

Latin Europe and Byzantium: Shift of Power

The Kingdom of Sicily: From Arab-Norman kingdom to Latin kingdom

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The abbey and cathedral of Monreale was founded and constructed at a time of significant political, cultural, and economic change in the Norman kingdom of Sicily, from 1179 onwards. While the cathedral still reminds its visitors of the complex cultural legacy that had been passed down in the kingdom of Sicily, with its mixed population of Greeks, Muslims, Jews and Latins, it is also a statement of the primacy of the Latin Church within the kingdom, under the protective authority of the king; it is a reminder of the changes that had been taking place in the Regno, which transformed the kingdom into a predominantly Christian, indeed, Catholic, entity. A salient comparison would be with the Cappella Palatina in Palermo. There, we can see Latin elements in the architecture, Byzantine elements in the mosaics and Arabic elements in the wooden roof; and, while there is no stylistic element that could be described as Jewish, the presence of Old Testament scenes and the coded references to Jerusalem that have been identified in the building might also have put observers in mind of the fourth religious group in the kingdom. Whether the Cappella Palatina was really a symbol of the meeting of cultures in the kingdom, as some have supposed, or whether it was an eclectic mix of styles that did not really match one another, is a topic that will remain controversial. But what is important in Monreale is what was missing: the Arabic element, for the cathedral possesses mosaics in a Byzantine style, encompassing scenes from the Old and New Testaments, and there is still the Latin ground plan. Maybe the interlacing arches traced out on the exterior betray architectural influences from Islam, but this is quite clearly an abbey church, visible from afar standing on its ridge and proclaiming the triumph of Christianity.

Probing deeper, we find that the abbey of Monreale was more than an abstract symbol of Christian ascendancy. King William II granted the abbey control of vast estates on the island of Sicily that were inhabited in large measure by Muslim peasants – areas mainly in the west of the island (the Val di Mazara) which had proved difficult to master, and which were seen as fruitful terrain for the conversion of the Sicilian Muslims to Christianity. Fortunately, lists of these peasants have survived, and it is possible, with a reasonable degree of certitude, to argue that at least 80% were Muslims (in some areas many more), while even among the Christian peasantry there are signs that the use of the Arabic language was common, alongside Greek. This conclusion depends on how we read the personal names of the peasants listed in the remarkable inventories (*jarida*) of Sicilian estates, particularly the estates of Monreale, drawn up in Latin, Greek and Arabic;

here we can deduce from the peasants' names that some were certainly Christian (with names like Nicholas) and a majority were Muslim (with names like Muhammad). Some others apparently belonged to families who adopted a mixture of names from Greek and Arabic, which may be evidence that these peasants were suspended between the two religions, perhaps as a result of inter-marriage or as a result of the conversion of some members but not all to Christianity, a process described, as we shall see, by the Spanish traveller Ibn Jubayr; in the same way, following the Muslim conquest of Spain in the eighth century, families had found themselves suspended between Islam and Christianity, though then the movement had been the other way, towards Islam.¹

This was, for both Muslim and Greek Sicilians, a world apart from that of the royal court in Palermo: in rural areas, Latin priests were rarely seen – even the bishops did not reside in their dioceses – and, if the Muslims were to convert from Islam, it would be to Greek Orthodoxy rather than to Roman Catholicism. Many of the Christians were undoubtedly bilingual, and some may have been primarily Arabic-speaking, after three and a half centuries of living side by side with Muslims. There is even some evidence that attempts were made to encourage the development in Sicily of an Arabic-speaking Church, with a liturgy in Arabic, alongside that of the Greeks and the Latins; the British Library preserved an Arabic manuscript of the Gospels from Sicily; and in the days of King Roger the priest Grizandus dedicated a memorial inscription in honour of his mother Anna, written in Latin, Greek, Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic in Hebrew letters); this symbolised the four religious groups on the island, but it was also a sign that Latin Christians aimed at their incorporation into a single Church.² Roger II himself, at the end of his life, is said to have tried to lure Jews and Muslims to convert by offering them gifts. And indeed an Arabic-speaking community of Christians did survive, on the island of Malta, which was part of the Regno. The Jews too were, as Henri Bresc has insisted, “arabi per lingua, ebrei per religione”, and the use of Arabic among the Sicilian Jews persisted until the fifteenth century; so here, as in Spain, being arabised did not mean the same thing as being islamised.³ What we can therefore say is that peasant communities, at least in western Sicily, had a strongly arabised identity, even if they were not fully islamised.

This was, however, rather different to eastern Sicily: in the Val Demone, around Mount Etna, Arabic influence had always been much weaker, even in the period when the Muslims ruled the whole island (they had only conquered the last redoubt in eastern Sicily, Rometta, in 965). There, a Greek population long flour-

¹ Metcalfe, Alex 2003, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the end of Islam*, London / New York; Metcalfe, Alex 2009, *The Muslims of medieval Italy*, Edinburgh.

² Zeitler, Barbara 1996, “‘Urbs Felix Dotata Populo Trilingui’: Some Thoughts about a Twelfth-Century Funerary Memorial from Palermo 1”, *Medieval Encounters* 2,2, 114-139.

³ Bresc, Henri 2001, *Arabi per lingua, ebrei per religione: l'evoluzione dell'ebraismo siciliano in ambiente latino dal XII al XV secolo*, Catania / Mesogea.

ished, with its main centre of activity at Messina. Moreover, in the towns on the southern flank of Etna, such as Randazzo, or in Patti, to the west of Messina, a large number of Latins had settled following the Norman conquest of the island in the eleventh century. The settlement of Patti began as far back as 1090, when a privilege explicitly excluded other ethnic and religious groups; and Lombardi from northern and southern Italy trickled into the island throughout the twelfth century and after, bringing with them forms of Romance speech which became dominant in Sicily. A particular source of these Lombardi was Savona and Liguria, coming in the wake of Adelasia del Vasto, the wife of Roger I, the 'Great Count', and mother of the future King Roger II.⁴ The island was thus a mosaic of ethnic groups by the time of the foundation of Monreale, and they lived in rivalry: in the 1160s Roger Sclavus, a relative of the king, launched fearsome pogroms:

They made unprovoked attacks on nearby places [wrote Hugo Falacandus], and massacred both those who lived alongside the Christians in various towns as well as those who owned their own estates, forming distinct communities. They made no distinction of sex or age. The number [...] of those of that community who died is not easy to reckon, and the few who experienced a better fate (either by escaping by secret flight or by assuming the guise of Christians), fled to less dangerous Muslim towns in the southern part of Sicily. To the present day they hate the Lombard race so much that they have not only refused to live in that part of Sicily again, but even avoid going there at all.⁵

The polarisation of the communities in the countryside led eventually to the rising of the Muslims in the west, which continued with no long breaks until Frederick II suppressed their independent emirate in Iato and Entella and deported the survivors of his tough campaigns to the isolated outpost of Lucera in Puglia, where they lingered until 1300.⁶

A similar story could be told of the cities, of tensions at the time of the assassination of Maio of Bari by his rivals in 1160, and of violence between Christians and Muslims on the streets of Palermo. The much-vaunted harmony of peoples and religions in Sicily should not, then, be exaggerated. It is tempting, all the same, to stress that there was one area where Sicilians of different backgrounds lived side by side and worked together: the royal court, which was capable of producing charters in three languages, was staffed by Greeks, Arabs and Latins, and was also the focus of patronage of the arts and letters. Yet the court represented an alien world, almost literally: just as several of the best-known cultural figures came from abroad, for instance the geographer al-Idrisi, so too many of the most successful royal officials, Latin, Greek and Muslim, were born outside the island. These figures included Roger II's great admiral, George of Antioch; the bureaucrat

⁴ Abulafia, David 1983, "The Crown and the Economy under Roger II and his Successors", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37, 1-14.

