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On the Dichotomy of Perceptions Regarding Sicily

Sicily has played host to various cultures throughout history. Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, and Normans have seen the incredible opportunities in the largest Mediterranean island. Being perfectly situated between Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa provided wonderful trade potential and ensuing economic prosperity for those who ruled. Sicily was also an island of bountiful agriculture and an extreme landscape. With the change in power, marked a variety of peoples journeying to see its wonders. However, the diversity in the religious and cultural backgrounds remained of significant importance for how the island was perceived by such people either traveling to Sicily or already having been born there. Throughout primary sources, there is a sense that the conglomerate of cultures creates a perpetual sense of otherness. Whether as an otherness of incredible and exotic beauty or an otherness of customs; Roman, Arab, Andalusian, Sicilian, and Muslim writers commented on the Sicilian situation.

After the birth of Islam in the early years of the seventh century, the teachings of Mohammed quickly spread. Soon the Arabic world rose to a position of dominance in many fields, such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, farming, cartography and poetry. Their military might was no less significant, and it was only a matter of time before Sicily, the crossroads of the Mediterranean, fell into Arab hands. After several aborted attempts, Ziyadat Allah seized control of the Val di Mazara, in the south-western part of the island[1]. The invasion

[1] "The History of Sicily," The Thinking Traveller, accessed Thursday, December 12, 2013, http://www.thethinkingtraveller.com/thinksicily/guide-to-sicily/sicilian-history/the-arabs-in-sicily.aspx.

continued towards Palermo, which fell some five years later[2]. Bal'harm, as they renamed the city, was to become the capital and seat of government. Beginning in 827 C.E., the Arab rule in Sicily passed through three North African dynasties: the Aghlabids, the Fatimids, and then the Kalbids[3]. However, the kingdom was not lasting. In 1061 C.E., the Normans invaded Sicily and captured Palermo by 1071 C.E.. The Norman conquest of Sicily was complete by 1091 C.E. and Roger I was put into power[4]. The shift of power from an Arab to Christian culture had a significant impact on the way Sicily was to be perceived. For some, this cultural binary was too extreme and fit neither an Arab nor Christian culture fully.

The Arab and Muslim component to the island greatly reiterated the otherness image that has circulated throughout history. In ancient times, Romans wrote about Sicily's extreme and exotic landscape. In The Aeneid of Virgil, Sicily and its surrounding waters become a major milestone in Aeneas' journey. In Book Three, Aeneas meets Andromachë in Buthrotum, a city in present-day Albania, and she advises him on navigating around Sicily. She begins in line 540 explaining how it is a historical tradition from ancient times that a vast convulsion tore the lands apart, creating Sicily and Italy. From that convulsion, "violently burst the sea,/ waves split apart the shores of Italy/ and Sicily[5]". Practically, the turbulent Strait of Messina that came from this separation is why she advises Aeneas to sail around the island. What the reader receives from this passage is a clear distinction between Italy and Sicily as being two different entities.

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[2] "The History of Sicily," The Thinking Traveller, accessed December 12, 2013, http://www.thethinkingtraveller.com/thinksicily/guide-to-sicily/sicilian-history/the-arabs-in-sicily.aspx.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Chronological - Historical Table of Sicily," In Italy, accessed December 11, 2013, http://www.initaly.com/regions/sicily/chronol.htm.

[5] Allen Mandelbaum, trans., *The Aeneid of Virgil* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 70 - 71.

Furthermore, Sicily has emerged from violence; violence has always been apart of the island's culture and identity. Another violent image the reader receives from this Book begins at line 742 with the description of Mount Etna. Mount Etna thunders, belches, vomits, and moans; the author gives Etna an anthropomorphic depiction of violence. Etna has a mythical aurora surrounding its existence. The volcano is erupting and violent, but Virgil's personal and detailed description adds another layer of mystery, intrigue, and desire to the exploration of this fantastical land. Even within this short passage, the elevation of Sicily to superiority creates a level of otherness. Here the author delicately balances beauty with violence, a theme continuing within the Aeneid and in further accounts.

