Islam in Sicily
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Sicily is the biggest island in the Mediterranean, followed by Sardinia and Cyprus as the second and the third largest. Sicily nearly attaches to Italian peninsula, but a narrow strait, Stretto di Messina, separates the island from the main land. This island is divided into three regions: Val di Mazara in the Western part of the island, Val di Noto in the South Eastern part, and Val Demone in the North Eastern. Messina, in the North East, is the nearest town to Calabria in the Italian land. Syracuse in the South East and Palermo in the North West included to the most important towns of Sicily. Most part of Sicily land is a plateau with some mountains. One of them is Monte Etna, the highest peak in the island and the most active volcano in Europe.

Its history can be traced several hundreds years before Christ. In the beginning, it was inhabited by a people came across Southern Italy called Siculi or Sicani; the name of the island might be derived from it. The island was then colonized by Greek (734 BC), and followed chronologically by Carthage (466 BC), Roman (246 BC), Vandals (440 AD), and Byzantine (535 AD). However, the possession of the island altered among ‘European’ nations, including the Vandals of the North Africa, until the Arabs whose were enlightened and glorified by Islam came from the Jazira Al-Arabiya through Ifriqiyya.

During its peak in the reign of Justinian I (527-565 AD), the Byzantine Empire surrounded the Mediterranean. Al-Bahr Al-Mutawasith became its great lake with Sicily (Shiqiya) float in the middle. But the Empire weakened and lost many territories after the chaotic period caused by the migration and attack of Germanic and Hunic tribes. Italian peninsula, with the exception several regions including Rome, later was occupied by the Lombard, but Sicily remained to the Byzantine’s possession. Toward the coming of Islam, the southern part of Italy was mostly inhabited by Greek people while the northern part by Latin.

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1 Encarta Encyclopedia Deluxe 2002.
In the end of the first half of the seventh century, Muslims army rapidly seized Iraq, Syria, and Egypt from the Byzantine. North Africa gradually possessed by the Muslims, but the sea spread out in the North and West delaying their occupation of Sicily and another islands in the Mediterranean Sea. But between 642-643, the inhabitants of Sicily could feel the powerful force of Islamic army led by Amr bin Al-Ash which moved westward from Egypt, since many refugees fled to the island from Tripoli.

The first trial to attack this island by Muslims occurred when Mu’awiya b. Abi Sufyan, the Governor of Syria, sent Mu’awiya b. Khudayj to raid this island in 652. The raid to Sicily then occurred several times and one of them, in the reign of Mu’awiyyah ibn Abu Sufyan as Amir al-Mu’minin 667 AD (45 H), brought many valuable booties to Muslims, including gold statues and silver crown with jewel. These precious goods were sent to India to be sold in high price there.³

The raids were happened in the condition that the Muslims and the Byzantine were in the active war and Sicily was one of Byzantine’s lands. For the next eighty years since the first raid, at least ten raids to Sicily had been done by the Muslims without any serious intention to occupy the island. Among many raids done by Muslims, however, most of them “often lack official character and were generally composed of ‘mujahid’ (zealot) and adventurous sailors’.”⁴

Two serious attempts to occupy Sicily occurred in 740 and 753 but the army had to call back to North Africa to suppress Berber revolts. The next half centuries were silent from any raids. The Abbasid dynastic replaced the Ummaya as the ruling family of Islamic empire. Bani Aghlab, began with Ibrahim b. Al-Aghlab in the beginning of the ninth century, was trusted by the Abbasid to lead North Africa as a vassal and pay tribute yearly to Baghdad.⁵ After passing the first quarter of the ninth century, a very serious campaign to occupy Sicily was planned, performed, and success. Then gradually, the island became a permanent habitation for Muslim and Islamic

civilization flourished for the next two centuries, and “became a smiling garden, proud of it sciences, trade and industry.”