⁵ Translation adapted from that by Loud, Graham A. and Thomas Wiedemann, eds. and trans. 1988, *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily by 'Hugo Falcandus'*, 1154-69, Manchester 1998, 121f.

⁶ Abulafia, David 2007, "The Last Muslims in Italy", *Dante Studies* 126, 271-287.

and naval commander, later burned as a renegade to Islam, Philip of Mahdia; the controversial Emir of Emirs Maio of Bari; Frenchmen such as Stephen de la Perche; Englishmen such as Robert of Selby, the last of whom contributed much to the building of an effective administration, and was also known for the delight he took in drinking parties.

I

I have spelled out these aspects of the Norman kingdom because there has been a tendency to understand its ethnic and religious diversity in entirely positive and rather romantic terms. Court and country differed in important respects; and what happened on the mainland, in the vast swathes of Calabria, Basilicata, Apulia, Molise, Abruzzo and Campania ruled by the Norman king was very different from the experience of the island of Sicily, for Islam was largely absent from the mainland and there the Greek population was concentrated mainly in Calabria and Apulia. In fact, the whole historiography of the Norman kingdom divides at the Straits of Messina. Those historians who have examined the kingdom from the perspective of the south Italian lands have tended to underplay the significance of the meeting of cultures in Sicily, presenting the Regno as essentially a western kingdom implanted on the frontiers that joined Latin Europe to Byzantium and the Islamic world. This was often the perspective of Léon-Robert Ménager in France, or of Mario Caravale in Italy.⁷ Historians of the Norman expansion across eleventh-century Europe, have sought to identify similarities between the government of Norman Italy and Sicily and that of Norman states further to the north, beginning with the American historian Charles Homer Haskins and the English historian Evelyn Jamison, both writing early in the twentieth century; traces of these views can be found in modern works by Salvatore Tramontana, Donald Matthew and others, though no one nowadays would wish to lay too much stress on the ‘Norman’ identity of the rulers of the Regno.⁸ Another school of historians has absorbed itself in the study of Islamic aspects of the Regno; Jeremy Johns in England and Hiroshi Takayama in Japan have mastered the Arabic documentation and have sought to understand the origins of its elaborate bureaucracy, and Takayama has written a number of books in Japanese which present Sicily as a “medieval kingdom of mystery” characterised by the meeting of cultures.⁹ Art historians, too, have their own perspective, drawn to Sicily by the simple fact that Palermo, Mon-

⁷ Ménager, Leon-Robert 1981, *Hommes et institutions de l'Italie normande*, (Variorum Collected Studies Series 136), London; Caravale, Mario 1966, *Il regno normanno di Sicilia*, Milan.

⁸ Matthew, Donald 1992, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, Cambridge et. al; Tramontana, Salvatore 1970, *I Normanni in Italia. Line di ricerca sui primi insediamenti*, Messina.

⁹ Takayama Hiroshi 1993, *The Administration of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, Leiden 1993, followed by prolific production in Japanese; Johns, Jeremy 2002, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: the Royal Dīwān*, Cambridge.

reale and Cefalù present to view the largest quantity of twelfth-century Byzantine mosaics, far in excess of what survives from the heartlands of the Byzantine empire from the same period. Thus scholars such as Otto Demus and Ernst Kitzinger brought their enormous command of Byzantine art to bear on their interpretation of the Sicilian mosaics. Finally, economic historians have a distinctive and highly instructive perspective of their own. The twelfth century is seen as the period in which Sicily lost its distinctive character as a nodal point in the trading networks of the Islamic world; Sicily, under the impetus of Genoese and Pisan merchants, was drawn into new networks which linked the island increasingly to the shores of continental Europe. At the same time, Sicily (including the Monreale estates) lost its traditional role as a source of specialised crops such as sugar and indigo, and became increasingly a source of wheat, though it remained for a while an important supplier of cotton on the international stage. Within this interpretation, which has been advanced in different ways by Illuminato Peri, Henri Bresc and myself (in my book *The Two Italies*), one can perceive an attempt to measure the impact of the changes that were taking place in Sicilian society and culture, as the island lost its 'oriental' character and was increasingly occidentalised.¹⁰

What then was this kingdom? It had come into existence only in 1130, more than a century after the first Norman adventurers arrived in southern Italy, seeking employment as mercenaries. The family of Tancred de Hauteville was able to establish its predominance in Apulia, under Robert Guiscard (d. 1085), and it was with his help that his younger brother (and, often, his rival) Roger, 'the Great Count', conquered Sicily from the 1060s onwards. But even then the conquest was a slow process, which most historians would say was only completed when Noto fell in 1090. But in an important sense this is to misunderstand what was in fact happening as Count Roger's men gained control of the island. Muslim leaders such as Ibn al-Thimnah in Catania invited the Normans to help them defeat rivals who were competing for power on the island. Conquest was accompanied by surrender on agreed terms, with a guarantee that the Muslims would be able to practise their religion. This was simply a reversal of the old arrangements which the Muslims had imposed on Christians and Jews as they swept through north Africa, Spain and, ultimately, Sicily in the seventh to ninth centuries. It seems that taxes similar to the *jizyah*, imposed by the Muslims on Christian and Jews, were now collected from the Muslims; the very name *gesia* actually appears in documents of Frederick II in the early thirteenth century. Payment of this tax was a guarantee that the ruler would protect his subjects of another faith.

But, even after Noto fell, the life of the islanders was not greatly disrupted by Norman rule. The terms of the surrender treaties meant that the Muslim communities continued largely to govern their own affairs. They had lost the freedom to

¹⁰ Bresc, Henri 1986, *Un monde méditerranéen: économie et société en Sicile 1300-1450*, 2 vols., Rome/Palermo; Abulafia, David 1977, *The Two Italies: Economic relations between the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and the Northern Communes*, Cambridge.

become involved in the internecine strife that had consumed the island in the mid-eleventh century; but peace brought dividends of its own. Across Sicily, the economy began to recover, after several decades of disorder which had damaged production and had led to the abandonment of some settlements. Messina flourished as it had not done since antiquity, attracting Latin merchants, and acting as a staging-post on the trade routes linking Genoa and Pisa to the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem, created in 1100, to the great spice port of Alexandria, and sometimes to Constantinople. The Great Count benefited from taxes on the trade in wheat sent to north Africa. Using the expertise of Byzantine Greeks from Calabria, the count's administration gradually became more efficient, so that tax revenues increased and records were kept in Arabic and Greek. Roger entered into a special relationship with Pope Urban II, who granted him authority equivalent to that of a papal legate in Sicily, apparently in the hope that he would organise the Church effectively on the island, setting up dioceses and encouraging Latin settlement (as he did at Patti in 1090); this authority over the insular Church was a distinguishing feature of Norman rule in Sicily throughout the twelfth century. Although Count Roger died in 1101 before his sons were adults, his determined wife Adelasia di Savona ensured that government did not break down before Roger II was ready to take the reins in 1114.

