


JEREMY JOHNS:
*Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Diwan.*

Jeremy Johns's book is a meticulous study of the extant Arabic documents produced by the *diwan*, the Arabic wing of the trilingual Norman royal chancery in Sicily. It is a welcome addition to the limited corpus dealing with the Arabo-Islamic heritage in Sicily and deconstructs the common assumption
that Arabic elements within Norman administrative and courtly life were simple continuations of previous Arabo-Muslim structures. It also presents a corrective to assumptions made about Norman administrative practice extrapolated from England and highlights the particularity of the Sicilian administration. The book also sheds light on the phenomenon of medieval Mediterranean kingship and the symbols shared by rulers, Muslim and Christian, from the Iberian Peninsula to Byzantium and Baghdad.

These quite distinct aspects of the work have the advantage of giving specialists in the divergent realms of Norman and Islamic studies glimpses of their familiar territories from a fresh angle. In fact, one of the strengths of this study is that it traverses boundaries of language and religion which more frequently remain uncrossed, thereby adding immensely to our understanding not just of the Normans in Sicily but also of other complex ‘frontier’ cultures in the medieval Mediterranean where the Islamic, Byzantine and Latin worlds overlapped.

Johns’s raw materials are a variety of administrative documents produced by the Normans from the late eleventh to late twelfth centuries. His focus is upon documents in Arabic or Arabic and Greek or Latin, the other two languages used in the royal administration. The majority of these documents fall into the categories of royal privileges, registers of royal villeins (jarā‘iḍ al-rījāl) and registers of boundaries (daftar al-hadid). These sources are listed in a preliminary catalogue of diwani documents in the appendixes. In the first part of the book, Johns traces the fortunes of Arabic within the Norman administration from the post-conquest era onwards through detailed analysis of the content, linguistic style and language combinations found in these documents.

As a result he is able to demonstrate that in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Arabic was used in an ad hoc and pragmatic manner, reflecting pre-Norman practices and the fact that a significant portion of the population was Arabic-speaking. It was superseded by Greek and Latin in the second and third decades of the twelfth century and one might have expected that trend to continue. However, in the 1130s, a new royal Arabic diwan began to emerge. It engaged in a flurry of administrative activity in 1144–45 when the king decided to renew a cluster of ecclesiastical and baronial privileges, and continued to produce Arabic documents for several decades.

These documents were significantly different in calligraphic style to their predecessors and shared several characteristics with the products of contemporary Islamic chanceries. This discovery introduces the second part of Johns’s book, which looks at the evolution of the Arabic diwan, its personnel, the prototypes upon which it was founded and last, but certainly not least, why the Christian Norman kings should have deliberately imported Islamic models to Sicily.

From the perspective of the historian rather than the palaeographer, this second part is particularly fascinating. It gives intriguing and, from the point of those with only rudimentary knowledge of Muslim and Norman Sicily, unexpected insights into the interactions between the two cultures. Through a close reading of Arabic and Latin sources such as Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Qalaquis, and ‘Hugo Falcandus’, Johns is able to demonstrate that, despite their political and religious differences, the Normans and the Fatimids of Egypt drew close in the 1130s, and the Fatimid diwan in its widest sense of a style of kingship and administration, became a powerful model for the Normans.

Key to the success of the Fatimid model in Norman Sicily, were a group described by Johns as ‘palace Saracens’, Arab eunuch servants many of whom
were crypto-Muslims. Through a process of detective work, Johns identifies the crucial mediator in this respect as George of Antioch, an Arab Christian who served the Normans after a period of service in Ifriqiya and travelled to Cairo as their emissary. It appears likely that George established the Arabic *diwan* and imported at least a core of scribes to work in Sicily. As Johns points out, the ongoing development of the Sicilian Arabic *diwan*'s products strongly suggests a transfer of personnel rather than formulae, something which also happened in the artistic sphere. This, of course, is very much in keeping with exchanges of artisans between Byzantium and Umayyad Cordoba, and Castile and Nasrid Granada.

