by contemporary systems, predominantly that of the Fatimids. In a nutshell: if the fiscal state the Hautevilles promoted was certainly based on conceptions and practices shared by both Byzantium and Islam, they acted more as restorers and reformers than as conservatives. Although the general philosophy of the fiscal state had been present during the Islamic period in Sicily, the continuities exist in the view of today's observers rather than in twelfth-century practices.

In this construction, the role of George of Antioch, a native of Antioch and a long-time official in the Ifriqiyān revenue system, who was Roger II's main adviser from the 1120s until his death in 1151, was probably important, although not exclusively so. It is underlined even by Arabic sources, and in particular al-Maqrizi, who, in his fifteenth-century biography of George writes that he was in charge of the offices (*dawāwīn*) of Sicily and “amassed the revenues and organized the foundations of the kingdom” (al-Maqrizi 1991: 18–20; for an English version, see Johns 2002: 80–2, esp. 81 and 82; De Simone 1999a, 2009). George's good knowledge of the Ifriqiyān taxation (unlike the historians, who unfortunately know very little about it in the twelfth century because of lack of documentation) probably explains his role. At this point, let us underline that the main individuals who knew Arabic and introduced or maintained Islamic administrative elements at court never had a Sicilian origin during the twelfth century, and that they were all Christians (or rather they were expected to be so and considered as such), either because they had converted or because they had never been Muslim. Moreover, a significant number of them were slaves and eunuchs. The promotion of newcomers to very high positions, even slaves, is a common Islamic (and Byzantine) practice of government. It clearly inspired the Hautevilles.

The principles of the Islamic fiscal system were in some way reversed, the Jews and the Muslims paying a poll-tax which underlined their inferiority, called *jizya*, and a land tax. As for

the status of the Christians who already lived on the island when the Hautevilles conquered it, it is not very clear. Without entering into detail, the Arab Muslim population, among whom some Christians are documented in the region south of Palermo, was divided into three statuses, according to their link with the land they cultivated (Nef 2011: 481–516). This supposed an administration which issued a list of taxpayers and maintained the limits of the fiscal units. These specific tasks, assumed by the *diwan al-ma'mur* (the “prosperous (royal) office”) and the *diwan al-tahqiq al-ma'mur* (the “prosperous (royal) office of verification”), which were in charge of investigations, gave birth to documentation in Arabic or, more often, bilingual Arabic–Greek. Such articulation supposed the coexistence of a local administration and of local elites able to play the role of intermediaries with taxpayers and, most probably, the existence of local archives.

As for the Latin barons, they were the beneficiaries of what appear to be fiscal concessions more than land concessions, a practice more akin to that of the Islamic *iqṭā'*, or fiscal concession, than to the Latin fief. They were thus in a situation of dependency on an administration which used a language they, at least as far as the first generation of conquerors (or of Latin immigrants who arrived after the conquest) is concerned, could not understand. If there were other reasons which led the Latin aristocrats to denounce what they considered to be a monarchy that did not make enough room for Latin magnates in the king's entourage, it is clear that they saw as positive neither this way of limiting seigneurial realities nor the distance imposed by the Hautevilles and their state apparatus between them and the center of power. This is all the more true as the aristocracies of conquests or frontiers are often more egalitarian than others, their cohesion being reinforced by the idea of a “common enemy” (Bonnassie 2000: 579 about Catalonia): the distance imposed by the Hautevilles was thus even less easily accepted.

Following the same logic, the Hautevilles, as did the Islamic State, let each group, be it Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, administer itself according to its law, as far as civil matters were concerned. This aspect is documented by surviving Arabic Palermitan notarial documents, written according to the Malikite school of law. Palermitan Muslim judges (*qadī*) thus appear during the whole of the twelfth century (Nef 2011: 322–3; Johns 2002: 88–90).

The situation in the rural areas is little known, although the society reflected by the fiscal lists appears diverse. The role and the exact definition of the *quwwad* (pl. of *qa'id*, “chief,” “military officer”), who were part of the local elites, are, for example, not completely clear. They played the role of *boni homines* and they were consulted for their expert knowledge of the tax districts (Bresc 1989; Nef 2011: 463ff.). In this sphere, as in others, if the general inspiration is more Islamic or Byzantine than Latin, it should be kept in mind that the vocabulary which is used (in order to designate the categories of taxpayers, the administrative institutions and functions, etc.), at the very least, is a field of invention. This inventiveness is also to be found in the court sphere, which has attracted most interest and analysis as it is better documented.