The success occupation of Sicily introduced by the conflict between Constantine, the appointed strategus of Sicily, and Euphemius, the naval commander of Byzantine. Being defeated, Euphemius asked help from Aghlabid in North Africa. A powerful troop, consist of 10,000 men and 70-100 vessels, was sent by the Emir of Ifriqiya, Ziyadat-Allah. The troop was led by Asad ibn Furat, a famous fuqaha of Maliki’s school. The Islamic force landed in Mazara and defeated the enemy. Ibn Furat and his thousands troops continued by moving to Syracuse, Byzantines capital of Sicily, and besieged the city for almost one year. Many Muslims then were killed by an epidemic, including Ibn Furat. The troops under the new leader planned to go back to Ifriqiya but their way was hindered by the Byzantine and Venetian fleets, so they decided to remain in the island and occupy another cities. They took over Mineo, Girgenti (Arabic Gorgant) and besieged Castrogiovanni (Arabic Qasr Yana), before finally withdrew to Mineo and Mazara. During this time, Euphmius was assassinated by the inhabitants of Castrogiovanni.

Muhammad Enan wrote that “the Muslims conquest of Sicily is a delightful story, very much like a fairy tail. It was conquered by a strange personality similar to those of ancient legends.” And when arrived to the end of Islamic period of Sicily he wrote, “thus Muslim domination of the island came to an end like a happy dream.” It was not a happy dream at all. However, his explanation about the “delightful story” might be related to the internal conflict of the Byzantine and the invitation from Euphemius for the Muslims to annex the island. Tragically, this story also made by Muslim rulers in the end of their era, with the result that the island was then recaptured by the enemy.

The second wave of occupying troops was sent by Ziyadat-Allah. The troops, also followed by Muslims from Spain, were led by a Berber, Asbagh ibn Wakil. They helped their brothers who were being pressed hard by the infidel. They hit the enemy but after that were hit by a pestilence. Asbagh died, and many Spanish Arabs went

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6 Muhammad Abdullah Enan, 1949, Decisive Moments in the History of Islam, Lahore, Muhammad Asraf, p.80.
7 Aziz Ahmad, 1975, A History of Islamic Sicily (Islamic Survey), Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
8 Muhammad Abdullah Enan, 1949, Decisive Moments in the History of Islam, Lahore, Muhammad Asraf, p. 78.
9 Ibid, p. 81.
back to Spain after Byzantine counter attack, but some of them still remained in the island and join the Islamic troops to besieged Palermo. In 12 September 831, Palermo surrendered to Muslims after eleven months besieging. Palermo became Muslims capital of Sicily, renamed *al-Madinah*,\(^\text{10}\) and the next February 832, Ziyadat-Allah appointed his cousin, Abu Fihr Muhammad ibn Abd-Allah, as the *wali* of Sicily.\(^\text{11}\)

Being separated by the sea, Sicily was governed by the Muslims with great autonomy. They minted their own money and when their *wali* passed away or killed they chose the new leader before the governor of *Ifriqiya* made the decision. The governor might be maintained it or made another decision. By now, Muslims possessed many parts of Val di Mazara, while most of the other two regions still kept by the Christians. Syracuse, and especially Castrogiovanni with its impregnable fortress, became the main city and defense of the Christians. During Islamic reign of Sicily, the concentration of Muslims mostly lived in the western part of the island, while the Christians remained the majority of the eastern part of the island.

Since many towns in ‘Europe’ were fortified, it took times to conquer them all, and the process underwent gradually. However, by 842, the Muslim Arabs fully occupied Val di Mazara. A year after that, they also occupied Messina and controlled the sea between Sicily and *Ifriqiya* making the Byzantine fleets difficult to enter Western Mediterranean. Castrogiovanni, the main city of the Christians besides Syracuse, was finally conquered by the Muslims in 859. They also defeated the Byzantine naval which try to reoccupy the city. A great mosque was then built in this city. Two years later, while returning from occupying Castrogiovanni, Abbas ibn Fadl, the governor of Sicily at that time, died and buried in Caltagirone. After the Muslims troops left the city, the Byzantine dug-up and burnt his corpse.\(^\text{12}\)

In 878, Syracuse surrendered to the Muslims after untiring defense. The following years, the cities in the west part of the island one by one fell to the Muslims. And finally, in 902 AD, nearly at the end of the Aghlabid period, Muslims took over the whole of Sicily.\(^\text{13}\)

