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Francesca M. Duncan, University of Portland, undergraduate student, “A Collaborative Crusade: Economic Incentives for Religious Tolerance in Sicily, 1061–1189”

Abstract: As the geographic and cultural crossroads of the Mediterranean, the island of Sicily represents the product of conflict and cooperation over the course of centuries. One particularly important shift in the island’s history was the Norman invasion of Sicily in 1061 CE, in which the Catholic Normans from France took over the island from the Muslim Arabs. Through this change in state religion, Norman Sicily highlighted the interaction between Christianity and Islam. Beyond the island of Sicily, this period saw the two religions pitted against one another throughout Medieval Christendom. In contrast, this paper argues that although the Normans imposed their own Christian culture and administration in Sicily after 1061, Norman rulers actually embraced many elements of Arabic culture because they prioritized economic prosperity over religion. Therefore, levels of religious tolerance towards Muslims depended on economic utility to the crown, fueling both conflict and cooperation between the two religions. This concept is apparent in the high levels of cultural exchange between Norman rulers and elite Muslims, the poor treatment of lower-class Muslims by the Norman Kings, and the basis of interreligious cohabitation in the lower classes apart from conflicts caused by the Normans.

A Collaborative Crusade: Economic Incentives for Religious Tolerance in Sicily, 1061-1189

By: Francesca M. Duncan

As the geographic and cultural crossroads of the Mediterranean, the island of Sicily represents the product of conflict and cooperation. Each shift in the island's rulers over the centuries resulted in an influx of different languages, religions, and ethnicities to Sicily. These demographic shifts can be still observed in the island's population today. As a person of Sicilian descent, the mixed DNA of Sicily's past is the same as my own. A DNA test revealed that Sicily's many cultural shifts had each contributed to unique parts of my genetic makeup. There was one especially notable trait in my ancestry: significant traces of Arab and Levantine DNA. This cultural heritage raised the curiosity of how Sicily— a land commonly associated with Christianity— had allowed for the intercultural mixing with Muslims in my own bloodline.

The answer to this lies with one particularly important shift in the island's history: the Norman invasion of Arabic Sicily in 1061 CE. This transition highlighted the interaction between Christianity and Islam. Beyond the island of Sicily, this period saw the two religions pitted against one another throughout Medieval Christendom. Violent events of religious conflict such as the Spanish Reconquista and the First Crusade have heavily influenced modern preconceptions of Christian-Muslims relations during the Middle Ages. In contrast, this paper argues that although the Normans imposed their own Christian culture and administration in Sicily after 1061, levels of religious tolerance towards Muslims depended on economic utility to the crown, fueling both conflict and cooperation between the two religions. This concept is apparent in the high levels of cultural exchange between Norman rulers and elite Muslims, the poor treatment of lower-class Muslims by the Norman Kings, and the basis of interreligious cohabitation in the lower classes apart from conflicts caused by the Normans.

Embracing Elite Arabic Culture

The tolerant attitudes of the Norman rulers towards high-ranking Muslims were fundamentally motivated by economics. As Timothy Smit argues, “Muslims in Sicily were allowed considerable autonomy and tolerance by the Christian rulers of the island, and the tolerance shown to them was always tied to their usefulness to the crown.”¹ Because of their experience ruling the island as well as access to existing trade connections, Sicilian Muslims were seen as economic and political assets. This caused the Normans to not only extend religious tolerance to them but also heavily embrace elements of Islamic culture as a sign of sophisticated status and economic prosperity.

Thus, Norman rulers actually chose to preserve and promote key aspects of Arabic culture that benefitted their reign, including perhaps the most obstructive difference between the groups: language. Alexander Metcalfe explains that King Roger I– the first Norman King of Sicily– maintained spoken Arabic in his royal court, and it became an esteemed language of the upper classes.² The acceptance of the Arabic language by the Norman rulers is further demonstrated by their decision to include Arabic symbols and inscriptions on official royal garments.³ The inscriptions and artistry of these textiles are ornate and regal, clearly designed to exhibit royal authority and elicit respect from their subjects. Therefore, the inclusion of Arabic phrases and imagery on the very garments that symbolized Norman power shows the huge extent to which Norman rulers prioritized economics, which prompted them to embrace Arabic culture within their courts.

¹ Timothy James Smit, “Commerce and Coexistence: Muslims in the Economy and Society of Norman Sicily,” PhD diss., (University of Minnesota, 2009) 1.

² Alexander Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2013), XV.

³ Isabelle Dolezalek, *Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily* (Boston, Massachusetts: De Gruyter, 2017) XII.

