

# **Between Christendom and Islam**

*The role of the Arabic language on Sicily*

*Masters dissertation 2020-2021*

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## Introduction to the master's dissertation

In the summer of 2019, I found myself amid a city of renown that carries its name Cairo with pride till this very day. Cairo is not only the largest city in Africa, but also a cultural hub whereabouts myriad cultures have blended over the centuries to form what some would call a potpourri of language and religion. It is exactly this symbiosis of cultural elements that sparked my interest, given that cohabitation in its full flowering necessitates complacency and a certain level of mutual respect amongst its inhabitants. The history of Cairo is marked by the multiple empires that have held or tried to hold sway over this city, with each of these 'intruders' leaving an indelible mark on the residents and their cultural output.

Being a former student of Egyptian Arabic has given me the tools to explore the local dialect. Consequently I was able to detect a considerable amount of Italian lexical items utilised by the Egyptians in their daily conducts. Initially this discovery left me dumbfounded as I never expected to find traces of the unwaveringly strong trading relations between Italian traders from the seafaring towns like Venetia and the Islamic rulers that first and foremost were regarded as uncultured and bellicose.

Upon further research I stumbled upon a text by the Italian scholar Susanna Valpreda<sup>1</sup> in which the intricate and fickle relations between the Muslims and the Byzantine rulers were recounted with an eye for detail. Thereupon it dawned on me that indeed the relations between Italy and the Middle East began to take flight as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, with Muslim pirates and buccaneers traversing the Mediterranean Sea in search of booty and slaves. I kept digging in Italian secondary sources, of which there is no paucity, to find that The Muslim conquerors were keen on occupying 'the boot' of southern Italy because they deemed it a steppingstone from which they could proceed to ransack Rome itself and cut short the 'scourge' that was Christendom. It is also noteworthy that Rome was considered the centre of the 'Dar al-Harb', the territory on which it was permissible to wage war against infidels or 'kufar'<sup>2</sup>

Sicily and Malta were the very first islands the Muslims sought to assert control over in their aspiration of bringing down the papacy in Rome.<sup>3</sup> They successfully launched multiple attacks to overwhelm the local Byzantine population from the sea, bringing down the local Byzantine rulers in twenty odd years. The Muslims however brought with them an immeasurable amount of wealth that would forever alter the course of events on both Sicily and Malta. It is possible to retrace Islamic influences across both islands both in the form of architecture and in the native dialect of Sicilian which is rife with Arabic lexemes and even grammatical constructs, whereas in Malta the locals still converse in a fully-fledged Semitic tongue be it with a large influx of Italian and English words.<sup>4</sup>

The actual role of the Arabic language on Sicily remains shrouded in mystery as several scholars have attempted to unveil some of the many linguistical mysteries that Sicily houses. Given the

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<sup>1</sup> Susanna Valpreda, *Sikelia: La Sicilia Orientale nel Periodo Bizantino* (Roma: Bonanno Editore, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), 217.

<sup>3</sup> George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 218.

<sup>4</sup> Arne A. Ambros, *Bongornu, kif int? Einführung in die maltesische Sprache* (Wiesbaden: Reichert 1998)

limited number of reliable texts available from the early era (9<sup>th</sup> till 11<sup>th</sup> century, it is essential to comprehend why and by whom these texts were written. Some scholars who preceded me in analysing the Arabic texts from the island chose to rely on specific parts of a given text in order to promote the idea that a separate Sicilian Arabic dialect came into existence and thrived throughout the Islamic period. Others assert that the reality is somewhat more complex and postulate that there has always been a linguistical division on the island between religious communities.<sup>5</sup> Christians and Muslims did not mingle outside the urban areas, some would argue. By contrast, it is indisputable that scholars from all over the Islamic world came to Sicily from far and wide and that they debated and discoursed on an island that was deemed a scholarly paradise even after the Christian Normans vanquished the Arabic speaking rulers there in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> A main source for our modern understanding of the Arab-Sicilian reality during this time is the *Tathqīf al-Lisān* by philologist and grammarian Ibn Makkī, a grammatical treatise that discusses grammatical flaws prevalent among the inhabitants of Sicily around the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century. Although there is a scholarly consensus in our time that this grammatical treatise should be used with caution in conducting linguistical research<sup>7</sup>, it is of undeniable interest to our understanding of life on Sicily during this tumultuous period.

In my research I intend to embed the person of Ibn Makkī in the Arab reality of 11<sup>th</sup> century Sicily. This entails a three-part analysis of the *Tathqīf al-Lisān* and a conjunct historical overview of events that shaped the linguistical and social texture of Sicily in those early days. Providing an entirely comprehensive overview of Sicily's Arab history is beyond the scope of this paper and thus, chapter one will offer an overview of key events leading up to the Arab conquest and the ensuing centuries of Arab rule. In the second chapter I will delve into Ibn Makkī's person and the debates revolving around the Arabic language and the role of Islam. These two chapters will tie in with the third chapter which will encompass an analysis of the *Tathqīf al-Lisān* and some of the linguistical idiosyncrasies manifested. Some attention will be given to the recently flared-up debate about the existence of a distinctively 'Sicilian dialect of Arabic' as well.

The main question I will try to answer in this research paper is: What does Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf al-Lisān* teach us about the Arabic language on Sicily during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century?

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<sup>5</sup> Amadeo Feniello, *Sotto il Segno del Leone: Storia dell'Italia Musulmana* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2011), 145

<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana* (Bologna: Mulino, 2012), 71-82

<sup>7</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 131-132

## The current state of research

As mentioned in the brief introduction there is an abundance in secondary sources to be discerned, primarily of Italian provenance. It is therefore not entirely curious to conclude that most sources written in English are largely based off these Italian texts. With many historians being illiterate in Arabic there is a substantial gap between what can be regarded as substantiated and what is basically implied without properly researching the primary sources. That is not to say that a lack of Arabic source material renders conducted research useless, rather it is an aide-memoire of sorts in ascertaining that scholars either critically assessed their primary sources or that they did not.

With that in mind it is now of prime importance to provide an overview of what has already been written about Ibn Makkī, the Arabic language on Sicily and about the Arab presence on the island in general. To shed sufficient light on the variegated sources available I will subcategorise papers and books written in the languages at my disposal, English, Italian, French and Arabic and of course I will do so chronologically. It must also be noted that this literature summary will not encompass all the sources I will use.

## Secondary sources

The first in-depth research committed to paper was Amari's 'Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia'<sup>8</sup> publication (1850s-70s) on Sicily in which the Muslim period is elaborately and exhaustively researched. Amari set the standard for scholars writing about Sicily with copious notes and actual translations of prime source material found on the island. This includes texts, but also archaeological finds and artifacts excavated during the foregoing centuries. Amari discusses sundry parts of the Arabic culture such as architecture, language, trade, money and intangibles such as local dialects, political gestures and myths. It should be noted that Amari's research is somewhat dated and is therefore due for a revision, especially considering the novel discoveries made during the past century. Amari was the first scholar who postulated that a Maghribi dialect of Arabic was spoken on Sicily, based on her findings in Ibn Makkī's grammatical treatise and some of the villein documents that she dove into.

The Maghribi dialect theory was taken up by a multitude of researchers in her wake. Umberto Rizzitano (1975) in his 'Storia e Cultura nella Sicilia Saracena'<sup>9</sup> relied solely on Ibn Makkī's treatise to substantiate Amari's assertion that an innocuous, so far untraceable Maghribi dialect was prevalent on Sicily during the Arab period. In the 50s of the last century, the idea sprung up that there might be a nexus between the poetry of Sicily and the Andalusian poetical output during the Arab period.<sup>10</sup> Francesco Gabrieli first conducted research on the 'Al-Durra al-Khatira' to conclude that the linguistical features seen in poetry from Sicily were relatively comparable to what was found in Andalusia. According to Gabrieli this also attested to the predominance of a

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<sup>8</sup> A.Nef, *Michele Amari ou l'histoire inventée de la Sicile Islamique : Réflexions sur la Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* (Roma: Etudes Réunies par B. Grevin, 2010) 285-306

<sup>9</sup> Umberto Rizzitano, *Storia e Cultura nella Sicilia Saracena* (Palermo: S.F. Floccoiro, 1975)

<sup>10</sup> Lev Kapitaikin, "The Daughter of Al-Andalus: Interrelations between Norman Sicily and the Muslim West" *Al-Masaq*, Routledge 25 (1) 2013 p 113-134

widespread Maghribi dialect in the region.<sup>11</sup> In *AL-DURRA AL-ḤAṬĪRA MIN ŠU‘ARĀ’ AL-ĠAZĪRA DI IBN AL-QAṬṬĀ’ AL-ŠIQILLĪ: TRADUZIONE E ANALISI DI ALCUNI FRAMMENTI* which was published in 2018, some of the poems in the Al-Durra were translated, yet no reference was made to Gabrieli nor to his theory.<sup>12</sup>

The only in-depth study conducted on the widely cited Sicilian vault of Arabic poets and scholars. This paper was published as a master's thesis by a student from Palermo and contains some innovative ideas about the meaning behind some of its poems. The writer does not discuss Ibn Makkī's poems nor the biographical information within the text, but rather focusses on the Hadith scholars in the late Islamic period. The copy I found online does not contain any peer reviews to the best of my knowledge.

In the 80s there is a growing propensity to rely on the villein documents as found in Diwani registers written in both Greek and Arabic. These 'annals' suggest a courtly system that was multilingual and representative of Sicilian society.<sup>13</sup> Amari researched some of these texts, albeit without offering translations and without conflating necessary linguistical research. In later years, some scholars revised and augmented Amari's work by studying the villein documents in detail, both linguistically and culturally. First came Cusa's 1979 release 'I diplomi Greci ed Arabi' which formed the first compilation of villein and administrative texts from Sicily which later came under scrutiny because it contained numerous errors.<sup>14</sup> Metcalfe's 2003 release of his labour of love *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic-Speakers and the End of Islam* became the first comprehensive account of the villein contents, although Ibn Makkī's grammatical treatise is entirely disregarded.<sup>15</sup>

Agius (1996)<sup>16</sup> tries to decipher the intricate process that led to the development of a distinct Arabic dialect on Sicily through rigorous in-depth skimming through primary sources found on Sicily. Again, Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf al-Lisan* receives ample attention because Agius is convinced that despite its incoherencies, there is important content there for the linguist. Agius's approach borders on purely linguistical, and this a rare phenomenon among scholars engaged with the topic. He offers a succinct summary of events leading up to the Arab conquest of the island and proceeds by laying out the key elements of the Sicilian Arabic dialect and the concomitant creation of pidgin Sicilian Arabic among local traders. Peer reviews underscore the troublesome expurgation of a due explanation for the meaning of the term 'Siculo' which was incidentally coined by Agius himself. His hypothesis that alludes to a division of Sicily into three regions according to language development patterns received both praise and boisterous critique because Agius offered no convincing proof of such a division.

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<sup>11</sup> F. Gabrieli "Ibn Hawqal e gli Arabi di Sicilia" *Rivista di Studi Orientali* XXVI (1961) 245-253

<sup>12</sup> L. Mazzasalina, "Title" (PhD diss, Università Catania: Messina, 2005)

<sup>13</sup> H. Brese, *Un Monde Méditerranéen : Economie et Sociétés en Sicile 1300-1450* (Palermo: Accademia di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Palermo, 1986), 2-10

<sup>14</sup> Salvatore Cusa, *I Diplomi Greci ed Arabi di Sicilia Pubblicati nel testo originale, tradotti ed illustrati da Salvatore Cusa* (Palermo: Archivio Storico Siciliano, 1868-1882) Vol. I and II.