Roger II's great achievements can only be listed briefly.¹¹ He gained control of the mainland possessions of his Hauteville cousins, and eventually extended his authority over other areas too, right up to Abruzzo and Molise and over the lands of his rivals the princes of Capua. He was able by 1130 to persuade Pope Anacletus II to grant him a crown (with the support of his own barons); Anacletus did not manage to hold on to Rome and the papacy, but his rival, Pope Innocent II, was eventually forced to make the same concession, and to grant Roger his crown, subject to acknowledgement that the 'king of Sicily, of the duchy of Apulia and of the principality of Capua' was his vassal and would pay the pope a tribute. His relations with the Greek world were even more complicated. Within Sicily, he favoured Greek administrators and made generous grants to Greek monasteries (he also took care, as his father had done, not to allow powerful lay landlords to gain control of vast estates on the island). He even expressed interest in the views of the Greek scholar Nilus Doxapater, who argued against the primacy of the Roman Church in his *History of the Five Patriarchates*. It was useful to have a stick with which he could beat the pope when disagreements with Rome arose. But Roger was seen by metropolitan Byzantium, by the Greek emperors of the Komnenos dynasty, as no better than a pirate and tyrant, or *tyrannos*, who had seized provinces of the Byzantine empire, even if one of them, Sicily, had for several centuries been lost to the Arabs. Roger responded to Byzantine hostility by raiding Greece

¹¹ Excellent account in Houben, Hubert 1997, *Roger II. von Sizilien*, Darmstadt, engl. transl. (Graham D. Loud and Diane Milburn) 2002, *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler between East and West*, Cambridge.

in 1147-8, at the time of the Second Crusade; his navies attacked Corinth and his troops carried away from Thebes dozens of Jewish silk-workers, whose skills were much appreciated in Sicily. In the same period, he launched very effective naval campaigns in north Africa, seizing a line of cities, notably Mahdia (the main terminal of the route carrying gold across the Sahara) and Tripoli. There is no reason to doubt that he saw this series of conquests as the first stage in the establishment of a 'kingdom of Africa', and his attempts to settle Christians in Mahdia suggest that one aim was the re-christianisation of the north African towns. But this was also part of a wider strategic plan, aiming to gain control of the seas around his kingdom – he had already re-occupied Malta in 1127 (after an initial occupation by Roger I in 1090), and he was keen to establish his influence over the Ionian islands. He even took an interest in plans for naval campaigns off the coast of Spain. He was thus on the verge of creating a great thalassocracy (to use Thucydides' description of King Minos of Crete) by the time that he died in 1154.¹²

Much of the credit for this must go to his admiral, George of Antioch, a Greek who had served the emir of Mahdia before entering Roger's service. George may also have played a role in the way Roger presented himself to his subjects, at least on occasion, as a ruler in the Byzantine style, for it was George who built the church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio (now often called the Martorana) in Palermo, with its vivid representation in mosaic of King Roger being crowned by a Christ who shares the same facial features as the king, while Roger wears the vestments of a Byzantine emperor. The inscription ΠΟΓΕΠΙΟΥ ΡΗΕ 'King Roger' uses a Latin term but is in Greek characters (but in the mosaics of the Palatine Chapel there appears NERO REX, so the terms 'king' and 'emperor' were freely confused). Also from Roger II's time we have an astonishing survival, the king's cape, made in 1133-34 by Muslim craftsmen or craftswomen in Palermo. Here, unlike the image in the Martorana, we seem to see the king dressed as a Muslim potentate, except that the theme of the design, two lions or tigers pouncing on camels, may well represent the victory of Christianity over Islam.

Roger's success was achieved in significant measure by sheer force of personality. The succession of his fourth son William I in 1154 marked the beginning of a time of troubles. Efficient the government of Roger II may have been; but under less charismatic rulers opposition began to articulate itself. One focus of discontent was the failure of the Sicilian army and navy to hold on to Mahdia, which was lost in 1158. No doubt the opposing forces were indeed too strong to resist, because the Sicilians now faced the fanatical Moroccan Almohads and their allies; but this provided a good opportunity to contrast the failures of King William's rule with the successes of King Roger. The elevation of the Bari patrician Maio to the office of Emir of Emirs – in effect, the royal vizier – was matched by the king's with-

¹² Abulafia David 1985, "The Norman Kingdom of Africa and the Norman expeditions to Majorca and the Muslim Mediterranean", *Anglo-Norman Studies* 7, Woodbridge, 26-49.

drawal from the day-to-day running of the kingdom's affairs; whether he really spent his time carousing in his harem is doubtful, but the bitterness at Maio's partisan rule was forcefully expressed in one of the most remarkable chronicles of the Middle Ages, the *History of the Tyrants of Sicily*, the name of whose author is unknown but is usually given as Hugo Falcandus. Falcandus was certainly very familiar with the inner workings of government in Palermo, and had walked the corridors of the royal palace. The assassination of Maio in the streets of Palermo in 1160, the rise and fall of Matthew Bonellus, the tensions between Muslims and Christians were all described in elegant classical prose.¹³

Although our understanding of William's reign is strongly coloured by the negative comments of Falcandus, there is no doubt that this king was far less successful in holding together the fabric of the kingdom than his father. That said, he (or his advisers) showed some skill in foreign relations, negotiating a treaty with the Genoese in 1156 which ensured that they would not take part in a planned invasion of southern Italy and Sicily, to be led by the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Another diplomatic success was achieved when the pope, Hadrian IV, was forced against his better judgment to recognise William's succession to his father's throne, and to abandon his support for the south Italian opposition, in the Treaty of Benevento. William also defeated a Byzantine invasion of the kingdom, which was looking for allies among disaffected south Italian barons and townsmen, and he was able to come to terms with Manuel Komnenos, the first time a Byzantine emperor gave grudging recognition to the kingdom's legitimacy. The price Bari paid for rebellion was that the city was razed to the ground. Success in these areas was, in fact, far more important to the survival of his kingdom than the preservation of Sicilian rule over Mahdia and its neighbours. In these senses, the kingdom was actually more secure in 1166, when William died, than his sobriquet, 'the Bad', acquired some time later, might suggest.

Yet leaving a kingdom which was already under internal strain to a minor, also named William, created a new wave of tensions in and around the court. These tensions were accentuated by the regency of Queen Margaret of Navarre and her favouritism towards a relative apparently of limited tact and talent, Stephen de la Perche. Stephen was happy to bring into the kingdom a number of his followers; it was probably for this reason, and not because Norman French speech had survived from the days of Roger I, that Falcandus stressed the importance of being able to speak French if one wanted to succeed at court. 'Norman' identity was by now an issue of little importance, a vague ancestral memory, though it was put to use when a marriage was arranged between William and Joanna, the daughter of the king of the Anglo-Norman realm, Henry II. This was proof that the Sicilian monarchy had arrived on the world stage; no longer was little Navarre the chosen

¹³ Siragusa G. B., ed. 1897, *La Historia o Liber de Regno Sicilie e la Epistola ad Petrum Panormitane Ecclesie Thesaurium di Ugo Falcaudo*, (Fonti per la Storia d'Italia 22), Rome; see also the valuable information in the translation by Loud and Wiedemann cited earlier.

partner of pirate Sicily in royal marriages. The Sicilians could aspire to much more – eventually, indeed, the hand of the future German emperor, but more of that shortly. Once William was in harness, he took a strong interest in wider Mediterranean affairs, capitalising on the existence of a large and powerful fleet. In 1174 he launched a massive attack on Alexandria in Egypt; in 1182 he set his sails in the direction of Majorca; in 1185 he sent his ships to the Byzantine towns of Durazzo, in modern Albania, and Thessalonika, and one of his naval commanders, his cousin Tancred, fired arrows at the walls of the Blachernai palace in Constantinople.

There was thus something grandiose and ambitious about this king. He saw himself as a fighter for Christ against both the Muslims and the Greeks, though he was also willing to make peace for practical reasons with the Almohads of Tunis, an event commemorated in Boccaccio's tale of Gerbino in the *Decameron*.¹⁴ And his wars against the Byzantines were officially motivated by the wish to return the legitimate Greek claimant to the imperial throne, though contemporaries such as the archbishop of Thessalonika, Eustathios (a famous Homeric scholar) saw the war of 1185 as a naked attempt to secure Constantinople for himself. And that is perfectly possible. His Norman ancestor Robert Guiscard had also attacked Durazzo and the Ionian isles a century earlier. We could think of this as part of the dynasty's grand master-plan: once Sicily was secure they would seek dominion in other lands that were or had been part of the Roman and Byzantine empire. On the other hand, he was content to come to terms with the German emperor. Frederick Barbarossa had never accepted the right of the Hautevilles to rule Sicily as kings, seeing the Italian South as part of his own *Regnum Italicum*. But when in 1176 he suffered defeat at the hands of the Lombard cities, who had been subsidised by gifts of money from Sicily, he realised that the wisest course was to assent to a pan-Italian peace. One of the outcomes was a marriage alliance between Henry, Barbarossa's ruthless son and heir, and Constance, the equally strong-minded daughter of King Roger II. There is no clear indication that the aim was to unite Sicily and Germany under the rule of a son whom Henry and Constance would engender. William had just married Joanna of England; no one could predict that they would have no children (Joanna did have children by her second marriage later, to the count of Toulouse). Constance herself took a long while to produce an heir, Constantine Roger, born on 26 December 1194, the future Emperor Frederick II.

