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CLAIMING HISTORY IN RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

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The Memory of Oblivion

Italian History and the Lost Memory of Arab Influence on Medieval Sicily

Francesca Maria Corrao

“Historical knowledge is the answer to definite questions, an answer which must be given by the past; but the questions themselves are put and dictated by the present”.

Ernest Cassirer

Italian history offers an interesting example of how a religious conflict can influence the process of national identity building. The Mediterranean Basin is easy to navigate, with relatively calm waters, and, as such, had all the characteristics to favour the circulation of commerce and cultural exchange and, at the same time, to open the way to wars and colonisation. The Mediterranean, the cradle of many civilisations, represented the fulcrum of history between the East and West for millennia, endlessly shifting from peaceful interactions and interdependence, as well as from holistic perceptions to hostile antagonism between its competing shores.¹

At the end of the great pagan empires, the beginning of the Middle Ages was ushered in with the Islamic holy wars, as the Arabs expanded their territories in the name of God. Western historians place the Crusades – a relatively brief period of hostility – at the origin of current Mediterranean conflicts. The disputes over control of Jerusalem and trade in the region that followed saw fortunes alternate between the maritime republics and the various Islamic sultanates. The dynamics of economic power and the political clashes between the ruling classes on opposite shores had repercussions

¹ Abulafia 2003, 9; Lewis 2004, 37–38. By contrast, the Italian orientalist, Francesco Gabrieli, as well as the medieval historian, Franco Cardini, showed that the Crusades were seen by the Arabs as armed actions in defense of pilgrims and not as wars of religion, Cardini 1999; Gabrieli 2009; see also Bono 1993, 1999, 2016.

when it came to confrontations with the “Other”, the “Muslim enemy” – a clash that inspired many writers and a rich narrative production on both shores of the Mediterranean, from Ludovico Ariosto in the 15th century to the Egyptian poet, Ahmad Shawqi, in the early 20th century.²

If we view the basin either as a frontier or as a bridge, we find many theories: sometimes a *limes*, sometimes a *limen*, sometimes a common space. Undoubtedly, the Mediterranean, once the point of departure and arrival of the Silk Road, lost its centrality following the circumnavigation of Africa by Bartholomew Diaz in 1488 CE, changing the route to India, as well as the discovery of America, which diverted economic interests towards new horizons. As the great historian, Fernand Braudel, incisively wrote, “the Mediterranean leaves History”.³ The war of “identity” did not cease, rather the battleground was transferred to pirate wars with kidnappings and forced conversions in both directions: from Christianity to Islam and vice versa. The area remained on the sidelines of the dominant geopolitical trends in the international system for centuries, until the opening of the Suez Canal, which brought the Middle East back to the centre of trade and security. The ancient religious rivalries, which had been revitalised by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, found a new turning point starting from the Oslo Accords (1993) and later with the Barcelona Agreement (1995). An important change, however, began with Pope Paul VI and the encyclical *Nostra Aetate* (1964), from which the interreligious dialogue between the different monotheistic faiths began.⁴ While religious progress has been made on a political and cultural level, following the attacks on the Twin Towers (2001), there has been a reversal in the trend when compared with the promising beginnings of the 1990s.⁵ Since the tragedy of the 9/11 attack, the media has revived the old, stereotypical vocabulary: holy war, sacrifice, the fight to defend the principles of faith from external contamination, etc. Even when it comes to

2 Moreh 1976; Orlando Furioso ed. Reynolds 1972.

3 Braudel 1986, 4; Braudel 1982; Braudel 1966, 42–47; Braudel 1995; Corrao/Redaelli 2021.

4 Aydin 2002; Unsworth 2008. On the importance of Dialogue see Pope Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*”. On the recent meeting between Pope Francis and the Shaykh of al-Azhar, see “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”; Caspar 1975.

5 Roy 2012; Dabashi 2012; Kepel 2004.

scientific production, a tough stance has been taken against the Islamic world, mostly due to Huntington's theory of the 'Clash of Civilisations', especially after the global spread of terrorism.⁶

Today, just as in the past, there are a multiplicity of causes for these religious conflicts, ranging from historical-social to political-economic issues. Following Le Goff's approach to the study of the intellectuals' role in the Middle Ages (1957), I will try to identify the cultural components that positively affect the writing and interpretation of historical events, in a constructive sense rather than a merely critical approach, or those which have had a negative impact on the same, in the opposite sense of a destructive view.⁷

In the last few decades, historians have devised a new approach to the interpretation of Christians conflicts with the Arab world, in what we call the Crusades and Muslims call the French Wars.⁸ Human experience in the Mediterranean can easily be described in terms of religiously motivated hatred and violence but, at the same time, we know that under Norman rule and later with Emperor Fredrick II, Sicily experienced a relatively peaceful coexistence. We can find evidence of this cultural atmosphere of tolerance in secondary school history textbooks,⁹ but little is said of what happened before, nor do we know whether this outcome was the result of a previously established coexistence or simply something that emerged all of a sudden, just as it disappeared soon after the end of the age of ancient empires. In my opinion, this is also the result of an approach to the study and research of the period that ignores the history of Arabs and Muslims in Sicily.

