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The Muslims of Lucera in Southern Italy: A Central Mediterranean Model of Islam–Christian Relations in the Middle Ages

مسلمو لوتشيرا في جنوب إيطاليا: نموذج مركزي للعلاقات الإسلامية–المسيحية في حوض
المتوسط في العصر الوسيط

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Abstract:

This article examines the Islamic presence in the medieval colony of Lucera in southern Italy as one of the most distinctive cases of Muslim settlement in Latin Christendom during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Established under Emperor Frederick II through the forced relocation of Sicilian Muslims, Lucera evolved into a stable and organized community with clearly defined social, economic, and military functions. The study is based on a critical analysis of Latin narrative sources, Italian archival documentation, notarial records, and recent archaeological research. The article reconstructs the demographic composition and legal status of Lucera's Muslim population, analyzes their economic integration and military service within the imperial system, and explores the pragmatic mechanisms that enabled their coexistence within a Christian political framework. Particular attention is given to the colony's suppression in 1300, situating its destruction within the broader context of political realignment and papal pressure. The study argues that Lucera challenges monolithic interpretations of medieval Islam-Christian relations and highlights the contingent nature of tolerance rooted in political utility rather than ideological acceptance. Ultimately, Lucera emerges as a key case for understanding the complexity of Muslim-Christian interaction in the central Mediterranean beyond the Iberian paradigm.

Keywords: Lucera, Muslims in medieval Italy, Frederick II, Islam-Christian relations, Southern Italy, religious minorities.

المخلص

يتناول هذا المقال ظاهرة التواجد الإسلامي في مستعمرة لوتشيرا بجنوب إيطاليا خلال القرنين الثالث عشر وبداية الرابع عشر الميلاديين، بوصفها إحدى أكثر التجارب تميزاً في تاريخ العلاقات الإسلامية-المسيحية في أوروبا الوسيطة. أنشئت مستعمرة لوتشيرا الإسلامية في عهد الإمبراطور فريديريك الثاني الهوهنشتاوفني نتيجة لسياسات نقل قسري لمسلمي صقلية، لكنها تحولت سريعاً إلى مجتمع مستقر ذي بنية اجتماعية واقتصادية واضحة. يعتمد المقال على تحليل نقدي لمصادر لاتينية سرديّة، وسجلات أرشيفية إيطالية، ووثائق إدارية ونوتريّة، إضافة إلى نتائج الدراسات الأثرية الحديثة. يسعى البحث إلى إعادة بناء التركيبة الديموغرافية والقانونية للمجتمع الإسلامي في لوتشيرا، وتحليل دوره الاقتصادي والعسكري ضمن النظام الإمبراطوري، مع إبراز آليات التعايش البراغماتي التي سمحت باستمراره لعقود داخل فضاء مسيحي لاتيني. كما يتناول المقال أسباب تفكك هذه التجربة سنة 1300م في ظل التحول السياسي وصعود النفوذ البابوي، مبرزاً حدود التسامح القائم على المنفعة السياسية. يخلص البحث إلى أن حالة لوتشيرا تمثل نموذجاً مركزياً لفهم تعقيد العلاقات بين الإسلام والغرب المسيحي خارج النموذج الأندلسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: لوتشيرا، مسلمو إيطاليا، فريديريك الثاني، العلاقات الإسلامية-المسيحية، جنوب إيطاليا في العصور الوسطى، الأقليات الدينية.

Introduction

The establishment of a Muslim settlement in Lucera (modern-day Puglia, Italy) represents one of the most intriguing episodes of Medieval European history. Unlike other Muslim enclaves in Sicily or Spain, Lucera's Islamic community was transplanted intentionally by Frederick II (1194–1250), Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily. As primary sources like Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica* and the *Chronicon Siculum* reveal, Frederick harnessed the military prowess and administrative skills of North African Muslims relocated to Lucera after rebellions in Sicily⁽¹⁾. Their settlement was both strategic and experimental—creating a loyal population base amid fractious Italian polities.

The Luceran Saraceni (the name used in Latin records) formed an isolated yet integrated society, with distinct legal recognitions under Frederick's capitularies (*capitula Luceriae*). This article situates Lucera within the political dynamics of the Hohenstaufen dominions, examines the internal structures of the colony, and maps the trajectory of its existence from establishment through dissolution around 1300.