Biographies of other key palace Saracens shed further light on the role of this group within the Norman administration. As in the Islamic world, eunuchs were particularly useful to monarchs who wished to elevate themselves above the aristocracy. They were brought up in the royal household and enjoyed a quasi-familial relationship with its members upon whom they were also utterly dependent for their positions. Intimacy, dependence and the absence of alternative loyalties made the Arab eunuchs loyal familiairs. Furthermore, Johns suggests that the use of Arab eunuchs, whom the Normans' subjects believed were Muslim, had the advantage of reassuring Muslim subjects whilst providing useful scapegoats for the wrath of Christian subjects in the case of unpopular royal measures.

The Arabic *diwan* and its staff thus emerge from the pages of Johns's study as a key element in the mature Norman administration in Sicily. Moreover, he demonstrates that the Norman kings and their ministers deliberately decided to revive the fortunes of Arabic as a royal administrative language and used Fatimid models to do so. This presents a picture of Norman innovation and flexibility which acts as a corrective to previous assumptions that they simply inherited elements of the previous Arabo-Islamic administration. It also sheds light on how the Normans sought to rule a multi-lingual and multi-confessional population and present themselves to the twelfth-century Mediterranean world.

AMIRA K. BENNISON


In his introduction, Alex Metcalfe compares the publication of his and Jeremy Johns’s books within a year of each other to “the old joke about waiting for a bus which does not come, then two arrive at once” (p. xvii). But readers will discover that these two “buses” are quite different and together fill a gap in the ever-growing field of studies in English of medieval southern Italy. Both authors are highly regarded Arabic linguists and historians who are able to consider aspects of the Arab impact on eleventh and twelfth-century Sicily against the backdrop of the broader historical developments in the medieval Mezzogiorno. Both explore strategies of cultural interaction and adaptation in the Regno: Johns examines royal administration, Metcalfe focuses on language development and religion. Using abundant and largely unknown (or untranslated) Arabic sources, they present lively portraits of the Arab-influenced administration and court life. In so doing, they also resolve important historical, geographical problems that have plagued the history of Norman Sicily for decades: they literally correct scholarship (M. Amari, C. A. Garufi, and S. Cusa, among others), and seek to distance the history of Norman Sicily from the better-known history of Norman England.

As the title of his book suggests, Johns examines the Arabic administration of the kingdom through the lens of the royal diwan or administrative bureau. He traces the creation and development of the diwan, from its roots in the early tenth-century Saracen administration of the island, to the early years of the Norman presence in the south, and from the Norman Conquest of Sicily (1061–1091) to the establishment of the kingdom under Roger II (1130–1154). Relying on rich sources that range from tax registers to peace treaties, Johns contends that the remnants of Muslim fiscal offices played a significant role in postconquest governance. He notes, however, that following the conquest, Arabic as a language of administration disappeared for twenty years, replaced by Greek, but reappeared when Roger II assumed his throne and created the royal diwan. Whereas initially the diwan issued Arabic and bilingual documents, by 1145, Arabic had supplanted Greek and even Latin as the language of royal administration.

Johns argues that the dramatic linguistic change had as much to do with administration as with royal image and authority. He credits Roger II’s advisor, George of Antioch (d. 1151), for this “renaissance of Arabic administration” (p. 257), suggesting that the diwan was modeled on Fatimid Egypt in an effort to promote the Arabic aspects of the kingdom. As a result, the royal diwan “came to play a role in the political life of the kingdom in government and in the formation of the monarchy itself that transcended administrative function” (p. 211). Johns suggests that the “external message” of the Arabic documents was as important, if not more so, than their actual content, for it was “the Arabic letters rather than their legible content which carried the message of royal power to the majority” (p. 299). To illustrate this point, Johns discusses the renewals in 1145 of fifty-year-old privileges granted by the Normans following the conquest. These registers were of little practical importance to either side; nonetheless, Johns emphasizes their symbolic value even to those who could not read them. Johns’s facility with such documents and the creative questions he pursues is exemplary, his argument persuasive.