Since Michele Amari wrote his book on the history of the "Muslims in Sicily", a great number of sources have been translated from Arabic and published. Unfortunately, apart from the world of specialised academic editions, both school textbooks and history books of a scientific nature – but intended for an audience of non-experts – devote only a few lines to the

⁶ Huntington 2002.

⁷ Le Goff 1996; Corrao/Redaelli 2021.

⁸ Gabrieli 2009.

⁹ For example, the official history textbook for Italian secondary schools barely mentions the Arab-Islamic presence that lasted almost three centuries in Sicily and seven centuries in Andalusia, see Guidi/Murgia 2007.

topic.¹⁰ The origin of this prejudice goes back to religious hagiographies; for example, Saint Nilus of Rossano, Calabria, presented a long list of violent attacks by Muslims on lands and convents mostly in southern Italy;¹¹ however, he also recalled that a Byzantine citizen named Blattone married his sister to an African Emir to free some Christian prisoners. A contrasting description of the Muslims is given by Saint John Theristus, another saint from Calabria, who wrote without prejudice about the Muslims and mentioned that good Christians worked at the court of the Kalbid Emir Abū l-Qāsim (969–982).¹²

Forgetfulness is contagious, and in both academic and scientific reviews we find a similar problem; for example, the special edition of the *National Geographic* dedicated to the Muslims in Italy offers only a list of pirate attacks on the coasts.¹³ The scholarly book by Leonardo Capezzone, *Medio-evo arabo. Una storia dell'Islam medievale (VII–XIII sec.)*, is marred by the same shortcoming.¹⁴ Religious contrast is placed at the centre of William Granara's *Narrating Muslim Sicily. War and Peace in the Medieval Mediterranean World*, where in order to motivate the leitmotif of his research, jihad, the scholar very briefly mentions some scientific contributions that take into account the cultural heritage left behind by Islam on the island.¹⁵ This is not an isolated case, prejudice against Islam is so strong that most Italians are unaware of the history of the Muslims in Sicily, as it is still scarcely

10 For example, "Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia" (History of the Muslims in Sicily) by Michele Amari is little known, while the well-known book by the historian Ludovico Gatto devotes little space to the subject. Amari 1991. Gatto 1995.

11 Bono 1993.

12 Guillou/Burgarella/Bausani 1981; Giovanelli 1966; Borsari 1953.

13 La grande storia – National Geographic – L'espansione dell'Islam, n. 18 del 31/1/2020, Rba, Italia Srl, pp. 90–95.

14 Capezzone 2016.

15 Granara 2019; in his most recent book, *Ibn Hamdis the Sicilian*, Granara paints a wonderful picture of the last phase of Muslim domination through the work of the famous Sicilian Arab poet, Ibn Hamdis, see Granara 2021.

Scholars also forget to mention academic studies that run counter to their opinion or do not fall within the logic of their discourse in other fields of study; see, for example, the articles by Jayyusi 2006, 25–60, on Arab culture under the Ottoman caliphate, and Dorigo Ceccato 2006, 347–369, on Arabic drama in post classical literature.

mentioned in school textbooks. It is a part of our history that still calls for investigation to uncover a great deal of evidence that has been buried over time or distorted by one-sided opinions.

Here, after a brief introduction to Siculo-Arabic history, I will present the recent debate on the Islamic presence in Sicily and its possible influence on medieval thought. I will go on to discuss two topics that are rarely covered by modern historiography: the role of intellectuals, in particular, the role of translators from Arabic into Latin and their influence on the formation of humanistic thought; the translation of works of Arabic literature, and how eastern culture and science have enriched the western Mediterranean civilisation by stimulating its evolution.

