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Bridging Europe and Africa: Norman Sicily's Other Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The Norman conquest of Sicily detached the island from its North African framework, and a century of Latin Christian rule effectively transformed its society. But the island was not completely disconnected from the southern Mediterranean, as long term trade contacts, political links and military ambitions intervened to cast relations between the two sides. A Norman thalassocracy in the mid-12th century created a short-lived political bridge between Europe and Africa. In the age of the crusades, regional forces across the central Mediterranean could not be contained within the model of direct Christian rule experimented in the Latin east. The present chapter studies the transition from informal control to the establishment of direct rule, which led to the formation of a 'Norman Ifrīqiya'. The short-lived Norman overlordship across Ifrīqiya was mainly recorded in the pages of medieval Muslim historians, conditioning the methodology used by its modern historians. The study of Norman Ifrīqiya became possible thanks to a remarkable Muslim historiographic effort to explain Christian intervention in the affairs of Ifrīqiya, underlining the historian's powerful role as arbiter. It is the Muslim historian who becomes the main narrator of Sicily's 'other Kingdom'.

It-tmexxija Normanna ta' Sqallija begħdet l-ikbar gżira Mediterranja mid-dinja tal-Magreb, waqt li matul is-seklu tnax is-soċjetà tagħha nbidlet mill-qiegħ. Biss il-ħakma Normanna ma qatgħetx il-kummerċ, il-kuntatti politiċi u anke l-ambizzjonijiet militari tal-gżira fil-Magreb. It-talassokrazija Normanna f'nofs is-seklu tnax bniet għal xi żmien pont politiku bejn l-Ewropa u l-Afrika. Fl-era tal-kruċjati, il-mudell Palestinjan ta' tmexxija diretta nisranija f'art Musulmana, ma rnexxiex fiċ-ċentru tal-Mediterran. Dan l-artiklu jistħarreġ il-bidla minn kontroll informali għal tmexxija diretta, li wasslet għall-ħolqien ta' l-Ifrīqijja Normanna. It-tagħrif dwar in-Normanni fl-Ifrīqijja ġej prinċipalment minn kittieba Musulmani, fatt li jikkondizzjona l-metodoloġija ta' l-istoriċi moderni. L-istudju ta' l- Ifrīqijja Normanna jista' jsir bis-saħħa ta' l-istorjografija Musulmana, li tat is-setgħa lill-istoriku jagħżel kif jirrakkonta l-intervent nisrani fl-Ifrīqijja. L-istoriku Musulman jieħu postu bħala n-narratur ewlieni ta' din is-'saltna l-oħra' ta' Sqallija.

The Norman conquest of Sicily, completed by 1091, shifted the largest Mediterranean island away from the sphere of influence of the eastern Maghrib, integrating it into a new Latin Christian framework[1]. The Norman conquerors took their place in the former capital of the Kalbite emirs, garrisoned castles and strongpoints, and established a network of lay and ecclesiastical Latin Christian lordships. The value of Sicily as a springboard for the wider Mediterranean ambitions of Robert Guiscard Duke of Apulia, Calabria and Sicily, and his brother Roger I Count of Sicily became evident even before the island had been fully occupied by the Normans. Short-term gains outside Sicily and southern Italy were, nevertheless, overshadowed by the task of consolidating the Norman conquests there. Almost half a century after the fall of Palermo (1071), Roger's son and successor Roger II undertook the difficult and protracted task to weld together Sicily and the Norman lands in southern Italy into a newly-established Kingdom of Sicily. Throughout the 1130s, Sicily's resources were stretched to the limits as it fought to quell rebellions in southern Italy and to repel the invasion of an international coalition led by Pope and Emperor.

From 1052 onwards, Ifrīqiya – the province of Africa, denoting an extensive region including modern day Tunisia – was devastated by the Banu Hilāl and the Banu Sulaym, invading tribesmen dispatched by the Fatimid Caliph against the insubordinate North Africans who were abandoning the Shiite cult. The ancient capital al-Qayrawān was destroyed in 1057, and the civil strife greatly weakened the African emirates. The long-term effects of the invasions have been the subject of historical discussion[2]. In a sense, al-Qayrawān's tragedy worked to the advantage of other areas in the provincial economy. It is clear that Ibn Khaldūn's depiction of the tribesmen falling on the Maghrib like a "swarm of locusts" has to be taken with a pinch of salt; Ifrīqiya remained a significant market for the Saharan trade in gold, slaves and other commodities in the 11th and 12th centuries[3]. The town of al-Mahdīya was an important provincial terminal for the trans-Saharan gold trade. Nevertheless, many historians followed Ibn Khaldūn in looking at the events of the 1050s as a catastrophic blow for the Maghrib, in many areas causing large-scale abandonment of land cultivation and leaving a long trail of chaos and destruction. The Arab tribesmen are said to have brought the Zīrids to their knees, and greatly weakened the neighbouring Hammādids. Although the Hilāli invasions are not the subject of this chapter, they cannot be dismissed as one amongst the several factors which weakened Ifrīqiya by undermining its political unity, inviting future Christian expansion in the region[4]. The North African troubles favoured the Normans in Sicily, not only because Zīrid resources were drastically curtailed, but also because periodic famines increased African dependence on the Sicilian granaries[5].