As Andromachë further explains why Aeneas should sail around the island, rather than passing through the Strait of Messina, there is a description of Scylla and Charybdis. She says, "Now Scylla holds the right; insatiable/ Charybdis keeps the left. Three times she sucks the vast waves into her abyss, the deepest/ whirlpool within her vortex, then she hurls the waters high, lashing the stars with spray./ But Scylla is confined to blind retreats,/ a cavern; and her mouths thrust out to drag/ ships toward the shoals. Her upper parts are human;/ down to the pubes she seems a lovely-breasted/ virgin; but underneath she is a monster/ come from the sea, a terrifying body[6]". He did, in fact, heed to her advice and sailed around Sicily. However, what is most stunning in these passages are how mythical beasts are connected to the island. Since the Italian peninsula and Sicily are separate, the way in which the poetry connects these beasts as only belonging to Sicily is relevant to its depiction. The reader now sees both the violence, but

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[6] Allen Mandelbaum, trans., *The Aeneid of Virgil* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 71.

intrigue surrounding the island. In some way, through this depiction, what makes this island beautiful is the intrigue that surrounds its violent nature.

The fact that Sicily could bring both beauty and destruction is a theme that continues in later ages. Although transformed to fit their contemporary socio-political circumstances, to the Muslim writers, Sicily was a place of beauty and destruction. When Muslims travelled to Sicily during the Middle Ages, a time when Islam and Arab culture had already been integrated into the area, the dichotomy remained. Ibn Hawqal was a Turkish merchant and traveller, his visit in 972 C.E. coincided with relative internal stability and regional security under Kalbid rule[7]. His experience and opinion show the different customs existing within Sicily regarding Islam, to Hawqal these people have distorted the traditional practices. Hawqal speaks of Sicilians with both distance and contempt, even though Palermo was very much an Arab-Islamic city, and had been so for over a century[8].

Hawqal feels foreign and denounces Sicily to a realm of otherness in the Islamic community, showing how religious and language commonalities do not create cultural ties. He specifically notes the incredible amount of privately owned mosques, "Looking out from [a lawyer, Abu Muhammad al-Qafsi's] mosque at a distance of a shot of an arrow, I noticed about ten mosques, some of them facing each other"[9]. What was most appalling about these mosques to him was their manipulation as status symbols, "Each one wants it to be said that this [is] so-and-so's mosque and no one else's. This son of [al-Qafsi] thought himself something special. He

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[7] William Granara, "Ibn Hawqal in Sicily," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 3 (Spring, 1983): 94, accessed December 12, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/521658.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid, 97.

admired himself and was so arrogant that he acted like the father instead of the son[10].” The mosque itself has few universal features in Islamic history. The mosque, at its most basic, is simply a place of worship as its Arabic designation, *masjid*, communicates[11]. Although Muslims generally accept the mosque as a community center, it is acceptable for the mosques to be private. What is most appalling to Hawqal in this case is how a sacred religious institution was being used to fulfill an individual’s earthly desires. Although Sicily was under Muslim and Islamic dominance, it still did not fulfill Hawqal’s understanding of Islam and remained to him as a foreign culture. The sense of otherness regarding Sicily is apparent through their means of practicing Islam and appropriating it into their mode of daily living .

His critique of the Sicilians does not end there, he further states how “there are quite a few ribat on the coastline, full of freeloaders, scoundrels, and renegades, both old and young, poor and ignorant. These people would pretend to perform their prostrations, standing in order to steal money given to charity, or to defame honorable women. Most of them were pimps and perverts. They sought refuge there because they were incapable of doing anything else, and because they had no place to go. They were low-life and rabble...[12]” A ribat is a fortified monastery usually situated in areas that border enemy territory. Clearly, he has no empathy for the people of Sicily and does not see them as people similar to himself. He critiques their version of Islam, and denounces the education and class of the people. He has pushed a critique of the Sicilian quotidian lifestyles into a disregard and disrespect. He does not see them as being

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[10] William Granara, “Ibn Hawqal in Sicily,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 3 (Spring, 1983): 97, accessed December 12, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/521658.

[11] Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11.

[12] William Granara, “Ibn Hawqal in Sicily,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 3 (Spring, 1983): 97, accessed December 12, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/521658.

Islamic in any way and creates a distinct barrier between him and them. Later, he even continues to talk about the "crudeness of their manners and the dullness of their senses[13]". This notion of "them" is exactly what the otherness of Sicily means. Through the accounts of Ibn Hawqal, the distinct notion of Sicily's otherness to Muslim scholars begins to form, perpetuated in this case by the convergence of multiple cultures.