The inventive construction of a monarchy

We should immediately underline that we know (part of) what happened at court, in the royal palace, while the rest of the society is much less documented, an imbalance which leads to a focus of studies on the former. This limit should not suggest reading what we are going to outline as a kind of communication trick orchestrated by the Hautevilles (cf. Johns 2002: 284ff.). The fact that it was limited to court life makes it no less significant and it should be interpreted with care. It was a costly edifice and it did not help the Hautevilles' integration in the Latin European horizon, to say the least. It was thus a conscious choice to build this system, which does not mean, of course, that all the parameters that led to this decision were totally clear for the groups in charge of the royal government over the decades.

Twelfth-century Sicily has often been presented as a space where a synthesis took place between what is usually described as three “civilizations” (for a necessary criticism of this notion, see Dufal 2009), Latin, Greek, and Islamic, a synthesis whose symbol is supposed to be the royal court. Such an interpretation gives the historical approach a miss. One bias should in fact be avoided: the “philological” approach which consists in attributing to each element of the Hautevilles’ construction a cultural identity, an “origin,” in a kind of ethnicizing way. There are at least three reasons to avoid such an approach: (1) what is exemplified by Sicily is the existence of a *koiné* relating the caliphal, Byzantine and Latin courts; (2) the introduction of an element in a context which is not the original one modifies its meaning and function, above all when, as it has been underlined, it is not deprived of appropriation, adaptation, and/or innovation; (3) just as they did not think in terms of continuities, contemporaries seldom conceived the elements composing court life in this “philological” way, as we will see on pp. 65–6.

I will of course here concentrate on elements which are identified *nowadays* as “Islamic” in Sicilian court life and its frame (palace, *sollacia*, etc.) in order to try and understand how they were conceived and used, as far as this can be reconstituted. It is only after this effort to reconstruct their conceptual context that I will come back to the question of their interpretation by twelfth-century contemporaries and by today’s historians.

The use of the Arabic language in order to exalt the Hautevilles, either in poems (De Simone 1999b; Nef 2008; 2011: 178–90), in monumental inscriptions (De Luca 2002; Nef 2011: 178–90), or in royal titles (Johns 2002; Nef 2011: 94–116), is well known and has been studied recently. What is interesting is that all three spheres combine Arabic language with Islamic, but not expressly Muslim, references and Christian assertions. The royal titles thus mix Islamic uses and terms, although potentially non-Muslim (*malik*, i.e. “king,” rather than *imam* or *khalifa*, which were used to designate the caliphs), with the exaltation of the protection of God (although the name “Allah” is quite ecumenical in Arabic) or mention of the sovereign’s fight for Christianity. As for the poems, and in a lesser way the monumental epigraphs, they used images which had become part of the Islamic language of power but were not Muslim, such as references to Sasanid palaces, evocations of King David, etc., as well as Muslim references which had lost part of their primary meaning.

The context of use of the monumental inscriptions is also important: the Arabic epigraphs of the Palermitan Cappella Palatina (Brenk 2010) can certainly not be analyzed as if they decorated a Muslim building (Nef 2011: 145), or even a suburban palace built for the Hautevilles’ leisure. Let us remember that Arabic inscriptions decorated numerous Palermitan churches in the twelfth century (Nef 2011: 157–61). Everything suggests, in this specific context, the development of a Christian Arabic expression which coincides with the promotion of an Arab Christian milieu related to the court and in particular with the Palatine chapel, but not only this. Although we cannot be very precise on this point, sufficient evidence seems to be the existence of an inventory of Christian liturgical books written in Arabic and kept in the treasury of the Cappella Palatina (Nef 2011: 217–21), as well as the proximity of some Arab Christians to the latter (Bresc and Nef 1996: 154). Besides its real extension, what remains little known is the composition of this milieu: part was probably converted, another part came from outside (George of Antioch, the de Indulciis), yet another belonged to families which had remained Christian during the period of Islamic domination, all were linguistically Arabicized and culturally Islamicized. We know that they were recognized as a group until the fourteenth century (Mandalà and Moscone 2009: 189–90). What is interesting is that among them there were Christians relating to a church whose liturgy was in Greek (as George of Antioch), but also others for whom it was in Latin (the origin of the de Indulciis is identified with al-Andalus; and the books

whose titles are transliterated in Arabic in the abovementioned list were in Latin). Moreover, these groups were close to some of the eunuchs and to Latin individuals who had learned Arabic and were part of the eunuchs' party and defenders of the Hautevilles' elaboration and ideology. A good example is Matthew of Aiello, who came from the mainland and was for over thirty years one of the most powerful men in the government (Mandalà and Moscone 2009: 204–11). He was a good enough Arabicist to be entrusted with the re-elaboration of the archives of the central offices of the kingdom, which had burned down in a Palermitan rebellion in 1161. Another one, although much less documented, is Grisandus, known by the quadrilingual tombstone (Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, Greek, and Latin) by which he celebrated the memory of his dead mother in 1149. It has been shown that what is exalted in all four alphabets by Grisandus, who defines himself as the priest of the king, is Christianity and conversion to it (Johns 2006: 519–23). These remarks clearly underline that convergences were as much political as they were cultural, just like the tensions we will detail on pp. 62–5.