Metcalfe, like Johns, privileges the position and impact of language in his book. In his sociohistorical and linguistic examination, Metcalfe explores the reasons for the “radical transformation in the religious and linguistic base of the island from Arabic-speaking Muslim to ‘Latin-speaking Christian’” (p. 30). Metcalfe uses this investigation of the fate of Arabic language, both spoken and administrative, to address attitudes toward Muslims in Sicily and the religious and demographic balances on the island. In his analysis of the “complex interrelationships” (p. 78) among peoples in the region, Metcalfe suggests that margins between different groups in Sicily were indistinct. Nonetheless, he demonstrates through the study of language that it is possible to draw conclusions about ethnic consciousness and identity. He cites a document from 1090, which states that the settlement of villeins in the town of Patti was open only to “men of the Latin tongue, whoever they might be,” clearly illustrating how language might define a community. In addressing issues of language and conversion, Metcalfe provides abundant evidence to suggest that the intermingling of communities did continue during the Regno, even among Arab Muslims and Arab Christians. Of particular value is his analysis of the Moncalce Register of Boundaries from 1152 (chapter six), which takes his readers through the register compiled under King William II. One of three from 1178–1183, it records the period of Christian rule over Muslim population, includes the full names of thousands of villeins, and
permits the reconstruction of some of the social ties that existed in this syncretic society.

Metcalf's painstaking analysis of translations and transliteration among Latin, Greek, and Arabic emphasizes the linguistic exchanges that continually occurred in medieval Sicily. At least among indigenous Muslims and the ruling Christians, there evolved imaginative and innovative strategies for coexistence and/or dominance. For example, the Muslims were able to retain some religious and legal rights in exchange for assuming a large tax burden at the hands of the Latin king: "A consequence of this for the Christian ruling minority, unwitting or not, was that it was to preserve a vital sense of Muslim consciousness" (p. 177). This consciousness would be preserved in the language, at least, into the thirteenth century.

Both Johns and Metcalf are to be commended for their heroic attempts to communicate their ideas clearly to the non-Arabic-reading scholar. Although both works could benefit from simple glossaries (and Johns's could use a map), the books include detailed indexes and valuable appendices. If there are points of intersection, even repetition between the two works, this is nothing less than fortunate owing to the exotic and complex nature of Arab studies for the Anglo-American scholar. Of greatest importance is how Johns and Metcalf open up new fields of study for scholars of the medieval Mediterranean, and southern Italy specifically. They reveal how incomplete is our understanding of the region, despite the flurry of published activity by J-M. Martin, P. Skinner, H. Hoeben, and the indefatigable G. A. Loud, among others. Fortunately, we learn from the authors that critical editions of some of the Arabic texts they employed are apparently underway.

JOANNA H. DRELL

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Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily is the first full account of this topic. "Arabic administration" refers to the system of distinctly Arabo-Islamic practices, institutions, and personnel that constituted a vital element of Norman governance of Sicily. Jeremy Johns, a lecturer in Islamic archaeology at the University of Oxford, indicates that until now, historians of medieval Sicily have largely ignored the subject.

Norman rule over Sicily was instituted gradually between 1060 and 1090. To govern the island, the Norman princes fashioned an innovative, highly complex administration that reflected the heterogeneity (Greek, Jewish, Latin, and Muslim) of their subject population. Greek and gradually Latin predominated as the languages of government. Following the coronation of Roger II (c. 1130-54), however, bilingual documents (Greek and Arabic) begin to appear, "which attest to the existence of a professional and sophisticated Arabic" administrative bureau (63).

Johns seeks to answer the following: Why, after some decades in which Arabic usage appears to have waned, does a return to Arabic language and administrative practice take place at the behest of these Latin Christian princes? Documents occupy much of Johns’s attention, but he makes clear that the Arabic "element" of Norman government appeared as well in coinage, inscriptions, court ritual, and kingly garb. Johns finds the greater part of his answer in the perceived need of Norman rulers to fashion an image of royal authority that "spoke" to their numerous Arab Muslim subjects and Arabo-Islamic politics across the Mediterranean. The Arab facet of their rule, a façade to be sure (255), was largely the product of liberal borrowing from Fatimid Egypt, on the one hand, and skillful manipulation of Arabo-Islamic symbols, practice, and officials, on the other.

Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily is written for specialists in medieval Islamic and European history (and, perhaps, very patient amateur historians). It is a work of luminous scholarship. Johns is comfortable with Latin, Greek, and Arabic at home with Islamic and European history alike and at ease with fragmentary and highly technical documentary evidence. It is also wonderfully written. Careful reading, even for nonspecialists, yields a rich prize: awareness of a fascinating and anomalous chapter of premodern Mediterranean history. A splendid work of lay history dwells within; one hopes that Johns will see to its production.

MATTHEW S. GORDON
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Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily. The Royal Diwan
JeremY johns, 2002
[Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization]
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
xviii + 389 pp.
£50.00
ISBN 0521816920

Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily. Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam
Alec MetcalfE, 2003
[Culture and Civilization in the Middle East]
London and New York: Routledge Curzon
xvii + 286 pp.
US$80.00 (Hardbound)
ISBN 0700716858

It is no accident that Jeremy Johns' volume quotes at its beginning the incomparable abbot Giuseppe Vella. As a matter of fact the Islamic studies in Sicily have their origin in the well-known "Arabic deception", which was organised by him at the end of the eighteenth century. The Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia in his novel The Council of Egypt has left us a fascinating literary reconstruction of him. The resourceful abbot, a typical eighteenth-century adventurer and counterfeiter, taking advantage of the visit of a Moroccan ambassador to Palermo and also of the complete ignorance of the Arabic language on the part of the Sicilian scholars, organised an unbelievable swindle. He contrived an Arabic manuscript about one of the Prophet's biographies, invented its translation and passed it off as a "Council of Sicily" containing the correspondence between the Sicilian emirs and the African Fāṭimids. In it he fraudulently created a historic document asserting that the island belonged to the Dār-al-Īslām (212/827-453/1061). Overwhelmed with honours and attention the abbot also invented an Italian translation as well as the Arabic text of the "Council of Egypt" and invented a correspondence between the Norman kings and the Fāṭimid caliphs.

The swindle held for 14 years (1783-1796), and as long as it lasted it provided him with money, fame and even a Chair in Arabic language at the future university of Palermo. The resounding discovery of the swindle, however, triggered off Sicilian-Islamic studies, which began with the research and publication of "authentic" historic and literary sources. The Sicilian scholar Michele Amari, editor of the collection of sources entitled Biblioteca Arabo Sicula and of the monumental Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia (History of the Muslims in Sicily)
deserves a relevant place in the survey of Islamic studies during the second half of
the nineteenth century.

Although Islamic studies in Sicily can boast important historic works and
publications of historic sources (with special reference to Salvatore Cusa, Umberto
Rizzitano and Adalisa De Simone) it has recently left more space to contributions
of foreign researchers and scholars, among them American, German, French ones
and in particular English.

Jeremy Johns, senior lecturer in Islamic Archaeology at Oxford University, can
with good reason be considered as a scientific authority in the field of Arabian and
Islamic presence in Norman Sicily (453/1061–585/1189). During the 1980s Jeremy
Johns had already devoted himself to that subject also in his PhD thesis *The Muslims
in Norman Sicily*. At the basis of his work was on the one hand the study of Arabic
documents of the Norman period, in particular that of Monreale; on the other,
Johns had already started the so-called “Monreale survey”, the first extensive
archaeological surface study ever carried out in Sicily, which lasted several years.
He first worked in brave loneliness and was later helped by university students. His
initial aim was that of verifying the information about the settlements, which were
provided by the archive documents of the sixth/twelfth century. However, almost
at once the work took the aspect of a big diachronic survey on the history of the
human environment in Sicily from the Paleolithic period to the Middle Ages.