<sup>15</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2003) in 'Sicily Before 1100'

<sup>16</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic* (London: Routledge, 1996)

After a rather long scholarly hiatus between 1996 and 2003 Metcalfe's research from 2003 was the first and is the last serious attempt at establishing the existence of a Sicilian Arabic dialect after Agius's seminal work was published. The text contains a meticulous description of the ins and outs of grammatical features tied in with the local history of the Arabs on the island which makes it indispensable for my research. It is also the only exhaustive source written in English about the intricate relation between Islam and the spread of Arabic on the island. As Jeremy John notes in his review of the earlier release: "*Metcalfe is a linguist with the scholarly rigour to turn this into an innovative work that separates the Arab rule into the administrative category, namely the Diwan and finds that the covertly Christian men of the Latin tongue were far from impervious to the policies of their fiends*"<sup>17</sup> Metcalfe published several other papers in which he analyses the Arab court on the island and the perpetuation of the Arabic language after the advent of the Normans. These articles, which require close reading, do omit a large of share of the Italian research that has been published even in the 2009' historical revised edition.<sup>18</sup> The number of Arabic sources he managed to collect however is quite staggering. Ibn Haqbal for example who is briefly cited to undergird Metcalfe's assertion that the Arabs deemed the Sicilians 'uncultured louts, much like the Persians' will be a welcome addition to my own research. Some Arabic scholars wrote but a mere few lines about their sojourn on Sicily, which is why Metcalfe's work will prove conducive as a compilation of sorts as well. The 'The heritage of the melody in al-Baḥr al-Shāmiy - The book entitled: Tathqīf al-Lisān wa Talqīḥ al-Jinān by Ibn Makkiyy al-Ṣiqilliyy forms a descriptive paper about the life and vocation of Ibn Makkī (unspecified release date), who wrote his treatise on the so called 'flawed Arabic dialect spoken by the Sicilians'. Under the extenuating circumstances of his time, he deemed it important to offer a didactic compendium of the (many) 'flaws' in the locally developing dialect used by both the educated and the common people who, according to Ibn Makkī, would not benefit from each other's faulty pronunciation. This paper reflects the amount of research conducted in the Arab world and encompasses a wide scope of brief references and more extensive analyses of the treatise. It also facilitates the perusing of Ibn Makkī's work by outlining the exact number of subchapters and the names mentioned therein.

In Mirella Cassarino's *Palermo Experienced, Palermo imagined: Arabic and Islamic culture between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century* from 2013, Cassarino primarily preoccupies herself with the history of Sicily and its interrelation with the rest of the Mediterranean in the early middle ages.<sup>19</sup> Her recap of the Arabic influence on Sicily is by no account exhaustive yet it discussed all the points relevant to this paper and primarily the Arab scholarly production on the island. Special attention is given to Ibn Makkī and his role as the only known philologist to hail from Sicily. Her command of Arabic, French and Italian makes her work wholesome and timely. Sadly, Cassarino

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<sup>17</sup> Joanna H. Drell, Alex Metcalfe. *Muslims and Christians in Norman Italy: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam and Jeremy Johns. Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Dīwān*, *The American Historical Review*, Volume 109, Issue 4, October 2004, Pages 1296–1297, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/109.4.1296>

<sup>18</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009)

<sup>19</sup> Mirella Cassarino, *A Companion to Medieval Palermo: The History of a Mediterranean City from 600 to 1500* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) Vol. 5 p. 89-129

does not expound where recent findings are concerned. She also does not discuss the 'lahn al-Awwam' genre.

Nowadays the study of the Sicilian Arabic dialect(s) leans towards a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses both the fields of cultural archaeology and linguistics. Whether or not we should analyse the Sicilian Arabic in the limelight of research conducted on Middle-Arabic from the same period is debatable, given the many drawbacks and impediments one faces when researching Sicilian documents from the designated period (9<sup>th</sup> till 11<sup>th</sup> century). An expansive research project necessitates ample source material to draw any conclusions for future reference and given that there are none, we have yet to establish the existence of 'Sicilian Arabic'. A method would be to compare dialects that were spoken in the vicinity of Sicily, yet the sheer paucity of sources prevents any such research from taking place. The three main researchers in the field, Amari, Agius and Metcalfe all argue that more source material is requisite and that their findings are but a steppingstone, for they have set the first teetering steps towards a better understanding of the dialects in the area.

## Methodology and scientific approach

For this paper and for any scientific publication a solid explication of the research method utilised is indispensable. Therefore, I would like to establish the basic method I will use for writing this paper which is still provisional and subject to possible changes. In outlining the methodology for this paper, I will work with a few basic pointers:

### Aims:

Offering a new perspective on the now outdated understanding of the Sicilian language 'convivencia' that lasted roughly from the 9<sup>th</sup> till the 11<sup>th</sup> century by way of perusing previously published papers and books. Some Italian scholars have tirelessly attempted to grasp how the Arabs impacted the language spoken by the Sicilians when the Arabs dominated over the island. Their efforts cannot go unnoticed and as such they will form the parable ground on which I can assess and discern the scanty yet fascinating texts at my disposal. Although Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf al-Lisan* is commonly seen as a disputable text through the eyes of modern scholarship, the linguistic debate in which he partook is rarely discussed. This paper tries to bring together linguistic aspects as found in Ibn Makkī's text while digging deeper into Ibn Makkī's motives and history to shed new light on the role of Arabic on Sicily.

Discussing a topic of this nature necessitates a decent grasp of both Classical Arabic as used by scribes in courtly matters and a thorough understanding of the Sicilian Arabic dialect, which yields several impediments. Who were the Arabs that landed on the island and what dialect(s) did they bring with them? Did the Sicilians willingly adopt Arabic or were they coerced to make it their own if they did so to begin with? All these logical queries require an answer that is oftentimes hard to find in the sources available. The enigmatic history of Sicily is still shrouded in mist and is rife with uncertainties that boggled many a mind. Although the Italians themselves have made strides in lifting a tip of the veil, western research has stalled after the release of Metcalfe's 'Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic-Speakers and the End of Islam' which is now almost a decade old.

Metcalfe asserts in his exhaustive studies that Arabic as a language was mainly used as an administrative tool that never found wide public approval. More recent publications by the likes of Vanoli however, contest Metcalfe's assertion on the basis that the Maltese still confer their thoughts in a fully-fledged Semitic tongue.<sup>20</sup> He does not state how and why he opines as such. The proximity to Sicily would however make a steep divergence in language between the islands an unlikely proposition. In my research I will attempt to bridge the gap between these two presumptions by finding a new middle ground in which both assertions carry relevance. Agius (1992)<sup>21</sup> imagined a disparaged Sicilian society in which the indigenous population contrived its own 'Arabic', whereas the educated minority conversed in what we call '*educated Arabic*' or an Arabic that approximated the Classical (read: Quranic) standards.

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<sup>20</sup> Alessandro Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana*, 205.

<sup>21</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 41-92.

## Research methods:

To properly understand the impact Arabic had on Sicily and its offshoot Siculo Arabic, it is imperative to discuss the idiosyncrasies and quirks of the Siculo Arabic dialect (as asserted by the likes of Agius) itself and to draw up an exhaustive overview of the Arabic dialect as it was spoken by the Arabs, Berbers and others who settled on the island in lieu of the first attacks. In order to do so I will make use of grammar books, etymological works and dictionaries that allow us to detect Arabic derivatives and remnants of possible verb-constructions, if they can be traced at all. In-depth research is sparsely available even in Italian, which translates in resorting to a variety of off-hand works that are centred around linguistics in general. Mercifully, I did manage to dig up one boon so sorely needed: 'the vocabolario Siciliano' by Giorgio Piccitto.<sup>22</sup>

Piccitto exerted great efforts in adding etymological context to his lexical additions. It is, for example, not uncommon to stumble upon Berber-derived terms that likely arrived on Sicily with the advent of Arab troops. Agius mitigates the effect Berber had on the inculcated Sicilian Arabic dialect, saying it was 'likely no more than a lexical influx'. The impact that Berber had on Sicilian Arabic is often relegated to an afterthought, however, even in Ibn Makkī's text the influence is as notable as Greek, as we will come to see.

This research will rely solely on qualitative research because of the paucity in original texts from the era discussed. I will commence with an extensive description of Ibn Makkī's treatise. In addition, an insightful translation of some of the poems from Ibn al-Qaṭṭa (as mentioned in the status questionis) is indispensable in bringing the plethora of texts from the period together. Historical travel logs such as those written by *Ibn Athir*,<sup>23</sup> who constitutes as one of the few Muslim scholars that studied the region in the wake of the Norman occupation, will be given attention. Deducing cultural and linguistical implications from these texts will ineluctably bring some dubious conclusions. Hence there is a bare necessity to substantiate my assertions with the latest Italian and French finds. The prime works I will avail in writing this paper can be found in the 'literature review'.

Most of the primary sources are copies of the originals or facsimile editions that need to be checked rigorously to ascertain that they are valid and contain no fallacies or typos. Only Ibn Makkī's text has been proofread in the most recent issue from 1990.<sup>24</sup> Although assuming the validity of a text is risky, I deem it paramount to rely on my predecessors in what is already an arduous and nearly inconceivable endeavour. To lend credence to my postulations I will at least screen the texts and compare them with the original manuscripts where possible. I will also analyse Ibn Makkī's text in an attempt to understand the Sicilian dialect, if only its pronunciation and some of its lexemes because the Sicilian dialect is markedly different from surrounding languages yet still carries many Classical Arabic qualities imbedded in its texts (Ibn Makkī first and foremost).

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.csfls.it/res/edizioni/catalogo/vocabolario-siciliano/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī, *Al-Kāmil fī l-Tārīkh* (Bayrouth: Dār al-kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1987)

<sup>24</sup> Abū Ḥafṣ 'Amr Ibn Khalf Ibn Makkī al-Ṣaqillī, *Tathqīf al-Lisān wa Talqīh al-Janān* (Bayrouth: Dār al-kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990)

Notwithstanding the elicited shortcomings in Agius his work, his is, as of yet, the only substantial linguistical research project conducted in an effort to highlight distinctively Sicilian Arabic features. The linguistical part of this paper will roughly emulate, but not copy Agius's output concerning Siculo Arabic. Agius rose to the challenge by partially updating his 1996 work with a brief paper (2007)<sup>25</sup> in which he imparts the idea that 'Siculo Arabic' descends from the Arab traders rather than finding provenance among the conquering Arab settlers. This hypothesis again met with widespread critique for its disputable figment-like content whereas other raved about his findings. I will also compare Agius's findings with those of Metcalfe.

## **Index of the chapters:**

### *Chapter one*

Chapter one will be entirely dedicated to the history of the Arabs on Sicily, touching on their slow yet consequential march towards Palermo and the architecture, culture and science they left behind during their centuries' long stay. Most attention will be given to the Arab integration and the merging of their culture with the Greco-Roman influences that had existed on the island for centuries. Are there parts of the island that resisted the Arab integration and how did this materialise? Several Italian scholars argue that the Arab influence on the island remained confined to the larger cities while remote countryside hamlets experienced no tangible effects. The notion that Sicily was entirely Arab at some point during the reign of the Aghlabids or the Fatimids stems from the olden days. The intricately interwoven society on Sicily has many facets that remain to be explored and even though the Arab dynasties ruled over the island, the echelon of power was occupied primarily by local chiefs. From the historical context I hope to discover how the Arabs were received by the local denizens and how and if they adapted to begin with. Was there a smooth transposition towards using Arabic or one encumbered by dissent and mutual misunderstanding? In recapitalizing this chapter, I will attempt to answer the question: What was the role of Arabic as a language on Sicily?