During Aghlabid period, more than fifteen governors ruled the island. The military campaigns of the Muslims, and also the development of economic and

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.
science, were interrupted by social and political interludes caused by court intrigues, Berber or Muslims Sicily revolts, or simply by the political bargaining between the local Sicily and the central Aghlabid rulers. However, the expansion of the Muslims extended to the North beyond the island and entered to the Southern part of Italian Peninsula. From 838 to the end of the ninth century, they took Apulia and then Calabria. Between these times, Mufarraj ibn Salam established an independent Islamic country in Bari and survived for three decades, before defeated by Louis II of Frank in 871.\textsuperscript{14}

909 AD in \textit{Ifriqiyya} or Tunisia, Ubayd-Allah Al-Mahdi, supported by the Kutama Berbers launched the Fatimid revolution and totally overthrew the Aghlabid dynasty. The new dynasty professed Isma’ili Shi’is. The Aghlabid Suni elites took refuge to Sicily, but the pro-Fatimid opportunist in the island soon defeated the Aghlabid party. The Fatimid government of Sicily was established in the same year and a new governor was appointed immediately by Al-Mahdi. Interfering by a short Suni’s revolt and expropriation led by Ibn Qurhub in the beginning, the Isma’ili Fatimid controlled the island for the next 133 years. However, the Fatimid has trusted and appointed the Kalbite family to govern the island since 947 AD for the next ninety years. As the previous period, the Kalbite governance was in great autonomy, especially when the Fatimid moved its capital from \textit{Ifriqiya} to Cairo in 972 AD. Still under the Fatimid, \textit{Ifriqiya} was governed by the Zirid dynasty since than.\textsuperscript{15} Actually, being far from the Fatimid capital was also led to disadvantage, the support from Fatimid central power was lessen while their distance to the enemy was very close.

One of the most reputable rulers of the Kalbite in Sicily was Abu-l-Futuh Yusuf who governed the island from 986 to 998 AD. But, Sicily began to decline under the reign of his sons. In 1037-1038 AD, Sicily was attacked by the Byzantine led by Maniakes who was helped by the Christian Sicilians. Maniakes, the Byzantine general, successfully occupy some towns in the Val Demone, before recalling to Constantinople and imprisoned. The Muslim Arabs, led by Hasan As-Samsam, the last Kalbite ruler of Sicily, regained almost all the lost territory in 1042. Two years later, Hasan As-Samsam was fell from his reign and the Islamic Sicily entered a

\textsuperscript{14} Ataullah Bogdan Kopanski, \textit{Islamization of the Mediterranean and Extermination of the Muslims in the Medieval Europe}, unpublished, p. 22-23.

\textsuperscript{15} Aziz Ahmad, 1975, \textit{A History of Islamic Sicily (Islamic Survey)}, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
chaotic period toward its political end, though the Muslim inhabitants and their civilization remained exist for more than two centuries.

During Fatimid and Kalbite period, religion and intellectual activities underwent in the tolerable circumstances. The Suni’s scholarship was flourished more significantly than the Isma’ili’s. In intellectual field, Islamic period in Sicily had produced too many scholars to be mentioned one by one. Some scholars came to and lived in Sicily, while some another were born in this island and continued their career outside the island.

In agricultural field, The Muslim Arabs gave a significant contribution to Sicily and also to Europe. They developed an excellent irrigation system, shared knowledge of cultivating several plants, such as sugarcane, mulberries, papyrus, cotton-plant, lemon, oranges, and grapes. Their expertise in growing roots and green vegetables led a revolutionary change in the agrarian and industrial economy of Sicily. The Muslims made Sicily an international market where merchants from the Christian Italian cities were as welcome as Muslims merchants from Africa and the East. In industry, Muslims mined and produced gold, sulfur, acid sulfuric, quicksilver, antimony, and alum. Taxes under the Islamic governance are lower than those of the Byzantines.16