The accounts of a malignant people, specifically within the government, remained with the traveller Ibn Jubayr. Though, his accounts more explicitly represent the dichotomy existing among perceptions of Sicily. Ibn Jubayr reached Sicily in 1184, on his return trip from Mecca to his native Al-Andalus[14]. Only a century before had the island been re-captured into Christian hands from the Muslims, meaning that William II was in power. His first critique of the island was of the government, "This king possesses imposing palaces and beautiful gardens, particularly in the capital of his kingdom"[15]. The word "imposing" is of particular interest and calls attention to Ibn Jubayr's attitude, "may God protect the Muslims from his power and the extension of his power"[16]. Here we once again see the distinction that Muslims are making between themselves and the Sicilians. However, the sense of otherness in his accounts evolve from Ibn Hawqal's to separate Sicilian Muslims from the current government. Ibn Jubayr does not denounce the practices of these Muslims, most likely since the Christian enemy is a worse prospect.

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[13] William Granara, "Ibn Hawqal in Sicily," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 3 (Spring, 1983): 98, accessed December 12, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/521658.

[14] Karla Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100 - 1250: A Literary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 148.

[15] Ibid, 150.

[16] Ibid.

Ibn Jubayr's greatest criticism is of the egoism existing within the court. He speaks to how self-centered the ruling population is, similar to Ibn Hawqal's observation of the privately owned mosques. In this case, "There are not among the Christians any king wealthier or more devoted to comfort and luxury as he; immersing himself in the delights of his kingdom, and the arrangement of its laws, and the establishing of its customs, and the apportioning of the ranks of its men, and honoring monarchic ostentation and the display of the ornaments of the monarchy"[17]. The monarchy was prospering and while the ostentation reflecting personal pride and power angered Ibn Jubayr, a further point that turned his anger into disgust was in how the prosperity was only being enjoyed by the elite Christian class. His critique was especially valid since the current position of the Norman rule was supported by the Arab time's innovation. Just like in Ibn Hawqal's account, the Sicilians were using the Muslim culture for their own interests. The Arab reign had brought such prosperity and innovation to the Sicilians. They exploited Sicily as a wheat producer, while introducing a whole variety of crops, including one of modern Sicily's major players: citrus fruits[18]. Sugar cane, cotton, dates and hemp were also cultivated in considerable quantities, nurtured by the implementation of highly effective irrigation techniques[19]. The Arabs helped to establish internal success in order to increase exports. They had strong trade links with the mid and far east, and soon cultivated new ones in Europe, turning Sicily into an international commercial crossroads[20].

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[17] Karla Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100 - 1250: A Literary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) 150.

[18] "The History of Sicily," The Thinking Traveller, accessed December 12, 2013, http://www.thethinkingtraveller.com/thinksicily/guide-to-sicily/sicilian-history/the-arabs-in-sicily.aspx.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

Ibn Jubayr's accounts show once again the important relationship that the Arab reign had to the land. Just like in The Aeneid, the chronicles use Mount Etna as a representation of the island; it is not just an entity that belongs to the island. Ibn Jubayr remarks, "There is a lofty mountain on the island known as the Mountain of Fire. A marvelous thing is reported concerning it, and that during certain years fire comes forth from it like a bursting of the dam. It burns everything it passes until it reaches the sea, and then it rides atop the surface of the waves until it sinks beneath them, God be praised for the marvels of his creation! There is no Gods but he."[21] The landscape here is relegated to otherness because it is also elevated to a spiritual nature. Here, Ibn Jubayr is in complete awe of the landscape's beauty, offering even a spiritual revelation for him. Through the extreme landscape, in this case being the volcano, he sees a part of God's ability and vision. While he is unable to fully connect with the people, he is able to connect and praise the island's land and seascape.

The poets that were alive during the shift from Arab to Norman rule, also related a connection to the land, especially the betrayal by the government. Ibn Hamdis was born after the Norman conquest had already begun, but the Islamic identity was still remaining in how he envisioned his area. In his elegies, the Normans are constantly presented as heartless conquerors who have separated him from a beloved homeland[22]:

I believed that my land would return to her people-
but my beliefs have become a torment to me; I have grown hopeless

I console my soul, since I see my land
fighting a losing battle against a venomous enemy

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[21] Karla Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100 - 1250: A Literary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) 151.

[22] Ibid, 29.

What else, when she has been shamed, when the hands
of the Christians have turned her mosques into churches

In these excerpts from a greater work entitled *Siqilliyyat*, the reader notices a clear distinction between the land and the government. The government is not one that is representative of Sicily, it is an imposing force that has simply won hold of it. In his opinion, he and his people are the true ones that are representative and owners of the Sicilian land. He repeatedly connects himself to the land through anthropomorphism as well as with the phrase "my land". Though unfortunately he has witnessed the Christian government's victory over the island.