The Norman rulers further reflected their tolerance of economically powerful Muslim subjects in the royal legislation put in place during this period. King Roger II was the third Norman king of Sicily, and he passed a series of laws in the 1140s, aptly referred to as “The Laws of King Roger II.” Because incorporating Arabic culture and traditions was actually beneficial in maintaining economic power, Roger II’s laws make no outward affronts towards Muslims or Arabic culture. In fact, the laws even state, “Because of the variety of different people subject to our rule, the usages, customs, and laws which have existed among them up to now are not abrogated unless what is observed in them is clearly in contradiction to our edicts here.”⁴ The laws make no mention of defending the Church specifically from non-believers, and in cases of wrongdoing against the Church, the punishment was a monetary fine rather than mandatory penance, prayer, or spiritual atonement.⁵ From this evidence, it is clear that the laws passed under King Roger II are concerned with protecting the economic assets of the Church rather than defending Christianity spiritually from Muslims.

King Roger II’s reputation as a tolerant leader also extended beyond these written laws. According to Ali Ibn Al-Athir, a Muslim scholar from Mosul whose account of Sicily dates from 1144 to 1145, King Roger II was actually rumored to be a Muslim because of his close association with Muslims in his court: “At this time there lived in Sicily a learned Muslim, a pious man. The lord of Sicily honored and venerated him. He consulted his words and gave precedence to him over any among his priests or monks, and because of this a rumor began among the people that he [Roger II] was a Muslim.”⁶ While the king was officially a Christian

⁴ “Laws of King Roger II,” trans. G. A. Loud, in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, ed. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, Joanna H. Drell, and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 175.

⁵ “Laws of King Roger II,” 177.

⁶ Ali Ibn Al-Athir, “The Complete Treatment of History,” trans. Joshua Birk, in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, ed. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, Joanna H. Drell, and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 122.

ruler, the speculation over his religious sincerity illustrates the extent to which Roger II embraced Arabic culture and respected his Muslim associates. His reliance on a Muslim advisor not only demonstrates high levels of tolerance, but it further proves that the Norman kings were willing to extend these honors to useful, high-ranking individuals regardless of religion.

Hardships of Lower-Class Muslims

While elite Muslims were held in high esteem for their economic and political utility by the Norman Kings, the Muslim experience was not identical in every part of the island. Lower-class and foreign Muslims were often barred from economic mobility and treated violently by the Norman rulers because they offered less economic and political opportunities than higher ranking members of their faith. This contrast in tolerance between elite and lower-class Muslims is evident in the journal of Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Jubayr al-Kenani, an upper-class Spanish moor who travelled to Sicily in 1183-1184. While Ibn Jubayr personally held King William II in high esteem, he also described Messina as a dirty city that was “cheerless” because no Muslims lived there.⁷ Ultimately, Ibn Jubayr expressed his disappointment as a Muslim traveler, lamenting the plight of other Muslims who had to live in a predominantly Christian city.

Ibn Jubayr also commented that although Christians treated Muslims as “friends,” Muslims were required to pay an extra tax that put them at a disadvantage.⁸ Ibn Jubayr’s observation of this tax exemplifies the economic focus of the Normans, who began demanding an additional tax from non-Christian populations in the late eleventh century. As Joshua Birk explains, “The Norman rulers either retained this valuable source of revenue for themselves or

⁷ Muhammed Ibn Ahmed Ibn Jubayr al-Kenani, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr, Being the Chronicle of a Mediaeval Spanish Moor concerning His Journey to the Egypt of Saladin, the Holy Cities of Arabia, Baghdad the City of the Caliphs, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, and the Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, (London: J. Cape, 1952) 339-340.

⁸ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 339-340.

doled out the right to collect taxes from certain non-Christian communities to favored subjects.”⁹ This tax contributed to the unfavorable living conditions amongst the lower-classes that Ibn Jubayr noted in his account. Thus, Ibn Jubayr’s observations both exemplify the culturally tolerant attitudes of the Norman rulers while also illustrating the disadvantages placed on lower-class Muslims. Both behaviors of the Normans point to an intense focus on economic and political gain, which motivated the Normans to extend or retract tolerance towards their Muslim subjects depending on financial status.

The Normans’ economic desire also fueled violence against Muslims in Sicily. In his work aptly titled *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily*, an anonymous author who went by the name of “Hugo Falcandus” described the personality and actions of King William I— or “King William the Bad.” Falcandus wrote a particularly stringent account of the rebellion in 1161, in which a coup was planned by lower class Christians to overthrow King William I. The real outcome of the event, however, was the huge attack against lower-class Sicilian Muslims, who were forced to flee from the city’s center or risk being slaughtered by the mob.¹⁰ The instances of violence committed by Christians towards Muslims in Sicily described in Hugo Falcandus’ account show the stark difference between the honorable treatment of Muslims in the royal court and the violent reception of Muslims in other parts of the island.

However, this hostility did not stem from Sicilian Christians’ inherent hatred of Muslims. Rather, it was derived from their resentment of the preferential treatment extended by the Normans towards their Muslim subjects.¹¹ These Christians, in turn, took their aggressions out

⁹ Joshua C. Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 1.

¹⁰ Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 214.