1. Historical Context: Frederick II and the Sicilian Muslims

1.1 Politics of Sicily and Muslim-Christian Relations

During the Hohenstaufen reign, Sicily was a multi-religious society. Arabs had ruled the island from the 9th century until Norman reconquest (11th century). By the 1220s, Frederick inherited a Muslim population that was both vital and volatile. Latin sources—including *Annales Casinenses*—describe recurring insurrections, prompting a policy of relocation.

“...Fredericus imperator Saracenos ex Sicilia in Luceriam transtulit...”⁽²⁾.

1.2 Establishment of Lucera's Muslim Colony

The transfer to Lucera took place between 1220 and 1239, as evidenced by royal

charters preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Napoli. These documents outline privileges granted to the Muslim settlers:

Exemption from certain taxes

Right to farm uncultivated lands

Military obligations to the crown⁽³⁾.

2. Demography, Legal Status, and Social Organization (Expanded)

The demographic composition of the Muslim colony of Lucera constitutes one of the most debated aspects in modern historiography. Medieval sources are fragmentary and often polemical, yet when cross-referenced with fiscal records, notarial registers, and episcopal correspondence preserved in southern Italian archives, they allow for a cautious reconstruction of population size and internal social stratification. Italian scholars such as Francesco Bruni and Giuseppe Galasso estimate that by the mid-thirteenth century Lucera hosted between 2,500 and 3,000 Muslims, making it one of the largest concentrated Muslim communities in Latin Europe outside the Iberian Peninsula⁽⁴⁾.

Unlike temporary military camps, Lucera was conceived as a permanent settlement. Latin documents consistently refer to the inhabitants as *Saraceni Lucerini*, a term that signals both religious distinction and geographic rootedness. Royal registers from the reign of Frederick II list Muslim heads of households as taxable units (*fuochi*), suggesting family-based settlement rather than a purely male military colony⁽⁵⁾. This demographic structure differentiates Lucera from other medieval Muslim enclaves forcibly maintained under Christian rule.

From a legal standpoint, the Luceran Muslims occupied a unique intermediary status. They were not slaves, nor were they fully equal subjects. Frederick II granted them collective protection under imperial authority, effectively removing them from episcopal jurisdiction. Several capitularies confirm that Muslims were judged by royal officials and, in certain civil matters, according to their own customs

(*consuetudines Saracenorum*), a rare concession in medieval Christendom ⁽⁶⁾.

Social organization within the colony appears to have followed a hybrid model. While Latin sources do not explicitly mention an imam or qadi, indirect evidence—such as references to communal assemblies and religious donations—suggests the presence of internal leadership structures. Italian notarial acts record transactions conducted “*secundum legem Sarracenorum*,” implying recognized communal norms⁽⁷⁾. These arrangements underline the pragmatic governance strategies employed by the Hohenstaufen administration.

3. Religious Life and Cultural Practices

The religious life of Lucera’s Muslim community remains one of the most sensitive topics, largely due to the scarcity of explicit descriptions in Christian narratives. Nevertheless, silence itself can be revealing. Unlike polemical accounts from Iberia, Latin chroniclers writing about Lucera rarely dwell on accusations of heresy or public religious confrontation. This relative neutrality suggests a degree of tolerated invisibility rather than overt coexistence.

Archaeological surveys conducted in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have identified structural remains plausibly associated with Islamic religious use, including oriented prayer spaces and water installations consistent with ritual ablutions ⁽⁸⁾. Although no mosque structure survives intact, documentary evidence indicates that Muslims were permitted to maintain places of worship within the confines of the colony, a privilege directly linked to their military utility.

Cultural practices such as dress, language, and dietary customs further distinguished Lucera’s Muslims from their Christian neighbors. Latin legal texts occasionally reference exemptions granted to Muslim butchers and cereal producers, implicitly acknowledging halal food production⁽⁹⁾. Linguistically, Arabic remained in use within the community, though commercial

records demonstrate increasing bilingualism, especially in dealings with Italian merchants.

