

The Muslims of medieval Italy, by Alex Metcalfe, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, x + 314 pp., £70.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7486-4; £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7486-2008-1

Metcalfe's history of Islamic Sicily helps to flesh out a topic largely neglected by both Muslim and non-Muslim historians and scholars of the Mediterranean. Such research naturally invites comparisons with Andalusia and the cornucopia of literature on that topic. In a very real sense Metcalfe has triumphed. This is a compelling portrait of a society long past, yet increasingly relevant to modern readers, especially as we move into an era of greater Christian–Muslim social interaction globally.

Whilst leaning towards the perspectives and conclusions of his former mentor, Professor Jeremy Johns (Oxford University), Metcalfe successfully presents his own interpretation of the past and makes it resonate. Demonstrating his grasp of the importance of contextual analysis, he begins by providing an excellent historical introduction to the piecemeal Muslim conquest of Sicily over a period of 70 years, starting in 827CE. The occupation of Sicily was a deliberate political objective of the Islamic regime in North Africa – the Aghlabid dynasty – which wanted to create an expedient ethnic-Arab colony as a counterpoint to the (perceived) unruly Muslim-Berber tribes which dominated the southern shores of the Mediterranean. As the author points out on page 1, 'this is a history largely devoid of heroes' on either side of the religious or cultural divides. Indeed, 'During the course of the eighth century, a distinctive pattern emerged in which Muslim expeditions in the central Mediterranean were conditioned, if not determined, by the situation in North Africa' (p. 7).

Axiomatic to Metcalfe's thesis is that the aim to carve this colony out of the disintegrating and ramshackle Byzantine Empire was not a religiously motivated assault on Christians or Christianity as such, but an entirely geopolitical and economic undertaking. He argues that contemporaries understood this as part of the regional politics of the day and Metcalfe demonstrates this by discussing the complicated roles played by Christian collaborators and converts in the Arab conquest.

The sleepy provincial town of Palermo was occupied before the main cities of the east coast, and consequently became the capital of Islamic Sicily. Depopulated during the decline of the Roman and Byzantine empires, various wars and plagues, and the Muslim invasion itself, the city and region was successfully colonized and developed by enterprising Arab and Berber settlers and local converts. Palermo prospered and flourished under the Arabs for 250 years as it 'was always the focus of political power' (p. 37). Ultimately, Metcalfe informs us, Muslim society dominated the north and west of the island numerically and culturally, whilst a Christian minority persisted in the east – in the port towns and districts nearest to Byzantine Greece rather than the chaos that was Italy. Linguistically the entire island seems to have changed over to Arabic fairly quickly.

One fascinating diversion that the author explores is the brief (847–871) Amirate (or emirate) of Bari in Apulia on the Italian mainland. Metcalfe demonstrates that this and several similar ventures were created entirely by bands of mercenaries and pirates from Muslim Sicily, rather than as a deliberate political effort of the Aghlabids (whose focus always remained on the island itself). It was these totally male 'Saracen' warrior-states – often allied to local 'wicked Christian' warlords – and based on the southern coasts of Italy beyond any real authority of either the Caliph or the *Dār al-Islām*, that earned the bitter recrimination of Latin writers at the time. In the first century at least, these were the wayward *impīi saraceni*, who attacked Rome, rather than the Muslim agricultural settlers or Islamic powers of Sicily.

Early Muslim Sicily was, however, dogged by poor administration. Although Islamic law was introduced and local Muslims followed the Maliki *madhhab* popular in *Ifriqiyah* (North Africa), it was

combined with a bewilderingly chaotic mixture of Shari‘a, military and gubernatorial edicts, and existing Byzantine laws and regional customs. Ultimately, power fell in 910 to the Shi‘a Fatimid dynasty, which took over *Ifriqiyah* and established a sophisticated bureaucracy for the island. However, the Fatimids made absolutely no impression intellectually, ideologically or theologically, and worse still they gave formal licence and official encouragement for Muslim pirates and mercenaries to raid the Italian coastlines of the Tyrrhenian Sea, owing to their strategic alliances with Byzantine Greece. Metcalfe shrewdly contends that this was Islamic Sicily's finest hour – from the 960s to the 980s – when semi-autonomous amirs governed the island for the benefit of the islanders. Palermo was extensively developed to become one of the biggest cities of southern Europe, agriculture prospered through Arab technology, and trade between the island and Egypt made the population fairly affluent by contemporary standards.

After the Fatimid dynasty relocated to Egypt in 969, however, Islamic Sicily slowly came to be perceived as a rival to *Ifriqiyah* and an antagonism developed between the regional powers, which ultimately undermined Sicilian security and led to a series of tax rebellions, civil wars and invasions. Metcalfe reminds readers that the 1061 conquest of Sicily by Christian Normans was just one of many such military campaigns and invasions of the island directed by outsiders at the time. Throughout the book Metcalfe demonstrates his deep grasp of the languages spoken and the gradual change from Latin and Greek dialects to a localized island Arabic. His analysis of the impact of medieval Arabic language on the topography is revealing: we learn that *qal‘at* – the Arab word for fortress – has survived in modern places names such as Calatrusi (*Qal‘at al-Trāzī*, the fort of Trazi).

This book is wonderfully accessible: well-written, intelligent and sufficiently erudite for academics, but also practical, lively reading for a general readership. The depiction of Islamic Sicily is thoroughly convincing. It includes meticulous attention to variegated literary sources, archaeology, etymology and modern history and historiography on the subject. I have two small criticisms. First, although Metcalfe is hampered by limited sources, I am surprised by the scarcity of females in the narrative. Were there really so few woman players in all of this? Second, the book ends rather abruptly. The final chapter details the Muslim communal revolts under Christian rule in the thirteenth century, but it fails to provide a satisfactory conclusion – an overview of the entire book and the period it covers. Following the excellent introduction and the otherwise excellent corpus, this omission would seem a curious oversight. An asset to any library nonetheless, Metcalfe's book will be popular primarily with historians and those with an interest in Christian–Muslim relations.