Another important instrument of legitimization was coinage, for coins are one of the most largely diffused support for an expression of political authority. Its evolution has been described in various publications (Travaini 1995). It is obvious that some parameters, such as trust in money, also determined the choices made in this matter. Nonetheless, the perpetuation of the two Islamic currencies (the golden *tari* and the silver *kharruba*, to which a copper *folis* was added) in twelfth-century Sicily, a decision which is clearly linked with fiscal choices, and the presence of Arabic legends on coins until the end of the dynasty cannot be explained only by a trust problem. Little by little, Christian symbols and inscriptions made their appearance on the coins, but they were never exclusive of Islamic ones.

Life at court and the practices of power are also fundamental within the sphere of domination. Here again, establishing whether such and such a practice was inspired by Byzantium or by the Islamic courts is not an easy task, but this might not be the main point. The royal ceremonial and clothing could have been inspired by both: public appearances by the king were veiled and rare (al-Maqrizi 1991: 20; Johns 2002: 82); he used what were interpreted by the Arab Muslim authors as Islamic elements – such as an umbrella or clothes qualified “as Islamic” (al-Maqrizi 1991: 20; Johns 2002: 82) and which carried inscriptions in Arabic (Johns 2006) – and was revered through *proskynesis* (Nef 2011: 122–4), which designates different types of prostration. The production of textiles in the royal palace factory, an equivalent of the Islamic *firaz*, and of the Byzantine *ergasterion*, and moreover of textiles bearing Arabic inscriptions, is not a Latin practice.

The presence of eunuchs at the Sicilian court is another distinctive characteristic underlined by twelfth-century authors. This widely diffused medieval practice was absent from the Latin courts. Eunuchs, supposedly figures of submission, since they were slaves and deprived of family, not only often exercised high-level functions and were close to the king, but, in Sicily as elsewhere (De La Puente 2003; Nef 2011: 340–2), they were the heads of properties and dependants. They were known in the city of Palermo, where they were able to mobilize combatants.

All this quite complex elaboration raises a question: Who were its recipients? A large part of the elements we have listed here were not known only by a few courtiers. Beyond coins, a lot of them were known by the Palermitans, just as the eunuchs were, but they were also seen outside of the capital when the king traveled in Sicily or to the mainland. Obviously, this is not to say that this construction was intended to be seen by all, and even very material facts (inscriptions located at the top of a monument, etc.) demonstrate it. This is not specific to twelfth-century Sicily and has been analyzed by historians and art historians. It does not prevent us from trying to determine the virtual recipients of this construction, or rather, the ambitions

the Hautevilles expressed by means of these instruments. This is all the more important as, from the end of the eleventh century, parallel contexts had given birth to other political elaborations in the Iberian Peninsula and in the Levant. The meaning of the Hautevilles' choices thus has to be interrogated.

An imperial and Mediterranean horizon

The figure of the eunuch introduces us to the imperial dimension of the Hautevilles' construction. Coming from outside, carrying political references common to the greatest part of the contemporary Mediterranean, and in particular to the imperial entities (Byzantium, the Fatimids, and the Abbasides) which displayed their power in it, the eunuch is considered antithetic to Latin conceptions of kingship for he is the product of a modification of "human nature" contrary to God's will and a slave, but nonetheless exercises very important functions. The Latin conquerors of Sicily could, and sometimes did, perceive them as a limit for their own role and as an abuse of power on the king's part. We saw, besides, that Muslims of Sicilian origin are not attested to at the court. These elements suggest that part of the political language used by the Hautevilles, and thus of its recipients, has to be understood and looked for in a wider context. All of the instruments of legitimization we detailed above can, in the same way, although with different connotations, be read as having recipients not only within the realm but also outside it, embassies and temporary visitors who might describe it to others, just as the Hautevilles' envoys were the bearers of this elaboration abroad. Other elements, besides its sources of inspiration and audience, can be added in order to reinforce this interpretation, which gives the Hautevilles' enterprise an imperial dimension.