### *Chapter two*

In chapter two of this paper, I will discuss the linguistical aspects of the Arabic spoken on the island at the time of the Arab rule over its main cities. Building upon conclusions I will analyse the Sicilian dialect that evolved from the multiple languages spoken before the coming of the Arabs. The somewhat unnuanced term *Sicilian Arabic (Siculo Arabic)*, which is an unstandardized form of Arabic (according to linguists and internationally renowned scholars), knows multiple locally spoken sub-dialects which renders comprehensive research intricate and makes drawing conclusions tenuous. For clarity's sake however, I will make use of the generic term 'Sicilian Arabic' that is now generally commonly supported amongst scholars. To further distil the idiosyncrasies of the Arabic(s) spoken in those days I will build upon Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf al-Lisan wa-Talqih al-Jinan* and Ibn Qaṭṭa's compilation, which I briefly mentioned in the literature section. Rounding up this chapter with a question I will respond to the question: How and in what form was Arabic spoken on Sicily in the heydays of Islam? I will rely first and

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<sup>25</sup> Metcalfe, Alex. " *Trusting The Text As Far As We Canthrow The Scribe:Further Notes On Reading A Bilingual Jarīdat Al-Hudūd From The Royal Dīwān Of Norman Sicily*". In *From al-Andalus to Khurasan*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007) doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004155671.i-252.41>

foremost on the seminal publication 'Siculo Arabic' by Agius to undergird what I extract from the primary sources mentioned. He asserts that Sicily housed three distinct forms of Arabic during the reign of the Fatimid, post-Aghlabid epoch on the island. I will embed Ibn Makkī's work in the context of his time with a description of the literary genre 'lahn al-Awwam' and the effects this discussion had on Ibn Makkī's Tathqīf.

### Chapter three

In this chapter I will summarize the content of the previous chapters and draw upon the works of two main scholars who both revisited Amari's theories about the Arab presence on the island and its ramifications on the Siculo Arabic dialect: Metcalfe and Agius. I will extract some key elements that could represent a typically Sicilian Arabic dialect or that contradict the idea that there are distinctions between other Maghribi dialects and Sicilian.

## Chapter One

### The historical purview

In this chapter I will address the historical canvas on which the Arab conquest took place and how the subsequent influx of Arab peoples altered the history of the island over the years. One can consider Sicily a gateway to the riches of the Western Mediterranean and indeed many of its rulers over the centuries considered it as such. More than a mere military outpost it formed the rendezvous point for traders from all over the basin. It is this variegated and fluid population density that makes the island an intricate subject of study for we cannot yet determine the exact composition of society's margins. We can however venture an educated guess based on records unearthed in Greek, Latin and Arabic, that provide an oftentimes rudimentary image of the interaction between religiously and linguistically diverging communities.

Sicily's history is teeming with manifestations of cultures that merged and intermingled. The scope of this history is by all accounts too expansive to discuss punctiliously, but for the sake of comprehensiveness it is imperative to address at least some pivotal events that ultimately led to the Arab incursions and thereupon to the occupation of the island.

#### On the eve of the Arab invasions

Following the sacking of Rome in 456 AD that meant the downfall of the Western Roman empire, the Mediterranean was ripe for the pecking. Germanic peoples like the Lombards and the Visigoths succeeded in laying waste to the unvanquishable empire that once stretched from Scotland in the north till Egypt in the southeast. The grandeur of this once dominant power had vanished, but the trading routes that formed the lifeline of the empire remained. The Eastern Roman empire, or the Byzantine empire ('Rum', among Muslims), secured the Eastern Mediterranean that encompassed an area reaching from the Levant all the way to Spain.<sup>26</sup> The Germanic tribes that frequently ransacked Italy and Spain were perceived to be a viable and alarming threat to the Byzantines. In consolidating their rulership, the Byzantine emperors set their sights on Sicily, the crown jewel that offered direct access to the North African provinces. Sicily was also a stronghold from which the Byzantines could replenish ships for trade with the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>27</sup> The ingenious general Belisario reached the coast of Sicily in 535 after a sequence of victories over the Lombards, taking time to annex the island in its entirety. Contemporaneous sources indicate that Sicily functioned as a granary and its produce fed large populations in Byzantine Greece and the North African provinces. One can liken this role as a storage to the role of Egypt in the eastern part of the Byzantine empire. Such largesse was alluring to the opponents of the Byzantine empire as well, namely the Lombards, who had succeeded in consolidating their power over the rest of Southern Italy, leaving only a few coastal cities untouched.

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<sup>26</sup> M. Vallejo Girves, *Hispania y Bizancio: Una Relación desconocida* (Madrid: Akal, 2012), 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> Amadeo Feniello, *Sotto il Segno del Leone: Storia dell'Italia Musulmana* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2011), 130.

Belisario, by decree of the emperor, instated a local governate on Sicily that would shape the future of the island's administration.<sup>28</sup> The emperor was hellbent on allocating arable land to the local gentry in order to prevent sedition between local leaders and to quell rebellions. Cities were governed by appointees dispatched from the Byzantine elite who received a 'small' stipend in recompense for their services. The Byzantines also took an interest in the religious adherence of the locals, introducing Orthodox Christianity as the state religion while bolstering the 'conversion' of Sicilians by sending clerics and church representatives to the island. The Byzantine doctrine of Christendom left an imprint on the population for centuries to come and the church itself refused to budge for the most fiendish assailants (most notably the Arabs in later years). The divide and rule stratagem of the Byzantines provided an administrative springboard for their successors, the Arab rulers of the island, who managed to suppress opposition by giving the incumbent administrators free reign in local affairs.<sup>29</sup> A veritable carte blanche for acting without impunity. As wherewithal in the Byzantine empire dwindled, an array of emperors felt compelled to demand more tax money from the colonies, which could be invested in repelling full-scale attacks launched by hordes of 'barbarians' at every Byzantine border. As we will discover, especially the advent of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula proved inauspicious for the financially crippled Byzantine empire.

### **The arrival of the Arabs**

The 7<sup>th</sup> century was detrimental in many regards for the Byzantines, who ineffectively and inconsistently defended the border territories in the Levant and in the Mediterranean. The rightly guided Caliphs quickly wrested control over Syria and Egypt, assuaging the locals with moderately tolerant policies and an exoneration from paying high taxes imposed by the vanquished Byzantines<sup>30</sup>. The quasi-tolerant *modus operandi* of the Arabs met with approval from all layers of society, providing an important steppingstone for future centralisation policies executed by the Umayyads.

On Sicily, much like in Byzantine Egypt and Syria, the Christian schools of thought vied with one another for public support.<sup>31</sup> The divisive rhetoric of clerics and the squabbles between churches about their dogmas no doubt contributed majorly to the Arab/Muslim successes gained over the Byzantines. Circumstances on Sicily were however categorically different in some regards, due to the dragging conflict between the Muslims and the Christian Byzantine population on the island. Accounts regale us with tales of the Sicilian town Mazzina, of which the denizens did not bother to put up a fight before surrendering. Italian scholar Tramontana even believes that Mazzina was on the brink of starvation when the Arabs set foot on the shores, making quick work of the remaining Byzantine garrisons. If the Arab account by Ibn Athir is any indication, it is likely that the Arabs ran into tough resistance by the Byzantine troops. Ibn Athir also narrates how the Muslim troops went berserk and butchered 'countless inhabitants' upon their taking of the city.<sup>32</sup> The true events transpired need not be as grim as Ibn Athir makes them out

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<sup>28</sup> George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Susanna Valpreda, *Sikelia: La Sicilia Orientale nel Periodo Bizantino*, 20-21.

<sup>30</sup> George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Salvatore Tramontana, *L'isola di Allah: Luoghi, Uomini e Cose di Sicilia nei Secoli IX-XI* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī, *Al-Kāmil fī l-Tārīkh* (Bayrouth: Dār al-kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1987), 284. Vol. VII

to be. What can however be stated with a degree of certainty is that the Byzantines were looked upon with distrust by locals, who oftentimes could not afford the 'exorbitant taxes'.

The alarming surge in tax demands from the Byzantines was not the only predicament the Sicilians faced. The Byzantine expansion necessitated an innumerable number of ships and vessels to wage war against pirates who imperilled the transport of goods overseas. To that end, the emperor instated a policy of deforestation that made Sicily vulnerable and susceptible to drought and hunger.<sup>33</sup> Italian accounts speak of the irreparable damage done on account of the local governors, who torched entire woods to create new soil to till for farmers. It became an increasingly arduous task for Sicilians to sustain themselves under their rulers as the decades progressed. Dissent between Byzantine governors grew vehement and riots were fomented by local lords to defy the emperor in Byzantium. The *Silentium et Conventus*, annex the Byzantine parliament, deemed it fitting to take necessary precautions.<sup>34</sup> It took a high toll on the Sicilians who were already dogged out by myriad ordeals inflicted upon them by the emperors and by foreign invaders. Throughout the Middle East the Byzantines were losing ground in swift succession, leaving a huge multi-ethnic Christian legacy in the hands of the Arabs. Sicily was soon to follow, according to the Byzantines, and in lieu of this perceived threat the emperor ordered a larger fleet to be built on Sicily. The notion that a strong navy could deflect incursions was rooted in experience, because the Arabs did not possess a forcible fleet, nor did they possess the experience to navigate the seas. The Arabs would come to understand that if they were to sequester Byzantine trade, they needed to compete with them at sea.

Under the Byzantines interconnection and intermarrying between the peoples of different origins gained momentum.<sup>35</sup> An intriguing mixture of race and language came into existence that knew no parallel in the region. Texts found on Sicily, Malta and elsewhere highlight how speakers of Romance languages and Greek adopted each other's names, customs and practices. There was a prolific literary circle on the island that accommodated scholars from far and wide. 'A sizeable part of scholarship from the Middle-Eastern churches found its way to Europe through Sicily as monks and vagabonds roamed the seas and transferred knowledge on the go'.<sup>36</sup> This congregation of different backgrounds yielded a new perspective on how societies can cohabit and collaborate under the umbrella of the Byzantines. Not long ago, comparisons were drawn between the Sicilian Convivencia and the Arab Andalusian Convivencia, although the myth of resemblance is thin and now considered debunked. The decentralisation that took place under the Byzantines granted some autonomy to a less subservient class of Greek and Latin speaking philanderers, the traders who had intensive liaisons with Arabs and Berbers. Ibn Hawqal, another celebrated Arab scholar, speaks of the bustling life in Sicilian towns that was unmatched by any land within the 'Dar al-Salaam'.<sup>37</sup> What he witnessed then was the culmination of century-long cultural exchange

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<sup>33</sup> Salvatore Tramontana, *L'Isola di Allah: Luoghi, Uomini e Cose di Sicilia nei Secoli IX-XI*, 193-194.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew J. Ekonomou, *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes: Eastern Influences on Rome and the Papacy from Gregory the Great to Zacharias (590-752)* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 180-181.

<sup>35</sup> Elena N. Boeck, *Imagining the Byzantine Past: The Perception of History in the Illustrated manuscripts of Skylitzes and Manasses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 63.

<sup>36</sup> Susanna Valpreda, *Sikelia: La Sicilia Orientale nel Periodo Bizantino*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Hawqal, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa l-Mamālik* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 1872), *bū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Iṣṭaḥrī* Wrote biographical information about Ibn Hawqal.

and the unencumbered trade that incandescently flourished under the Byzantines. Intensive contact with the Arab tribes from North Africa did bring a menacing risk with it that the Byzantines failed to consider in the equation: The Arab ambitions of conquest.