In my opinion, the lack of Islamic historical representation in the history of Sicily perpetuates the negative prejudices towards its cultural influences. These are the result of what I would call a 'memory of oblivion' which is widespread among the general public and institutionalised in public schools. A narrative of dialogue, understanding and mutual knowledge can convey a broader idea of human identity, be it national or supranational; and last but not least, it can help create positive cultural and religious relations that may be useful to counter xenophobia.

Sicily was part of the Eastern Roman Empire when the Muslims conquered the island (827 CE). The Siculo-Arabic period lasted until 1072, when the Normans finally managed to take control over the island. By that time, Muslim rule had been weakened by decades of fratricidal wars, deceptive alliances and the Pisan attack on Palermo.¹⁶ Amari's history of the Muslims in Sicily speaks of clashes but also of a peaceful co-existence with the natives and tolerance towards minorities. The Sicilian historian was a nationalist and his approach was useful to demonstrate just how far back in history the Sicilian identity was rooted. The Muslim experience in ruling over minorities in the Middle East was regulated by the dhimmi institution based on the Medina Charter.¹⁷ This approach was later adopted by the Normans but, of course, the Muslims now found themselves paying more

¹⁶ Petralia 2003.

¹⁷ Serjeant 1978, 1–42. The Muslim community would protect the non-Muslim, the dhimmi's life, property and freedom of religion in exchange for loyalty to the ruler and the payment of a special tax.

taxes, just as the Christians had been required to do before, when they had been in power.¹⁸

Frederick II was educated in a cultural milieu where Arabic culture was known and respected, which gave him the right tools to cope with religious conflicts and promote, on some occasions, non-violent settlements, such as when he was crowned King of Jerusalem. Frederick was not a crusader; before going to Jerusalem, he visited the Egyptian Sultan and, at his court, he met with many intellectuals. His arrival in the holy city was anticipated by an exchange of letters with Arab intellectuals, which paved the way for the constructive outcome of his visit.¹⁹

After the moderate rule of Frederick II, the rivalries between the East and West prevailed once again and almost all traces of dialogue and coexistence were erased from historical documents to make room for conflict: from profitable trade exchanges to “religious” conflicts, initially, and later, to piracy.²⁰ Historical reasoning can contribute towards unravelling religious conflicts and can help pacification when it is not a simple list of military attacks but an articulated framework in which every socio-economic aspect and all the various perspectives are taken into account.

Recent studies on the dynamics and transcultural communications on the island have further highlighted the complex cultural heritage of the Muslim age, prompting the pursuit of a more appropriate definition of what can be seen as an influence or intellectual transmission.²¹ Contemporary studies and archaeological discoveries have stimulated ample debate on Mediterranean cross-cultural exchanges and their possible influence on the evolution of European humanistic culture.²² A number of studies have examined the phenomena of an intercultural interface to explain the circularity of knowledge in the Mediterranean area. James Montgomery adopts the term cross-pollination and shares Hamilton Gibb’s idea that one system can

18 Bresc-Bautier 1980, 631–647.

19 Spallino 2002; see also Abulafia 1988; Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri 2006.

20 For a historical reconstruction of the contrast between the *East and West*, see Bono 1993, 2016, and Le Goff 2005.

21 The Istituto per l’Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino (IPOCAN), in Rome, published a new editorial series in 2017, “La Sicilia Islamica: testi, ricerche letterarie e linguistiche”. Jackh/Kirsch 2017; Pellitteri/Elsakaan/Sciortino/Sicari 2019.

22 Nef/Bagnera/Borghese/Bresc 2013.

influence another if that system happens, in some respects, to be superior.²³ It would be preferable to say (to avoid a neo-colonialist perspective) that a new custom prevails when it is better suited to the needs of a changing society, as emerges from Patricia Crone's investigation into the role of the Arabian Roman province in the evolution of the Umayyad polity.²⁴ It is not the aim of this study to go further into detail on this topic, but the debate shows the complex tapestry of influences and borrowings in art and poetry that attest to the peaceful encounter between different religious cultures. The adoption of Arabic numerals is an evident result, as was the shift to the more practical Islamic, green-glazed ceramic in place of porous Roman products, but conflict arises in the debate about Islamic heritage, when cultural identity and values other than Greek and Roman come into play. An interesting example can be seen at the baths of Cefala Diana, which were considered Norman until recent discoveries revealed their Muslim origins.²⁵