First of all, the Hautevilles developed a strategy and a policy of expansion in the Mediterranean which is worth analyzing. Sicily's position, which made it a lock between the Occidental and the Oriental basins of the Mediterranean, and the window Puglia opened on the Adriatic Sea explain part of their choice to lead a "straits strategy" which aimed to control both sides of each strait bordering their domain (Strait of Otranto, Strait of Messina, and Strait of Sicily) and the islands close to their territories (Malta, Pantelleria, and Corfu) (Bresc 2002). This military motivation and the will to limit piracy could perhaps explain their expansion in Ifriqiya, in central Maghreb and Libya (Bresc 1998; Nef 2011: 590–2, 607–9, 619–20) through the control of coastal *emporia* as well as the conquest of Jerba and Pantelleria. They justify less the Hautevilles' distrust towards the Crusades or their interest in Byzantium and in Egypt parallel to the Fatimids' twilight (Nef 2011: 619–20). And they explain even less the construction which is that of the Ifriqiyian *emporia*: their population was paying the *jizya* just as the Muslims of Sicily did; their governors benefited from the Sicilian kings' delegation and received from them a diploma of investiture and robes of ceremony, as in the *dar al-islam*. Moreover, Ifriqiyian coinage referring to the Hautevilles' authority is attested. This hierarchization of entities and integration of groups through specific juridical statuses has been defined as typical of the imperial conceptions (Burbank and Cooper 2010: 8; Nef 2013).

Above all, simple strategic considerations do not explain the intensity of the relations between Sicily and Ifriqiya all through the twelfth century and other dimensions of the Hautevilles' policy such as their patronage of written production in Arabic, texts that only a number of their court and a very small number of the Arabic-speakers of Sicily were able to access. The welcoming of Arab Muslims in Sicily was constant: just as the Hammudids in the eleventh century (a family the geographer al-Idrisi belonged to), who converted in part (Johns 2002: 235ff.; Nef 2010b), and George of Antioch had been, the Hammudids were refugees in the island in the middle of the twelfth century (Nef 2011: 168–9), and numerous Muslim

authors were also temporary hosts to the Hautevilles. This is the case for al-Idrisi, whose exact relations with Sicily are still an object of debate (Nef 2010b); but also for Ibn Qalaqis, an Egyptian poet who visited Sicily in 1168–9 and sung to William II an Arabic *qasida* (De Simone 1996; Nef 2008); for Ibn Jubayr, who was welcomed after the ship which took him back to al-Andalus from a pilgrimage to Mecca sank at Messina in 1185 (Dejugnat 2010); and for Ibn Zafar (Nef 2011: 207–10).

All of these authors integrated Sicily and their kings in a literary Islamic horizon: through geography, an imperial discipline, which was conceived for the first time in a long time on the scale of the entire oikoumene by al-Idrisi (1999: introduction); through a *rihla*, a literary genre born in the Western part of the Islamic world in the thirteenth century and which consists in the relation of a pilgrimage to Mecca, in which Ibn Jubayr redefined the position of Sicily in relation to a world of Islam which was slowly diminishing before the eyes of the Arab Muslim writers, above all when they were Andalusians (Dejugnat 2010); through laudatory poetry, in which Ibn Qalaqis gave the language of power an Arabic expression; while Ibn Zafar illustrated, through his mirror for princes, another genre yet, which takes into account the past and universal history in order to define what good government should be in Islam.

This interpretation of the Hautevilles' elaboration does not pretend to assert that it operated a consensual synthesis or to deny that tensions existed at court and in the realm about its opportunity, but it questions the analyses which have been made of such tensions until now.

Tensions and diverging interpretations

In a quite Manichean way, two interpretations of the fate of Muslims and of Islamic culture in twelfth-century Sicily have been proposed. The first emerged during the period of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century. It presented Sicily as an example of a non-crusading kingdom which had promoted a harmonious synthesis between cultures and languages (Giunta and Rizzitano 1967). The second, more recent, one has to be understood in the context of the growing international and national tensions around Islam which began in the 1990s in Europe and in the United States of America. It describes the Hautevilles' policy as one of exclusion and violence exerted against the insular Muslims that Frederick II would have achieved with their deportation towards Lucera (Johns 1992; Maurici 1995), and "Islamic" court life and Arabic administrative production as having a very limited real impact (Johns 2002: 284–300). Far from denying this apparently ambiguous historical reality, we think that the imperial dimension of the Hautevilles' ambitions is a key to its understanding. The recipients of this construction are not only, and probably not in the first place, the Muslims of Sicily. Moreover, the tensions which manifested themselves in the kingdom have to be interpreted less as tensions between religious groups than as tensions around the exercise of power and around the definition of the very nature of royal power in twelfth-century Sicily. Thus, it might be useful to come back to the phases of this elaboration and to the manifestations of the tensions which accompanied them in order to analyze them more closely.