The Norman conquest did not detach Sicily completely from its former North African coordinates, as the Norman rulers were quick to organize grain shipments to north African ports, and sealed their lucrative control of this activity via trading agreements with the Zīrid authorities, effective from 1076. As is well known, Roger I refused to

support the Christian attack on al-Mahdīya in 1087, citing his trade agreement with the Zīrid state. Sicilian immigrants in Ifrīqiya retained links with their co-religionists subjected to Norman rule, while some late Jewish trading contacts on both sides were attested in the documents of the Cairo Geniza. This chapter studies the strategic shift in Sicilian-African relations from commercial cooperation to confrontation. The transition from informal control to the establishment of direct rule, enabled the formation of a 'Norman Ifrīqiya' – which really amounted to a constellation of Norman-held towns along coastal Ifrīqiya. Whilst one Christian source announced prematurely the Norman conquest of 'Africa' as early as 1135, Arabic sources commenting about Sicily's involvement in Africa were careful to distinguish the various steps leading from the initial confrontation, to the stage of commercial cooperation, onward to the reduction of the Zīrid state to a Norman satellite, and the establishment of direct political control over key parts of it.

Conquerors and conquered at Africa's doorstep

The Norman occupation of Sicily altered the balance of power in the central Mediterranean, pushing the Christian frontier with Islam southwards. The scale of this shift became increasingly evident in the course of the 12th century, as the island's political, social, and economic structures were irreversibly realigned by the Christian ruling class[6]. Reshuffling the cultural elements, the various forces gradually converged to create a new society.

Could these changes be extended to the other side of the Mediterranean, along the North African coasts? Roger I annexed the Maltese islands in 1091, a feat perhaps repeated by his son Roger II; while Pantelleria was taken in 1123, and Djerba in 1135. Early signs of a central Mediterranean thalassocracy were already exhibited in Guiscard's extended Byzantine ambitions, affirmed in the temporary occupation of Corfù and Durazzo; and in Roger I's annexation of Malta, described in detail by Geoffrey Malaterra. The Sicilian thalassocracy is evident in the leading accounts of the Norman capture, and subsequent loss, of key parts of Ifrīqiya in the 1140s-1150s[7].

"Great of heart and ever full of ambition", as described by Romuald of Salerno, Roger II like his father seemed to epitomize the Norman warrior. But Roger II's overlordship also bridged different cultural worlds[8]. Whether, or how far, Roger II intended contemporary western Europe to take his status as "king of Africa" seriously, is a moot point – the terms *rex Africae* and *malik Ifrīqiya* (as he was described on a quadrilingual tombstone at Palermo in 1148) were invoked in different contexts, echoing Roger's real power in the region. The expansion of ᶜAbd al-Muᶜmin's Almohad empire into Ifrīqiya terminated any long-term Norman aspirations to North African lordship. Of equal significance, the collapse of Norman Ifrīqiya in the wake of Almohad expansion by 1160 provided a dismal backdrop to the next few decades in Sicily, which were marked by

ethnic strife and the disintegration of the forms of *convivencia* which had taken root there[9]. The end of 'Sicilian multiculturalism', which had been displayed at court under Roger II and William I, was expressed in the island's rapid Latinization by 1200.

A substantial literature has discussed Norman Sicily and its African ambitions in detail, identifying the main factors in the interplay between changes and continuities[10]. The continuities with the Muslim past were actively present at different levels. The survival of large Muslim communities openly practising their faith was one consequence of the pragmatic policy adopted by the Norman conquerors. In both town and countryside, Muslims organized into distinct communities worked the land and practised crafts, paying their taxes and living according to their laws. The Norman government seemed to acknowledge key Muslims as community leaders, thereby permitting elements linked to the old Muslim ruling class to play a public role. Numerous Arabic speakers served the Christian rulers, while large bodies of Muslims were periodically called to arms. The inclusion of North African models into the Norman administration of Sicily, as well as the application of Arabic as one of the languages of government, would underline this pragmatic approach[11]. It was epitomized in the multicultural environment of the Norman court, centred around Christian rulers 'dressed like Muslims' and surrounded by palace Saracens. Beyond the palace walls, more than a century after the fall of the Sicilian capital, a 'Muslim Palermo' visited by the Spanish traveller Ibn Jubayr existed alongside the other communities in the city[12].

All the same, Norman rule had wrought long-term, irreversible changes. The Muslim population of Sicily was subjected to Christian rule, and had to come to terms with this reality. Personal freedoms varied substantially according to social position and economic status, but those sectors of the Muslim population who could emigrate from Sicily to North African lands, did so. An undetermined percentage of the former Muslim population was absorbed into the emerging Christian mainstream. Ibn Jubayr did not fail to record his meetings with notable Muslims who expressed their discontent. Despite the survival of a 'Muslim Palermo' in 1185, in the late 12th century Islam was increasingly marginalized in the island's life. The Palermitan Muslims were recorded by Ibn Jubayr to be organized into a large community with their own leadership and tribunals, enjoying access to free market activities. Nevertheless, the Muslim situation in the Sicilian capital seemed to have been the exception, rather than the rule. Decades of intermittent ethnic and religious violence undermined the multicultural experiment of Norman Sicily. The surviving Muslim communities were gradually enclaved – and, from 1189, rose in open rebellion against Christian rule[13].

SICILIAN TRADE, ITALIAN CRUSADE

In the 11th century, the central Mediterranean was a significant arena of Christian-Muslim conflict. A joint Genoese-Pisan expedition in 1016 freed Sardinia from a large

Spanish Muslim armada led by a Muslim emir, al-Mujāhid, who had taken much of the island in 1015. Later Christian raids included the Pisan strikes against the north African seaport of Bône (present-day Annaba) in 1034 and the Sicilian capital city, Palermo, in 1063. The joint military effort witnessed in Sardinia in 1016 – an intervention which paved the way for substantial and long-term Pisan and Genoese activities in that island – was repeated in 1087 in the Genoese-Pisan strike against al-Mahdīya.