While the huge archaeological and topographic work of the “Monreale Survey”
still waits for its complete publication, the demanding study of archive sources have
now been systematised in the volume *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily* (which
had been preceded by previous essays, sometimes just left as typescripts). Johns’
volume represents the first exhaustive treatise on the Arabic administration of
Norman Sicily which has been carried out through a detailed, scrupulous and deep
study of Sicilian archival documents. The two appendixes (1, *Catalogue of divanî

A long historiographical tradition has believed that the Normans in Sicily had
inherited the administrative structure of the Kalbite emirs of Sicily, to which part
of the first chapter of Johns’ volume is devoted (pp. 11–30). As a matter of fact after
the military conquest of the island (Chapter 2, pp. 31–62) Greek officials and
notaries were employed to adapt the previous Arabic fiscal and cadastral materials
as the basis for a huge redistribution of the land and of the subjects (and therefore
of the internal revenue) during the reign of Roger I. After the conquest and after
the first generation of officials and administrators, however, the production of
documents in Arabic ceased and this language does not seem to have been used for
about 20 years (506/1112–525/1130) by the central administration, which instead
used Greek (Chapter 3, pp. 63–90, in particular pp. 78–80).

The situation changed when Roger II was crowned in 1130 and a new
production of Arabic documents surprisingly started (*jarâ’id al-rijâl* or peasants’
list and *dاستی al-kuhûd* or register of borders, both firstly drawn up for fiscal aims;
Chapters 6 and 7, pp. 144–192) which would last until the years of Henry VI and
Constance. The most famous of these documents is the great register of Monreale,
May 1182 (pp. 186–192) which was the guiding text in the “Monreale survey” and
which constitutes an extraordinary mine of data and information.

To that work the organisation of the royal *divan* is obviously connected (to which
Johns devotes Chapter 8, pp. 193–211), in which we find the most important
Arabic eunuchs (saracen palacii) and whose biographies are outlined by Johns
in Sicily, since their translation into Italian does not seem feasible. In other words, Johns’ and Metcalfe’s works have very few chances to modify or, at least, slightly affect the blurred and reassuring view that cultivated Sicilians (not, of course, specialists of the Middle Ages) share about themselves and their own history. It is therefore safe to predict that the Sicilian reading public will continue to prefer the comforting image of a “Norman Sicily” as a peaceful crossroads of languages, cultures and religions, rather than the complexity and drama of the fifth/eleventh–seventh/thirteenth centuries when the image of a modern Sicily is outlined as a consequence of the destruction of Arabic–Islamic “Ṣiqlīḥyā”.

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(Translated from the Italian by Ninfa Pagano)
Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Diwan. By Jeremy Johns

Johns opens this genuinely interdisciplinary and much-anticipated work with a review of comparisons formerly made between the administrations of England and Sicily in the post-Norman Conquest periods. He argues not only that the kings on both islands set about their tasks differently, but also that the forces underpinning the development of their respective administrations were fundamentally dissimilar too. Those who believe that, by re-opening the analogy debate, Johns may have fuelled it still further are, however, likely to find their views modified by the end of the second chapter, if not long before. By then, Johns's baptism of historians who see with 'predominantly Latin eyes', and for whom the book is allegedly written, into the world of Arab-Islamic administrations, may leave some feeling that their heads are being held under the water – indeed, this may be the 'disturbingly unfamiliar perspective' which he promises to show them, having first claimed that we would be 'progressing at a leisurely pace towards the Mediterranean' (p. 1). Should that be insufficient, there follow pithy and erudite warning tales against the explanation of the Arabic administration in northern European terms. Indeed, after the Introduction, further England-Sicily comparisons merit little attention, and the first chapter instead offers a well-balanced introduction into the background issues and most of the main technical terminology relating to the relevant medieval Islamic administrative offices, their operations and evolution.