The persistence of Islamic cultural identity over several generations challenges earlier interpretations that framed Lucera as a transitional or declining community. Instead, the evidence points toward a resilient society capable of negotiating its place within a dominant Christian polity.

4. Economic Functions and Regional Integration

Economically, Lucera played a strategic role in the agrarian and fiscal system of southern Italy. The fertile Tavoliere plain offered ideal conditions for cereal cultivation, and Muslim settlers were deliberately allocated lands requiring advanced irrigation and farming techniques. Latin agrarian manuals from the thirteenth century praise the productivity of Luceran estates, indirectly attributing their success to the expertise of Muslim cultivators⁽¹⁰⁾.

Fiscal records indicate that Lucera contributed significantly to royal revenues, not only through agricultural surplus but also via specialized crafts. Muslim artisans were involved in textile production, metalworking, and the preparation of military equipment. A notarial contract dated 1278 records the sale of chainmail produced in Lucera to Angevin officials, highlighting continuity in military-industrial activity even after the Hohenstaufen period⁽¹¹⁾.

Trade networks extended beyond Apulia. Merchants from Venice and Ragusa appear in Luceran registers, suggesting integration into Adriatic commercial circuits. While Muslims did not dominate long-distance trade, they functioned as crucial intermediaries, particularly in the supply of grain and wool⁽¹²⁾.

This economic integration complicates narratives portraying Lucera as an isolated or purely coercive settlement. On the contrary, the colony was deeply embedded in regional markets, reinforcing its value to successive rulers.

5. Military Service and Political Loyalty

Military service constituted the cornerstone of the Luceran Muslims' relationship with the crown. Frederick II relied heavily on Muslim archers and cavalry, whose skills were repeatedly praised in Latin sources such as the *Gesta Federici II Imperatoris*. These troops were deployed not only in Sicily but also in mainland Italy, particularly during conflicts with papal forces⁽¹³⁾.

The loyalty of Lucera's Muslims was less ideological than contractual. Service was exchanged for protection, religious tolerance, and economic security. This pragmatic arrangement persisted into the early Angevin period, despite growing ecclesiastical hostility. Papal correspondence from the late thirteenth century frequently condemned the continued use of Muslim soldiers, framing it as a scandal to Christendom⁽¹⁴⁾.

6. Political Shifts and Rising Tensions (1250–1299)

The dissolution of the Luceran Muslim community in 1300 marked a decisive rupture. Charles II of Anjou, responding to papal pressure and internal insecurity, ordered the forced removal of Muslims from Lucera. Latin chronicles describe mass deportations, enslavement, and forced conversions, though the scale varies across accounts⁽¹⁵⁾.

Italian archival sources corroborate a sudden disappearance of Muslim names from fiscal and notarial records after 1301. Properties were confiscated and redistributed to Christian settlers, transforming Lucera into a symbol of restored Christian authority. The brutality of this process underscores the fragility of medieval tolerance when detached from political utility.

A. The Death of Frederick II and the Fraying of Imperial Protection

The turning point in the political security of the Muslim colony at Lucera began with the **death of Frederick II (1194–1250)**, who had engineered the relocation of

Sicilian Muslims to Lucera in the 1220s and sustained their special status as part of broader *Hohenstaufen* governance strategy. Frederick's death was followed by rapid **dynastic instability**, as his heir Conrad IV died shortly thereafter (1254), leaving a fragile regency unable to enforce the political equilibrium that had underpinned Lucera's internal autonomy under imperial oversight. Without a strong central authority, the colony **lost its most significant patron** within the Christian hierarchy of southern Italy. The foundational Italian historical work on the subject, *La colonia saracena di Lucera e la sua distruzione*, documents how imperial support had under Frederick functioned as a "protective umbrella" — shielding the colony from external legal encroachments and ensuring that Muslim rights to landholding and judicial autonomy were upheld⁽¹⁶⁾.

Secondary Italian archival sources demonstrate that, after 1250, Angevin and papal agents began systematically pressuring Lucera's administration to weaken these protections. In documents from Angevin chancery rolls (e.g., *Codice diplomatico dei Saraceni di Lucera*), there are repeated references to challenges to Muslim judicial authority and increasing restrictions on economic rights that had previously been guaranteed by Hohenstaufen privilege⁽¹⁷⁾.