The Italian maritime republics sacked the Zīrid capital and its suburb, az-Zawīla. The 1087 campaign, which also included Roman and Amalfitan forces, foreshadowed the First Crusade. "It was as a *peregrinatio*, or pilgrimage, that the *Gesta Francorum* understood the expedition of 1096-9 to liberate the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem", remarks H.E.J. Cowdrey. "But in 1087 . . . the Pisans already wore pilgrim insignia as they prepared themselves to fight. Pilgrimage and holy war were evidently drawing together"[14]. The author of the *Carmen in victoria Pisanorum*, the Pisan victory poem, was careful to point this out.

On their way to North Africa, the joint forces made a stop at Pantelleria. The Pisan victory poem described the attack as follows:

> Navigating the sea they reached an island called Pantelleria [which was endowed] with a strong fortress; its inhabitants dispatched pigeons with letters informing Timinus about the large fleet. [Both] nature and man made the castle there astonishing, unlike any other castle in the world; two thousand men held the citadel, acknowledging neither God nor human virtue. [The Christians] landed there amazed at the buildings, and constructed very tall wooden towers; they destroyed and killed as God wished, and did what no one in the world may believe. I reckon only six men of those who came forth survived; they sent other pigeons with news about what had happened. King Timinus despaired upon learning this, and, troubled by the news, sought to negotiate with princes.

The Muslim chroniclers an-Nuwayrī and Ibn al-Athīr, also recorded the event:

> This year the Rūm put together [a fleet of] four hundred ships, and, assisted by the Franks, they all sailed to Pantelleria, which they depredated, devastated and burned. They then captured the city of az-Zawīla next to al-Mahdīya. The troops of Tamīm [Tamīm ibn al-Muʿizz ibn Bādīs, Zīrid ruler from 1062 to 1108] had gone out [of al-Mahdīya] to suppress a revolt. Therefore [Tamīm] made peace with the Rūm, paying them eighty thousand dīnār, on condition they hand back all the captives they had taken. Having done this, they all returned home[15].

The description by an-Nuwayrī is echoed by Ibn al-Athīr, who claimed that the armada of the Pisans and Genoese, "both Frankish [in nationality]", took "four years" to put together, and that Pantelleria was their meeting place. Both Muslim authors dated the Christian expedition against Pantelleria, az-Zawīla and al-Mahdīya to the Muslim year 481 (= 27 March 1088-15 March 1089).

Moreover, in the *Kitāb al-Bayān al-Maghrib* Ibn ʿAdhārī dated the attack by the *Rūm* on al-Mahdīya to 480 (=8 April 1087-26 March 1088). According to Ibn ʿAdhārī, who

made no mention of the sack of Pantelleria, the Italians reached Africa with a fleet of three hundred warships and thirty thousand fighters on board. The author claimed that the Zīrid army was employed in fighting away from al-Mahdīya and that the townsmen lacked arms and munitions to defend themselves. Ill advised by squabbling ministers, the Zīrid prince had refused to heed warnings about the coming invasion, and the walls of al-Mahdīya were reportedly left derelict. This explanation was repeated by at-Tigānī, who reported that the Christians took the King's tribute payment but sailed away with the women and children. Tamīm paid the invaders a handsome tribute of eighty thousand gold dinārs according to an-Nuwayrī; the figure may be exaggerated, but the reference to the payment of tribute is in itself a significant element in the history of Ifrīqiya[16].

The Normans were conspicuous by their absence in the events of 1087. According to Geoffrey Malaterra, the Pisans, realizing they lacked the men and the means to govern and garrison al-Mahdīya, offered the lordship of the city to Roger of Sicily. The Norman count quickly turned down the offer, citing a peace pact he had made with Tamīm. Malaterra had this to say on the event:

> While this was happening, the Pisans who had travelled to Africa to do commerce became the victims of reprisals. They put an army together and took by storm the city of King Teminus and obtained all of it except the main fortress where the king himself was holding out [the Qasr al-Mahdī, according to at-Tigānī]. He bravely prevented the attackers, who were not in sufficient numbers, from keeping hold of the city which they had sacked. So they sent representatives to the Count of Sicily, who was very powerful and had the means to carry out these things, enquiring whether he desired to have the city [for himself]. However [Roger] had already made a peace treaty with King Teminus and was committed to honour it, so he upheld the agreement and turned down the offer as it was against Teminus's interests. When King Teminus was no longer able to defend himself by means of arms, he offered money in exchange for peace. The [Christian] fleet left his realms after receiving his money. Nonetheless he swore according to his faith not to attack any Christian land in future, and to release all his Christian captives[17].

The details of Roger's treaty with Tamīm may be conjectured. Since 1076, an agreement with Roger I of Sicily had given Tamīm's subjects access to Sicilian grain. A peaceful commercial exchange presupposed the cessation of hostilities between the two sides. The agreement was profitable, and it gave Roger a free hand in the final stages of his campaign against the Muslims of Sicily. At the time of the Genoese-Pisan attack, Roger's forces were besieging Muslim Agrigento. The Zīrid ruler organized raids against Nicotera and Mazara in 1074 and 1075 and, as late as 1079-80, a North African squadron was spotted off Taormina, which was then besieged by Roger's troops. But this did not deter the Christian advance in Sicily. Nor did it forestall the agreement, which was quite extraordinary in allowing peaceful exchange to lessen the Christian-Muslim divide. The treaty was recalled by Ibn al-Athīr, with regard to Roger's refusal to assist a large Frankish army to conquer Africa[18].

