



## Exploring Medieval Mediterranean Trade and Cultural Exchange

أحوال التجارة والتبادل الثقافي في العصور الوسطى في البحر الأبيض المتوسط

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### Abstract:

This study examines the cultural, economic, and political interaction between the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, Sicily, and southern Italy during the medieval ages, from the seventh century to the fifteenth century. It sheds light on the significant role of trade in promoting the prosperous exchange of goods and ideas. Based on recent excavations and analysis of the Cairo Geniza documents, this study uncovers an atmosphere of religious coexistence and economic prosperity in North Africa post the Arabs rule. Despite the political differences between Sicily and Andalusia, there are many similarities, especially in the field of arts and architecture. Notably, Roger II emerged as a significant figure symbolizing cultural exchange in Norman Sicily. This interaction added to the blend of styles that included the prior styles belonging to the Fatimid and Crusade era and it was primarily manifested in the Norman church. Additionally, the study examines the trans-Saharan trade routes during Nasrid's rule and its role in the transfer of African materials to southern Italy.

**Keywords:** Trade, Cultural Exchange, Medieval Mediterranean, Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, Sicily, Southern Italy, Fatimid State, Geniza Archive, Trans-Saharan Trade Routes, African Material Culture, Norman Invasions.

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## ملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة التفاعل الثقافي والاقتصادي والسياسي بين الغرب المسيحي في شبه الجزيرة الايبيرية وصقلية وجنوب إيطاليا مع الحواضر الإسلامية خلال العصور الوسطى، تحديداً من القرن السابع حتى القرن الخامس عشر. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الدور الهام للتجارة في تعزيز التبادل المزدهر للسلع والأفكار. استناداً إلى الحفريات الأخيرة وتحليل وثائق جينزة في القاهرة، تكشف هذه الدراسة عن جو من التعايش الديني والازدهار الاقتصادي في شمال أفريقيا خلال حكم العرب المسلمين. فعلى الرغم من الاختلافات السياسية بين سكان كل من صقلية والأندلس، هناك العديد من التشابهات، خاصة في ميادين الفنون والعمارة. ومن الجدير بالذكر هنا هو أن الملك روجر الثاني ظهر كشخصية محورية ورمز للتبادل الثقافي في صقلية النورمانية مع الآخر المسلم. أضاف هذا التفاعل الحضاري بالإضافة إلى مزيج الأنماط السابقة التي تعود إلى عصر الفاطميين والصليبيين جمالية مشرقية في الكنيسة النورمانية. كذلك تفحص الدراسة مسارات التجارة عبر الصحراء الكبرى خلال حكم النصريين ودورها في نقل البضائع الأفريقية إلى جنوب إيطاليا.

**الكلمات الدالة:** التجارة، التبادل الثقافي، البحر الأبيض المتوسط الوسطى، شبه الجزيرة الايبيرية، شمال أفريقيا، صقلية، جنوب إيطاليا، الدولة الفاطمية، أرشيف جينزة، مسارات التجارة عبر الصحراء الكبرى، الغزو النورماني.

## Introduction

Academia addresses the cultural interdependence and conflicts throughout the Central and Western Mediterranean which includes the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, Sicily, and southern Italy in the period extending from the 7th and 15th centuries. Significant attention is dedicated to the role of North Africa, being a major economic and cultural region, due to its connection with the rest of the Mediterranean<sup>1</sup>.

Trade played a crucial role in the Mediterranean during late antiquity and the beginning of Islam, with economic concerns being the main hallmarks of Mediterranean Studies<sup>2</sup>. The broad historical frameworks of these three regions have not always been as secure as they seem to have been. This provides many opportunities for the exploration



of new research avenues as well as the old fields of discussion within and across these frameworks. This task has not been free from challenges but rather exacerbated by some discrepancies among regional research tracks since research in each region has developed at different rates. Consequently, such conditions have hindered the establishment of similarities, connections, and comparative histories. This is particularly clear in the case of North Africa, where Academics struggled to keep up the research momentum in the postcolonial era which was plagued by a range of factors including shifting economic, research priorities, and political uncertainty. These factors, in turn, have influenced Mediterranean studies.

These factors had a notable impact on the current and future archaeological investigations, not only in North Africa but also in the direction of trans-Saharan trade routes, commodities, and trading posts. Their impact has transcended mere reflection in excavations at major transit stations such as Udagost and Aghmat for the Aghlabids, Fatimids, and Banu Ziri, unlike the case in Sicily before the Normans<sup>3</sup>. During the Nasrid period in Andalusia, the similarities in livelihood styles between Andalusia and Sicily were striking. These similarities are supported by various direct reports and relevant transactions. Moreover, such similarities are reinforced by ethnically mixed populations through a variety of methods including the influence of like-minded jurists and the stylistic resemblance between their cultures.

