



# A History of Muslim Sicily

*By Leonard C. Chiarelli*

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*History of Muslim Sicily* by Leonard Chiarelli is a delightful read for anyone interested in a thorough overview of the politics, economy, and society of Muslim Sicily over two and a half centuries, from the beginning of Muslim rule in 827 until the Norman conquest in 1070. There is some awareness of the Islamic history of Spain, and Balkan Muslims, though very few remain today, are still a reminder of the centuries-old Muslim civilisation that developed in south-eastern Europe. It is, however, difficult to say the same for the Islamic heritage of the rest of Europe, from Portugal and Poland to Hungary and Sicily. This is partly because the Muslim populations of these territories were completely eradicated, such that one cannot find a single Muslim community and active mosque that survived from the medieval period to the present in Portugal or Spain, Hungary or Italy. Moreover, not only Muslims as a people but also most architectural remnants of Islamic civilisation were also almost completely annihilated. In Sicily as well, as Chiarelli notes, "the legacy of the Muslim presence for some four hundred years eludes them in its paucity of physical structures." (xv) Despite this lamentable situation of almost no physical remains of the Islamic civilization of Sicily, the increasing number of books on Muslim Sicily, including the current volume, allow us to mentally reconstruct the physical, social, and political structures of these four hundred years of coexistence between Muslims, Jews, Catholics and Orthodox Christians on the largest island in the Mediterranean.

Chiarelli's book has several distinct advantages. First, it includes a very detailed historiography of Arab-Sicilian studies with a focus on Italian academia and primary sources (xix-xxxii), which would be useful for anyone looking for an overview of the accumulation of knowledge on this subject. Second, the book is not only a military and political history, particularly since three of the seven chapters of the book strictly focus on the social, economic, and cultural history of Muslim Sicily. Third, Chiarelli scrutinises every empirical claim found in the primary documents and previous works to arrive at a most reasonable estimate about their veracity. For example, he convincingly argues that the initial Arab-Muslim force that began the conquest of Sicily in 827 could not possibly have been 10,000 men as some others claimed, and must have

been much smaller (p.26). Fourth, his account is truly comparative also in the sense that he puts Muslim Sicily in the broader framework of Christian-Muslim frontier societies, drawing comparisons with Byzantine-Islamic frontier in southeast Anatolia, as Henri Bresc also emphasises in his Preface. Fifth, there is a detailed 2-page map of Sicily with the Arabic names of dozens of locations (cities, towns, communities, rivers, etc.) with their current names in parenthesis, which is a more detailed map than found in the other works on Muslim Sicily. Some readers may be intrigued to see that the town of Corleone that attained global fame thanks to the *Godfather* trilogy was *Qurliyun*, or that Mount Etna was called, perhaps unsurprisingly, as *Jabal Nar*, the Mountain of Fire in Arabic.

The detailed historical narrative of the first two hundred and fifty years of Muslim Sicily provides many examples of intra-Christian and intra-Muslim infighting with alliances across religious and sectarian divisions, especially in the earlier periods. It is, after all, an ambitious and disgruntled Byzantine naval commander who invites Muslim armies from North Africa to Sicily in the first place. Similarly, it is upon the request of Gaeta for protection that a Muslim military colony is established in south-central Italy at the mouth of Garigliano river, not far from Rome, from 881 until 915 when it was eliminated in a joint military effort led by the Papacy. In this period, Muslims captured and ruled Taranto (840-880) and Bari (847-875), both of which had their emirs (pp.36-46). The Sicilian Muslims appear to have been even more fractious than the Christians since ethnic (Arab, Berber, Persian, etc.) and sectarian (Sunni, Shiite, Ibadite) factions fought each other throughout Muslim rule. Court conspiracies, assassinations, and an unending list of rebellions by splinter groups of different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds dominated Muslim politics, perhaps providing some competitive dynamism, but ultimately weakening the Muslim polity in Sicily, making it vulnerable to further invasions. The Sunni Aghlabid dynasty, the original conquerors of Sicily, was overthrown by the Shiite Fatimids from North Africa, who in turn were succeeded by another Shiite dynasty, the Kalbids, ruling over an overwhelmingly Sunni (Hanafi and Maliki) Muslim population until the Norman conquest.

There is also one notable shortcoming of *A History of Muslim Sicily*, which is its deliberately limited chronological scope that leaves the reader with a feeling of a great story cut short. The book ends with the Norman conquest and thus the end of Muslim rule over Sicily in 1070. However, already by 1030 “at least half the population was Muslim,” (p.181) meaning that Sicily was majority Muslim by the time of the Norman conquest. Moreover, the Arabic language and Islamic culture shaped not only Muslims but also the Christians and Jews of Sicily, a deep influence that continued well after the end of Muslim rule. “A hundred years after Muslim rule, around 566/1170 the Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela (d.569/1173) describes the older women of Messina, Christian and Jewish, wearing the same garb as Muslim women, while most of the population was speaking Arabic,” a particularly notable observation also because “Messina was one of the least Arabized cities” in Sicily (p.173).

Sicilian Muslims continued to exist in large numbers at least for another one and a half-century until their deportation from Sicily to the Muslim colony of Lucera in the Italian mainland that began under Frederick II in the 1220s. These originally Sicilian Muslims constituted a vibrant colony in Lucera in Apulia until its destruction and the deportation, enslavement, or killing of Lucerine Muslims in 1300 by the Angevin king Charles II. Thus, there are roughly another 230 years of Sicilian-Italian Muslim history that Chiarelli's book does not cover, corresponding to three successive Christian dynasties under which Muslims lived: the Normans, Hohenstaufen, and finally the Angevins. I would recommend Alex Metcalfe's *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (1) and Julie Anne Taylor's *Muslims in Medieval Italy: The Colony at Lucera* (2) to complete the story of Sicilian Muslims.

Chiarelli concludes *A History of Muslim Sicily* by pointing out its “living legacy” in an unexpected location outside of Sicily, in nearby Malta: “The Maltese language, for example, may be the Siculo-Arabic language spoken on the island during this period, which would make Malta its living legacy” (p.323). As I argued in my “Myth of a Christian Europe and the Massacre in Norway” (3), the Islamic history of Europe is very much neglected and even deliberately suppressed in order to maintain the dangerous misconception that Europe was only inhabited by Christians, where Mus-

lims only appear as recent and unwelcome intruders. *A History of Muslim Sicily* is a very valuable contribution, a brick in the wall of remembrance if you will, for those who are eager to disabuse themselves of such a dangerous myth.

## REFERENCES

- 1- Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009)
- 2- Julie Anne Taylor, *Muslims in Medieval Italy: The Colony at Lucera* (Lexington Books, 2003)
- 3- Şener Aktürk, “September 11, 1683: Myth of a Christian Europe and the Massacre in Norway,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol.14, No.1 (2012), pp. 1-11.