Ibn al-Athīr's report, dated to AH 491 (=9 December 1097- 27 November 1098) is linked to an incident related to the Frankish conquest of Antioch. Recycling the incident of 1087, Ibn al-Athīr skilfully contrasted the political-religious discourse of the Frankish crusaders with the logic of profit. The passage traces the emergence of Frankish domination in the Mediterranean world, mentioning the fall of Toledo, the conquest of Sicily, and the temporary capture of footholds on the African mainland. The Arab chronicler dated the Frankish incursion in Syria to 490 (=19 December 1096 – 8 December 1097) and reported Baldwin's request of assistance from Count Roger for the passage of a large Frankish army to conquer Africa. Roger's counsellors urged him to cooperate with the Franks. Roger's reaction is grotesque, raising his thigh to pass air, to show his disapproval. But the passage which followed revealed his clever diplomatic calculations:

> When these Franks arrive here, a thousand ills will afflict me: I would be forced to provide them with ships to transport them to Africa, and to send my own troops too. Now, suppose they conquer the land and become its masters, they will control the trade in victuals instead of the Sicilians, and I would lose, to their advantage, the profit I make each year on the price of grain. If, on the contrary, they fail to achieve their objective, they would return to my land, and I shall be vexed with their presence. Moreover, Tamīm will tell me: "You have betrayed me; you have violated our pact", and will discontinue our friendship and the commerce between Sicily and Africa. No: It is much better that this remains to our profit, until we feel strong enough to take Africa ourselves.

Then calling Baldwin's ambassador, Roger told him "Since you propose to wage a Holy War against the Muslims, the noblest enterprise is the conquest of Jerusalem, which you will surely be able to free from Muslim domination, to your glory. With regard to Africa, know that I am bound by oaths and pacts stipulated with that people"[19].

Ibn al-Athīr's assertion that Roger redirected Baldwin's attention from Africa towards Jerusalem may be unfounded, yet his text confirms the main value of the agreement and provides an important insight into Roger's character. By citing his treaty with Tamīm as the reason for not providing assistance to fellow Latin Christian warriors (the Italian attackers of 1087 and the Frankish delegation of 1096), Roger was upholding an agreement with a Muslim lord well above his perceived duties as a Christian ruler. African gold permitted the Normans to consolidate their position as regional power brokers. One could argue that the arrangement between Sicily and Ifrīqiya developed from one of regional interdependence to a relationship of unequal exchange. The exchange of grain for gold, grossly speaking, entrenched the rulers of Ifrīqiya in a situation of economic dependence versus Sicily. The Sicilian commissioners supervising the North African customs houses became powerful agents of government, and the indebted Zīrid state was reduced to a form of economic protectorate by the treaty. Until the 1110s this regional arrangement was framed mainly in terms of commercial cooperation. In the 1120s the Zīrid state made an effort to break out of the vicious circle, to no avail. The region moved towards a renewed legitimation of violence. From 1135, the Sicilian

protectorate over al-Mahdīya was consolidated, granting Roger II a free hand in occupying whole parts of coastal Ifrīqiya. To an extent, the way to the physical extension of a Sicilian lordship along the Ifrīqiyan coast in the 1140s was paved by decades of economic control.

CONQUERING A NORTH AFRICAN KINGDOM

A variety of factors contributed to step up Sicilian ambitions to formalize their regional hegemony. Sicily under Roger II was steered towards an adventurous but ultimately misguided foreign policy by the ruler and his admirals, including ʿAbd ar-Rahmān or Christodoulos, and George of Antioch. In particular, George of Antioch, a political exile who rose to serve as chief minister to Roger II, and to become a major exponent of the Sicilian thalassocracy[20]. In a sense, the new generation of leaders after Roger I and Temīm were drawn into the dominant political-religious discourse which governed the Muslim-Christian conflict around the Mediterranean. The regional balance of power which had rested on peaceful commercial exchange was challenged on the drawing board with stillborn plans in Ifrīqiya to regain Sicily, and upset in fact with a partly-realized programme in Palermo to establish a Norman kingdom of Africa.

The Normans learned how to exploit to their own advantage the factional divisions which weakened the control of the Zīrid prince of al-Mahdīya in other parts of Ifrīqiya. Sicilian-African hostilities broke out in 1117-18 when Roger II was called to assist the governor of Gabes against the emir of al-Mahdīya[21]. Significantly, the conflict was triggered by a plan to attract foreign commerce to the port of Gabes, thereby challenging al-Mahdīya's monopolist pretensions. According to Ibn al-Athīr, Roger exchanged bitterly-worded letters with the ambitious prince at al-Mahdīya, ʿAlī, leading the latter to invoke Almoravid help for the Muslim reconquest of Sicily[22]. Roger demanded the release of his trading agents, and the immediate renewal of the Sicilian-African agreement, but it became increasingly clear that the Sicilians were determined to draw more political advantages as regional power brokers.