The interrelations between Norman Sicily and the Islamic world were strong. Nonetheless, notable distinctions exist between the medieval Moors' history and Sicily's history. Sicily is quite small in terms of subsistence compared to North Africa or the Iberian Peninsula. The languages and cultures that exist among the Indigenous inhabitants of Spain, the dominant Visigoths<sup>4</sup>, as well as the inhabitants of Byzantine



refinement, stand in stark contrast to those of Muslim settlements. Moreover, there have been separate phases of Islamic conquest for more than a century and they have faced various levels of armed resistance and support.

## 1- Contrast between Political and Religious Ideologies

The political, religious, and defensive dynamics that emerged in Sicily and Andalusia are quite in contrast<sup>5</sup>. The independent Umayyad Caliphate of Al-Andalus did not recognize the authority of the Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad and was an opponent to the Fatimid Shiites (Safran, 2000). Despite being nominally loyal to the Abbasids, Sicily and Ifriqiya became under Fatimid rule after 909<sup>6</sup>.

The Cairo Geniza<sup>7</sup>, a remarkable collection of documents, has become an essential historical source for the medieval Mediterranean. These documents provide substantial information on many areas of knowledge, particularly the history of art under Fatimid rule. This revelation contributed to a better understanding of the nature of socioeconomic exchanges in the region at that time. Muslim Sicily, supposed to be inspired by the East, was influenced by the Fatimid culture that dominated North Africa for 70 years<sup>8</sup>.

Striking similarities between Sicily and Andalusia could be perceived particularly during the period of political stability under the reign of Abd-al-Rahman III of Córdoba<sup>9</sup> and the Fatimid dynasty at the height of the Kalbids rule of Sicily and Palermo<sup>10</sup>. Unlike Andalusia, where a period of so-called religious tolerance produced cultural prosperity in new and prestigious regional centers, political collapse in contemporary Sicily has led to a vicious circle of financial and military crises that have caused a debilitating civil war.



The Dark Ages of the Taifa kings lasted for a decade and were followed by a cultural decline in terms of major commercial, religious, artistic, or architectural output. This crisis reached Sicily and lasted for thirty years throughout the Norman invasion. As a result, the luxurious workshops of the Islamic period did not survive and were inherited by Norman rulers who, in turn, employed highly skilled Muslim artisans<sup>11</sup>. After 1130, Muslims moved to their royal palaces and reintroduced artistic influences according to patterns found around the world.

## 2- The Interrelations between Southern Europe and the Muslim World

Amidst the Civil War and the invasion of Sicily, merchants sought new markets and many prominent Muslim figures left the island. Those who chose voluntary exile primarily settled in Ephrysia, Andalusia, and a small part of Egypt as their main destinations. The poet Ibn Hamdis al-Sakri rose to prominence at the courts of Seville and Mahdia. The names of certain immigrants could connote their origins as it could be traced to names associated with Sicily. For instance, the minaret of Al-Ma'jad of Seville, later called The Giralda Tower, is one of the works of Abu Laith of Sicily. The movement of people between Sicily and Andalusia was becoming increasingly bipartisan and was no longer ruled by the Umayyads and Fatimids.

Subsequently, the impact of the Iberian Peninsula on Sicily has grown more evident. The potential presence of Andalusian Muslims on the island has raised many controversial and unresolved issues, particularly during the chaotic period of conquest<sup>12</sup>.

Art historians are actively searching for precedents of Norman palaces beyond Sicily after the century of separation and decline between Sicily and Roger II's coronation in 1130<sup>13</sup>. Research revealed the origins



of geometric patterns used in the Palatine church and the form of square towers like mosques<sup>14</sup>.

Therefore, it is necessary to study the question of Islamic influences on Western architecture - especially in the Maghreb and Andalusia - alongside other artistic features used by the Normans in Sicily<sup>15</sup>. The origin of the muqarnas technique used to make the Capella Palatina roof can also be seen in the western Mediterranean<sup>16</sup> where the specimen is found in the Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fess and the Dar Al-Saghir Mosque in Murcia is regarded as a common Mediterranean architectural model<sup>17</sup>. A sumptuous Norman church embodied other elements such as calligraphic texts, leaf decorations, and vaulted elements probably drawn from Moroccan and Andalusian artistic traditions<sup>18</sup>. This led to more extensive links between Sicily and the western Mediterranean- as evidenced by Benjamin's testimonies about Italy.

From the twelfth to thirteenth century, Norman invasions reached the coast of Ifriqiya as they took control of the main coastal cities and several trade routes which resulted in conflicting and divided political-religious relations among the regions that formed the Fatimid state; the regions where trade, material culture, and artistic transfers were taking place<sup>19</sup>. Thus, items of African origin were made a part of material culture and continued to flourish in the sixth and twelfth centuries<sup>20</sup>; such phenomenon persists to be prevalent nowadays.