By then everything had unravelled. William died in 1189, as he was planning to send relief to the crusader states in the East, overwhelmed by Saladin. Constance was now the legitimate heiress to the kingdom; but the barons, who had traditionally played a role in electing the king, did not wish to let the German

¹⁴ Abulafia David 1979, "The reputation of a Norman king in Angevin Naples", *Journal of Medieval History* 5,2, 135-147.

prince Henry into the kingdom through the back door. Tancred, who had already distinguished himself in 1185, but was illegitimate, became king, and had to hold the kingdom against invading German armies led by the irate Henry. He also had to face rising resentment among the Muslims in the west of Sicily; a long-brewing revolt broke into the open by 1190, and royal authority in parts of the island vanished. In any case, Tancred had to make grand concessions to the towns and nobles in order to guarantee their support, which gravely weakened the monarchy and undermined its tax base. Short-term gains were, understandably, given priority over long-term interests. After Tancred's death and the succession of the minor William III, Henry was at last able to conquer the kingdom, and was crowned in Palermo the day before his wife gave birth at Jesi in the Marches. The victorious Henry took back to Germany the lavish coronation vestments of the Norman kings, adopting them as the imperial coronation vestments; long preserved in Nuremberg, they can now be seen in the imperial treasury in Vienna. Henry's victory did not mark the end of the Norman Regno, for after his death in 1197 his widow Constance did her best to re-invigorate the Norman system of administration, which managed to hold together through the long and difficult minority of Frederick II. And Frederick did much to restore the old system, constantly harking back in his laws to 'the days of King William', which were seen as the apex of good government and internal peace in Sicily. This was, certainly, an exaggerated view of the reign of William 'the Good'; but on the surface at least William II appeared to have enjoyed a successful reign.

In fact, the reign marked a decisive period in the process of latinisation of Sicily. In order to understand this, it is helpful to look at some travellers' accounts which describe Norman Sicily and which can be used to demonstrate how and when these changes were occurring.

II

There are three windows through which we can look at the Norman kingdom of Sicily, provided by al-Idrīsī, Benjamin of Tudela and Muḥammad Ibn Jubayr; a fourth description, by the chronicler Falcandus, survives from the end of the century. The first is the *Book of King Roger* by the north African scholar Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, a man of high birth who probably had spent much of his life in Ceuta in northern Morocco, but who also knew Spain well. Political pressures propelled him eastwards, and he found an enthusiastic patron in Roger II and possibly William I, writing a geography of the world around 1154.¹⁵ This work was particularly

¹⁵ References here are to Bresc, Henri and Anneliese Nef, eds. 1999, *Idrīsī, La première géographie de l'Occident*, Paris; for Sicily see also Amari, M. and C. Schiaparelli, ed. 1883, *L'Italia descritta nel 'Libro del Re Ruggero' compilato da Edrisi*, (Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, ser. 2a, vol. 8), Rome; all translations in the following citations are by the author.

rich in detail concerning Sicily and neighbouring areas such as north Africa, though it also extended as far as China in the east and Finland in the north.¹⁶ Written in Arabic, it incorporated large chunks of earlier material, which was normal practice among those writing narrative history or works of description at this time. But this does sometimes mean that the surviving text contradicts itself, where al-Idrīsī did not iron out differences between conditions reported centuries before and conditions in his own day. The work was not widely read; it was never translated into a western language. Perhaps one idea in Roger's mind was to obtain descriptions of lands he might attack and conquer, but the book ranged far wider than the central Mediterranean and was clearly intended to satisfy his wider, and genuine, curiosity about the world.¹⁷ It was accompanied by an engraved map, lost when rioters sacked the royal palace during the reign of King William I; however, late medieval manuscripts do contain maps which seem to reflect al-Idrīsī's view of the shape of the continents. It is now known that these maps were themselves based to a very large extent on earlier maps, of which one, in the *Book of Curiosities*, originally compiled in the eleventh century, has recently come to light after it was purchased by the University of Oxford.¹⁸

Al-Idrīsī was well aware that his patron was King Roger and did not hold back from praising him and his island of Sicily, which was a "pearl" blessed by its excellent qualities.¹⁹ Many a traveller, he said, praised its extraordinary beauty. Moreover, those who ruled the island were famous for their success in war and for their nobility. This encomium led al-Idrīsī to describe how Roger the Great Count had seized the island from quarrelling and tyrannical petty governors.²⁰ Rather than presenting him as someone who was ever ready to arrange a surrender treaty, he portrayed Roger I as a ruthless figure who never set down his sword, conquering Sicily systematically zone by zone. But once the island was under his command, he set in place a system of justice and guaranteed the practices of the different religions, as well as the right to be governed by the law-code of the group to which one belonged. He ensured that his subjects lived in peace and safety and were able to pass on their possessions to their children. Such praise might indeed have been

¹⁶ Dozy, R. and M. J. de Goeje, eds. and trans. 1866, *Description de l'Afrique et de l'Espagne par Edrīsī*, Leiden; Tallgren-Tuulio O. J. and A. M. Tallgren, eds. 1930, *Idrīsī, La Finlande et les autres pays baltiques orientaux* (Géographie, VII 4), Helsinki; Lewicki, Tadeusz 1945-54. *Polska i kraje sąsiednie w świetle 'Księgi Rogera': geografia arabskiego z XII w. al-Idrīsī'ego*, 2 vols., Warszawa; Ahmad, S. Maqbul, ed. and trans. 1960, *India and the neighbouring territories in the Kitāb nuzhat al-musbtāq fī ikbtirāq al-āfāq of al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī: a translation, with commentary, of the passages relating to India, Pakistan, Ceylon, parts of Afghanistan, and the Andaman, Nicobar, and Maldive Islands, etc.*, Leiden.

¹⁷ Drecoll, Carsten 2000, *Idrīsī aus Sizilien: Der Einfluß eines arabischen Wissenschaftlers auf die Entwicklung der europäischen Geographie*, Egelsbach u.a.

¹⁸ Savage-Smith E., E. and Y. Rapoport, eds. 2007. *The Book of Curiosities: a critical edition*, www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/bookofcuriosities, Oxford.

¹⁹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 2; Bresc and Nef 1999, 305.

²⁰ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 23f.; Bresc and Nef 1999, 306.

attached to a Muslim ruler; al-Idrīsī, however, side-stepped the embarrassing fact that this Roger was a Christian conquering Muslims.

Of course, when he came to Roger II, al-Idrīsī was even more enthusiastic. He was said to have set in motion the system of government on the island, and to have given great attention to the maintenance of justice and peace.²¹ This, we can agree, is a fair enough statement of Roger's aims, and in some degree of his achievements. He raised the prestige of the royal throne to such a point that lesser kings "confided to him the keys of their kingdoms".²² It is hard to identify any such individuals, though al-Idrīsī might have been thinking of the grudging submission of the prince of Capua, or of the submission of several north African emirs to his authority. On balance, though, it is best to view this statement as fawning hyperbole. What it added up to was that "the influence, glory and grandeur of his kingdom have not stopped growing day by day right up to the time when I write this book".²³ In his description of the north African towns, al-Idrīsī also emphasised the great achievement of King Roger in establishing Sicilian power along the African coast; he sought to present this Christian king as a liberator.