An ill-thought provocation soon provided the pretext for war when an Almoravid squadron attacked the Calabrian town of Nicotera in 1122, sailing away with captive women and children[23]. Knowing that Norman retribution was only a matter of time, the terrified rulers at al-Mahdīya contacted the Fātimid court in Egypt to intercede with Roger II on behalf of Ifrīqiya. George of Antioch was dispatched as Roger's envoy to Egypt, but the diplomatic exchange did not halt the Sicilian war plans[24]. In 1123 Roger II dispatched a fleet of three hundred ships, carrying an army led by 'a thousand and one knights', to capture al-Mahdīya[25]. The Sicilian armada was dispersed by a storm; some ships reached Pantelleria. A large number of its men were killed, while the women and children were captured, and the island was annexed to Sicily. According to Ibn al-Athīr, when the Sicilian forces reached the African coast and took control of the cas-

tle of ad-Dīmās, they were surprised by the determined Muslim resistance. Galvanized with cries of *Akbar Allāh*, the Muslims fell on the invaders, forcing the enemy troops to kill their own horses and flee to their ships. The Christian garrison of the castle of ad-Dīmās, lacking provisions and exhausted from constant battling, finally surrendered and were killed to the last man. Abandoning the siege of al-Mahdīya, the remainder of the Sicilian forces sailed away[26]. Underlining the new discourse legitimating violence, Ibn al-Athīr remarked that this victory was celebrated around the Muslim world in verse by several poets. Four years later, another Almoravid force sacked Syracuse after making landings at Patti and Catania.

All the same, Muslim audacity did not bring an end to the Sicilian ruler's role as regional power broker. The internal divisions of Ifrīqiya played in the hands of the Sicilian thalassocrats. The emir of al-Mahdīya enjoyed little effective authority outside his capital, and the provincial governors could not be expected to show loyalty towards the Zīrid prince. In an ironic twist, the same prince, al-Hasan ibn ᶜAlī, who triumphed against the Sicilian invaders in 1123, was forced to invoke Roger's protection in 1135 to ward off a Hammādid invasion[27]. Reportedly, it was the discontented subjects of the Ifrīqiyan vassal king who had appealed for the intervention of Yahyā, Hammādid emir of Bougie, in 1134. Following a successful intervention by the Sicilian fleet, Roger II obtained from al-Hasan extensive rights in Ifrīqiya, including the control of all customs revenues generated through trading activities, purportedly to ensure the regular collection of the Sicilian tributes. From 1135 onwards, al-Mahdīya was virtually Roger's protectorate[28]. Forced to accept ignominious terms, al-Hasan effectively agreed to partition Ifrīqiya with Roger II by recognizing the latter's right to impose Sicilian authority over those parts of Ifrīqiya which were not under direct Zīrid government. Moreover, Muslim communities which were to rise in revolt against Norman rule were to get no help from al-Mahdīya[29].

George of Antioch captured the island of Djerba in 1135 after surrounding it with his ships. In a letter addressed to the Fātimid caliph in Egypt, Roger II explained that he had occupied Djerba to destroy its pirates, thereby protecting Sicilian shipping. George of Antioch's occupation of Djerba, marked by the pillage of the island and the deportation of captive women and children to Sicily, confirmed his thalassocratic ambitions[30]. Roger granted the surviving Djerban community the *amān* (or safe conduct) to ransom their relatives and friends. al-Idrīsī remarked, almost in justification of the Sicilian occupation, that the Berber kharijite inhabitants of Djerba were generally "brown-skinned, inclined towards evil and of a hypocritical character. [Both] the upper classes and the rest of population speak only Berber. They are wont to rebel and disobey". Following their rebellion against Norman occupation in 1153, the Djerbans were "reduced to slavery and transported to Palermo"[31].

A Norman-held Djerba, with a royal governor installed there, opened the way for further expansion along the North African coast. It was also a consequence of a marked

shift in policy, from peaceful commercial cooperation to military intervention, already signalled in the failed Sicilian attack on al-Mahdīya. From 1123 to its capture by George of Antioch in 1148, the Zīrid capital was transformed into an economic and political satellite. Despite the consideration that the risks would outweigh the benefits, and that gains would be made at too heavy a price, the Christian rulers of Sicily embarked on an expansionist programme in the Maghrib, formalizing the advantages. The programme assumed the ability to establish, and manage in the long run, profitable forms of overlordship as had been achieved in the wake of the Sicilian conquest. They must have known that the making of a Christian realm in Sicily was still very much a work in progress. Naturally, this expansionist policy entailed administrative and financial restructuring at home.

> The Sicilian thalassocracy was consolidated under the "emir of emirs", the chief minister George. According to al-Maqrīzī's biography of George of Antioch (as translated by Jeremy Johns): 'George amassed the revenues and organised the foundations of the kingdom. He veiled Roger from [his] subjects, and arranged for him to dress in clothes like the Muslims, and not to ride out, nor to show himself in public, except on holidays, when he would process, preceded by horses adorned with saddles of gold and silver, and with caparisons studded with gemstones, and by domed litters and gilded banners, with the parasol above him and the crown upon his head. George was entitled "exalted master, pleasing [to God], glory of the victorious king, pride of majesty, rule of leadership, leader of armies, honour of ministers, emir of emirs"[32].

Allowing for the fact that al-Maqrīzī was writing in the 15th century, his biographical sketch of George of Antioch provides vital insight on Roger II and his chief minister. The 'orientalization' of Roger II's image, court, and trilingual administration, and the extension of Norman lordship to parts of Ifrīqiya, were, in a sense, an acknowledgment of the strategic location of the Norman kingdom as a bridge between civilizations. Whilst nourishing wider ambitions in the Latin East – claiming, unsuccessfully, the principality of Antioch after Bohemond II's death in 1130 – Roger's best opportunity for Mediterranean expansion seemed to lie southwards. These ambitions had immediate international reverberations – in 1135 it was reported at a German imperial meeting by alarmed Byzantine and Venetian envoys that Roger had taken "Africa, which is known to be a third part of the world"[33].