To explain the crucial role played by language in the exchange of knowledge, John Marenbon, in his study on Dante, observes that the Latin Averroist movement accepted what they could understand about the Muslim philosophical vision from a Christian perspective.²⁶ Moreover, the Jewish translator, Yacov Anatoli, wrote that he asked the Christian Michael Scot (1175–1232 CE) for advice when translating some passages from the Bible in order to have a better understanding of the text. At the court of Federico II, in Palermo, but similarly in the Spanish school of translations in Toledo, Arab and Jewish translators worked together, and would question the mother-tongue philosophers/translators in order to have a clear understanding of the cultural background of the topic. Anatoli stated that he even created new words to express some aspects of Averröes' ideas.²⁷

From a linguistic perspective, it has been documented that a language undergoes major transformations when the native speakers encounter a foreign cultural invasion. For example, a recent study has demonstrated that when the Normans mixed with the Saxons, they soon lost the habit of using

23 Montgomery 2007, 148–195.

24 Crone 1987.

25 Arcifa/Bagnera/Nef 2012, 241–274.

26 Marenbon 2007, 138–144.

27 Pepi 2012, 43–47.

the male and female gender, and the neutral prevailed because it was easier.²⁸ There is no evolution without adaptation to new cultural values, and this is also evident in art, as we can observe in the transition from pagan poetry to Islamic literary production, or in the adaptation of certain Greek mythological metaphors in the poems of the Umayyad caliph Walid (706–744 CE), as Garth Fowden pointed out in his study.²⁹

The Role of Literature

According to the Russian semiologist, Jurjii Lotman, language is a system of signs through which human beings restructure the world and which informs all other systems.³⁰ More specifically, with regard to the topic under discussion, the vision of the world as a horizontal geographical space moves in a vertical direction, transformed by the transcendence of ethical-religious priorities; this change is reflected in literary texts. Hence the polarisation between sacred spaces and spaces of sin (Christians against Muslims), which translates into mine/ours against yours/theirs (alien). More precisely, according to Bertrand Westphal, the geography within a literary text expresses the ideology of an era.³¹ He takes as an example the British imperial nationalism hidden in Jane Austen's works, and we are reminded of Umberto Eco's study on James Bond's adventure, in which he explains anti-Soviet propaganda in the dichotomy of good against evil. Another significant example can be seen in Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*, where he demonstrates that literature anticipates and justifies a political project.³² In this sense, we can read the *damnatio memoriae* of the Arab/Islamic influence on humanistic culture or anti-Muslim propaganda as a tool to reinforce the superiority of Christianity over Islam, the new version of the old opposition now being the juxtaposition of secular state against religious state and the West against East.

28 Curzan 2003, 231.

29 Fowden 2007, 38–42; on the evolution of Sicilian Arabic, see La Rosa 2019.

30 Lotman/Uspenskij 1975, 143, 183, 188. Lotman 2000.

31 Westphal 2009, 23, 120.

32 Said 2003; Del Buono/Eco 1965.

All this helps us to understand why we do not find traces of constructive memories of the Islamic and Jewish presence in Europe in most history books. Long periods of ideological warfare have wiped away almost all traces of cultural exchange – just 20 years ago, in Sicily, it was widely believed that the Arabs had left no trace and that Islamic-type works were Norman artefacts made by Muslim workers. It would take too long to list all the constructive cultural exchanges that took place in the historical period mentioned here, but I would like to point out some noteworthy evidence. At the court of Roger II of Sicily, admiral Eugene translated the *Liber Kalilae et Dimnae*, and compared it with the Greek version of the famous Indian collection of stories called *Panchatantra*, which had survived since the age of Alexander the Great.³³ The *Kalila and Dimna* was also translated into Spanish with the title *Directorium vitae humanae*, by Rabbi Joel in the 12th century. The other major work is by the Moroccan geographer al-Idrīsī (1099–1165), author of the *Book of Roger*, the oldest treatise on geography. The sacred and secular monuments erected by the Normans in Palermo and Monreale are tangible evidence of their appreciation of Islamic architectural and decorative works. The Normans adopted the system of Islamic taxation and kept Arab secretaries at court, who passed on their knowledge to the new sovereigns. Roger II was dubbed *al-Mu'tazz bi-Llāh* (the mighty by the grace of God), as were his successors; the Norman king was a man of culture and a tolerant ruler. In his court, the poet 'Abd al-Raḥmān of Butera dedicated a great many eulogies to him.³⁴

Emperor Frederick II promoted the spread of a new culture by inviting famous scholars from Toledo, such as Michael Scot, a mathematician and translator of Aristotle and Averroes' "De Anima" (On the Soul). Among the works translated at the emperor's court, we also find Ibn Zafar's book (d. 1170/72) on political advice, "Consolation for the Ruler During the Hostility of His Subjects" (*Sulwān al-Muṭā fī Udwān al-Atbā*). The emperor sent this and other translations to the Bologna library as a present, and this might have inspired Machiavelli's well-known book, *The Prince*.³⁵ The