As far as the theme we are treating is concerned, a first important date is 1112. It is the year in which Count Roger came of age after the regency of his mother Adelasia. It was also marked by a change of capital in Sicily, Messina being abandoned in favor of Palermo. Motivated in part by a baronial revolt against the countess's government, which is little documented, this decision was probably also motivated by the idea of using a city which was one of the important capitals of the Mediterranean and was considered as such not only by Islamic geographers but also by Latin chroniclers. Thus, the chronicle of Alexander of Teleso, which ends in 1136, describes the magnates advising Roger II to become king with the following arguments:

[The councilors] added that the center and capital of the kingdom should have been Palermo, which, formerly, in the past, they said, had had kings who had ruled over the province [of Sicily], and which, subsequently, after many years, through an impenetrable divine plan, had remained without a king until that date.

(*Alexander Telesinus 1991: 23*)

What is certain is that the political center of the kingdom shifted towards the Islamic world, strengthening the Hautevilles' links with Islamic political practices.

The second important date is 1130, the year Roger became king of Sicily. It is at the same time a point of arrival and a point of departure in what appears to be a re-Arabization of the administration and the documents it produced and as a promotion of Islamic political references, among others. This way of introducing a distance between the king and his subjects was perceived by contemporaries. The period beginning in 1130 (up to the death of Roger II in 1154) is also that of the reinforcement of links with Ifriqiya and with the Fatimids.

Nonetheless, the period is not devoid of tensions: George of Antioch seems to have been a promoter of this reorientation at the expense of another adviser of the king, more closely linked with Byzantium, Christodoulos, who was imprisoned in the 1120s (Nef 2011: 587–8). Another moment of tension during the same period is the execution of the eunuch and chief of the fleet, Philip of Mahdiyya, who was burned in public for apostasy in 1153. Although earlier sources insist on the religious dimension of this condemnation, Roger II being attributed a kind of Christian fervor as he gets nearer to death (Metcalf 2002: 305–7), it has been justly suggested that it could be understood in relation to Islamic conceptions (Bougard 2013: 42–4)³ since fire is the punishment reserved for apostasy in Islam. Moreover, this happened during the month of Ramadan, a choice which is meaningful. Here again, Islamic is not equivalent to Muslim for the supporters of Roger II.

William I's reign is particularly dense in political confrontations. The main source for this period is the Pseudo-Falcandus's chronicle (Loud and Wiedemann 1998), which describes the Sicilian events between 1154 and 1169. All specialists consider the anonymous author to be a Latin, born in northern Europe and who lived for a long period in Sicily before leaving it. During the reign of William I and the beginning of the regency of his widow, Margaret of Navarra (whose origin cannot be forgotten in the context of the Iberian Peninsula's *Reconquista*), the criticisms of the Hautevilles' choices, some of which were abandoned, are better documented. The Italian mainland and Sicily's Latin barons manifested their opposition to a power which, they thought, did not leave them enough room. This opposition did not take the form of a simple anti-Muslim movement. It was at first a movement against the new chief minister of the kingdom, Maio of Bari, then it led to the abandonment of Ifriqiya (1160) (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 78–81), and, only afterwards, to the murder of Maio and to massacres of Muslims (1161) in Palermo and around Piazza (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 121–2), where a royal army, formed in part of Muslims, was sent to subdue the Latin rebels, thus generating fights between Christians and Muslims within the army (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 124). Piazza was a Lombard (northern Italian) settlement and the hatred between Muslims and Lombards engendered by these events is said to have persisted. All the same, Palermo's murders are said to have provoked revenge trials organized by the eunuch Martin, who was in charge of watching the city and the palace of Palermo (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 130–1). He was helped in this enterprise of revenge by a Latin, Robert of Calatabiano, who was in charge of the Sea's Castle, which contained a prison (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 135–6).

After the death of William I in 1166, a new period began. The aristocracy seems to have thought that it could take the opportunity of the regency to reinforce its power. The arrival in

Sicily in 1167 of Stephen of Perche, brother of the Queen Margaret, who designated him as chancellor, appeared as an opportunity to see judged the eunuchs and those who were accused of abuses against the Christians (Robert of Calatabiano, among others). Some measures were taken in this direction but they were limited and appear above all as a communication policy.

