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Trade relations between Sicily, Ifrīqiya and Egypt under the Fatimids and Zirids of Ifrīqiya (10th -11st centuries)

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David Bramoullé. Trade relations between Sicily, Ifrīqiya and Egypt under the Fatimids and Zirids of Ifrīqiya (10th -11st centuries). Emily Sohmer Tai; Kathryn L. Reyerson. Mapping Pre-Modern Sicily. Maritime Violence, Cultural Exchange, and Imagination in the Mediterranean, 800-1700, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.93-109, 2022, Mediterranean Perspectives, 978-3-031-04914-9. 10.1007/978-3-031-04915-6_6 . hal-04461762

HAL Id: hal-04461762

<https://hal.science/hal-04461762v1>

Submitted on 16 Feb 2024

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Trade relations between Sicily, Ifrīqiya and Egypt under the Fatimids and Zirids of Ifrīqiya (10th-11st centuries), in Sohmer-Tai, E., Reyerson, K. L. (éd.), *Mapping Pre-Modern Sicily*, Cham, Palgrave MacMillan, p. 93-109

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*“The situation is worthening all the time. People are very worried about what’s going on in Sicily and the fact that the enemy mastered most of it and because here the food prices levelled high because the city is dependent upon Sicily for its food”.*¹

The 18th of August 1061, Labrāṭ b. Moses b. Sughmār, the Jewish judge (*dayyan*) of Mahdiya, the main maritime town on the coasts of Ifrīqiya (approximately modern Tunisia, east of Algeria and west of Libya), shared his concerns with his interlocutor and business partner in Egypt, (p. 94) Nahray b. Nissīm, waiting for news and goods from Ifrīqiya and Sicily. This letter, quite a long one in fact, and many others bear witness to the strong ties between Sicily and North Africa. It even attests to the growing dependence which has gradually established in Ifrīqiya with regard to Sicilian agriculture productions about which Ibn Ḥawqal, passing through the island into the 970’s, did not pay much attention to. Despite the obvious exaggerations he expressed towards Sicily and its people who found no grace in his sight, it is also true that in a century the context had changed.² Since the first days of the Aghlabid conquest of the island in 827, a conquest about which sources suggest that it followed regular commercial traffic between Ifrīqiya and Sicily, relations between the two territories, now united under the same authority, seem to have intensified.³ In 909-910, the Fatimids overthrow of the Aghlabid emirs confirmed this.

From 910, the conquest of Ifrīqiya and Sicily by the Fatimid caliphs placed the two territories in a situation of increasing economic and political interdependence. If the union of Sicily and Ifrīqiya under a common Muslim tutelage predates the Fatimids, the sources show how much, from the 10th century onward, the commercial relations between the Ifrīqiyān ports and those of Sicily became more pronounced. Beyond mere trade, the island played a central ideological role for the Ismaili caliphs of Ifrīqiya. Engaged in an ideological war against their Islamic competitors, the Abbassids caliphs of Baghdad and the Umayyads of Cordoba, both Sunnis, the Ismailis Fatimids had to prove the Islamic world their legitimacy as the sole

¹ INA D 55 No 13, recto l. 42, margin ll.1-4. In Moshe Gil, ed. *In the Kingdom of Ishmael*, (Jerusalem: Bialik Institutes, 1997), IV: 35.

² On the description of the island by Ibn Ḥawqal, cf. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-ard*, ed. Johannes H. Kramers (Leiden: Brill, 1938), 118-131.

³ Annliese Nef, “ Comment les Aghlabides ont décidé de conquérir la Sicile” », *Annales Islamologiques* 45 (2011) 191-212.

contender to the caliphal throne. The best way to do it was to defeat the Christians, especially the Byzantines, usually called the Rums in Arabic sources and considered as the epitome of the enemies of the Islamic world since the 7th century, on their own “field”; the Mediterranean called the sea of the Romans (*baḥr al-rūm*) in most Arabic sources. On this aspect, Sicily was of some interest for the Fatimids. A part of the island was still on the hands of the Byzantine when the Fatimid took over the power in Ifrīqiya and decided to come to take what they considered as their due in Aghlabid Sicily. To outstrip the Aghlabids (p. 95) in the control of this territory, the island became a main goal for the Fatimids between 910 and 973 while during the same period the Abbassids were defeated by the Byzantine in northern Syria and the Umayyads were negotiating agreements with Constantinople against the Fatimids.⁴ Because of its natural resources and its location near Southern Italia, Sicily also played a major role in Fatimid sea policy against these same Byzantines. Sicily thus furnished a tactical advantage with both a practical and ideological aspect: a naval base for commerce and defense set in the center of the Mediterranean, it could also function as the lynchpin in a narrative meant to legitimize Fatimid claims to the caliphate.