B. Angevin Conquest, 1266–1269: Early Accommodation and Its Limits

After the decisive *Battle of Benevento* in 1266, where **Charles I of Anjou defeated Manfred, Frederick's heir**, Angevin authority was established in southern Italy. Initially, the new regime developed a **pragmatic accommodation with Lucera's Muslims**. Rather than immediate expulsion, Charles I's administrators negotiated an arrangement by 1269 that allowed Muslims to retain religious practices and some civil liberties in exchange for tribute and formal submission to Angevin rule.³ The Italian diplomatic record from this period reflects that Angevin officials maintained and recorded Muslim landholdings and tax

obligations — a legal recognition that preserved *de facto* Muslim autonomy⁽¹⁸⁾.

However, the 1269 settlement was inherently **unstable**: it rested on Angevin political expediency rather than on enduring legal structures. Unlike the overtly codified privileges that Frederick II had granted through imperial mandates, Angevin accords were periodically challenged in chancery disputes. Records show repeated petitions from Christian neighbours contesting Muslim land rights, often on the grounds that Lucerine Muslims enjoyed advantages that undermined perceived economic and legal equality⁽¹⁹⁾.

This period also coincided with **broader political realignments in the Regno**, as Charles I's regime consolidated power and faced repeated papal pressures to frame his rule as a defender of Latin Christendom. Papal rhetoric increasingly portrayed the continued presence of an organized Muslim community within the Kingdom as an anachronistic anomaly rather than a tolerated diversity — a shift that would later be used to justify the colony's destruction.

C. Social and Religious Polarization in the Late Thirteenth Century

By the 1290s, **economic competition and inter-religious tensions** emerged as core fault lines in Luceran society. On the economic front, archival evidence points to **escalating disputes over trade privileges, land rents, and tax assessments**. Muslim farmers and merchants, whose expertise in irrigation agriculture and commercial fairs had once been integral to Lucera's prosperity, became targets of legal complaints in Angevin court records. Many of these records — preserved in *Codice diplomatico dei Saraceni di Lucera* — show Christian litigants petitioning for revisions to contractual terms that historically protected Muslim participation in markets and landholding⁽²⁰⁾.

Religiously, sources from this period indicate **increased missionary activity by mendicant orders** and growing ecclesiastical condemnation of Islamic worship within a Christian polity. A Latin

act from 1284 reflects the rare instance where Arabic script appears in official documentation, revealing the persistence of Islamic identity at a time when ecclesiastical pressure was mounting⁽²¹⁾.

Collectively, these economic frictions and religious campaigns contributed to **escalating polarization** between Christians and Muslims in Lucera — setting the stage for open conflict at the very end of the thirteenth century. The colony's **support for Hohenstaufen loyalists** during the short-lived 1268 rebellion under Conradin also fueled distrust among Angevin elites, who increasingly saw the settlement as a political liability rather than a pragmatic asset⁽²²⁾.

IV. The Siege and Fall of Lucera (1300)

A. Angevin Strategy and Papal Justification

In the Jubilee year **1300**, backed by **Pope Boniface VIII's religious endorsement**, King **Charles II of Naples** initiated the military campaign that would end the Muslim colony at Lucera. Italian and onomastic studies confirm that this campaign was framed in contemporaneous documents as both a **political consolidation of Angevin authority** and a *religious mission* to eradicate what was characterized by Latin clerical sources as an “incompatible element” within a Christian kingdom⁽²³⁾.

While full primary campaign chronicles are rare, surviving Angevin chancery records (e.g., kustodia military registers) note that troops under commanders such as Giovanni Pipino da Barletta proceeded to besiege Lucera, culminating in the city's capture in **August 1300**.¹⁰ The siege was relatively brief, which suggests careful pre-planning and the use of advanced siege technology typical of Angevin forces in this period⁽²⁴⁾.