In the end of Islamic era of Sicily, the political power in this island divided among several local rulers, like Al-Mankud in the West of Sicily, Ibn Hawwas in the East, and Ibn Maklati in Catania. During 1053-1060 AD, Ibn Thumna became master of Syracuse. He ambitiously attacked and defeated Ibn Maklati and then Ibn Mankud, before came into conflict with Ibn Hawwas. Defeated by Ibn Hawwas, Ibn Thumna stupidly invited the Norman’s brother, Robert Guiscard and Roger I,17 in the Italian Peninsula to annex Sicily. The Norman did not wait the second invitation. They began the trial to conquer the island in 1060. Helping by the local Christians and some Muslims under Ibn Thumna, they gradually occupied Sicily and totally conquered it within thirty years, compared with seventy five years of the Muslim conquest of the island. Ibn Tumna himself was slain by Muslims in a skirmish in 1062.18


17 According to Geoffrey Malaterra who worked at the court of count Roger, Robert and Roger were sons of Tancred from his second wife, Fresenda. Robert was the eldest son and Roger was the youngest, number seven of all the sons. For this please see Elisabeth van Houts, 2000, *The Norman in Europe*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, p. 238-239.

Normans successfully conquer the island, but they would re-conquest significantly by Islamic culture.

The Muslims civilization kept exist during the Norman period, from Roger I, Roger II (1111-1154), William I ‘The Bad’ (1154-1166), and William II ‘The good’ (1166-1189). They lived under tolerance circumstances. The Norman rulers resisted the ecclesiastical pressure for the conversion of the Muslims to Christianity, though in the end of the period the pressure occurred from some of the Christian communities. The Muslims suffered and rebelled several times. The Muslims population was gradually reduced caused by conversion and especially by immigration to the North Africa.

However, Islamic culture influenced the Norman Kings significantly. They maintained the Islamic heritage in Sicily, such as political system, official language, and the habitual of the previous Arabic rulers. They could speak Arabic, used to invite Muslims scholars to their court, such as Al-Idrisi the Geographer who made Kitab Ar-Rujari (Book of Roger) for Roger II. They also involved the Muslims in their army – to attack their enemy in the Italian Peninsula or to suppress the Muslims revolt – and used Muslims administrator in their governance. The Norman Kings from Roger II to William II used Arabic title like many Muslim Kings. Roger II called himself al-Mu’tazz-bi-Allah, William I was Al-Hadi bi-Amri-llah, and William II was Al-Musta’izz-bi-Allah. Their coinage also bored their Arabic title. These Norman Kings, especially Roger II, sometimes were considered as “the crypto-Muslims” or “the baptized sultans.”

A Muslim Spanish, Ibn Jubair, who returned from the East through Sicily in 1185 made some accounts about this region under the Norman. He noted the toleration and politeness shown by ordinary Christians to the Muslim population, though, according to Donald Matthew, it was not sufficient to prevent terrible massacres. He showed that some Muslims styles were even adopted by the Christians, like those Christian women in Palermo who used the same kinds of jewelry, make-up, and perfumes – also veil – like Muslim women. However, the position of the Muslims at that time was actually precarious, since they depended on royal protection and were at risk from basic Latin antipathy.¹⁹

The Norman dynasty was then replaced by the German emperor, Henry VI, in 1194. Henry’s son, Frederick II (1208-1250) succeeded him later. Like the Norman Kings, Frederick II was greatly influenced by Islam and Arabic culture during his reign and buried in Arabic draperies after his death. While the Muslim population was suffering during his reign, the Islamic culture even reached its height and had ‘a great and far reaching civilizing influence over barbaric Europe.’ Many Arabic books were translated into European language. The University of Naples, the first university of Europe, was established in 1224, and then followed by universities in Messina and Padua, and the renovation of the old medical school of Palermo. All took Muslim civilization in Andalusia and Middle East as their orientation.²⁰

However, during his reign, Muslim population was reduced significantly and they rebelled against the pressure of the Christian society. Frederick II was firmly committed to ending all vestige of the Muslim presence in the island. By 1246, all Muslims had already expelled to and concentrated in Lucera in Italian Peninsula. Frederick’s illegitimate son, Manfred, who succeeded his father also influenced by Arabic culture and denounced by the pope as ‘the Sultan of Lucera’ and ‘Lord of the Saracens’. He was attacked by Charles d’Anjou and killed in 1266. By then, the Muslims in Lucera came into terrible end. They were pressured to convert from their religion. Many of them immigrated to North Africa. The rest were forcibly converted to Christianity and the Arab colony of Lucera was destroyed between 15 and 24 August 1300.²¹

Some factors could be considered to explain the decline of Muslim authority and civilization in Sicily. One of them is external, while the rest are internal.