Yet what interested al-Idrīsī most was the layout and resources of the kingdom itself, especially its wealthy coastline. Naturally, he began his description with Palermo, which he singled out among the cities of the world for its size and beauty and also for its importance.²⁴ He was impressed by the tall, solid buildings that lined the main street of the Cassaro quarter, by the many bath-houses, and by the Great Mosque, though in a roundabout way he pointed out that it had reverted to its original use – that is, it was now the Christian cathedral. The Cassaro was very well defended, taking advantage of its elevation; at its peak was the great fortress which Roger had repaired and which was covered in mosaics; inside the palaces of this quarter one could find painted walls and marvellous examples of calligraphic art.²⁵ Taking Palermo as a whole, it was impossible not to be impressed by the water courses that ran through the city; the suburbs also contained extensive areas given over to shops, markets and baths, but there were parks and gardens too, and around the town were many mills powered by the River Oreto.²⁶

Talking about the western Sicilian countryside, al-Idrīsī also observed the production of grain and something apparently similar to pasta, which was exported to Calabria, Muslim lands and the Christian north.²⁷ His emphasis on the richness of the soil was consistent. Round Brucato there were mills, gardens, fine fields, and in

²¹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 24; Bresc and Nef 1999, 306.

²² Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 24; Bresc and Nef 1999, 306.

²³ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 24; Bresc and Nef 1999, 307.

²⁴ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 25ff.; Bresc and Nef 1999, 307ff.

²⁵ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 27; Bresc and Nef 1999, 309.

²⁶ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 27; Bresc and Nef 1999, 309.

²⁷ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 28.

the interior, lands which were “perfectly cultivated”.²⁸ Cefalù impressed al-Idrīsī for similar reasons: rather surprisingly to a modern reader, he did not mention the cathedral, but of course this was the period of its construction; he was impressed, rather, by the great brooding rock that overhangs the town.²⁹ Al-Idrīsī also noted, when describing Santo Stefano Vecchio, which he called “the fortress of the boats”, that ships arrived regularly to take on board the cereals which were cultivated in that area. Al-Idrīsī thus provides precious evidence for the extent of cultivation of cereals in Sicily at this time. Nearby, at San Marco, ships were actually built with wood brought down from the neighbouring mountains.³⁰ Some silk was, he says, produced in that area, and in fact the range of products was quite varied; the land was well watered. His encomium of the beauty and fertility of Sicily continued along the north shore of the island, encompassing such locations as Patti, which, as has been seen, was in fact a focus of Latin settlement (though he did not mention this), Oliveri and Milazzo, the last two of which were famous for their tunny-fishing industry.³¹ We know from royal charters that the crown tried to gain control of tunny-fishing, insisting that tunny “belonged” to the crown.³² Milazzo also exported good-quality flax.

However, al-Idrīsī reserved most praise in this part of the island for Messina. He noted that ships arrived there from all parts of the Christian Mediterranean, and that the town had flourishing markets, where goods were sold at attractive prices. Messina exported iron, which was mined locally, but it was also surrounded by orchards and gardens which, as ever, earned al-Idrīsī’s fulsome praise. It was here, he said, that big ships would put in, carrying travellers, both Christian and Muslim, from many lands; ships could come right up to the shoreline, making it easy to offload goods from their holds.³³ The implication of al-Idrīsī’s wording is that the ships themselves tended to be Christian-owned vessels, while those on board were of mixed origin; and this fits well with what we know from other sources, such as the archival records in Genoa, about navigation in these waters during the twelfth century. The problem, he confessed, was that the Straits of Messina were dangerous waters, and when the sea was turbulent only God could save travellers from disaster – later, we shall see how the pilgrim Ibn Jubayr became caught in these cross-currents thirty years later, and was lucky to escape with his life.

Elsewhere in Sicily, al-Idrīsī noted the presence of ancient remains: the baths at Termini, where there was also a remarkable amphitheatre; the Roman amphitheatre at Taormina (where he says there existed a gold mine).³⁴ The export of

²⁸ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 28; Bresc and Nef 1999, 309.

²⁹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 29; Bresc and Nef 1999, 310.

³⁰ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 30; Bresc and Nef 1999, 311.

³¹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 30; Bresc and Nef 1999, 311f.

³² Abulafia 1983, 6f.

³³ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 30f.; Bresc and Nef 1999, 312f.

³⁴ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 31; Bresc and Nef 1999, 313.

pitch from the east coast, which he described, is also mentioned in documents from the time of Roger II; pitch featured among the products whose trade the crown sought to control. Al-Idrīsī made it plain that the export of grain was not simply characteristic of western Sicily; large quantities were exported from the coast near Catania as well.³⁵ His portrait of Catania is once again an image of a busy trading centre with warehouses, inns, mosques and bath-houses. But by the time we reach Noto we may feel that al-Idrīsī's constant refrain about the excellence of cultivation, the quantity of water available to irrigate the fields, and the number of mills, is becoming rather monotonous. The point he is making, about the great agricultural wealth of Sicily, is made well and made often. Al-Idrīsī himself seems to have tired of the encomium at a certain point, for he said of Syracuse that it was not necessary to describe the city in detail, for it was already so well known throughout the world.³⁶ What is most important in his account of south-eastern Sicily is the series of references to local trade routes, which we cannot identify in other sources. Thus he speaks of the coast around Scicli, and of the arrival of boats on its shore from north Africa, Calabria and Malta (elsewhere, al-Idrīsī notes the importance of Malta as a source of sheepskins, fruit and honey, not mentioning its famous cotton, rather surprisingly).³⁷ What comes into focus, remarkably, is a whole network of short-distance connections, dominated by the trade in wheat, alongside the much more celebrated long-distance trade in grain in which the Genoese and Pisans were becoming heavily involved.

Al-Idrīsī emphasizes how the middle-sized towns like Noto and Ragusa had ports on the coast which were frequented by merchants of many lands.³⁸ Agrigento was one place where he said that larger ships tended to arrive; the fertility of the surrounding lands meant that they could rapidly be filled to the brim with the products of its gardens and wheat-fields.³⁹ It is therefore interesting to note that the treaty of 1156 between King William I and Genoa singled out for attention the trade in cotton through Agrigento.⁴⁰ Sciacca, al-Idrīsī says, was much visited by boats from Tripoli and north Africa (an interesting comment, because at this time Tripoli was ruled by King Roger; indeed, the king clearly used the dependence of the African towns on Sicilian grain as a means to ensure their submission). But what is also remarkable is the similarity between the picture of trade in grain from ports along the southern coast of Sicily and the clearer evidence from the thirteenth century for a vibrant trade in grain from the same ports – Licata, Agrigento, Sciacca, and then, on the western edge, Mazara.⁴¹

³⁵ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 32f.; Besc and Nef 1999, 314.

³⁶ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 33f.; Besc and Nef 1999, 315.

³⁷ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 34ff. (and 21f.); Besc and Nef 1999, 316 (and 304f.).

³⁸ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 34f.; Besc and Nef 1999, 315f.

³⁹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 37; Besc and Nef 1999, 320-8.

⁴⁰ Abulafia 1977, 93f., 222.

⁴¹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 37; Besc and Nef 1999, 318.

Most of these towns are treated as places with a long and continuous history, rooted in the ancient buildings which one could see on every side. Marsala was a rather different case, because Roger I had repopulated the city after its earlier destruction, but it was now full of flourishing markets, brought in a good tax revenue, and was much visited by north African merchants.⁴² But what distinguished Trapani was the enormous tunny-fish that were captured there, as well as the local supply of coral. Because of its calm waters, Trapani was also accessible in the winter.⁴³ There were other parts of western Sicily that specialised in interesting products. Round Carini, almonds, figs and carobs were cultivated, and many of them were exported from the island. Taken as a whole, then, al-Idrīsī's description of the coast of Sicily confirms the importance of the island as the granary of the Mediterranean. It is necessary to insist on this point, since some modern research has tended to stress the importance of the domestic market and has undervalued the significance of the trade in Sicilian wheat and other agricultural products.