EHR, cxix. 480 (Feb. 2004)
The structure of the first half of the volume is broadly chronological and argues that the earliest administrative output of the 1090s was most likely to have been based on now-lost documentation of the old Islamic administration, while most of the select band of twelfth-century, pre-regnum scribes and administrators can be shown to have come from Greek or Italo-Greek backgrounds, during which time Arabic lay dormant as a written administrative language. In the more thematic second half, Johns describes the conspicuous re-animation of Arabic as a royal language under Roger II and his emir of emirs, George of Antioch. The largely bilingual (Greek-Arabic) renewals of the 1140s, the lists of men and lands, the dynamics of the diwān and its staff — largely crypto-Muslim emuums — are covered in an unprecedented level of scholarly detail. The arguments which Johns outlined in 1993 in his seminal article ‘The Norman kings of Sicily and the Fatimid Caliphate’, Anglo Norman Studies xv, namely that the Normans based their own Arabic bureau on the contemporary models of Fatimid Egypt with whom they had extended and warm diplomatic relations, are here re-worked in much greater depth, and with significant new material. Johns concludes that administrative efficiency could not have been the sole aim of the royal diwān, since it also played a key role in the projection of the royal image and thus in the transmission of royal authority. The work is brought to an end with three useful appendices including a catalogue and summary of royal and private documents that herald the forthcoming publication of the critical editions which the author et al. are in the course of preparing. These will doubtless open up this field still further.

The work is not without its minor slips in among some of the devilishly fine detail. For example, the fascinating case of 70 villeins who are named but do not appear as registered under any estate in 1178 (p.162) as part of the vast royal concessions to the church of Montcale, and who are cautiously linked by Johns with Maghaniya in lato (ubi sunt villani septuaginta, as a royal boundary definition from 1183 tells us) do indeed have a number of connections with other households on the list, in spite of the claim to the contrary. They are, however, all linked to different internal estates within the magna divisa of Corleone, not lato, and further research might reveal their dubious, but potentially significant, status.

Some may find Table 2.5 (p.59) unclear from the information provided, which is a pity as it might have re-enforced some of the delicate assumptions on which the important ‘neogamos system’ (pp.46–59) of up-dating old villein registers rest, and which are clearly fundamental for establishing the argument about the origins of the output of the 1090s.

One of Johns’s significant contributions in this volume is to clarify, and usually to amend, the numerous mis-readings on which scholars have based their previous interpretations, a task which serves to highlight the enduringly intricate nature of the source material. For example, one might note how the continued existence of the diwān al-fawā'id or ‘the diwān of the revenues’ (pp.204–6) depends in part on the length of a curve made by the pen of a scribe and the presence (or not) of a dot. On this same matter of detail, in the technically-difficult transcription of the Arabic introduction to the villein register of 1178 (p.156), there is the omission of the preposition ‘alā between bidabiba l-jaridatun and sharba. Of course, this does not seriously affect the sense, but, given that the Johns version is the first accurate transcription in almost
a thousand years, this uncharacteristic oversight is probably worth noting. In the same introduction, the important town of Corleone is marked in the MS as having a geminated ł, giving a reading of Qurja'llihan, which echoes the standard Greek version of the name, rather than Qurlian (passim). On p.97, Allahouç, and a Latin version, Alis, are more probably derived from the name attested in Sicilian Arabic as ‘Allūsh, rather than ‘Ali. Finally, Roger Fesca, the little-known archbishop-elect of Palermo, (pp.116 and 307) is to be found under Robert Fesca (p.382) in an otherwise impeccable index.

These, however, are caviling comments that in no way over-shadow the painstakingly-researched detail and meticulously-constructed argument throughout in a valuable work on an often inaccessible area of European and Middle Eastern history. Indeed, such is the nature of this volume that it merits a good deal of careful reading by historians from a wide range of disciplines. All who relish the academic and intellectual challenge that Norman Sicily has to offer will find here a masterly account presented with a great deal of wit, style and scholarship.

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ALEX METCALFE

EHR, cxxi. 480 (Feb. 2004)

This long-awaited book provides the most exhaustive study yet of the Arabic fiscal administration on the island of Sicily from the Muslim conquest of the island and its later conquest by the Normans under Roger I and Robert Guiscard, to the succession of Henry VI and Constance. Jeremy Johns is working in a long and distinguished tradition of Arabic studies of southern Italy and Sicily, of which those of Michele Amari are certainly the most significant. Everyone since has owed a large debt to his *Storia dei
Muslims of Sicily, his Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula (1880-1), as well as his other work. This tradition was nurtured by scholars such as Salvatore Cusa, Carlo Garufi, and most recently by Vera von Falkenhausen and Hiroshi Takayama. Johns’s study, however, carries us well beyond previous research. It has been known for twenty years as a doctoral dissertation from Oxford and has already been widely cited, but the present book represents his continuing research. The result is a master study of the development of the royal diwan, heavily based on a diplomatic reading of all known Arabic documents from Sicily in this period. This process often makes for heavy going. Many of the references are in Arabic, which, even when transliterated, require careful attention in order to follow the argument. But the effort brings significant rewards in more complete understanding.