The 1140s were very difficult years for Ifrīqiya, which was troubled by large scale famine, as well as the plague. According to Ibn al-Athīr, the "great mortality" struck the country in 1142-3, killing many people, while those with means fled to Sicily, "where they met with cruel sufferings"[34].

Recurring famines which afflicted Ifrīqiya constrained al-Mahdīya to depend increasingly on Sicilian grain shipments, forcing the emir al-Hasan to sink deeper in debt with Roger. In a show of force, in 1141/2, George of Antioch appeared with his fleet off Ifrīqiya, seizing shipments sent from Egypt to alleviate al-Mahdīya's plight, to en-

force payment[35]. Despite the renewal of the protectorate, in 1142/3 the Sicilian fleet attacked several coastal areas of the kingdom, claiming to act on behalf of al-Mahdīya against rebellious communities. The town of Tripoli "of the West", which had asserted its autonomy from al-Mahdīya under the Banū Mātrūh chiefs, was attacked in June 1143, but Arab help enabled the Libyan town to repel the Sicilian attack[36]. Rearming in Sicily, the fleet went out again, this time burning down the Hammādid town of Djidjel, between Bougie and Bône. In 1144/45 the port of Bresk was taken. According to Ibn al-Athīr, its inhabitants were massacred, while women and children were enslaved and sold in Sicily "to the Muslims". The same fate met the inhabitants of the Kerkenna islands north of Djerba, which were captured in 1145/46; al-Hasan wrote to Roger to remind him of their bond, but Roger justified his action by claiming that the islanders were disobedient towards al-Mahdīya[37].

Ibn al-Athīr noted the following under the year 541 (= 13 June 1146-1 June 1147) "This year the Franks, may God curse them, took possession of Tripoli of the West". "Roger the Frank, king of Sicily", prepared a great fleet and sent it to Tripoli, which was surrounded by land and by sea on the third day of Muharram (15 June). The Tripolitanians came out to combat the invaders, and the battle lasted for three days. Exploiting internal divisions in Tripoli, where a town faction had expelled the Banū Mātrūh and brought it an Almoravid militia (the Mulattāmīn), the Sicilians took possession of Tripoli. Following the usual pillage of goods and capture of women, a universal amān was issued, allowing those who had fled the town to return. Soon they delegated authority to the Banū Mātrūh. Under Roger's overlordship, Tripoli prospered. According to al-Idrīsī, who recorded the slaughter of the townsmen and the enslavement of their women, the town flourished under Roger, and its district was "without equal in the products of the land, unlike any other inhabited place in the world". Nevertheless, Roger's geographer was careful to refer to Tripoli's earlier period of splendour as a trading centre, blaming tribal attacks for its decline[38].

In 542 (= 2 June 1147- 21 May 1148) it was the turn of Gabes to be taken by a Sicilian force, exploiting a chaotic situation in that town resulting from the disputed succession to the late governor al-Rashīd. A scheming freedman named Yūsuf threatened al-Mahdīya to submit Gabes to Roger of Sicily, as the governors of Tripoli had done, unless he was allowed to place Muhammad, a minor in his influence, in the governor's seat. Roger II duly dispatched Yūsuf his robe and charter as *wālī* or governor. The emir al-Hasan sent an army from al-Mahdīya to quell the rebellion in Gabes, and Yūsuf met an ignominious death. Following this incident at Gabes, where Norman expansion was checked, Roger was determined to eliminate Zīrid rule at al-Mahdīya, taking advantage of the widespread famine which continued to ravage the Maghrib. Indeed, if Ibn al-Athīr is to be trusted, "the worst came in the year 542, so that the notable families abandoned the towns and the countryside [of Ifrīqiya], and in their majority crossed over to Sicily; while the others ate each other, and there was a great mortality"[39].

The Sicilian fleet – which, according to al-Maqrīzī, included two hundred galleys, and one hundred oared horse-carriers – passed by Pantelleria, where it encountered a ship coming from al-Mahdīya. Taking carrier pigeons from the Ifrīqiyan ship, George tried to deceive al-Hasan by sending him news that the Sicilian fleet was sailing eastwards to attack the Byzantine islands. Nevertheless, a terrible wind "unleashed by God" wrecked George's plan to take al-Mahdīya by surprise. The Sicilian commander requested al-Mahdīya's help to defend the rights of the young Muhammad at Gabes. Realizing that this was just a pretext for capturing the capital, the Zīrid ruler declared that he could not join the Christian force to fight against fellow Muslims at Gabes. At the same time, he could not stay behind to defend his capital, because the Norman force was superior and it would block the city's access to provisions. Preferring "the salvation of Muslims more than [his] kingdom", the ruler and his household abandoned the city and found refuge in the ruins of ancient Carthage. Many of his subjects also fled the city, while other Muslims hid in Christian churches. By the time the wind had abated, permitting the Norman ships to drop their anchors inside the port, many inhabitants were already gone. George entered the royal castle and took possession of the Zīrid treasure and the prince's numerous concubines. Following a two-hour sack of al-Mahdīya, the pillage was stopped and a general *amān* was decreed, extending to the militiamen of the city, and the large numbers of inhabitants who had managed to escape. George was even reported to provide transports for the women and children. Having taken possession of al-Mahdīya, George sent armies to occupy Sfax and Sousse, treating the populations there with similar moderation[40].