The Byzantines were renowned for their diplomatic assets and negotiation skills. From east to west, they paid off tribes to fight for their cause while their own troops were busy protecting borders elsewhere. Hiring mercenaries was not an uncommon practice in those days, as virtually every large empire had employed foreign mercenaries to fill gaps. We find a dearth of information about the interminable wars waged against the Sassanids in the Eastern part of the empire, where Arabic speaking tribes gladly joined ranks with the party that offered large sums in compensation for their 'costly' efforts. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century Arab tribes played an invaluable role in the byzantine defence mechanism. The perennial wars in the east brought imminent bankruptcy upon the Byzantines and made the collapse of the empire's expansion politics ineluctable. This economic decline translated in being overrun by the Muslim Caliphs in what is ubiquitously known as the Byzantine regression.<sup>38</sup>

Much like on the eastern fringes of the empire, Byzantines sought foreign aid among the North African Aghlabid leaders (under Arab rule) to fend off Lombard attacks and truculent bands of looting pirates on the Sicilian shores throughout the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Aghlabid rulers initially contraposed Byzantine solicitations and were apprehensive. It soon became clear that the Byzantines were coping with insuperable internal conflicts and that foreign succour was a last recourse. In the 'Annales Regni Francorum' we encounter vivid descriptions of both *Mores* and pirates who "captured monks on Sicily to sell them as slaves in Spain and other remote lands (806 AD)".<sup>39</sup> It is impossible to deduce from the text who these *Mores* were, but in retrospect it is at least evident that the seas were incrementally perilous for the Byzantines.

In 830 AD the Aghlabids were called upon by the Byzantine emperor to quell a local rebellion led by Eufemio, a prominent member of the Byzantine gentry on the island. The emperor sent a mighty fleet to suppress the rising tensions on the island, counting on Aghlabid support from the east of Sicily.<sup>40</sup> The plan was to stifle the resistance in towns and surrounding hamlets, and thereupon confer power to the emperor who still ruled in absentia. Eufemio was to be executed for treason after two to three months of incessant fighting. The governate capital Palermo was at least partially reduced to rubble by the Arabs when they seized the opportunity to maraud the town (834-835). The ramifications of this would be disastrous for the Byzantine emperor not least because it spurred the Aghlabids in their quest for dominion over Sicily. And indeed, the Aghlabids spent many a year robbing the Byzantines blind along the Sicilian coasts, trying to gain a foothold in expectation of greater booty in the hinterlands.

The Aghlabids had to deal with wars fought out in North Africa during the 30s of the 9th century A.D. to establish themselves as the independent rulers over Berber tribes.<sup>41</sup> The Umayyad caliphate was crumbling under the pressure of its own dreams of expansion with its territory

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<sup>38</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Alessandro Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana*, 55.

<sup>40</sup> Idem, 59-60.

<sup>41</sup> Abu Nasr Jamil Mir'I, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 55.

encompassing many different cultures and languages. The disintegration of the empire took its course in North Africa first and foremost, with Berbers rebelling. Some Berbers, according to Arab historian Ibn Hawqal, deemed Eufemio's revolt a once in a lifetime opportunity to accrue wealth and security independently from the Caliph. One proponent of the attack on Sicily was Hafaja Ibn Sufyan, who was to become the scourge of Syracuse<sup>42</sup>, plundering the last Byzantine stronghold on the island and realizing the long-harboured Aghlabid dream of lording over Sicily. In 877 Syracuse was surrounded and besieged from all sides by a formidable Aghlabid force of which the total numbers are shrouded in misconceptions. Muslim scholars and travellers back in the day tended to exaggerate in enumerating victories and in counting troops. In all likelihood the Aghlabid army consisted of Berber forces, Arab troops, pirates and delinquents from al-Andalus looking for a brighter future. Vanoli<sup>43</sup> points out that even the most perspicacious and experienced scholar cannot discern traces of Berber in the Sicilian dialect, which might sound odd (chapter 2 in this paper will deal with languages in detail).

The Aghlabid invasion proceeded sluggishly, town by town over several decades before military leaders could proclaim themselves the true 'proprietors of the island'. This might require some elucidation, because the word proprietor suggests a business transaction or a purchase and indeed the Aghlabids bought large 'plots' from local owners after which they allotted these lands to numerous confidantes and high officials. Aghlabid rulers also obtained land by uniting in matrimony with daughters of wealthy land proprietors, much like the Byzantines. Only a few larger towns were to succumb by coercion, namely Syracuse and Palermo but Mazzina and several coastal towns were beleaguered as well.<sup>44</sup> The smaller towns removed from the coast remained unhampered by their new overlords. Again, this curious distinction between regions on Sicily is clearly visible in the development of language and culture in these individual territories. Coastal towns were not only more receptive to new cultural impulses, but they were also more dependent on adaptivity for their existence. The diverse and downright disparaged nature of Sicily in those days made a complete integration into the Aghlabid sphere of influence inconceivable. We can assume that the Aghlabids incapacity to 'subject' the entire population led to their ultimate downfall upon the arrival of the Shia Fatimids from Egypt. Notwithstanding the brief yet tumultuous reign of the Aghlabids, the Aghlabid rulers found military success in building a fleet to be reckoned with. The Fatimids took a queue from the Aghlabids after coming to the fold, expanding on their plans to build a larger navy.

In 910 the first Fatimid caliph announced himself as the 'wali' of Sicily. The ruling Aghlabid dynasty proved as tough as nails in the struggle to wield control over the island. In fact, it took the Fatimids several decades to assume their position as the dominant force on the island. The doctrine of the Fatimids was a horse of a different colour insomuch as they fought under the banner of *Jihad*. As I mentioned before the Arab conquest of former Christian (Byzantine) lands was not merely a matter of 'legitimation' for a Muslim ruler as representative of Islam, but also a means of ascertaining the loyalty of his army.<sup>45</sup> The Aghlabids followed the principles of Jihad in the strictest sense, meaning they saw a window of opportunity to loot on Sicily whereas the

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<sup>42</sup> Alessandro Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana*, 71-73.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> M. Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* (Catania: Editione Elefante, 1933) Vol. II

<sup>45</sup> Alessandro Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana*, 79.

Fatimids were more geared towards establishing a solid-state structure in annexed regions. We cannot substantiate this assertion due to the lack of local records found but based on source material from Egypt we can safely assume that the Fatimids did accomplish their goal of imbedding themselves in the Sicilian society.

The Fatimids instated a novel court system under a different madrasa, however the Aghlabid legacy under the maliki school of Sunni Islam remained a pertinent presence on Sicily.<sup>46</sup> In the 940s the Fatimids dispatched Qadis and scholars from Cairo who adhered to the homebred Ismaili school of Shia Islam. This event was momentous because it irrevocably altered the way in which we perceive the enforced Ismaili presence on Sicily. The prominence of Islamic scholars under the Fatimids and the debates about matters of politics, poetry and theology they entertained ushered in a new era for Islam on Sicily. Ibn Qaṭṭā, to whom I referred in the introduction, was one of the scholars who curried favour at the Sicilian court during the Fatimid 'golden' age (10<sup>th</sup> century). He is, alas, the only legible proof of the scholarly trends on the island, aside from Ibn Makkī's output. Many modern Italian scholars such as Feniello contest that the Fatimid age marked the beginning of a gradual 'conversion' to Islam because the Sicilians, much like other 'dhimmi' under Islamic rule, no longer wished to live as second-rate citizens.<sup>47</sup> Based on archaeological finds such as seals and rings with inscriptions from the post-Islamic era we can extract that acquiring a 'Muslim' name was very much in vogue.

The zenith of Fatimid culture is exhibited in its architectural feats that still tower over Palermo. The Fatimids actively converted Byzantine churches into mosques, adding minarets to the mix and repainting the ceilings and walls. The resourcefulness of the Fatimids is measured by its construction of 'sewers' and irrigation systems that had been imported from China. The advanced irrigation method of drainage 'or 'saqiyya' in Arabic, allowed farmers to produce more crops and exotic vegetables which in turn made population growth possible<sup>48</sup>. Trade and commerce harvested more revenue and scholarly exchange of knowledge grew exponentially.

### **The period of disintegration**

In spite of the cultural and scientific developments that were ongoing, the Fatimid dynasties (909-1091) on Sicily were marred by poor legislative measures and sedition. The Kalbid dynasty, which was the first Fatimid adhering dynasty to exercise power over the island, had to cope with rampant fratricide and treachery from all sides including their military. Refractory troops and officers were not the only ordeal of the Fatimids. Matters of succession were always a complex issue that needed to be dealt with promptly. Like most Turkish origin dynasties including the well know Ottomans, the Fatimid Kalbids had to cope with strife between their own members of kin.<sup>49</sup> The Kalbid period is marked by the increasingly bloody attempts at raiding southern Italy. Especially Calabria, but also Sardinia, which was less covetable due to the inhospitable mountains there, had to suffer several major attacks conducted by general Abu al-Qasim among others. Abu al-Qasim managed to vanquish a mighty force of Christian troops in Stilo (982

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<sup>46</sup> Shainool Jiwa, *The Fatimids 1: The Rise of a Muslim Empire* (Boston: I.B. Taurus, 2017), 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> Amadeo Feniello, *Sotto il Segno del Leone: Storia dell'Italia Musulmana*, 109.

<sup>48</sup> Salvatore Tramontana, *L'isola di Allah: Luoghi, Uomini e Cose di Sicilia nei Secoli IX-XI*, 128.

<sup>49</sup> W. Granara, *Narrating Muslim Sicily: War and Peace in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2019) Chapter: Turncoats in a New World order, Kindle

AD).<sup>50</sup> The town of Bari on the Italian mainland even came under Muslim rule for twenty odd years, after which they were expelled. The persistent attacks launched on the Italian mainland were a thorn in the eye for the pope in Rome, who felt even more threatened by the Arab Fatimid hordes. The pope eventually engaged with the upcoming Norman kings to eradicate the threat and reinstate a Christian ruler in Sicily.<sup>51</sup> The Normans, who were by then solely interested in marauding such distant coasts were already on track to consolidate a kingdom that stretched over Western Europe. This proved to be the crucible for the slowly decaying Kalbid dynasty. Sicily was ravaged by several natural disasters during the early 11<sup>th</sup> century and the Kalbids felt their power waning. Then in 1061 the Normans seized the opportunity and landed on the Sicilian shores. The fighting lasted for thirty years, during which the Normans were oftentimes greeted as liberators rather than hostiles.

The completed Norman conquest in 1091 did not mean the end for Arab influence on Sicily, despite the heated fighting between the two entities. The Normans were eager to retain the Arab administrative system and although Christians were given the privilege of paying less tax money and impots, the Muslim population was treated with a great deal of respect under the rule of the first Norman kings. Arabic even remained an important language of administration, along with the newly introduced Latin. Most sources found from this period indicate that the Norman court harboured scribes of different religious adherence. The villein documents, also mentioned in the introduction, provide a glimpse of what life at court must have been like. In the hubbub and confusion of the early Norman period there was a growing tendency for Muslims to emigrate to Muslim territories. The Christian Norman arrival was not the only impetus to move across the strait towards town like Tunis and Qairawan. Hunger and economic insecurity along with higher taxes most likely made Muslim life challenging.

There were however still plenty of Muslims who decided to stay notwithstanding adversities. Ibn Makkī, who forms the spill of this paper, was one of the Muslims who decided to leave. Although his motives remain hazy, sources indicate that he was appointed as qadi by a Zurayd ruler in Tunis.<sup>52</sup> The Zurayd kingdom was a welcoming shelter for many Muslims who refused to live under Christian Norman rule. It is no confounding surprise that Ibn Makkī saw opportunities in the Muslim realm, rather than in his native Sicily. As an aspiring philologist and grammarian, Ibn Makkī wrote his *Tathqīf al-Lisan* somewhere around the time of his departure from Sicily or thereafter. This makes Ibn Makkī's work relevant, as it can tell us myriad things about the discussions and interests of the Muslim community during this scarcely documented time.

In the following chapter we will tackle Ibn Makkī's persona and discuss his relevance to not only the historical debate on Sicily, but also linguistics in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>50</sup> Amadeo Feniello, *Sotto il Segno del Leone: Storia dell'Italia Musulmana*, 73-74.