The thesis argues that, after the use of Arabic in comital documents under Roger I and Roger II, for twenty years there is no evidence of such activity. Only after the arrival of George of Antioch, who had been employed in Fatimid service in Egypt, and the formation of the monarchy in 1130, did the Arabic diwan emerge. Johns recognizes that this interpretation may not explain all aspects of the development of the royal diwan, in particular the important role of local Muslims in its administration and influence from North Africa. But his discussion of the various names for functions of the diwan, if we may speak in rather awkward terms, given the state of our evidence, does show conclusively that the diwan al-taqiq can be traced only to Fatimid Egypt. Other pieces of evidence support this conclusion, so that there is a good circumstantial case for Johns’s view of the role of George of Antioch.

What contributions does this work make to our understanding of the role of Sicily and its Norman kings in the history of the Mediterranean? In the broadest terms, Johns seems rather ambivalent about the nature of the monarchy. While he views the Norman kings as tyrants in an oriental mode, he stresses that the royal titles found in the Arabic sources seem chiefly aimed at strengthening relations with the Muslim population of the kingdom and with the surrounding Muslim world. They were an instrument of policy. As this work is almost exclusively concerned with Arabic sources, with some attention to Greek terminology found in the same documents, Johns cautions his readers about drawing sweeping conclusions regarding the Greek and Latin counterparts of the Arabic diwan. Thus, if we view the conclusions reached here through Johns’s prism, we will be inclined to accept his interpretation of the monarchy as a tyranny. However, we also need to take to heart the wise summaries found in the final chapter.

Johns has made a major contribution to our understanding of the monarchy, but much remains to be done until that picture is filled out from Byzantine and Latin sources. In many ways, the challenge here is greater, as they carry a heavy load of historiographical baggage that needs to be sorted out. Still, if we take Johns’s work for what it has accomplished, we get a
better grasp of the relations between the Norman kings and their Muslim neighbours. For one thing, we see the formal effort to build relationships based on clearer understanding of one another. Emphasis on language penetrates deeply into the patterns of thought and expression that are key to communication. Likewise, the level of Arabic culture in Norman Sicily receives here the kind of detailed analysis that shows how it flourished even as it chafed under limitations. Scholars are going to be building on Johns's research in numerous areas for a long time to come.

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Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily; The Royal Diwan
Canadian Journal of History, Apr 2004 by Shatzmiller, Maya

Ancient and Medieval/L'Antiquité et le Moyen Âge


The bilingual Arabic-Greek and Arabic-Latin documents of Norman Sicily have been partially edited and studied in the past, but this book provides a new perspective on their origins. Johns has chosen to focus on one category of documents, those issued by the court administration, leaving the ones of a more private nature, mostly sales of property, for future study. By examining meticulously both individual documents and groups of documents, and with the help of Arabic and Latin chronicles, placing them in their historical context, he has reached a new conclusion, that the chronological and contextual juxtaposition of the documents show that there was an interruption of twenty years, corresponding to the end of one tradition in the court chancery and a beginning of another, one inspired by the Fatimid court in Egypt. He argues this thesis throughout the eleven chapters of the book, using a systematic textual and linguistic analysis combined with a careful historical investigation of the individuals who issued the documents and the changing circumstances which gave rise to them.