A largely similar picture obtains for the interior.⁴⁴ Towns are described as "well-fortified" and the surrounding countryside is praised for its fertility. There is little variety in the information (though we are told that at Iato there is an underground dungeon in which prisoners are kept); the whole point is to show the peaceful prosperity of the island under its Norman king. These are lands, as he says of Raia, "blessed by God".⁴⁵ Nothing is said about the inhabitants, and the emphasis is consistently on the growing of cereals, whether he speaks of Caltanissetta or Castrogiovanni, of Castelvetro or Corleone. In the south-east, al-Idrīsī singles out Centorbi for its profitability and its wealth in cereals.⁴⁶ In the north, he notes the market and impressive fortress at Petralia.⁴⁷ References to livestock are rare; he mentions sheep and cattle at Collesano, while Montalbano was notable not just for its flocks but for its honey.⁴⁸ Caronia, with its fine castle, was able to live off tunny, its vineyards and other agricultural produce, all of which must have been traded with the grain-producing areas.⁴⁹ In conclusion, al-Idrīsī insisted, "we do not know of any island in the world situated in the middle of the sea which contains more inhabited places and more inhabitants".⁵⁰ By comparison, he passed very quickly over Sardinia, noting the existence of silver mines and observing that the Sardinians were of Roman African origin, but that

⁴² Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 38; Bresc and Nef 1999, 318f.

⁴³ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 38; Bresc and Nef 1999, 319, also 320-38.

⁴⁴ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 38-63.

⁴⁵ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 43; Bresc and Nef 1999, 323.

⁴⁶ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 56; Bresc and Nef 1999, 333.

⁴⁷ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 58; Bresc and Nef 1999, 334.

⁴⁸ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 60; Bresc and Nef 1999, 335f.

⁴⁹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 61; Bresc and Nef 1999, 337.

⁵⁰ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 49; Bresc and Nef 1999, 338.

they had lived apart from other Latins and had become barbarians. He only noted three towns on the island.⁵¹

Al-Idrīsī's account of Sicily therefore offered the Norman kings an idea of the material resources available on the island, which was the part of their kingdom where they possessed by far the greatest amount of land. Al-Idrīsī's book reinforced the existing sense that the great strength of Sicily was its fertility and the amount of wheat the island produced. Al-Idrīsī made it abundantly clear that this wheat was not just consumed locally but was sent for export. Thus it is certain, using not just al-Idrīsī but the Sicilian treaties with Genoa and many narratives written by both Christian and Muslim authors, that the elaborate grain trade from Sicily, so well documented in later centuries, was very active in the years around 1150. Taxes on this trade clearly were one of the major sources of the wealth of the Norman kings of Sicily.

III

Some reflection of this wealth can be found in the travel narratives of Benjamin of Tudela, the Jewish traveller from Spain, and of Ibn Jubayr, the Muslim pilgrim also from Spain. Benjamin's aim was to describe the lands of the Mediterranean, large areas of Europe, and Asia as far as China, for a Jewish audience; he wrote his book in Hebrew somewhere around 1160, and the book seems to reflect genuine travels across the Mediterranean, though Benjamin's descriptions of more remote areas are clearly based on report and rumour, which became more fantastic the further his imagination ventured.⁵² It is likely that he enhanced his description of his travels with material borrowed from other travel writers, including Arab ones; on the other hand, his account can be located fairly exactly in time. On his way to Constantinople and Jerusalem, Benjamin visited the mainland territories of the Sicilian kingdom, noting the destruction of Bari and the large number of Greeks in southern Puglia – the reference to Bari is one of the indications that he made his journey around 1160.⁵³ On his return, he passed through Sicily, apparently arriving in Messina. Like al-Idrīsī, he was aware of the importance of Messina as the departure point for those bound on long voyages: "Here most of the pilgrims assemble to cross over to Jerusalem, as this is the best crossing."⁵⁴ Benjamin recorded the presence of about two hundred

⁵¹ Amari and Schiaparelli 1883, 16f.; Bresc and Nef 1999, 302.

⁵² Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, Marcus Nathan Adler, ed., London 1907; other editions include that of M. Signer (Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages*, Marcus Nathan Adler, trans., introd. by Michael A. Signer, Marcus Nathan Adler, and A. Asher, Malibu 1983), which, however, excludes the Hebrew text.

⁵³ Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary* 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 78.

Jews in Messina, which probably means two hundred households rather than individuals; but this did not compare with Palermo, where he identified 1,500 Jews and many Christians and Muslims.⁵⁵

Palermo stood in an area that abounded in water and was rich in wheat and barley, as well as being full of gardens and orchards, so that there was nothing to compare with it anywhere in Sicily. Most remarkable was the king's garden, surrounded by walls, which contained an artificial lake filled with fish; the king maintained boats plated with gold and silver on this lake, and would take trips accompanied by the women of his court, by which we are no doubt to understand his harem. This was the great park that extended from the royal palace towards the future site on Monreale, and Benjamin was also astonished by the sight of the palace, with its painted and mosaic-encrusted walls, and its marble floors laid out in amazing designs, so that "there is no building like this anywhere".⁵⁶ These comments may well have been based on reports of the Palatine Chapel, though whether he visited it is doubtful. In any case, there is a basic similarity between what Benjamin says about the decorated walls of the royal palace and what al-Idrīsī, writing only a few years earlier, reports. As for the other towns of Sicily, he mentioned a few, all but one on the coast, but singled out Trapani for its coral.⁵⁷

Finally, we come to Ibn Jubayr.⁵⁸ His account of the kingdom of Sicily has much more to say about its inhabitants, particularly the Muslims. As secretary to the Almohad governor of Granada, he was able to gain access to important figures on the island and to penetrate some way into the entourage of the king. Moreover, he was writing at a time when conditions were deteriorating as far as the Muslim population was concerned. He arrived from the kingdom of Jerusalem, where he expressed his disgust at the conduct of the Christian rulers of the crusader state.⁵⁹ In Sicily, his mood was at first not very different. He almost drowned when his ship was wrecked in the Messina roads; even the king had come out to watch the drama. Messina was full of "worshippers of the Cross" and was filthy, while the inhabitants were rude.⁶⁰ The city, he said, had no Muslim residents, apart from a few craftsmen, "so the Muslim stranger there will feel lonely".⁶¹ This is an important point, if true; it had long been the major centre of Greek Christian settlement, and the Latin population was also growing in this period, as merchants from Amalfi, Liguria, Tuscany and further afield set up shops and homes in the city. Despite Benjamin's remark that it contained a couple of hundred Jews, it had not been a

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 79.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibn Jubayr, *The travels of Ibn Jubayr*, J. C. Broadhurst, trans., London 1952, repr. New Delhi 2001.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 315-25.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 335-339.

⁶¹ Ibid. 340.

significant Jewish centre in the eleventh century, when the Jewish merchants of Cairo, many of whose letters survive in Cambridge in the Cairo Genizah collection, also thought the town dirty and believed there were far fewer Jews living there. Only a few years after Ibn Jubayr's visit, in 1190, tension between Greeks and Latins in the city would boil over, exacerbated by the stay in Messina of the English king Richard Coeur-de-Lion on his way to the Holy Land. But Ibn Jubayr did note that the city was safe and that foreigners were not molested. Like al-Idrisi, Ibn Jubayr was amazed at the way big ships came close up to the shore and goods were unloaded straight on to the shore, without having to use lighters to transport goods to land. "You will observe ships ranged along the quay like horses lined at their pickets or in their stables." The port was also a major arsenal with "an uncountable number of ships".⁶²

Ibn Jubayr was so impressed by the fertility of Sicily that he was prepared to compare it with his own homeland of al-Andalus:

the prosperity of the island surpasses description. It is enough to say that it is the daughter of Spain in the extent of its cultivation, in the luxuriance of its harvests, and in its well-being, having an abundance of varied produce, and fruits of every kind and species.⁶³

On the other hand, Muslim farmers, though well treated by the Christians, had a tax imposed on them, collected twice a year, which deprived them of some of the wealth that they had possessed when the land was in Muslim hands. This must be a reference to the Christian tax modelled on the *jizya* of the Muslims, mentioned earlier.⁶⁴ Overall, the tone of Ibn Jubayr's account oscillates between admiration of the fair treatment of the Muslims by the Christian rulers of the island, and resentment at the difficulties faced by Muslims living in Sicily. At times, this results in contradictory viewpoints. Clearly, Ibn Jubayr was puzzled by what he saw. He tried to make sense of Christian kings who immersed themselves in the glitter of an oriental court, and had Muslims, or at least people of Muslim origin, among their courtiers; equally, as a devout Muslim, Ibn Jubayr complained at the loss of this land to Christendom, and the erosion of Islam on the island. He was less offensive in his comments than he was when he wrote of "that pig" the king of Jerusalem.⁶⁵ We could, indeed, take his confusion as a sign that the Norman kings were still up to a point succeeding in their attempt to present themselves as rulers immersed in Arabic culture, even if the trend towards latinisation was now quite far advanced.