There can be little doubt that Rome looked favourably at the Norman annexation of coastal Ifrīqiya; an "Archbishop of Africa" was consecrated in 1148[41]. According to Ibn al-Athīr, Roger would have conquered "the whole of Africa" were it not for his conflict with Byzantium[42]. Towards the end of his life, there are signs that Roger wished to be seen as a great Christian ruler. A Norman fleet commanded by George of Antioch's successor in the admiralty, the eunuch Philip of al-Mahdīya, captured the city of Bône in 1153. Upon his return, Philip was arrested and accused of having shown excessive clemency towards the Muslim population. Moreover, he was charged with practising Islam in secret, and condemned to death. In a public display of Christian zeal, Roger had his former admiral burned at the stake. The story, which was recorded by Ibn al-Athīr, was noted in great detail by a later editor of the chronicle of Romuald of Salerno, but the emphasis in the latter text is on Roger's unimpeachable credentials as a Christian king – a man "consumed by love for the Christian faith" – who would not desist from punishing his closest servants for their sins[43]. A blow to Sicilian Muslims, Philip's execution marked a traumatic ending to Roger's reign – for "God allowed Roger to live for only a short time afterwards".

The network established by the Sicilian thalassocracy across parts of Ifrīqiya seems to have extended to the important city of Tunis – the modern-day capital – only in a sec-

ondary way. For a time, according to a Venetian source, Tunis was forced to pay tribute to the Norman rulers of Sicily[44]. The project of Norman Ifrīqiya involved the resettlement of immigrant Christians across new areas under Norman lordship. It also brought about new hopes for surviving Christian communities in Ifrīqiya. Very recently, a major study has revealed some of the complexities of the evolving relationship between the Norman rulers of Sicily and the papacy[45]. The benefits accruing from the extension of Christian rule in the eastern Maghrib were not lost on Rome. Norman Africa, and the prospect of Christian expansion there, may have provided an additional motive for Rome's rapprochement with Palermo in 1156. William I's chief minister, Maio of Bari, a chief broker of the Siculo-Roman peace, may have shifted the focus from African to Italian politics in this crucial period, and was popularly blamed for the loss of Norman Africa in 1160. The *ammiratus ammiratorum* Maio was assassinated later that year in a revolt lead by Matthew Bonello; and Maio's character was likewise assassinated by 'Hugo Falcandus' in the pages of his *Liber de Regno Sicilie*.

The present contribution has underlined the medieval historian's role in tracing the evolution of the relationship across the Mediterranean waters from one of commercial cooperation, to one of unequal exchange, to the establishment of a Sicilian protectorate over al-Mahdīya, and the Norman military interventions leading to a short-lived overlordship. It has been claimed that "Norman rule in Africa aimed to be benign"[46]. Nevertheless, a benevolent form of government, including the delegation of administrative tasks to local notables, could hardly mask the reality of subjection to a Christian overlord. The accounts of the uprisings in 1158-59 leave no room for doubt; in the minds of Sicily's African subjects, the benefits of living under a restored Muslim rule vastly outweighed any consideration of mild Christian government. Sporadic signs of resistance to Christian rule emerged in the early 1150s, notably the Djerban revolt in 1153, which was crushed thanks to a major naval expedition, leading to the Norman re-conquest of the island, together with the subjection of the Kerkenna archipelago. In William I's early years of rule Sicily's fleets ranged across the Mediterranean, in a campaign in the Nile Delta (1155), as well as expeditions against Byzantine Negropont and Muslim Ibiza (1157). At the approach of the Almohad army, a series of revolts spread quickly to bring the Norman presence to an end. Town after town rapidly subjected themselves to the Almohads. The Muslim *reconquista* of Ifrīqiya was accelerated, according to Ibn al-Athīr, when the Almohads created two huge mountains of wheat and barley. The politics of grain were not lost on the Almohads, it seems.

The campaign culminated in the triumphal entry of the Almohads into al-Mahdīya in January 1160; the Almohad caliph ͨAbd al-Muͨmin is said to have wondered why the last Zīrid ruler of the city, who had become his *protégée*, had surrendered the fortress to Roger in 1148. Although a formal peace was not reached with Sicily before 1180, it has been shown how Genoese merchants were actively involved in linking Sicily and its former Ifrīqiyan domains under the new Almohad princes[47].

The formalization of Sicilian regional hegemony in the establishment of a Norman Ifrīqiya was the final stage of a process which originated in commercial cooperation across the Christian-Muslim divide in the central Mediterranean. Radically redrawn with the Norman conquest of Sicily, the divide was shown to be bridgeable through peaceful commercial exchange. By the early 12th century, Sicily and Ifrīqiya were linked through their economic interdependence. From 1135, al-Mahdīya became a de facto Sicilian protectorate, and in the 1140s much of coastal Ifrīqiya was subjected to Roger II's overlordship while the Zīrid state ceased to exist. By 1160 it was the turn of Roger's African dominion to meet the same fate. Ironically, the final Muslim victory saved Norman Ifrīqiya from historiographical extinction – by drawing Muslim chroniclers to write at length about the developments that would lead to a final Muslim victory. In doing so, they also recorded the degeneration of a relationship which, at first, avoided confrontation and turned to commercial cooperation to bridge the Christian-Muslim divide. Seizing on an excellent example, which foreshadowed the Muslim defeat of the Latin East and marked the prestigious success against a notable Christian thalassocracy, they became its chief narrators. Exploiting the benefits of hindsight, the Muslim historians reconstructed with meticulous detail the chain of events marking the rise and fall of Norman Ifrīqiya, relaying precious information on the making of a short-lived polity which, for hardly two decades, bridged the Mediterranean.

Notes

[1]   C. Dalli, *From Islam to Christianity: The Case of Sicily*, in J. Carvalho (ed.), *Religion, Ritual and Mythology. Aspects of Identity Formation in Europe*, Pisa 2006, pp. 151-70.