<sup>51</sup> Donald Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 16.

<sup>52</sup> 'Alī ibn ja'far ibn al-Qaṭṭa, *Al-Durra al-Khaṭīra fī šu'arā' al-Jazīra* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islām, 1995), 57-58.

## Chapter Two

### The Arabic language on Sicily

Siculo Arabic is a term coined by renowned scholar and Arabist D. Agius, who asserts in his seminal work 'Siculo Arabic' that the island of Sicily represents a unique case of convergence in the history of Islamic-Christian relations<sup>53</sup>. Sicily, with its strategic importance in the Mediterranean basin, not only exhibits significant cultural intermingling in its architecture but in its canvas of languages as well. As mentioned in the introduction, Greek maintained a predominant role as the lingua franca on the island throughout the classical era, with Latin becoming the language of administration under the Romans until the Byzantines, the successors of the Western Roman empire, reintroduced (or introduced) *Koine* Greek as the language of courtly matters and administration. The Sicilian populace under Byzantine rule consisted of a largely bilingual mixture of peoples with variegated provenance that echoed the islands' rich past. Noteworthy are Phoenicians, Carthaginians and descendants of Greek settlers over the course of many centuries ere the Arabs embarked on their overseas incursions.<sup>54</sup> With the advent of Islam and the ensuing Arabic attacks, which allegedly commenced in at the dawn of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, a consequential change was set in motion that left an indelible mark on the native tongue of the Sicilians to this very day.

In this chapter I will present a succinct yet comprehensive overview of the linguistical situation on the island during the Arab/Berber reign over the island that lasted for over 250 years. In accordance with Agius's assertion that Sicily gradually developed distinct, divergent linguistical patterns under Muslim rule, I will assume that three major languages gained or regained significance in different areas on the island, Arabic, Latin and Greek with Berber dialects being of secondary weightiness. The potpourri of these three (four) languages produced what is now ubiquitously known as Sicilian Arabic, cited as a branch of Maghrebi Arabic that forms a pidgin language (Agius) with a sizeable influx of Greek and Latin terms.<sup>55</sup>

Over the past century a few scholars who invested themselves in Sicily's historical output noted the scarcity of texts at our disposal that can plausibly reflect the existence of a distinct form of Arabic on the island. The sources we can utilize for the purpose of analysing linguistical patterns are available in a condensed tome. This compilation encompasses a wide array of annals, dowery contracts and agreements of purchase both in Greek and in Arabic or both. A complete, thorough translation of most of the texts has yet to be produced, but it can be stated with a degree of certainty that Arabic and Greek were the main languages of communication even well after the Norman conquest of the island.<sup>56</sup> Agius postulates that Sicily was subdivided over three regions, in which each region spoke predominantly Arabic or Greek or an admix of both with Latin taking

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<sup>53</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 72.

<sup>54</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*, 2-3.

<sup>55</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 109.

<sup>56</sup> H. Brese, *L'Habitat Medieval en Sicile 1100-1450: Atti del Colloquio Internazionali di Archeologia Medievale* (Palermo: Universita de Palermo, 1976) Vol. II

a backseat in the quotidian life of denizens on the Island. It was in the coastal regions that a pidgin Arabic prevailed among traders from far and wide who had to remain adaptive and flexible when conducting business.<sup>57</sup> Agius states however, that the nature of pidgin is its short-lasting validity, which would account for the paucity of attested source material.

Discerning distinguishing features in a dialect that has not been put to record is downright inconceivable. Scholars like Metcalfe and even Agius rely on contestable assertions and elements found in texts that oftentimes cannot be traced back to actual 'Sicilian' writers or notaries. However, calling aforementioned scholars' efforts pure conjecture would be stretching it. Metcalfe for one, acknowledges that the lack of thorough research in the field results in the lack of facts to build upon, however there are ample grounds to assume a Sicilian origin of texts like Ibn Makkī's, who will feature prominently in this paper. The development of a separate Siculo Arabic dialect is a convoluted, intricate and above all gradual process that involved cultural immersion of pre-existing models of Arabic into the Greek speaking communities over a long period.<sup>58</sup>

Commonly, we find that alterations in pronunciation, enunciation and lexical influence slowly seep through. Although we lack the records to paint an accurate portrayal of the pronunciation of words, we can deduct and extrapolate information by glancing at copious notes by Arab grammarians and 'udaba' who roamed the region at the time of the Arab dominance over Sicily. Mercifully, Ibn Makkī's text on grammar is a legible and insightful text that grants us enough lucidity to draw conclusions despite its defects.

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<sup>57</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 109-110.

<sup>58</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam*, 15.

It should be noted that grammarians oftentimes spent vast amounts of time in scrupulously delving into the mistakes frequently made by the 'ajami' or 'non-native' speakers of the Arabic tongue. This Sicilian Tathqif al-Lisan is thence, no exception to the vademecum of its day and age. The consensus was to adopt a classical pronunciation of Arabic, which stemmed from the understanding that Quranic Arabic was the only correct Arabic, albeit inimitable, that should be attained by an erudite scholar.<sup>59</sup> In effect, we only obtain a rudimentary sketch of the dialectal features of the day, which is more than we could have ever hoped for.

What is more, the origin of the mentioned scholar himself is often contestable. He might have been an Egyptian scribe, as several court officials and their retinue consisting of slaves and factotums came to the island throughout the Islamic rule.<sup>60</sup> Especially the Fatimids who ruled from Egypt were eager to dispatch trustees to Sicily so as to imbed their culture and traditions on the island and document vicissitudes as they transpired. Scribes from Egypt or from Ifriqiya, the common name for the Maghreb (formerly Numidia), might have impacted the local Sicilian dialect although that is a questionable assertion at best. We have no valid sources that hint at a widespread base of scribes from Egypt nor from elsewhere in the Middle East. Later Norman sources show that the newly settled conquerors had a predilection for Arab scribes and historians, allowing them to attend courtly ceremonies for example. The Arabs introduced an administration that was admired by Norman kings and perpetuated by king Roger the I and by his successors which was a common practice all over the former Arab territories regained by Christian kings and rulers.<sup>61</sup>

### **Sicilian Arabic as a dialect**

At first glance it is glaringly evident that the Arabic writings contain 'dialectal forms' of the Arabic masculine plural 'un' which is rendered as 'u'. This cannot be denoted as a rare feature, given the common tendency of syncopation of the plural forms in practically all Arabic dialects. We can find a similar form in the colloquial varieties of Egypt, the Gulf and even in the *Andalusian Arabic* that allegedly bore so much resemblance to the Siculo Arabic referred to here. How can we account for such alterations of Sicily?

Under Roger I and his successors the confiscation of land from Muslim rulers was rampant. More often than not this entailed filing a royal decree to impound lands whilst granting the landowner a measly sum in recompense. The inequity that dominated on the island was of a lasting character in that the Muslims were compelled to extend a monthly additional tax fee (tantamount to the Muslim *Jizya* in many aspects). It is of significance to mention that the Normans maintained the incumbent administrative body for more than a century, ere they opted to alter their trajectory in politics. It was only after the coronation of Roger II in December 1130 that the Normans made Latin their official state language to supplant the Arabic and Greek *lingua franca*'s.<sup>62</sup> In spite of this dextrously inculcated plan which was devised to uproot the descendants of the Arab

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<sup>59</sup> Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2014), 57.

<sup>60</sup> Alessandro Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana*, 189-195.

<sup>61</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 101.

<sup>62</sup> Hubert Houben, *Roger II of Sicily: A ruler Between East and West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151.

communities, the Arabs preserved their language for another century. The language thrived in one form or another until a devout Christian king expelled the residual Islam-adhering communities from their homes to consolidate Christendom.

Over a period that stretches three centuries that Arab language came to accrete lexemes, morphological elements and phonological traits from the languages that ebbed and pulled from Sicily. Agius postulates that there was a clear-cut dichotomy between what the 'cultured' Arabs in higher spheres spoke and what the local citizenry infused with their own Romance tongue. Hence, according to Agius, we can safely assert that the pidgin Arabic availed by the Sicilians themselves cannot be branded as an 'Arabic' dialect in the strictest sense whereas the officials and Arab courtesans spoke an eloquent, almost classical form of Arabic.<sup>63</sup> His claim can easily be substantiated when we assess the 'Jara'id' or 'reports or annals' handed down through the centuries and saliently discussed by Metcalfe. The (CA) Classical Arabic used in these texts, as mentioned above, do not point to any remarkable grammatical quirks or anomalies. Most of the grammatical aberrancies reflect other dialects, thus Agius named it 'Siculo Middle Arabic'.<sup>64</sup>

The 'diglossia' that developed on the island between the pidgin Arabic and the more classical Arabic spoken by people of consequence was widespread at the time. The remnants of these divisions are conspicuous till to-day and there is proof that attests to a diglossia in place on the island both archaeological and otherwise. In lieu of statements made by Agius, it is imperative to zoom in on another germane point conveyed in his book 'Siculo Arabic'. "In the Western part of Sicily, the Christian churchgoing populace never harboured an intention to learn the language of their new rulers".<sup>65</sup> In the stead of Arabic, they conversed in Greek, with a substrate of Latin permeating through due to their affiliation with the ecclesiastical bodies in Rome. It is however difficult if not impossible to define the slight distinctions between regions or cities wherein a language was spoken.

Some textualization is requisite here to illicit how Greek and Latin shimmered through the pidgin Arabic. Agius and Metcalfe both lean towards a comparison drawn between the Maltese language spoken in our day and age and the Sicilian dialect as it was spoken in the Arab era.<sup>66</sup> We can thence assume that the grammar of Sicilian Arabic was Semitic in nature, with a large influx of Latin vocabulary and suffixes to nouns added during the early Norman period. Below I will provide some examples that can elucidate the predominant lexical influences. Keep in mind that most of these findings derive either from the works of Agius or from Metcalfe.

Most lexical items present in modern day Sicilian with an Arabic provenance pertain to agriculture, politics and flora and fauna. Take for example the word 'shabka' which in CA means as much as 'fishnet' or 'network' and while this meaning is preserved in Sicilian, it gained another imaginative meaning: 'being caught'. Approximately 300 words inherited directly or indirectly are still in frequent use on Sicily, casting some light on how and whereabouts Arabic was commonly

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<sup>63</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 124.

<sup>64</sup> Idem.

<sup>65</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam*, 12.

<sup>66</sup> Arne A. Ambros, *Bongorno, Kif Ant?: Einfuhrung in die Maltesische Sprache* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1999) in *Introduction*. This work is both didactical as well as linguistical in nature.

spoken.<sup>67</sup> 'The lexical vestiges of Arabic in modern Sicilian can also tell us something about the Arabs (and Berbers) who once debarked on the island in search of booty.'

### **Solicism and Apologetics**

Sicilian Arabic is an entangled cobweb of different dialects and languages that once thrived on the island, most of which can no longer be distilled from primary source material. Attested sources can only provide us with a sketchy notion of the myriad substrata once present in Sicilian Arabic. Ibn Makkī, a philologist who once resided on the island felt disgruntled about the distorted speech of the Sicilians who were, incidentally, compelled to acquire Arabic as a second tongue. He was zealous and vociferously admonished the Sicilians, rebuking them for their 'uneducated' enunciations and grammatical errors present in their speech. Ibn Makkī came from the school of Ibn Qutayba, a Persian scribe and lawyer who accrued fame with his elaborate tractates on corrupted language transmission.<sup>68</sup> Arabic was not merely the language of the divine message bestowed upon all humanity by a benevolent God, it was to be mastered by all who aspired to become of consequence in the ever-expanding Muslim influence (i.e. the Umayyad Caliphate and the Abbasid Caliphate). Ibn Qutayba was unequivocally invested in imparting the 'art' of the written word, the word of the noble Quran. His 'Tanbih'<sup>69</sup> is a veritable epistle wherein he establishes and reconsolidates the imbricated idea that there is only one true 'Arab' identity, Arabness incarnated in the Bedouins of the Hijaz. Hordes of scholars took a queue from Qutayba and his appealing conceptualization of identity under Islamic rule.