The king of Sicily spent his time in his magnificent palaces enjoying a life of luxury, but he was also active in legislating, in administering his kingdom, and in

⁶² Ibid. 343.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 339f.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 324.

displaying his magnificence, “in a manner that resembles the Muslim kings”.⁶⁶ In fact, he even read and wrote Arabic. King William II “is admirable for his just conduct, and for the use he makes of the industry of the Muslims”.⁶⁷ He surrounded himself with eunuchs who were of Muslim origin, most of whom pretended, however, to have accepted the Christian religion. William trusted his Muslim courtiers, so that even his kitchen was run by a Muslim (trust indeed, for if anyone were to attempt to poison the king, this was the obvious place to begin); he also made use of Muslim physicians and astrologers, and when a foreign physician or astrologer was heard to be visiting his kingdom, he would detain him and induce him to forget his native country by showering him with gifts. He chose ministers from the ranks of his courtiers and was protected by a guard composed of black Muslim slaves. His Muslim courtiers fasted during Ramadan and gave out alms, as required by Islam.⁶⁸ He possessed many Muslim concubines. Ibn Jubayr met the king’s embroiderer who told him that “Frankish Christian women”⁶⁹ working in the royal palace had even been converted to Islam by the Muslim concubines and servants; but the king knew nothing of this. Of course, this was mere rumour, and Ibn Jubayr’s story was double-edged: on the one hand his faith had survived against the odds at the court of this Christian king; on the other hand, here was a Christian king who was at best ambiguous in his attitude to his Muslim subjects. Ibn Jubayr told how on one occasion a powerful earthquake had struck Sicily, and the terrified men and women of the court had been heard to cry out to Allah; then they saw the king in their midst and were even more terrified, but William simply remarked: “Let each invoke the God he worships, and those that have faith shall be comforted.”⁷⁰

Ibn Jubayr met in Messina one of the king’s Muslim courtiers, named ‘Abd al-Masiḥ (‘slave of the Messiah’, in Greek Christodoulos). He had heard of the dramatic arrival of Ibn Jubayr’s party and asked to see the Granadan pilgrims. But before he spoke with Ibn Jubayr, he sent away any of his servants who might be untrustworthy. He showed great interest in the shrines at Mecca and Medina which Ibn Jubayr had visited. He said:

You can boldly display your faith in Islam, [...] and are successful in your enterprises and thrive, by God’s will, in your commerce. But we must conceal our faith, and, fearful of our lives, must adhere to the worship of God and the discharge of our religious duties in secret. We are bound in the possession of an infidel who has placed on our necks the noose of bondage.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid. 341, also 337.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 341.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 340f.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 341.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid. 342.

The royal eunuchs even managed to pray regularly; when the time for Muslim prayer came, they would individually make their excuses and leave the king's presence. It was not always easy to find somewhere out of sight where they could pray (bearing in mind that Muslim prayer is very visible and involves prostration), but "Almighty and Glorious God conceals them".⁷² That, at least, was what Ibn Jubayr reported; but the overall impression is that the king was content with the outward adherence of his courtiers to Christianity and knew perfectly well that they continued to practise Islam all the while. His policy was thus a pragmatic compromise.

From Messina, Ibn Jubayr moved westwards by sea and by land to Palermo, passing Cefalù (where like al-Idrīsī he noted the great rock but not the cathedral) and Termini, which he praised for the fertility of the surrounding countryside.⁷³ As they approached Palermo, Ibn Jubayr was struck by the great friendliness of the Christians he passed on the road, but he decided that this was mere seduction "which would offer temptation to ignorant souls",⁷⁴ an attempt, therefore, to win Muslims to Christian manners and ultimately the Christian faith. He was clearly in an ungenerous mood towards the Sicilian Christians, and they could do nothing right – either they were insidiously polite or plain rude, as at Messina. In a mosque outside Palermo, where Ibn Jubayr spent the night, he heard the Muslim call to prayer, which, he says, he had not heard in a long while. Impressed as he was by the facilities for Muslims, Ibn Jubayr could not help noticing the Christian hospitals that lined the roads leading into Palermo; "we marvelled at such solicitude".⁷⁵ But when they reached the gates of Palermo, Ibn Jubayr and his companions were sent down to another gate near the royal palace, so they could be questioned, "as they do in the case of all strangers".⁷⁶ No doubt he meant strangers of importance, because it is hard to believe all travellers were led through the palace courtyards and gardens, past the royal dining-hall. A high official came to meet them; he spoke good Arabic, but it does not appear that he came from the Muslim community; his "long white moustaches"⁷⁷ conjure up the image of a Greek official, perhaps, such as Admiral Eugenius, Emir of Emirs at the court of King William.⁷⁸ His main interest was apparently in news about Constantinople, for the king was at this moment planning his great assault on the Byzantine empire, which took place the next year and was described in harrowing detail by Eustathios, archbishop of Thessalonika, which the Sicilians captured.⁷⁹

⁷² Ibid. 343; cf. 356.

⁷³ Ibid. 344f.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 345.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 346.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 374.

⁷⁸ Ibid.; cf. Jamison, Evelyn 1957, *Admiral Eugenius of Sicily. His life and work, and the authorship of the Epistola ad Petrum and the Historia Hugonis Falcandi Siculi*, London.

⁷⁹ Eustazio di Tessalonica, *La espugnazione di Tessalonica*, Stilpon Kyriakidis, ed., Palermo 1961; Hunger, Herbert, Hg. und Übers. 1967, *Die Normannen in Thessalonike: die Eroberung*

Palermo excited Ibn Jubayr's admiration, or rather his envy. "It is an ancient and elegant city, magnificent and gracious, and seductive to look upon." The city was full of gardens and it possessed broad roads and avenues. The higher parts of Palermo were surrounded by royal palaces, "like pearls encircling a woman's full throat".⁸⁰ Here the king spent his leisure time, enjoying the gardens and courtyards. It is thus a very similar picture to that painted by Benjamin of Tudela. But Ibn Jubayr also mentions the churches which the king had endowed, and it is hard not to suppose that Monreale was the main example he had in mind: "how many fine monasteries whose monks he has put in comfort by grants of large fiefs, and how many churches with crosses of gold and silver!"⁸¹ Typically, this observation then prompted Ibn Jubayr to pray for the return of Sicily to the Islamic faith.