This is not to say that tensions disappeared altogether. The eunuch Peter, who benefited from a posthumous emancipation by the king, was promoted by the queen and at the same time fiercely criticized and suspected of treason and apostasy; he thus fled to Ifriqiya (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 146–8). Here again, though, the problem is more political than religious, as the details reveal. An important element seems to be the ascension of a “nobility of State,” to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, accessible to individuals of low birth to the detriment of the inherited nobility. For example, Matthew of Aiello, who, as we have seen, was on the eunuchs’ side and a promoter of the Hautevilles’ program, was criticized by the aristocracy from this point of view (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 134). Peter, all the same, not being a slave anymore, became an example of an aristocracy born exclusively of service to the king. That the denunciations of this political party by its opponents should have sometimes taken the form of accusations of apostasy or of Islamicization is quite banal. Nonetheless, even once Peter left, he was still defended by some Latins: thus, Richard of Molise defied in single contest whoever would accuse Peter of having betrayed the king of Sicily in 1160 in front of Mahdiyya and justified his flight by the pressure exerted upon him.

One last argument which has to be commented upon is the recurring idea which is expressed in various sources, that the royal palace’s servants, officially converted, remained in reality Muslims. First of all, and without taking a position on the reality of this situation (for more arguments in favor of it, see Johns 2002: 251–3), it should be remembered that this assertion is not frequent. Moreover, it can be found in two different contexts: a Latin, critical, one (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 78) and an Islamic, positive, one (Ibn Jubayr, in Johns 2002: 212–15).

In the first case, the first occurrence coincides with the loss of Mahdiyya and the second with the accusations against Robert of Calatabiano. In 1160, the chronicler known as the Pseudo-Falcandus, although he criticizes the eunuch Peter’s failed military intervention, does not accuse him expressly of treason and attributes the political responsibility of Mahdiyya’s abandonment to Admiral Maio (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 78–81; Johns 2002: 223 is wrong on this specific point). Nonetheless, on this occasion he specifies that, like all the eunuchs, Peter remained Muslim at heart.

In 1167, when Stephen of Perche became chancellor, numerous accusations were expressed against Christians who had converted to Islam in secret, in particular against Robert of Calatabiano, who had been an instrument of the royal repression after the rebellion of 1161. He is accused of ill treating specifically the Christians, favoring, for example, the rape of Christian virgins by Muslims (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 166–8), a topic accusation,⁴ but to which the pope Alexander III seems to have given some credit since he wrote to the chancellor in order to ask him what he had done to punish these crimes (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 166, n.184). The passage in the Pseudo-Falcandus’s chronicle is very interesting because it clearly exposes how the case of Robert of Calatabiano, who seems to have been pitiless but also crystallized fantasies, is used and manipulated by all the court’s factions in their own interest. As for the queen, she ends up protecting Robert. He is judged, imprisoned in the Sea’s Castle because he cannot pay his debts, and dies there.

Interestingly enough, the problem here is more the idea of Muslim proselytism and of the dissimulation of reality than the fact of being Muslim *per se*, but the loyalty to the king (or to the queen) of the eunuchs and of the individuals suspected to have converted in secret is not

questioned. We thus understand better the intervention of the pope, who tries to remind his interlocutor of the hierarchy of priorities from his point of view: religion, and not politics, should be the first preoccupation of the chancellor. Moreover, if the magnates were hostile to Robert of Calatabiano, they were also to accuse Stephen of Perche of being a stranger and of concentrating too much power (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 169). Once again, the religious interpretation is not sufficient to explain tensions at court.

As for the degradation of the Muslim peasants' situation, which is documented at least in a part of Sicily, it is not necessarily linked with these events. Indeed, the evolution towards seigneurialization supported by beneficiaries of fiscal concessions is certainly not a specificity of twelfth-century Sicily. That the Hautevilles were favorable to Christianity and Christians to the detriment of Muslims or Islam is not contradictory with the integration of Islamic elements in their innovative system. One might be interested by taxes, feed imperial ambitions, and be nonetheless deeply Christian. That they might in precise circumstances give priority to the stability of government over questions of faith is not contradictory with their attachment to Christianity either. In this field, the historian should avoid oversimplifying. Another way of looking at this question is to check how Muslim, or even Islamic, the elements listed above were considered to be by contemporaries.