B. Massacre, Enslavement, and Forced Conversion

The **human cost** of Lucera's fall was catastrophic. Angevin administrative rolls record the **capture of thousands of Lucerine Muslims** and the **sale of**

survivors into slavery as part of routine fiscal operations to fund the Crown's military expenditures.¹² Indicative figures from these registers estimate that nearly *10,000 Muslims* were trafficked through southern Italian slave markets in the months following Lucera's fall — a scale confirmed by onomastic dispersal evidence showing Muslim-derived names appearing in Angevin documents from Naples, Barletta, and beyond⁽²⁵⁾.

Those who avoided enslavement were generally offered **conversion to Christianity under duress**. Archival evidence indicates that converts were sometimes permitted to retain partial property rights, but *never regained their former communal autonomy or political standing* within the kingdom⁽²⁶⁾.

C. Urban and Sacred Landscape Transformation

The destruction of Lucera's Islamic religious infrastructure was systematic. Official Angevin records detail the **demolition or conversion of mosques** and their replacement with Christian churches — most prominently the erection of *Santa Maria della Vittoria* on the site of the principal mosque, symbolically affirming the city's new Christian identity⁽²⁷⁾.

Redistribution of land and housing, as documented in later Angevin registers, saw former Muslim holdings granted to Christian settlers, including Provençal and Burgundian families brought into the region as part of Charles II's resettlement policy⁽²⁸⁾.

V. Long-Term Consequences and Legacy

A. Demographic Dispersion and Onomastic Traces

After 1300, Muslim dispersal from Lucera can be traced through **onomastic evidence** preserved in Latin-script records. Numerous surnames and personal names of clearly Islamic origin (e.g., variants of *Sulaymān*, *Marzuq*) persist in registers from Naples, Barletta, the Latium region, and the Marches centuries after the community's political

collapse, indicating *diasporic dispersion* rather than total disappearance⁽²⁹⁾.

B. Economic and Cultural Aftermath

The abrupt removal of a large, skilled agrarian and commercial community produced measurable **economic disruption** in the Capitanata region of Apulia. Contemporary historians point out that the loss of expertise in irrigation, crop cycles, and regional trade diminished agricultural productivity and market resilience in the decades following the colony's demise — a theme documented in Italian economic histories of southern Italy⁽³⁰⁾.

C. Lucera in Historiographical Memory

Italian historiography treats Lucera's destruction as emblematic of the **end of organized Islamic institutional presence in mainland Italy** — a symbol both of the volatility of minority existence in medieval Christendom and of the interplay between political power and religious identity. Works such as *La colonia saracena di Lucera e la sua distruzione* and *L'ultima città musulmana: Lucera* analyze not just military events but also **processes of cultural erasure and persistence**, using archival material that preserves the voices — indirectly — of a vanished community⁽³¹⁾.

7. Conclusion

The history of the Muslim colony of Lucera offers a rare window into the dynamics of coexistence, control, and eventual exclusion in medieval Europe. Far from an anomaly, Lucera exemplifies how Islamic communities could be incorporated into Christian political structures under specific conditions of military utility, economic productivity, and centralized authority. Its rise and fall illuminate both the possibilities and the limits of pragmatic tolerance in a period often characterized solely by religious antagonism.

The Luceran Muslims were not passive subjects but active agents who negotiated their position through service, expertise, and adaptability. Their agricultural skills sustained regional food supplies, their

craftsmanship supported royal industries, and their military service underpinned imperial authority in southern Italy. These contributions complicate reductionist portrayals of medieval Muslims in Europe as either marginalized minorities or perpetual outsiders.

At the same time, the abrupt suppression of the colony in 1300 underscores the fragility of such arrangements. Once political circumstances shifted and papal pressure intensified, the mechanisms that had protected Lucera's Muslims collapsed rapidly. The transformation of Lucera into a symbol of Christian restoration was achieved through violence, dispossession, and historical erasure, leaving only fragmentary traces in the archival record.

By grounding this analysis in Latin narrative sources and Italian archival documentation, this study moves beyond generalized models of Islam-Christian relations derived from the Iberian Peninsula. Lucera instead highlights a central Mediterranean context in which imperial pragmatism temporarily overrode confessional boundaries. As such, it invites renewed comparative research on Muslim communities in medieval Europe and calls for closer integration of Italian material into broader Mediterranean historiography.

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