We need to bear in mind that Ibn Makkī is less geared towards the defamation of the Sicilians themselves, which is in stark contrast to Qutayba's deep-seated resentment towards 'lesser' peoples. Rather, Ibn Makkī analyses both the usage of language among 'commoners' as well as among 'specialists' which sets him apart from the crowd of his day and age. Ibn Makkī truthfully argues that the flaws in one's speech derive not from contriving one's own speech, but from copycatting the elite's speech.<sup>70</sup> This is quite frankly commonplace and holds true for any spoken language, although Ibn Makkī is one of the few philologists to acknowledge this reality among his contemporaries. Ibn Makkī created fervour in literary circles not merely for his insightful writings, but also for his sermons. Multiple orations and even poems can be credited to his name. He perceived the literary elite to be corrupted by their propensity to mock and lampoon outsiders whereas the ('ama), freely translated as the 'common man', imprinted the erroneous enunciation of these very same figures in their minds. To break with this vicious cycle, Ibn Makkī opted to delve into the matter. He even dedicates an entire chapter to the mistakes made by the upper class ('khassa') that the ('Ama) performs correctly.<sup>71</sup> Ibn Makkī accentuated the existent dichotomy between the classes on the island in terms of language usage. Agius himself failed to provide a wholesome definition of the word 'Siculo Arabic', which is rendered as 'Sicilian Arabic' for the lack of a more comprehensive term. Many modern scholars deem this omission cumbersome.

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<sup>67</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 159-243 'Siculo Lahn Arabic'

<sup>68</sup> Ibn Qutaybah, *The Excellence of the Arabs* (New York: NY University Press, 2017) Introduction: XIV, Edited by Peter Webb and James E. Montgomery.

<sup>69</sup> Idem.

<sup>70</sup> Abū Ḥafṣ 'Amr Ibn Khalf Ibn Makkī al-Ṣaqillī, *Tathqīf al-Lisān wa Talqīh al-Janān*, 16.

<sup>71</sup> Idem, 186-193. 'What the educated condemn as wrong yet the 'Ama uses it correctly'

It is interesting to note that Ibn Makkī refrained from describing what we now denote as Maghribi colloquialisms and forms; most notably the first-person 'n+imperfect' construct that is found in all Western Arabic dialects<sup>72</sup>. For example: (*ka-nbāgi* – I want/wish) in Moroccan Arabic. Ibn Makkī lucidly explicated that he deemed a turgid elaboration on mistakes unnecessary or even unwise because the Sicilians, who rarely perused linguistical tractates, would just misinterpret the corrections. Socially, this would suggest that Ibn Makkī did not hold the locals in high regard. I would be hard pressed to argue as such, given the intricate but above all tacit relationship between the Christians and Muslims who dwelled on the island during Ibn Makkī's lifetime. One's speech does not reflect the nature of interreligious dialogue, per say. Besides, there are no sources that give a sense of what it was like to live on Sicily under the Arabs. It is only after the advent of the Normans that some top-down social implementations began to play a significant role in writing.

Ibn Makkī concerns himself merely with the ubiquitous pronunciation mistakes he heard on Sicily whilst refraining from criticizing the Sicilians with derogatory terms altogether. We have yet to discover where Ibn Makkī hailed from, although his *kunya* 'al-Siqilli' or 'of the island of Sicily, suggests that he made his first teetering steps on Sicily. If we can lend credence to the assumption that he was Sicilian by birth, we can also comprehend why he never criticised the Sicilians personally. More often than not, scribes and dignitaries were of foreign descent, settling on Sicily in service of the Fatimid court in Egypt. These scribes were hardened and drilled to perform their task with rigour and precision, inculcated with the idea that only classical Arabic was to be used in documents. It is however not unfathomable that these same scribes brought with them their own dialects. The original Arab conquerors of Sicily after all, formed a ragtag band that conflated multiple ethnicities and peoples versed in different languages.

If Ibn Makkī did traverse the Mediterranean at some point, it is hard to pinpoint where he came from exactly. His analysis of the 'alhan' (commonly translated as errors) is written with the holy Quran and pre-Islamic poetry in mind<sup>73</sup>, which makes the extraction of colloquialisms unfeasible. What we can deduce with a decent amount of certainty is that Ibn Makkī spoke neither Greek nor Latin, and this could possibly hint at his foreign provenance. Ibn Makkī's background remains opaque and hazy, seeing as he is rarely mentioned in other historical accounts save for Ibn al-Lakhmi's tractate and the 'Durra al-Khatira'.<sup>74</sup> Irrespective of his enigmatic presence in historical accounts we did find, we can ascertain that Ibn Makkī was instated as a court representative after leaving Sicily under the auspices of the Norman conquerors in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Here he met with widespread acclaim and laudation for his poignant and comprehensive analysis of the Arabic availed on Sicily during the advent of the Normans. As mentioned, Ibn Makkī's name circulated in several primary sources in which we will delve in the final chapter of this paper.

Sicily knew an inherent linguistic division between the western and the eastern part of the island back in Ibn Makkī's age. The western part was primarily inhabited by speakers of Arabic while

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<sup>72</sup> Roberto Sottile, "*Il Siculo Arabico e gli Arabismi medievale e Moderni di Sicilia*" Bolletino – Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, 24 (2013) 131-132.

<sup>73</sup> Idem.

<sup>74</sup> 'Alī ibn ja'far ibn al-Qaṭṭa, *Al-Durra al-Khaṭīra fī šu'arā' al-Jazīra* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islām, 1995), 57-58.

the eastern part predominantly conversed in a form of Latin.<sup>75</sup> This ostensible division cannot however be taken at face value due to a large degree of multilingualism on the island of Sicily. Linguistic fronts were most likely overlapping. Another key factor in the uncertainty that surrounds the linguistical division of the island is the constant eb and flow of migrants who roamed the seas back and from the island. Throughout the Muslim era and thereafter Sicily witnessed times of drought, hunger and mass expulsions were not uncommon either.

At the dawn of the eleventh century a new influx of Latin-speaking settlers came to Sicily with hopes of slowly but steadily replacing the Arabic-Muslim cultural influence on the island by supplanting it with a Christian tradition that hailed largely from mainland Italy. This Christian culture was to become the mainstay culture under Norman rule after the final Arab communities had been expelled from their homes and then sent back to what is now Tunisia. The prior sense of conviviality between the Christians and the Muslims on the island, that flourished in the days of the Aghlabids and later the Shia governors had all but waned by the time Latin became the main lingua franca. Especially after the death of the Norman king Roger II, the remaining Arabs were regarded with ill-repute. Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf* is a product of its day, an epoch of significant change in the basin which heralded a breakaway from the Muslim world and a steady contraction with the Christian world. Ibn Makkī's text does not necessarily reflect the shift towards the Christian world, nor does it portray the common perceptions of the Sicilians as they slowly morphed into the Christian sphere of influence. How then, should we regard Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf* and how does it canvas the prevalent conception of identity among educated Muslims?

Agius emphasises the issues that arose when he first perused Ibn Makkī's text; The apparently insuperable problem occasioned by the lack of affiliated sources is Makkī's conspicuous leaning towards classical texts, primarily the Quran, the Hadith and pre-Islamic poetry. 'This is of course entirely congruent with texts of a similar nature published by contemporaries in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries'.<sup>76</sup> As modern research necessitates a wholly alternate perspective on language development, we need to perceive Ibn Makkī's text as canonical but not as immaculate. Be that is may, Ibn Makkī's text is due for revision with a fresh pair of eyes now that Agius's last research is somewhat outdated. No scholar dared to follow in his footsteps without salient additional information to augment what was staple in the field. I will not postulate that I possess radically innovative ideas about Ibn Makkī's provenance nor his, frankly, grossly understudied grammatical treatise. Agius argued that we require painstaking work to assess the syntactical structure of the Sicilian Arabic sentences to obtain a more substantiated grasp of its dialectal grammar. Since Ibn Makkī's treatise omits even the slightest trace of erroneous syntax, we ought to rely on comparisons with intrinsically linked dialects.

In Metcalfe's renowned scholarly analysis of the Arabic spoken on Sicily he barely mentions Ibn Makkī's work despite its ostensible cultural relevance and its resourcefulness. Metcalfe does summarise Ibn Makkī's effort by calling it 'incoherent and inconsistent' which coincides with his idea that if there was ever a distinctively Sicilian form of Arabic it must have been spoken and written in courtly spheres rather than on the streets. 'We cannot deduce any germane conclusions

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<sup>75</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam*, 71.

<sup>76</sup> Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Century*, 2-3.

from Ibn Makkī's text given its inconsistent analysis of grammatical and lexical phenomena.<sup>77</sup> Metcalfe instead focuses on the villein documents and administrative registers that showcase the gradual shift from Arabic to Latin and the role of Greek in local affairs. In the foregoing pages my analysis of the villein documents illustrate how modern-day scholarship tends to rely on administrative documents rather than on linguistical treatises like the *Tathqīf al-Lisan*.

Several Spanish scholars who have investigated the profound nexus between Andalusian Arabic and Sicilian Arabic observed a seemingly consistent tendency of vowel reduction (elision).<sup>78</sup> Lexical items can still be distinguished from Andalusian Arabic, however; this has no apparent effect on the grammatical development of a language. More grammatical treatises were written in Andalusia during the period of Arab presence. In fact, the majority share of these records shows an overall grammatical similarity, both in morphology and presumably in 'vocalisation' as well. Agius hypothesises that the grammatical congruences between Andalusian and Siculo Arabic can be traced back to language exchange between the locals and the first Arab settlers sojourning in their respective lands. There was a lively culture of commerce that occasioned the traders to swiftly acquire knowledge of the settlers' tongue. Over time, Arabic flowered specially in Andalusia, becoming the language of the common people ('Am) and the educated gentry (Khas). On Sicily, circumstances were radically different, and the dragging path of Arab conquest hampered the dissipation of the Arabic language on the island. Feniello even postulates that the slow march of the Arab troops resulted in the gradual yet unfinished acceptance of Arabic on Sicily, leaving pockets of unbending Greeks who refused to internalize Arabic as their '*spoken*' language. In Turn, Ibn Hawqal attests to their refractory attitude even in later years of the occupation.<sup>79</sup>

The well-read scholars on Sicily, frequently cited as the 'Qura' or the 'udaba' not only enjoyed a large degree of self-autonomy but were also regarded with esteem. Discord between the commoners and these learned men was frowned upon in society. Consequently, only parleys amongst the higher classes were condoned and standardised. It is difficult to assess how different layers of society interacted and conducted business with one another under Arab rule and, presumably, with the Arabic tongue as their medium. It is in turn unlikely that large groups of Sicilians came to accept Arabic as their main language, while it was obviously acknowledged as a scholarly language.

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<sup>77</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam*, 142.

<sup>78</sup> Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, 80.