Another Norman-era poet, 'Abd al-Halim, witnessed the same transition of power. He also represented the same dichotomy within his accounts of his time. He says, "Ardently did I love Sicily as a young man, and it was like a corner of the garden of eternity; but it was not ordained that I should live to middle age before it became a burning hell"[23]. He speaks in the highest regard of the terrain and even elevates it to a spiritual level, like Ibn Jubayr. Further showing his spiritual connection, is how he uses the passive voice to say that "it was not ordained". Not naming an entity, instead only giving it an action, is still giving a representation to that entity. Hell is also a highly spiritual concept, and gathering from these three points al-Halim connects Sicily to being of divine and exotic value. The transition within a sentence, from paradisal elevation to demonic squalor happens only because of the Christian occupation. For the native Sicilian, al-Halim now feels the otherness being imposed on him, and thus reacts to it. This is what causes such a great reaction on his part, he is lacking a sense of identity with the new government.

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[23] Karla Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100 - 1250: A Literary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) 29.

The pleasure-violence complex happening between these aforementioned texts, is a common theme amongst travel literature. Sicily is a particular case because it has been a home to many cultures. This change in culture has brought a variety of opinions and a diversity of peoples to the island. As seen particularly through the poetry of Ibn Hamdis and the excerpts from ‘Abd al-Halim, they have claimed Sicily as their rightful home and Christians as harbingers of violence. They are each very connected to the Sicilian landscape, which itself has attracted many authors due to its waters, mountainous shores, and a volcano. The two main recurring themes recorded by non-Christian or non-Europeans are either of Europeans being harbingers of violence or of Europeans as carriers of exotic goods[24]. European colonizers were perceived as violent people who are also given to devious acts and only care about advancing their own interests[25]. On one account, an Indian sufi remarks on how he believes that God has sent the Portuguese to punish Muslims, destroying the Indians’ trade industry, destroying mosques, impeding pilgrimage, and selling the Indians as slaves[26]. Although, clearly consumeristic pleasures outweigh crimes against humanity since the Europeans were also praised for bringing musical instruments, birds, tobacco, and “new world creatures”[27].

Throughout the encounters of new territories with indigenous populations, the trend continues. Otherness can bring both intrigue, but when brought too close, disgust. Admiring a culture from afar is much more acceptable than claiming the culture as one’s own. This is the

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[24] For more non-European accounts on interactions with Europe and Europeans, see Nabil Matar, *Europe Through Arab Eyes: 1578 - 1727* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[25] Sanjay Subrahmanyam. “On the Hat-Wearers, Their Toilet Practices and Other Curious Usages,” in *Europe Observed: Multiple Gazes in Early Modern Encounters,* ed. Kumkum Chatterjee and Clement Hawes (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2008), 48.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid, 51.

problem that runs throughout all of these text. The crossroads culture of Sicily also means that it will never fully be one culture or another. It, therefore, has its own distinct situation arising from its unique people and history. In contemporary culture, it is popular to associate oneself with being both Sicilian and Italian. Italians take particular regional pride, which may also be connected to a lack of unity even today. In political terms, Italy is a unified country; however, rarely does one see this in self identity.

In fact, this is a possibility for why the Mafia arose in Sicily. At a time when the government was not representative of Sicilian culture, they formed their own governance. Sicilian people disagreed with, as they saw it, the Northern imposition of government. Not only was this another time in history in which rulers were controlling and claiming Sicily, but also one in which the government was not attending to the Sicilians' unique needs. In the process of unification, the Northern Italian government thought that their laws would fix the Sicilian problems. Today, Italians and non-Italians alike see a great animosity between the northern and southern regions of Italy. Each one claiming the other to be the reason for their own plights. Although, the pleasure-violence complex still applies. Northerners visit Sicily in order bask in the extreme natural beauty existing within the island as well as relish in the roots of their Italian heritage. Conversely, Southerners look to the North for economic successes. If given the opportunity, Milan and Turin are the preferred options for education at the university level. This only perpetuates the dichotomy and the otherness to remain from within a supposedly unified country. The specific question existing within the Sicilian history, makes one wonder about what other pleasure-violence complex existing within contemporary society's collective consciousness.

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