1. The Norman Attack (external factor): The Norman had not only a powerful military troop and strategy, but also a good capacity to govern and control the society in Sicily and Southern Italy. They conquered not only the Sicily from the Muslims, but also the Southern Italy from the Byzantine, the Lombart, and the Pope. This Norman factor met other internal weaknesses of the Muslims and led to the decline of the Muslims in Sicily.

2. Internal Conflict: As what would happen later in Andalusia, Muslim leaders were in political conflict just before the coming of the Normans. This is the


²¹ Ibid.
biggest problem which make them loose the opportunity to defend the island well. Dissension was one of the main factors weaken the Muslim community from external threat.

3. The Involvement of Some Muslims to Help the Infidel: To work with the infidel ruler might be considered allowed as long as it will not harm the Muslim society. But in Sicily under the Norman, we found some Muslim troops were used by the Christian Kings to fight against their own brother. However, this was a sin and rejected by Islam. Even previously, one of the Muslim rulers, Ibn Thumna, was directly invited the Normans to come and conquered the island.

4. Not preserve the Muslim ethic of war: Sometimes the Muslim *jund* did unethical act of jihad during their effort to conquer the land in Sicily. They did not follow the complete Islamic way of war and sometime they persecuted and massacred their enemy without following any basic Islamic value. And when the *Sunna* was forgotten and left behind, the *baraka* of *jihad* did not prevail and Allah’s help would not come.

5. The Lack Seriousness to Convert the Christians: The Muslims occupy Sicily for more than two centuries. But, differ to another places like Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, they failed to convert the Christians in the island significantly. Of course they should not do this by force, since it was forbidden by Islam itself. But if this effort was taken seriously by doing active *da’wah* to the Christians, the case might have been different. The Muslims chose to use only the classic strategy of raid and besieged the Christians city, instead of combining it with silent conquest by sending Muslim preachers or *da’i* to the Christians under peace circumstances.

6. The Moved of Fatimid Capital to Cairo: The moved of the capital had to reduce the power and military supply to Sicily. Sicily had already been in a closer distance with the Italian infidels than with the *Ifriqiya* Fatimid, what else with the Cairo. Although there was the Zirid authority in the *Ifriqiya*, but the relationship must be different, since the Zirid and the Kalbite were in the same position and in fact their alliance was finally broke-up. The Fatimid should have to keep their capital in *Ifriqiya*, even established their second capital in Sicily or in Italy. By this, they would be able to conquer the whole Italian Peninsula and more. The later ‘gazy state’ of Ottoman Turk did this
strategy when they entered and occupied some part of Europe from Asia Minor. They build Edirne (Adrianople) as their capital in the Roman side, while maintained their previous capital, Bursa, in the Asia Minor, and the Ottoman Sultans were went back and forth from one to another until they conquered Constantinople. But, if the Fatimid wanted to apply this strategy, they were required to have a good naval power. However, this naval power was also another weakness of the Muslims.

7. The weakness of the Muslim Rulers in North Africa: This also another factor might lead to the fall of Sicily completely to the Christians. There was hardly any significant support from the Muslim power in the North Africa when the Sicily re-conquered by the Norman. Other Muslim possessions in the Mediterranean sea, such as Crete and Sardinia, were also defeated by the Christians without any support from the Ifriqiya Muslims. Even, during the reign of Roger II, many ports in the North Africa were conquered and controlled by Roger. This all factors have contributions to the decline of Islamic Sicily. Wallahu a’lam bi shawab.

Bibliography