¹¹ Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 3.

on their Muslim neighbors, driving a wedge in the collaborative system that Hugo Falcandus claimed as vital for the prosperity of Sicily.

Lower-Class Interreligious Exchange

As demonstrated by Hugo Falcandus' account of the violent rebellion of 1161, much of the conflict that occurred between low-ranking Christians and Muslims was a result of the Norman monarch's prioritization of economic gains. Instances of violence, such as the 1161 rebellion, are more indicative of the disgruntled attitudes of Christians towards their Norman rulers than actual hostility towards their Muslim neighbors. According to Birk, "The 1161 riots did not signal a permanent and irreconcilable antagonism between the Latin Christians and the Muslim populations of Sicily."¹² When the economic interests of Norman rulers were removed from the equation, peoples of mixed faith traditions lived and died together in community.

The communal living of lower-class Christians and Muslims is supported by the 2017-2018 archaeological study "Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily," by the Universities of York, Rome and Lecce under the auspices of the European Union 2020 program. This study focused on the daily living conditions of Sicily's populations in several sites, including the town of Segesta—home to a rich demographic mixture of Christians and Muslims during the Norman monarchy.¹³ This study's findings in Segesta include several key pieces of archaeological evidence that support the argument that of high level of cultural cooperation in Sicily's peasant classes.

¹² Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 208.

¹³ Carver, Martin, Alessandra Molinari, Veronica Aniceti, Claudio Capelli, Francesca Colangeli, Léa Drieu, Girolamo Fiorentino, Fabio Giovannini, Madeleine Hummler, Jasmine Lundy, Antonino Meo, Aurore Monnereau, Paola Orecchioni, Milena Primavera, and Alice Ughi, "Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily, 2017-2018," (*Associazione Internazionale di Archeologia Classica*, 2019) 27, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334083622_Sicily_in_transition_new_research_on_early_medieval_Sicily_2017-2018.

First, through analysis of pottery shards and teeth, the researchers concluded that Sicilian Muslims and Christians ate similar diets, which differs from other parts of Europe where the two groups cohabitated: “To date no evidence has emerged that diet varied with religious affiliation... This contrasts with a recent study from eastern Spain (Valencia), which found that there was a difference in diet between the two faith groups... This was considered to reflect socio-economic and status differences between the two populations [in Spain.]”¹⁴ Because both Christians and Muslims were equally able to access and consume the same types of foods, it is likely that religion was not a large factor in determining social status and economic prosperity in Segesta. While this evidence alone is not sufficient to make this generalization for all of Sicily, these finds do point to a relatively tolerant society amongst commoners in Segesta. Sicily, with its long history of intercultural cooperation, exemplified more equality in socioeconomic status, indicating a society in which neither group forcibly subverted the other to poverty.

Just as Muslims and Christians cooperated and lived together through their shared diets during their lives, a sense of community between the two religions is also apparent in their deaths. This study also reveals that burial sites in Segesta included Muslims and Christians buried nearby one another: “In the search for variations associated with religious practice, we have at least one site where individuals using the Islamic and Christian rites were buried in adjacent and nearly-contemporary cemeteries (at Segesta).”¹⁵ As religions that support the belief in an afterlife, death and burial in both Islam and Christianity are particularly important as the transition into new life. The adjacent burials of Christians and Muslims near one another shows that there was no deep stigma about sharing the ground with non-believers. This agreement shows the willingness of both groups to cooperate and cohabitate across religious boundaries.

¹⁴ Carver et al., “Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily,” 27.

¹⁵ Carver et al., “Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily,” 27.

Conclusion:

The transition from Arabic to Norman rule in Sicily showed that intercultural interaction in the Middle Ages was not all “black and white.” Modern preconceptions surrounding interreligious relationships during the time of the Crusades often reflect a false dichotomy: Muslims and Christians were fundamentally enemies and always acted in opposition of each other. However, as the example of Norman Sicily reveals, there was a degree of cooperation and mutual respect between religions uncommon in typical views of the Medieval Christian mindset. The plight of intercultural conflict was not nonexistent in Sicily, but the conflicts that did arise between Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily did not stem from inherent animosity between religions. Rather, it was the economic mindset of the Norman rulers fueled both cooperation and conflict in Medieval Sicily.

Just as Sicily’s peasant population was divided by the Norman rulers’ economic preference for upper-class Muslims, the growing sentiment of “Islamophobia” in the western world as well as increasingly antagonistic views of Christians in the Middle East paint the picture of these two religions as enemies. However, despite religious conflict arising from a world that grows increasingly complicated, the modern era has also made significant strides in interreligious dialogue since the time of the Crusades. Both Pope Francis and Muslim leaders from around the globe have recognized the need to repair the centuries-old plight between Christians and Muslims for the sake of both their peoples. Therefore, if a society of mutual respect and collaboration was possible between Christians and Muslims over 900 years ago in Sicily, people of faith in the present day– with the support of their religious leaders– can move towards more peaceful interreligious relations in the modern world.

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