<sup>79</sup> F. Gebrieli "*Ibn Hawqal e gli Arabi di Sicilia*" *Rivista di Studi Orientali* XXVI (1961) 245-253

## Chapter Three

### Ibn Makkī's treatise and colloquial Sicilian Arabic

"When the fundamentals of the Arabic languages were established and the path (of the language) was trodden, corruption wrought havoc upon the Arabic tongue, mixing abhorrent fallacies with incorrigible mistakes on a whim. The Arabic language was invaded upon and its fundamentals started crumbling under our feet while its heroes perish, and the sanctity of Arabic is incessantly being distorted while its true legacy is being expunged." – Ibn Makkī, introduction to his 'Cultivation of the tongue and the Impregnation of the Soul.'<sup>80</sup>

The introduction to Ibn Makkī's treatise is a clear representation of Ibn Makkī's thoughts about the slow diversification of the Arabic tongue no longer kept in its pristine form. If the title was not entirely clear, then Ibn Makkī makes sure that all his readers have no preconceptions of what he aims to achieve with his work. Ibn Makkī suffers to rectify the wrong language usage of the multitudes in his environment not merely by relying on God, but also by issuing a complaint about how both the masses and the educated elite cluelessly administer fallacies to an already sullied language. In his words:

"The mistake did not cease to spread and diffuse among the people, until it made them distort famous traditions of the Prophet, God bless him and grant him peace, caused them to make grammatical mistakes in their (i.e. the traditions') clear and common language, made them pause at places in the book of God, to Whom belongs might and majesty, where one is not allowed to pause, and caused them to alter and distort the poems of the Arabs and to write books on Islamic law and other subjects that are full of grammatical mistakes."<sup>81</sup>

Ibn Makkī proceeds by providing accounts of how he compiled his work into a 'cohesive whole that will appeal to the masses':

"I but compiled what I hearkened from the mouths of the Sicilian people, that which has no place in the Arabic language and that which could be pronounced more eloquently yet they know not [...] I commented on what pertains to roots, structures, conjugation and poetic testimonies not leaving out curiosities and excerpts of grandeur so that this work may be of use to the cultivation of eloquence in lieu of overhearing the knowledgeable ones and the ignoramuses."<sup>82</sup>

It is not entirely lucid who is referred to as an ignoramus or as a knowledgeable one who sports an eloquent tongue. This raises several dilemmas for we are oftentimes unaware of the speaker's identity. Did Ibn Makkī venture far and wide to note dialectal nuances in the way a modern scholar would, and did he speak to people from all strokes of life in order to gain a better understanding of social constructs and their impact on one's speech? According to Ibn Makkī himself, he did:

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<sup>80</sup> Abū Ḥafṣ 'Amr Ibn Khalf Ibn Makkī al-Ṣaqillī, *Tathqīf al-Lisān wa Talqīh al-Janān* (Bayrouth: Dār al-kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990), 14.

<sup>81</sup> *Idem*, 15-16.

<sup>82</sup> *Idem*, 17.

"Verily, most of the errors in speech that came to my attention stem from all strokes of life. Especially the mistakes in speech that have not been commented on by other grammarians because they are too preoccupied with their own class appealed to me."<sup>83</sup>

Of course, this is insufficient information to sketch a full profile of the people he spoke to, much less to indicate whereabouts he addressed them. In fact, Ibn Makkī never heeds the geography of Sicily, contenting himself in the knowledge that his readers either do not care or that his '*kunya*' will offer salient context. Ibn Makkī does frequently refer to the scholars and texts he cites to undergird his assertion that one pronunciation is more correct than what he overheard. In essence, it is only possible to attain a more profound understanding of 'Siculo Arabic' by studying the pronunciation of others and by assuming that Ibn Makkī overheard words correctly insofar that he made no mistakes himself. Ibn Makkī arranged his lexical findings alphabetically, leaving room for the countless quotations he inserts in the text.

### **Ibn Makkī's interests**

The plethora of *Hadith* verses that Ibn Makkī cites allude to his education as a court judge of stature, erecting a reputation that preceded him. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ibn Makkī was a sought after Qadi that was parachuted into fame due to his mellifluous speeches and oratory skills. This allows us to eliminate with certainty any mistakes made on his account and Ibn Makkī made it a case to showcase his sprawling eloquence. This does beg us to ask which readership he meant to attract, given that only scholars were thoroughly familiar with the texts that he refers to. Ibn Makkī frequently refers to poets, not necessarily pre-Islamic ones but also to poets from the Islamic golden age in Baghdad. Namely *Abu Tamam ibn Aws* received attention with ample poems taken from his *Diwan*, but also anonymous poets with whom Ibn Makkī engaged in conversations about grammatical rigour and correctness. He expounded most especially on these elaborate conversations, because it allowed him to exhibit his unmatched skills in composing poetry:

"I replied to his request, realising that it came from his incapacity to attain his coveted goal (of composing eloquent verse) as his backwardness and defects impeded him. If only he came to accept that these trying times necessitate his writing, unyielding to the ones who envy in condescension and call his deathbed in eulogy."<sup>84</sup>

Ibn Makkī responded with his usual sardonic wit:

"I am the one who is drowning, so wherefore should I be terrified of getting wet?"<sup>85</sup>

The rest of the text primarily consists of comparisons drawn between colloquialisms and corrections given by Ibn Makkī. Upon closer inspection it becomes evident that the mistakes as mentioned by Ibn Makkī do not make for a compelling case, as Ibn Makkī freely interpreted colloquial usage of Arabic, whereas we are now cognizant that languages are not rigid patterns of speech and cannot be measured by comparison with a classical written language like Classical Quranic Arabic. Nonetheless, as Agius states, Ibn Makkī's text offers just enough insight to

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<sup>83</sup> Abū Ḥafṣ 'Amr Ibn Khalf Ibn Makkī al-Ṣāqillī, *Tathqīf al-Lisān wa Talqīh al-Janān*, 16.

<sup>84</sup> *Idem*, 17.

<sup>85</sup> *Idem*, 17-18.

establish the existence of a distinct dialect. Alas, it is still impossible to register incidental consistencies between the many languages as they were spoken on Sicily insofar as lexemes are concerned. Pronunciation is a slightly more intricate phenomenon because distilling conclusions here is tenuous and presumptuous.

Not even one of the classical philologists in the tradition of Ibn Makkī expounded on the (mis)pronunciation of a specific word in its contemporaneous context. "In its stead, most took recourse in the conceptualisation of 'flawless' enunciation as it was noted down by forebears of the *awwa'il* (initiators of the grammatical tradition in Arabic) more than two centuries prior. Their main drive was to compile, rather than to comment on what the first linguists and philologists penned down. They consequently perceived aberrant pronunciation to be a flaw, a defect or even an insult to the divine language as it was cast upon the world by God."<sup>86</sup>

Ibn Makkī supported the notion that a philologist was never to berate or mock locals who only came to grips with Arabic upon the advent of Islam in their formerly Christian, Greek culture. In his understanding and that of other commentators such as al-Zubaydi and al-Lakhmi, who delivered a critical review of Ibn Makkī's *tathqif*, the uneducated masses would accumulate and retain flaws in speech as they were made by the domineering elites (orators, scribes and imams). Ibn Makkī joined a long tradition of philologists who had come to understand that Arabic, like any other language, had a propensity to evolve and devolve over time. The grammarians who belonged to the Solecist school (Lahn al-'Ammā/'Awwam) drew upon the idea that anything outside the context of classical texts was impermissible and erroneous per definition. The development of a separate, distinguishable grammatical tradition appeared in concomitance with the study of 'lahn' as observed by the likes of Sibawayhi. He was the first one to acknowledge that the immaculate Arabic spoken by the Bedouins and by the pre-Islamic poets was inimitable and thus should be studied and understood as a benchmark.

Ibn Jauwzi, who wrote his grammatical treatise on the dominant local dialect of Andalusian Arabic and its idiosyncrasies, garnered fame with his revolutionary compilation the *Taqwīm al-Lisān* or 'amendment of the tongue'.<sup>87</sup> Therein he enumerated his own findings rather than relying solely on the findings of classical grammarians such as Sibawayhi.<sup>88</sup> Al-Zubaydi wrote down what he heard in the streets and in mosques, squares and *maktabs* wherein scholars frequented to engage in lively, passionate discussions. This form of observation and perception is very Greek in nature. For his skills as a philologist and a grammarian he obtained the title 'Akhbar al-fuqaha" or the most experienced and knowledgeable of the *faqihs*.<sup>89</sup> His works set an example for future philologists concerning themselves with the faulty language of the normal folk.

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<sup>86</sup> Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2014), 6.

<sup>87</sup> Jamāl al-Dīn Abī al-Farğ 'Abd al-Rahmān 'Alī Ibn al-Ġūzī, *Taqwīm al-Lisān* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1983)

<sup>88</sup> Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Century*, 170.

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[http://shiaonlineibrary.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8/4645\\_%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AC-%D9%A2/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9\\_81](http://shiaonlineibrary.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8/4645_%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AC-%D9%A2/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9_81) (last consulted: 4-1-2021)

The categorical singling-out of the 'Amma as ignorant and ill-informed and the simultaneous placation of stigmas on the common people seems to have been a hotly debated topic even in Ibn Makkī's time. Scholars like Ibn Qutayba, who wrote didactic manuals for the prospective court scribe did not refer to the 'Amma as uncouth or ill-mannered. Instead, he magnified the mistakes made by those considered the echelon of the courtly system, the scribes themselves. Ibn Qutayba was however instrumental in the conceptualisation of a common representative image of the 'Arab' as a Bedouin who traversed the desert, watched over his herd and recited poetry impromptu.

Ibn al-Birr, who took Ibn Makkī under his wing when he commenced his Hadith studies took his leave from Sicily upon the arrival of Normans, much like his pupil Ibn Makkī. Ibn al-Birr, a scholar of repute on Sicily himself, commented on and allegedly revised Ibn Makkī's Tathqīf, although no copies of such a manuscript have come to light. Anliese Nef, who conducted research on the Tathqīf states that the Tathqīf accrued several devout and dedicated followers across the western Islamic hemisphere for its rigor and innovation.<sup>90</sup> The Tathqīf most likely drew attention because of its role in the controversial debate between east and west both religiously and linguistically. The religious factor might have had a bearing on Ibn Makkī's person as well, given his background in Hadith and Quranic studies.

Ibn Makkī set himself apart from the gamut of philologists by subcategorising each group of scholars and myriad other scholarly or educated elites. In doing so he most likely took a queue from works that are no longer extant, but still find reference in transmission through different sources. Namely al-Askari's 'sarh ma yaqa' fihi l-tashif wa-l-tahrif and several books that did not stand the test of time allude to a possible trend toward the mentioning of scholars individually.<sup>91</sup>

Interestingly, Ibn Makkī's work, like many of the works known to us from that era were not alphabetically arranged. As *Baalbaki* states: "This probably stems from a keen interest in the alterations that were apparent in lahn material, which certainly holds true for Ibn Makkī's tathqif treatise. Herein we find a separate chapter for each form of change: vowel omission, insertion, reduction, shift and even morphological patterns receive ample attention. Active and passive participles, gender, singular/plural, diminutives and gentilic adjectives (read: nisba constructions). [...] Only the first two chapters were written with the *alifba* in mind, because Ibn Makkī considered it advantageous. It was common practice to augment or rectify erroneous material from previously published works whilst adhering to the arrangement of words as it is found in the books discussed."<sup>92</sup>

The thin veneer between what could be denoted as 'Amma or Khassa, as in elite, was hazy at best. The terminology availed in grammatical treatises such as the Tathqīf is opaque in itself, seeing as we rarely get a glimpse of whom was addressed in the conversation. Even if a name is

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<sup>90</sup> A.Nef, *Michele Amari ou l'histoire inventée de la Sicile Islamique : Réflexions sur la Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* (Roma: Etudes Réunies par B. Grevin, 2010) 285-306

<sup>91</sup> Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Century*, 186.

<sup>92</sup> Idem, 185.

mentioned we oftentimes find that there are no other sources in which the same name is present. Al-Jahiz<sup>93</sup>, the philologist and historian who conducted research by observing local communities and customs, opined that local speech was to be condoned or even praised. The idea that locally prevalent linguistical constructs were regarded with respect and admiration was unprecedented in Al-Jahiz's era.