[2]   H. R. Idris, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Zīrides, X–XII siècles*, 2 volumes, Paris 1962; J. Poncet, *Le mythe de la 'catastrophe' hilalienne*, in "Annales ESC", 1967, 22, 5, pp. 1099-1120; H. R. Idris, *De la réalité de la catastrophe hilalienne*, in "Annales ESC", 1968, 23, 2, pp. 390-396; M. Brett, *Ifrīqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century A.D.,* "The Journal of African History", 1969, 10, 3, pp. 347-364.

[3]   *Ibid.*, pp. 347-364.

[4]   D. Abulafia, *The Norman Kingdom of Africa and the Norman Expedition to Majorca and the Muslim Mediterranean*, in D. Abulafia (ed.), *Italy, Sicily and the Mediterranean, 1100-1400*, Aldershot 1987.

[5]   Idris, *La Berbérie orientale* cit.

[6]   D. Abulafia, *The Two Italies*, Cambridge 1977; D. Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, Cambridge 1992; H. Bresc, G. Bresc-Bautier (eds.), *Palerme, 1070-1492. Mosaïque de peuples, nation rebelle: la naissance violente de l'identité sicilienne*, Paris 1993; G. A. Loud, A. Metcalfe (eds.), *The Society of Norman Italy*, Leiden 2002.

[7]   Abulafia, *The Norman Kingdom of Africa* cit.; J. Johns, *Malik Ifrīqiya: the Norman kingdom of Africa and the Fātimids*, in "Libyan Studies", 1987, 18, pp. 89-101; H. Houben, *Roger II of Sicily. A Ruler between East and West*, Cambridge 2002.

[8]   K. C. Britt, *Roger II of Sicily: Rex, Basileus, and Khalif? Identity, Politics, and Propaganda in the Cappella Palatina*, in "Journal of Mediterranean Studies", 16, 2007, 16, pp. 21-45.

[9]   F. Maurici, *Breve storia degli arabi in Sicilia*, Palermo 1995; Dalli, *From Islam to Christianity* cit.

[10]   For e.g. Abulafia, *The Norman Kingdom of Africa* cit.; J. Johns, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily. The Royal Dīwān*, Cambridge 2002.

[11]   *Ibid.*; A. Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily. Arabic speakers and the end of Islam*, London 2003.

[12]   BAS [Amari M. (ed), *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, 2 volumes, Rome-Turin, 1880-81], I, pp. 137-180.

[13]   F. Maurici, *L'emirato sulle montagne*, Palermo 1987; C. Dalli, *Migrant Society to Island Nation: Sicily*, in A.K. Isaacs (ed.), *Immigration and Emigration in Historical Perspective*, Pisa 2007, pp. 65-77.

[14]   H.E.J. Cowdrey, *The Mahdia Campaign of 1087*, in "The English Historical Review", 1977, 92, pp. 1-29.

[15]   BAS, II, pp. 110-160, at pp. 153-154; BAS, I, pp. 353-507, at pp. 440-441.

[16]   BAS, II, pp. 41-81, at pp. 62-63.

[17]   For another translation see K. B. Wolf, *The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of his Brother Duke Robert Guiscard by Geoffrey Malaterra*, Ann Arbor 2005, p. 179.

[18]   BAS, I, pp. 450-452.

[19]   BAS, I, pp. 450-452.

[20]   L.R. Ménager, *Amiratus – Αμερας. L'émirat et les origines de l'amirauté (XI-XIII siècles)*, Paris 1960.

[21]   BAS, II, p. 154.

[22]   BAS, I, pp. 454-455.

[23]   BAS, I, p. 456.

[24]   Johns, *Arabic Administration* cit., p. 259.

[25]   BAS, I, pp. 456-458.

[26]   BAS, I, p. 458; BAS, II, p. 290-291.

[27]   BAS, I, pp. 459-460.

[28]   BAS, II, p. 55; BAS, II, p. 157; BAS, II, p. 292.

[29]   M. Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*, Florence 1872, III, pp. 403-404.

[30]   BAS, I, p. 461.

[31]   H. Bresc, A. Nef (eds.), *Idrīsī. La première géographie de l'Occident*, Paris 1999, pp. 205-206.

[32]   Johns, *Arabic Administration* cit., pp. 80-82.

[33]   Abulafia, *The Norman Kingdom of Africa* cit.; Houben, *Roger II of Sicily* cit.

[34]   BAS, I, p. 469.

[35]   BAS, I, pp .461-462.

[36]   BAS, I, pp. 462-463.

[37]   BAS, I, pp. 464-465.

[38]   Bresc, Nef, *Idrīsī* cit., p. 199.

[39]   BAS, I, p. 470.

[40]   BAS, I, pp. 470-476.

[41]   Houben, *Roger II of Sicily* cit., p. 81.

[42]   BAS, I, p. 476.

[43]   Houben, *Roger II of Sicily* cit., pp. 110-112.

[44]   Abulafia, *The Norman Kingdom of Africa* cit., p. 35.

[45]   G. A. Loud, *The Latin Church in Norman Italy*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 255-339.

[46]   Abulafia, *The Norman Kingdom of Africa* cit., p. 36.

[47]   G. Pistarino, *Commercio e comunicazioni tra Genova ed il Regno normanno-svevo all'epoca dei due Guglielmi*, in "Centro di Studi Normanno-Svevi", *Potere, società e popolo nell'età dei due Guglielmi*, 1981, pp. 231-290.

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