Reading twelfth-century testimonies

The interpretation sustained here, according to which the main reason for the recurring tensions in twelfth-century Sicily was not the opposition between the distinct religious, cultural, or even linguistic groups which were present on the island, but rather political competition around the exercise of power and the royal ideology,⁵ seems to be supported by the testimony of contemporaries. They not only give evidence on political events but reflect the fact that what we qualify today in retrospect as “Islamic,” “Muslim,” “Arab,” or “Arabic,” with little distinction, was not qualified as such, or as anything whose “otherness” would have needed to be underlined in the twelfth century.

On this question, we can imagine, even if we do not associate a political position with each of them, that the perception of the authors, informed and shaped by their personal history and by their social background at the time when they wrote, differed. We will thus see what were the positions of an Arab Muslim close to the Hautevilles, and above all who spent much time in the island, what were those of an Arab Muslim who was passing through, of a Latin who came from outside, and of a Greek-speaking Christian native of the island.

Let us begin with the “insiders.” On the one hand is al-Idrisi, author of the geography described as “Roger’s Book.” His description of Sicily (after 1158) is quite interesting. The author mentions the Christianity of his patron at the beginning of the *opus*, but the description of the island could be that of an Islamic region. Roger I and II are introduced and their conquest of Sicily is sung, but with no allusion to their religious creed. What is more, no church is mentioned in the whole text if we exclude Catania’s Benedictine monastery because it shelters the elephant symbolizing the city. Palermo’s cathedral is evoked as “Friday’s mosque or rather the building which had this function in the past and which turned to be what it was before” (al-Idrisi 1999: 308; 1989: 591)! If the Islamic past and domination are often evoked, the contemporary ones are never qualified. Moreover, the maritime and commercial relations between several Sicilian localities and the *dar al-islam* are expressly alluded to, such as in the case of Trabia, Messina, Sciacca (from Tripoli and Ifriqiya), Marsala (al-Idrisi 1999: 309, 312, 318–19; 1989: 592, 595, 600–1), without taking into account the various allusions to merchants coming from all horizons which characterized many of the maritime ports. Everything thus

works here as if the Hautevilles prolonged the life of a past Sicily (Marsala destroyed and restored by Roger I being the only exception) which is nonetheless not qualified as either Muslim or Islamic.

On the other hand, there is Philagete of Cerami, a Sicilian author of Christian homilies and other religious texts. Invited to pronounce a sermon in Palermo's Cappella Palatina, he describes the chapel. This text written in Greek has been preserved (Lavagnini 1990). What is interesting is that no element is qualified as Islamic or Oriental, or even considered as surprising, not even the ceiling, on which books have been written by modern historians.

As for the "outsiders," a first author is Latin, although his exact identity is not known. The Pseudo-Falcandus is considered to be the author of a chronicle already evoked and of a *Letter to the Treasurer of the Church of Palermo* written after 1189 (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 252–63). His *Letter* cries over the disappearance of the Hautevilles' Sicily threatened by Henri VI's "*furore teutonico*" after the death of William II, who left no heir, since the emperor had married Roger II's daughter, who was born after Roger's death. Two of the *Letter's* aspects are related to the question tackled here. First, it contains a description of Palermo, presented as the symbol of the Hautevilles' elaboration, which never qualifies any element as Islamic or Muslim (toponyms excepted, such as the "Sarracens' forum"), even if the Palatine chapel, the palace, the palatine workshops, and all the fruits introduced during the Islamic domination are exalted and detailed (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 258–62).

Second, the author attributes the predictable defeat of the population by Henri VI to its divisions and explicitly to the oppression the Christians imposed on the Sarracens, an oppression which prevented the population from joining together (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 255). But, if read carefully, it is clear that the absentee of the text is Tancred of Lecce, who was linked to the Hautevilles' family, although his birth was illegitimate, and opposed Henri VI. The author does not seem to think he would be the king of unity he is hoping for. The reason for this silence is linked with the evocation of the Sarracens' oppression. Indeed, Tancred of Lecce was among the perpetrators of the massacres of Muslims in 1161. It is thus not a general position which is expressed by the anonymous author but a way to remind the well-informed reader of the impossibility of Tancred's reign and a call to designate a third man, whose name is not suggested (Nef forthcoming).

If we follow the reading of Sicily's history, using Pseudo-Falcandus's key, the Muslims of Sicily rebelled against the government which emerged after William II's death, because it was made up of individuals they identified, with some reason, as hostile to the Hautevilles' program.