The literary tradition known as *Lahn al-Awwam*, of which Ibn Makkī was a part, was a direct response to the swift incorporation of foreign elements into the 'pure' Arabic tongue with the expansion of Islam and the successive conquests that ensued. With the inclusion of Persians 'Ajami' and Greek-speaking communities into the 'umma', the Arabic language gradually became the lingua franca in the Dar al-Islam which was indeed quite expansive.

### **Biographical accounts and Criticism**

In the 'Durra al-Khatira' otherwise known as the only existent registry of poets who sojourned or resided on the island of Sicily, we find mention of Ibn Makkī and some of the verses he wrote or at least verses ascribed to him. It is however impossible to establish the provenance of these poems. Some citations about him and of his can be found below.

"Jurisprudent, orator, philologist. His virtue precedes him to furthest outskirts (of the empire).<sup>94</sup> He categorized a book concerning the Arabic language and called it 'The cultivation of speech'. The work characterises itself with its lucid, erudite style which can be accredited to Ibn Makkī's undeniable qualities as a connoisseur. Ibn Makkī travelled to Tunis to steer clear of the enemy scourge (on Sicily) only to be instated as a court judge and orator in a local mosque. Ibn Makkī excelled in giving speeches and gave a khutbah in the mosque every Friday that would mesmerize the storytellers present. He fancies poetry and recited it with conviction:"

"O thou who art vigilant, struggling through the days of hardship in dejection and worry. The gift that God bestowed upon us shall not pass you by."<sup>95</sup>

"Dost, thou covet man's affection despite his severing ties. Woe onto thee, verily thy guidance has vanished. If he is not benevolent towards his father nor his son then no one will intermingle with him."

"Thou shalt not aimlessly fling opinions ere consulting others and if thou cometh across defect. For foolish is he who dishes out opinions before requesting succour."

"Make thyself a confidante and companion and thy house an accommodating shelter. Be content with meagre bread and salt and turn thy book into thy companion. Thou shalt not yearn for anyone but him who does not turn a blind eye. Live in safety and dignity until the time is ripe for interment."

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<sup>93</sup> "The place of al-Jāhiz in the Arabic philological tradition". al-Jāhiz: A Muslim Humanist for our Time, ed. A. Heinemann, J. L. Meloy, T. Khalidi & M. Kropp, 91–110. Beirut: Ergon Verlag Würzburg, 2009.

<sup>94</sup> 'Alī ibn ja'far ibn al-Qaṭṭa, *Al-Durra al-Khaṭīra fī šu'arā' al-Jazīra* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islām, 1995), 57.

<sup>95</sup> 'Alī ibn ja'far ibn al-Qaṭṭa, *Al-Durra al-Khaṭīra fī šu'arā' al-Jazīra*, 58 (including all translated citations from this source).

"In praise of solitude: He who remains in solitude is impervious to humiliation, anguish and anxiety in our day and age. It engulfs us like a vessel on troubled seas. And if thou beget a child, thou shall ineluctably drown."

"Speaking of old age: Whoever does not show bodily defect by the age of forty shall show shortcomings of the mind."

If Ibn Makkī's output offers any indication, he might have been a rather prolific writer by the standards of his age. However, researchers have only managed to come up with little more than a few references to either his poetry or his grammatical tractate, the *Tathqīf al-lisan*. In the edition of the *Tathqīf* that I used for this paper it is mentioned that there are only two original manuscripts in circulation that hint at the popularity of the *Tathqīf* in Ibn Makkī's time or perhaps at a reappraisal of its scholarly value in subsequent centuries. A rekindled interest in Ibn Makkī's work alludes to the possibility that more copies were made over the course of the last few centuries. It is difficult to determine how the copies were made and if any misreading or hypercorrections came into play in the process, however such fallacies are ubiquitous in virtually all copies of original works from this era. Bearing this in mind, at first glance the two manuscripts as they appear in the 'dar al-ilmīyya' edition of the *Tathqīf* were copied with a steady hand and most likely by a connoisseur in the field who understood the intricacies conveyed by Ibn Makkī. Although we can only fathom the real purpose of Ibn Makkī's work, it is reasonable to assume that his labours garnered widespread attention among fellow philologists and grammarians.

Ibn Makkī most notably concerned himself with the phenomenon of 'tabdil' or vowel alteration. In Arabic the slightest change in vowel placement can change the meaning of a word drastically. The substitution of consonants and vowels was therefore a subject that Ibn Makkī deemed significant enough to want to dedicate several chapters to it. What is more, Ibn Makkī contributed significantly to the ongoing debate about pronunciation in the Mashriq (eastern part of the Dar al-Islam) and the Magrib (the western part of the Islamic realm: al-Andalus). Philologists in his day considered the different schools of grammar divided into two main disparate geographical entities, which encompassed a large territory. According to Ibn Makkī both the Easterners and the Westerners had a propensity to make grave mistakes in their enunciation whereas his own people (Sicilians) were less likely to make mistakes. According to the ALT (Arabic lexicographic Tradition compendium) a Maghrebi dialect of Arabic was predominant on Sicily when Ibn Makkī resided there. The question of how Sicily placed itself between the east-west dichotomy remains to be answered. The island is literally poised between east and west in the Islamic realm of the day.

Recently a third copy of the *Tathqīf* manuscript surfaced on Twitter<sup>96</sup>, which could indicate that there are indeed more copies within reach that simply have not been subjected to research yet. Some grammatical treatises written by contemporaries of Ibn Makkī provide ample grounds to assume that the *Tathqīf* was a sought-after analysis of what constitutes as 'proper Arabic'. Ibn Lakhmi, who was a philologist himself, expanded upon Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf* by contesting some

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<https://ketabpedia.com/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AB%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%8A/>

of his findings and correcting them to the best of his knowledge. Ibn Lakhmi dedicated an entire chapter to the Tathqīf, which spans a little over a hundred pages filled to the brim with disproving remarks and sidenotes in reference to Ibn Makkī's "false assumptions".

Ibn Lakhmi most notably claims that the pronunciation of the 'Amma, or the transliteration thereof as given by Ibn Makkī, is off far from incorrect.<sup>97</sup> To undergird his statements, Ibn Lakhmi avails different verses of poetry and leaves no stone unturned to disprove Ibn Makkī's so called '*outlandish*' claims and conceitedness. Ibn Makkī does come off as high-minded, although his postulations do not always hold their water. Ibn Lakhmi by contrast, is almost defending the 'common' people by endorsing and promoting their way of speaking by turning to the classical works of Sibawayhi, al-A'rabi, Ta'lab and Ibn Durayd. He rejects the notion that 'Amma speech is per definition a signpost of ignorance and backwardness. This only goes to show that there was a fine line between what was deemed permissible and what was deemed inadmissible.<sup>98</sup>

Again, much like Ibn Makkī, Ibn Lakhmi refrains from specifying any groups or individuals that he or Ibn Makkī spoke with or extracted information from. In light of such gross uncertainties, it is but possible to deduce sketchy information as to what the 'Sicilian dialect' or 'Siculo Arabic' truly constituted of. To add insult to injury, the grammatical abstractions and incongruences between Ibn Makkī and Ibn Lakhmi's works render it even more difficult to deduce consistent information about the Sicilian dialect, or rather, the Arabic spoken on Sicily. Contrary to Agius, Metcalfe believes that Ibn Makkī's work barely contributes to our understanding of the 'Siculo Arabic' dialect as it was coined by Agius. Ibn Makkī's output has been scrutinized by many scholars over the last century and was the only means to unveil the secretive, unattested language spoken by the Sicilians in the heyday of Arab power in the Mediterranean. 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship in this field largely overlooked the relation between Ibn Makkī and other philologists, whatever the significance of this nexus might be.

Metcalfe, one of the scholars who analysed Sicilian annals in Greek and Arabic found scattered across the island came to some interesting conclusions about the Sicilian Arabic dialect. The dialect as it was spoken on Sicily, argues Metcalfe, was most likely a Maghrebi dialect with a steady influx of Greek and Latin, although the possibility that a separate Sicilian dialect developed from the language spoken by the Arabs and Berbers is slim, if not unfeasible. The annals found in several major trading centres were likely written by Greek scribes who were educated in Arabic and Latin, which suggests that the transition towards full-blown use of Latin in courtly matters was already ongoing at this time.<sup>99</sup>

In the annals (villein documents) discussed we can discern a pattern of suffixes added to Arabic nouns, primarily to common names and nicknames (ism, laqab and kunya). Toponymic names were also treated as foreign and therefore were only transcribed into the Greek alphabet.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibn Hišām al-Laḥmī, *al-Madḥal ilā Taqwīm al-Lisān* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Bašā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 2003) chapter 2.

<sup>98</sup> Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Century*, 185-186.

<sup>99</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2003), Introduction p. XV

<sup>100</sup> Alex Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic speakers and the End of Islam*, 255.

Arabic definite articles were frequently removed in favour of the Greek definite article in the case of names such as al-Buni [o pounis] and al-Gawdisi [o gowtios].

Greek copyists also had a tenacious tendency to alter the gender of specific words according to their interpretations, which does not necessarily allude to their incapacity to reinterpret the original words. Metcalfe argues that this practice was common among copyists across the Islamic world who had to work with two or multiple languages simultaneously.<sup>101</sup> This remained to be the case even after the advent of the Normans as shown by Cusa's work in 1979.

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<sup>101</sup> Idem, 53.

## Concluding remarks and further research

There is no doubt about the linguistic changes that crept into the Arabic language. Across the Middle East and former Arabic-speaking territories moribund dialects prevailed over the scholarly and static Classical Arabic. How this phenomenon affected the language of the Sicilians is still debateable and will be subject to discussions for some time to come. I agree with my predecessors when they say that more research and time should be committed to texts from the fringes of what constituted the Islamic realm. The truth is that Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf* does not tell us enough about the linguistic features of Sicilian Arabic to draw general conclusions. However, in contradiction to what modern scholars say about Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf*, I solemnly believe that Ibn Makkī's treatise carries as much relevance as any of the administrative documents now considered more important. The *Tathqīf* represents after all the scholarly leanings of the day and hints at the tacit existence of a widely spoken Sicilian dialect that developed independently of the Arabic used in court and in higher spheres. Furthermore, it is of vital importance to comprehend the nexus between Sicilian Arabic and Middle Arabic. It has not been ascertained if any general trends can be witnessed between the different registers spoken at the Arab court on Sicily in relation to courts elsewhere in the Arab world. Although it is highly unlikely that we will learn of the actual background of Ibn Makkī, his biography tells us that he navigated in courtly spheres and must have been familiar with its traditions and customs. His persona is inspiring enough to pursue a path towards greater understanding of the Arab history on Sicily in general, which is sadly enough still underappreciated and understudied.

The literary trend, initiated and promoted by Ibn Qutayba and contemporary philologists, carried significance well into the 11<sup>th</sup> century and across the Arabic speaking world. This was especially, and to no surprise, the case in subdued territories whereabout different peoples were incorporated into the Islamic sphere of influence. The fear of losing the precious meaning of the Quran existed on Sicily as well. The Norman invasion might have caused a new wave of self-consciousness that spurred Ibn Makkī to pen down the flaws in speech that he frequently heard. It is of interest that Ibn Makkī categorised the social layers he navigated through. Ibn Makkī was one of the few philologists in his day to (partially) apply alphabetisation in his lexical analysis which hints at a development in the *Lahn* genre.

The *Tathqīf al-Lisan* depicts the perspectives on local inhabitants as much as it shows the importance of local scholarly circles. Although Ibn Makkī leaves distinguishing features between classes untouched, his *Tathqīf* is one of the few works that categorize groups of scholars in particular. Although these delineations are blurred, it is reasonable to assume that Ibn Makkī did indeed speak to people outside his circle to account for the minute differences especially in pronunciation. Ibn Makkī's *Tathqīf* enjoyed respect across the Islamic world and obtained praise as well as critique with at least two scholars writing commentaries.

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