In order to demonstrate the element of continuity, the author begins by examining the administrative patterns of the Islamic fiscal administration, looking for patterns which might have served as a model for Muslim Sicily before the conquest. All the historical sources used relate to Egypt, a not unexpected fact, since this region had a both long established and sophisticated system of landholding and tax collection, and a rich documentation which has generated many research publications. In spite of all the evidence, Johns believes that the initial Sicilian model would have been rather closer to the patterns of tax administration in neighboring Zirid Ifriqiya, whose patterns are not known. The first documents to be examined are the jara'id, the registers of the Muslim serfs, or villeins, people with Arabic names, who were transferred through royal privileges to the church and lords together with the land they cultivated. These early jara'id, of which only later copies have survived, were compiled under Count Roger, 1095–97, and are believed to have been based on pre–conquest tax registers of the Islamic administration. Arabic documents ceased to be issued by the court during the reign of Adelaide and early years of that
of her son, Roger II, but the names and careers of the Greek administrators have survived. The issuing of the first diwani documents by the new chancery in March 1132, and the renewal of the old privileges in the years 1144–45, however, have presented some challenges to the author’s thesis. The new documents reproduced the nominal lists of the contents of the jara’ids from some forty years earlier, which, as the author admits, make no sense. Not only do they register dead people, but the very use of Arabic is an enigma, since by this time no governors, recipients, or supervisors used it. Nonetheless, the author maintains, the issuing of court documents cannot be separated from the history of the chancery which produced them. Hence the documents should be credited to a new class of Arab scribes in the Norman court who were experimenting with elements of diplomatic forms and titulature. George of Antioch was familiar with the contemporary Islamic patterns and, as the head of the royal chancery, he was credited by both Arabic and Latin sources with the instigation and the building of a new court chancellery modelled upon the Fatimid protocol. As the new chancery developed, new bureaus were created which were responsible for issuing of new documents examining and fixing the physical boundaries of the properties donated. Next, the author attempts to reconstruct the palace milieu, the personnel behind the Arabic phase of Roger’s administration, by shifting from a discussion of the documents to the contents of the chronicles. A series of crypto-Muslim eunuchs in the court were equally instrumental in creating an Islamic court protocol for Roger II, designed to project a new monarchical image for a monarch who was less and less in the public view. The author concludes by showing how from 1123 to 1143, the Norman and Fatimid courts maintained close and regular contacts which might well have inspired the innovations, including Arabic titles for the Norman rulers of Sicily and the way these were used both in the royal diwan’s documents and the mint. The Arabic chancery, the diwan, now played a major role in cultivating a new dynastical image through a variety of symbols, administrative and material.

The format of book review precludes me from developing the elaborate scholarly apparatus I would need in order to correct the author’s frequent references to the peasants and their property. However, since this point has an immediate relevance to the changeover from Islamic to Norman administration which is studied here, a short comment on the state of property rights in the island is necessary. Land ownership patterns in Muslim Sicily followed that found in Egypt, where land was held by the state and leased on an annual basis to the cultivators for cash payment in addition to taxes, rather than that found in North Africa, where land was privately held (mulk). The difference in landholding patterns between the two regions is clearly shown in their respective Arabic legal documents, such as
contracts, notarial manuals, and fatwas. It is the similar landholding pattern in Sicily, where state-owned land was leased to peasants, which explains the existence of the jara'id, the smooth transfer of crown-owned land to the hands of barons and the church and the conversion of the peasant lessees into serfs. The Muslim peasants did not own the land they cultivated, even though they had property rights to the constructions they put on it according to Islamic law. The distinction between the status of property rights of Muslims in the rural areas and those in the cities is demonstrated in the private documents, which show the sale of houses by Muslims to Muslims and Christians in the towns for full payment. The conquering Christian administration, likewise, fully respected Islamic property rights and this was clearly seen after the conquest of Granada by the Catholic kings.

All in all the book makes an important contribution to the study of the post-conquest history of Sicily. It combines nicely the long historical view with the study of a specific moment of cultural interaction during a unique period in the history of convivencia, with its other cultural achievements, such as the early translations from Arabic to Latin, an aspect which the author omits entirely. It is well-written and, despite the minute details and tedious textual probing, it makes for a fascinating read. The comprehensive list of the diwani documents provided, appendices, index, together with an excellent, critical and up-to-date bibliography, or list of references, will make this book a useful and obligatory text of reference for years to come.

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