33 Cassarino/Borruso 1991.

34 Metcalfe 2009, 105–108, 117–118, 127–130; Gabrieli 1948, 15–16.

35 Amari 1852; see also Thorndike 1965; Spallino 2012, Hrair Dekmejian/Thabit Fathi 2000.

famous letters addressed to Frederick II by the philosopher Ibn Sab'īn (1217–1271) of Murcia on the immortality of the soul clearly demonstrate the emperor's knowledge and understanding of Islamic culture. This rich cultural environment produced poems in the first standard literary Italian, enriching the vernacular base of the existing popular love songs. Averroes' thought influenced the cultural milieu in which the major Sicilian poet, Giacomo da Lentini (1210–1260), lived and worked. It is also possible to recognise in Giacomo's poems many rhetorical figures used by the Siculo-Arab poets, including, for example: the theme of separation and amorous reconciliation in poems by Ibn al-Ḥayyāt,³⁶ Mağbar b. Mağbar and al-Ballanūbī; the theme of obedience in the twofold sense, i. e. to worldly and otherworldly authority, as it is expressed in the poems by Muḥammad b. Qāsim b. Zayd and Ibn Ḥamdīs;³⁷ the theme of love as a sickness that only the lover can cure, which we find in the verses of al-Ḥayyāt, Muḥammad b. Qāsim b. Zayd, Muḥammad b. Sadūs and Ibn al-Ṭūbī;³⁸ the gaze of the fair object of love, which strikes death into the heart, as in the poems by al-Tamīmī, al-Ballanūbī and Ibn Ḥamdīs.³⁹

Moreover, in the poems by Cavalcanti, a renowned Averroist, we find similar metaphors, for example:

“Alas, you who see that the heart bears wounds inflicted by a gaze, and pleasure and humility”.⁴⁰

Which can be compared with the lines of the poem by the Siculo-Arab poet, al-Ballanūbī:

“The sword of her gaze cut out my heart
and the blood stained her cheeks”.⁴¹

³⁶ Corrao 2002, 51, 67, 119; Corrao 1998.

³⁷ Corrao 2002, 63, 169; see also Granara 2021; Licitra 2021.

³⁸ Corrao 2002, 49, 61, 77, 43.

³⁹ Corrao 2002, 55, 89, 183.

⁴⁰ The metaphor of the gaze of love that kills is a rhetorical image in both Greek and Latin literature, but not so emphatic and insistent as in Arab poetry. Ciccuto 1978, 102.

⁴¹ Corrao 2002, 89.

The Arab-Muslim domination in Spain and Sicily left conspicuous traces on the local culture, and also a notable mark on the very fabric of the oral tradition, as demonstrated, in the popular cultures of these countries, by the survival of certain anecdotes, such as stories about Giufà and the folk tale of *The Arabian Nights*.⁴² Stories about Giufà can be found both in folklore and classical literature. Some of his stories are even attributed to Bertoldo in the famous book “Bertoldo, Bertoldino and Cacasenno” by Giulio Cesare Croce and Alessandro Banchieri;⁴³ other stories appear under the name of ‘Vardiel-lo’ in *Lu cunto di li cunti* (The Tales of Tales) by Giambattista Basile, and even in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, where a story is attributed to a certain ‘Chichibbio’.

Conclusions

Like Norberto Bobbio, I believe that there can be no dialogue without mutual respect, and this requires reciprocal knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, it is important to find room for the history of Muslims and Normans in Sicily in school textbooks because the coexistence of different cultures and the three monotheistic religions under their rule shows that human beings have the potential to overcome differences and create bridges even amid great misery and war. A richer vision of our history can be used to counter the growing phenomenon of xenophobia and to promote the development of a new era of humanism. It is a matter of whether one touches the life of an individual, since even a single person can make a difference. As Daisaku Ikeda affirms, “[e]ven more essential, however, is the kind of empathy (...) which exists independent of any codified norms of human rights, is the light of humanity that can shine brightly in any place or situation”.⁴⁴

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⁴² Corrao 2007; Zipes 2004; Pitre 2016.

⁴³ Corrao 2001; Croce/Banchieri 1973; Basile 2006; Boccaccio, Decameron.

⁴⁴ Bobbio 1994, 139, 143–145; Ikeda 2016, 2.

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