Still, there were practising Muslims in Palermo. Ibn Jubayr says that most mosques were still operating, and contained Islamic schools; however, the Friday sermon was banned and so there were no big gatherings on Fridays, the Muslim holy day. This was because the sermon was accompanied by the recitation of the name of the Caliph, an indication of the loyalty of the congregation to one or another branch of Islam; particularly worrying to the royal court would have been any attempt to name as Caliph the Almohad ruler in north Africa and Spain.⁸² Still, it was permitted to recite the name of the Sunni Caliph in Baghdad on Muslim feast days, who was so far away that loyalty to him was of little consequence. The Muslims followed their own laws under the supervision of a Muslim judge or *qāḍī*, but Ibn Jubayr felt that they enjoyed little real security, and that their possessions, even their women and children, were at the mercy of the Christians. There were suburbs where the Muslims lived separately from the Christians. They were very active in trade: "they are the merchants of the place", and the market-places were full of Muslims.⁸³

As for the Christians, Ibn Jubayr ventured into their parts of the city as well. He visited the "Church of the Antiochian", as has been seen. It was Christmas Day, 1184. The church was filled with men and women. What struck Ibn Jubayr most forcefully was the way the walls seemed to be covered with gold; he had never seen anything like the marble and mosaics within the church, or the glass windows, themselves gilded, "which steal all looks by the brilliance of their rays and bewitch the soul". Ibn Jubayr discovered that the church had been built by "the vizier to the grandfather of this polytheist king", that is, Admiral George of Antioch. Ibn Jubayr begged Allah to turn the church into a mosque and to make

von Thessalonike durch die Normannen, (1185, n. Chr.) in der Augenzeugenschilderung des Erzbischofs Eustathios, (Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber 3), 2. Aufl., Graz, 1967; Eustathios of Thessaloniki, The capture of Thessaloniki, John R. Melville Jones, ed. and trans., (Byzantina Australiensia 8), Sydney 1987.

⁸⁰ Ibn Jubayr, *Travels* 348.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

its beautiful bell tower into its minaret.⁸⁴ But he was also struck by the behaviour of the Christian women, who went around veiled like Muslim women, though on this feast day they had dressed in silk robes embroidered with gold. They wore similar jewellery to the Muslim women, and even decorated their hands with henna in the north African fashion.⁸⁵

Ibn Jubayr's travels took him westwards through rich countryside, richer even than that of Córdoba (praise indeed), with its orange groves and planted fields. He made his way to Trapani, which was alive with rumours that the king was preparing a great fleet to raid Majorca, or Alexandria, or possibly Constantinople – in fact, he had raided Majorca a couple of years earlier and was now turning his attention to Byzantium, but the destination of the fleet was a closely guarded secret.⁸⁶ Ibn Jubayr also met Ibn Ḥammūd, one of the leading figures in the Muslim community in Sicily, who had been favoured at court, or rather, kept at court out of harm's way; but in the end he had been stripped of his office and of much of his great wealth, and he described the lot of the Sicilian Muslims in deeply pessimistic terms.⁸⁷ Young girls were sent abroad to Muslim lands to marry for fear that they would become Christian if they stayed in Sicily, for some had obstinately done so against their parents' wishes.⁸⁸ It was a portrait of a community in sharp decline, demoralised, losing numbers, lacking favour at court. Of course, this was the sort of negative report Ibn Jubayr expected and wanted to receive; on the other hand, it is clear that the ethnic balance within the island was indeed changing, and that the west of Sicily – including the lands granted to Monreale – was an area in which tension was rising, as the Muslims found themselves under greater pressure. This was soon to result in the outbreak of rebellion; and, as has been seen, it was impossible effectively to suppress the rebellion while the monarchy was in crisis following the death of King William in 1189.⁸⁹

IV

The depth of this crisis can be measured from the letter sent to Peter, treasurer of the Church in Palermo, by the author of the chronicle attributed to Hugo Falcandus. Here a Latin Christian bewails the fate of the island now that it is threatened by the armies of the German empire. The letter combines an encomium of the beauty and wealth of Sicily with an overpowering sense that a mighty tragedy is about to befall the island:

⁸⁴ Ibid. 349.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 349f.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 350ff., 354.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 358ff.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 359f.

⁸⁹ On this see Metcalfe 2003.

But if the force of the raging storm were to strike that blessed island which deserves above all kingdoms the privilege of wonderful gifts and great deserts, if the inexorable clash of weapons were to disturb its pleasant peace and quiet, made more attractive by every type of enjoyable thing, then who could stop his mind from exceeding the proper measure of grief?⁹⁰

The writer asked what line the “Sicilians” should follow. Should they resist the Germans, “that disgusting race”, or accept “the yoke of slavery”?⁹¹ Maybe if the Muslims worked with the Christians, some unity in the face of the invasion could be achieved; but the Muslims felt they had been persecuted long enough, and there was a danger that they would act independently, perhaps seizing strongholds in the mountains (as in fact happened) or along the coast. Still, a king could be chosen both by Christians and by Muslims who, showing generosity to potential supporters, would win allies in Sicily and Calabria (the rest of the mainland was apparently regarded as lost, or not worth defending, since the Apulians, he said, were always plotting rebellion).

Sicily was a beautiful island; but it was also an island “whose condition is wretched, and fate damned”.⁹² Ibn Jubayr may have been deeply pessimistic about the Sicilian Muslims, but here was a Christian writer who was profoundly pessimistic about the whole island. He felt betrayed by Constance, a Sicilian princess, who now returned in the invading armies – unable to predict that she would prove very hostile to the Germans in Sicily once her husband died in 1197. So, immersing himself in classical allusions, the writer called on the ancient cities of Messina, Catania and Syracuse to resist bravely this foreign onslaught.⁹³ But when he came to describe Palermo, what he saw was, rather, the city as it was in his day: he saw the Sea Castle and the royal palace, with its Pisan Tower which still survives; he saw the sparkling decoration on the walls, alluding to the mosaics in the palace chambers; he saw the pavilions and kiosks scattered around the royal park in which the royal concubines and eunuchs resided, including small palaces (such as the Cuba and Zisa, one presumes), ‘shining with great beauty, where the king discusses the state of the realm in private’ with his advisers. He saw the silk workshops, describing in loving detail the elaborate processes by which the different weaves were made, and embroidery in gold and pearls was added to the silk cloth. He saw the extraordinary mosaics of Biblical scenes in the Cappella Palatina, and the elegant sculptures within the chapel. And then he looked down on the city itself to observe its great long streets, its fine churches, such as that of Admiral George, and the houses of wealthy and powerful Latins and Muslims. He singled out for attention the Amalfitan quarter, towards the port, where silk cloth and

⁹⁰ Cited from the translation of the “Letter of Peter” in Loud and Wiedemann 1988, 252-263, at 253.

⁹¹ Ibid. 253f.

⁹² Ibid. 255.

⁹³ Ibid. 256-8.

French or Flemish textiles made of wool could be bought. But there was also the lush countryside to consider: the vineyards and orchards of the plain that stretched for miles from Palermo, “holding in its lap every sort of tree and fruit”. Water wheels helped irrigate the land. There were citrus groves; there were melons and squash, pomegranates and bitter oranges, cultivated more for their fine appearance than their usefulness. Olives, figs, walnuts, carobs and an amazing reed that produces a substance like honey, known as sugar, were all cultivated in these open spaces.⁹⁴

The tragedy Peter feared was, then, the loss of this great kingdom to rude foreigners from the north, with their grunting speech and bestial ways, who would rape the Sicilian women and cut down with the sword those who resisted them: “the madness of the Germans is not accustomed to being controlled by reason”.⁹⁵ His idealisation of Sicily before its impending fall is eloquent and moving; and yet the changes that had been taking place in Sicily during the twelfth century had already transformed the ethnic, religious and cultural balance in the island. “Sicilians” (to use his word) were now predominantly Latins, though he himself was quite sympathetic to the Muslims. In fact, the Jews rather than the Muslims would become the standard-bearers of the culture of the Arabic world in thirteenth-century Sicily. The Greeks would decline in importance and lose control of the trade of Messina to brash Latin merchants from Tuscany, Liguria and beyond. Even without the German invasion, even without the years of disorder that stretched from the death of King William to the decisive reassertion of royal authority under Frederick II, particularly from 1220 onwards, the kingdom of Sicily was undergoing a massive transformation. The Arab-Norman kingdom of Sicily had become the Latin kingdom of Sicily.

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⁹⁴ Ibid. 258-62.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 253.

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