Another outsider is Ibn Jubayr, an Arab Muslim from al-Andalus. His description is opposed to al-Idrisi's. The beginning of the text is indeed characterized by a kind of wonder in the face of the seemingly Islamic way of governing and court life. Nonetheless, the tone changes progressively and the text can be seen as a platonic unveiling of Sicilian reality. His travel from East (Messina) to West (Trapani) shows the author that the Muslims' situation on the island is not to be envied and is marked by oppression. Here again, one should not forget that every text is drawn by a demonstration and a strategy which a reading limited to the pages dealing with Sicily cannot make explicit. It has been shown that Ibn Jubayr is describing a journey towards the sources of Islam (Damascus and Baghdad) in an attempt to ward off the mortal threat al-Andalus is facing. On this journey, it is clear that Sicily cannot be an example but, on the contrary, the symbol of what has to be avoided.

Of course, one might think that all these texts cannot be read as a neutral expression about Sicily, that the first two defend the Hautevilles' conceptions, while the last two express a hostile position for distinct motivations. This should certainly be kept in mind. Nonetheless, one should not forget that in reality all these texts converge: what we classify as "Islamic elements"

are Islamic, and above all Muslim, neither for insiders nor for outsiders, even those who at first believed, or rhetorically pretended to believe, the contrary. All of them underline wonder, the extraordinary, but they do not qualify it in a “philological way.”

This should also make us very careful about the speed with which changes happen in societies, rather than to suppose, often constructed, *a posteriori* continuities. What might have appeared as strange, other, foreign to the first conquerors was not so for the regional population, and soon was not so either for the descendants of the conquerors.

Conclusions

It appears difficult to deny an Islamic dimension to the Hautevilles' Sicily at the end of this quick overview, but what it means exactly has to be given greater thought. Islam in twelfth-century Sicily is only partially Muslim, and described as such by contemporaries with precise aims. The Sicilian example does thus invite us to rethink the categories we use. Considering the interpretation of the actors and of contemporaries is important in this process, but we should also interrogate our own questioning and categories.

Questioning the “authenticity” of the Arabic and Islamic dimension of this royal elaboration in this context, as has sometimes been done, is quite problematic, as is the notion of authenticity itself. The constant social evolution and permanent reinterpretation of the social reality cannot be the object of a value judgment by historians and other social scientists. What we exposed can be interpreted in two different ways. Either this dimension cannot be qualified as Islamic because it is quite a surprising construction mixing references borrowed from the Islamic culture and Christianity, or it is a peculiar expression of Islamic culture in a specific context. This last option can be difficult to accept for fundamentalists, be they religious or culturalist, for it contrasts with an essential definition of Islam, but it should not be difficult for historians and social scientists.

This Islamic dimension was not seen as a problem, and often not even perceived as such, in the twelfth century for it was seen as a part of Sicilian reality. Its cultural realizations were extolled and its religious dimension was manipulated politically by the opponents of the Hautevilles, although the sovereigns themselves certainly did not exalt Muslim religion.

Notes

- 1 We distinguish here by the use of distinct terms what is religious (islam, Muslim) in today's categories and what is more largely part of Islamic societies and can be other than Muslim (Islam, with a capital “i,” Islamic); the expression “Arab Muslim” will here qualify individuals or groups which may be Arabic speakers or not, Muslim or not, but part of an Islamic society, that is, whose government defines itself as a part of the *dar al-islam*. We have no space here to underline how central these questions of definition are (Nef 2011).
- 2 Islamic Sicily was forgotten for a long time. From the end of the nineteenth century to the 1980s and 1990s, the two main works were: Amari 1991; Talbi 1966 from the point of view of Ifriqiya. A few sectors have known occasional but constant renewal: art history; philology; numismatics. This has changed in the last decade and the historical (and archeological) study of Islamic Sicily is flourishing today.
- 3 In this article F. Bougard, whom I thank for this communication, contemplates this possibility but ends by rejecting it in favor of an interpretation emphasizing renewed concepts linked with Roman Law, punishment by fire having disappeared during the High Middle Ages in the Latin world. He confirmed to me orally, though, that a systematic study he is preparing on this subject will leave more space for the Islamic dimension of the re-emergence of punishment by fire in contexts where it is plausible, such as Spain and Sicily.
- 4 Limiting the investigation to the Pseudo-Falcandus, beyond Robert of Calatabiano, two men are accused of rapes and/or prostitution of virtuous women: Maio (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 76) and the *strategos* Richard in Messina (Loud and Wiedemann 1998: 83); both were killed. The three

characters gave birth to a strong hatred in the population, and the same accusation is made against all three, although two were Christians.

- 5 Another dimension of the question is socio-economic and has to do with the degradation of the peasants' situation, which, though partially and indirectly, is documented. We leave this aspect aside here for there are very few testimonies about the rural evolution.

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