Comparing the biography of Ahmed ibn Ali al-Maqrizi to the former vizier Georges of Antaki- a parent group living in Palermo- highlights the links between influential figures from Normandy and Ziri court circles. Also, the temporary residence of Emir and historian Izz al-Din ibn Shaddad is an example of how the movement of people along the



axis of Sicily-Africa can be traced more easily in records and documents. Although the two phenomena are closely related, African elements of the Norman Sicily population are well-documented in records. This is explained by the fact that tides were recorded between the expansion of the Norman kingdom and the fall of the Zerris state.

When the Normans who were led by George of Antioch captured Mahdia in 1148, they found the Ziri palace complex intact and teeming with harem women. A few years later, Al-Idrisi recorded that the rebellious Jews of Djerba were transferred to Palermo after the occupation of their island in 1153<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, the Normans turned Mahdia into a colonial and ecclesiastical center until its liberation by the Almohads and the expulsion of invaders from its land.

### 3 - Trade Routes and links across the Sahara

Sericulture and silk production had a long tradition in pre-Islamic Africa but continued to flourish under Muslim patronage. One of the oldest beautiful Islamic silk textiles, the so-called Marwani style<sup>22</sup>, is attributed to North Africa although it may not have been woven there, in the Levant<sup>23</sup>. Its embroidered inscription provides the only historical evidence we have regarding the existence of Dar al-Tiraz in Morocco as early as the reign of Marwan ibn Muhammad. The Fatimid state was known as Dar al-Kiswah where all kinds of gold-style garments and turbans had been tailored while the Italians were already trading the African and Byzantine silk in Córdoba-the heir to the Levantine Umayyad Caliphate<sup>24</sup>. Silk textiles used as vestments and other church furnishings were revealed in two treasures of the Norman Church of Sicily. Examining the descriptions in these inventories allows us to conclude how textiles were made and used- some of which were especially ancient and precious. Silk of similar quality was not only



produced in both Ifriqiya and Sicily in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but traded between them.

In this regard, trade was a key factor linking the three regions. Apart from textiles, many other goods have been transported throughout the Mediterranean ranging from basic items such as foodstuffs (cereals, olive oil, wine), normal practical goods (containers used to transport these perishable goods or ceramic tableware used for eating and drinking) to luxury items<sup>25</sup>.

Another aspect of the history of modern art has been lost. This is because people of the Mediterranean viewed Fatimid Egypt as the sole supplier of luxury materials such as ivory and rock crystals. These materials were either in their raw state or carved into goods used for commercial purposes in the Mediterranean region. However, it is significant to note that Africa during the Fatimid period looked west to export its luxury goods, especially to the gold-rich region of Sudan and to the ancient kingdom of Ghana located in modern Mali and Guinea. They also needed access to the gold required to pay in exchange<sup>26</sup>.

West Africa has long been recognized as a crucial source of raw ivory for workshops in southern Italy. Trans-Saharan routes facilitated the transport of various goods, including elephant tusks to Africa which were later spotted at market ports on the Italian coast. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, abundant ivory supplied in this way fueled the demand for fine ivory sarcophagi such as those made in Norman Palermo. The southern Italian centers of Amalfi and Salerno made olivines, sarcophagi, and ecclesiastical crowns in response to this demand.

The subject matter of long-distance interstate trade in the Nasrid World of the Western Mediterranean is based on the above-mentioned economic history and trade links with a special focus on the Nasrid



period<sup>27</sup>. The complex documented evidence of Italian customs records would be sought as a reference for this subject. There is evidence that Nasrid merchants operated directly in these stretches of the Mediterranean; sometimes under the auspices of the Nasrid rulers themselves. The physical evidence of Nasrid pottery, particularly chandeliers found at sites in North Africa and Egypt, is used to assess the depth of Nasrids' economic ties with their trans-Mediterranean trade partners.

## Concluding Remarks

This study focuses on the significant role of trade and cultural exchange in the medieval Mediterranean. By analyzing primary and secondary sources, the study emphasizes the region's importance in shaping the development of the Mediterranean world. The study explores the economic, political, religious, and artistic influences of the region as well as the similarities and differences between Sicily, Andalusia, and the Fatimid state. Additionally, it investigates the impact of trans-Saharan trade routes and the transfer of African material culture from the sixth to the twelfth centuries in addition to the influence of the Cairo - Geniza documents. Moreover, it examines the role of Norman invasions in the region and the study further demonstrates that trade and cultural exchange are essential to the development of the medieval Mediterranean.



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