Sicily’s importance in the Fatimid strategy did not diminish, even after their departure to Egypt in 973 and the establishment of the government of the Zirid emirs of Ifrīqiya and the Kalbids in Sicily, both of them under Egyptian’s theoretical authority, the role of the island in the Fatimid strategy did not get weaker. On the contrary, both the Arabic documentation of the 10th and 11th centuries, such as geographic treaties and the Islamic juridic texts -the *fatwas*- and the very rich letters of the Geniza from the 11th and 12th centuries testify that the island, blessed by varied agricultural productions, played a major role in supplying not only Ifrīqiya, but also Fatimid Egypt. Moreover, in Palermo, Kalbid emirs favored the emergence of quality craftsmanship which strengthened the role of the island and made it an obligatory space for exchanges between Egypt and Ifrīqiya but also more largely between the Muslim and Christian worlds, and the gradual conquest of the island by the Normans in the second half of the 11th century did not fundamentally change things.

RENOWNED AND EXPORTED PRODUCTIONS FROM SICILY

Far from the portrait drawn up in the 970’s by Ibn Ḥawqal who reported that the vital interests of the Sicilians depended on importers, agricultural and artisanal productions were numerous and gave rise to renowned exports.⁵ The export of food products to Ifrīqiya is documented as early as the 10th century, when the Fatimids were still there and even before during the Aghlabid era. While the early documentation does not say anything (p. 96) about the

⁴ David Bramoullé, *Les Fatimides et la mer* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 126-129.

⁵ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 122.

food products from Sicily, medieval geographers, fatwas, and Geniza letters, written mainly after 1020, furnish details regarding this agricultural production. Much of this was cereal cultivation, mainly barley and wheat concerning which al-Idrīsī attests that at least by Norman times, vermicelli (*iṭrīya*) was made near a place called Trabia and exported in all directions.⁶ Exportation of wheat to Ifrīqiya and Egypt appears in several fatwas by the Muslim jurist al-Qābisī (d. 1012) and letters from the 11th century.⁷ In several *fatwas* by al-Māzarī (d. 1141), rental contracts for the transportation of Sicilian wheat to Ifrīqiya were signed on a regular basis until the beginning of the 12th century, when the Sunni jurists of Ifrīqiya forbade trade with an enemy land as Sicily was considered by that time.⁸ Syracuse is clearly mentioned as a port where big ships were loading wheat in the 12th century⁹. Rice is also mentioned in this documentation, albeit in a more anecdotal way. In a letter from Mazara written between 1053 and 1060, the writer refers to sending rice to Egypt. It is unclear, however, whether this is a reference to local rice or not.¹⁰ The Muslim conquest also made it possible to introduce or develop a number of new vegetable products thanks to the importation of new agrarian techniques. Sugar cane, introduced in the region of Palermo and mentioned for the first time around 930, spread throughout the island.¹¹ The kitchens of the Fatimids, which produced large quantities of pastries, needed a great deal of sugar. The caliphs had cane plantations on the island, and sugar for candy figures among Sicilian exports in the 10th century.¹² (p. 97)

The orchards and the fruits of Sicily are abundantly referred to in medieval literature.¹³ Citrus fruits enjoyed a great reputation throughout the Mediterranean, and beverages were made with cane sugar and exported along with wine.¹⁴ Shelled almonds and nuts of all kinds were also widely exported Sicilian products.¹⁵ The breeding of animals such as cows allowed the manufacture of a very famous cheese appreciated everywhere as well as the development of a leather industry.¹⁶ Craft leather from Syracuse is cited, and shipments of hundreds of calfskins,

⁶ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al-āfāq* (Port Saïd: Maktabat al-thaqāfa al-diniya, 2001), II: 592.

⁷ Al-Wansharīsī, *al-Mi'yār al-mu'rib wa-al-jāmi' al-mughrib 'an fatāwī ahl Ifrīqiyya wa-al-Andalus wa-al-Maghrib*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥajjī (Beyrouth: Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1983), VIII : 307; IX: 114,115, 116, 117. T-S 10 J 15, f. 14, fol. 1b, l. 1; ENA 2805, f. 4B, fol. 1a, l. 12; T-S Ar 30, f. 74, fol. 3, l. 1; T-S 16. 163, fol. 1a, l. 18; T-S 13 J 28, f. 9, fol. 1b, l. 11; T-S NS J 566, fol. 1a, l. 18; T-S 16, f. 13, fol. 1a, ll. 12-13; INA D-55 No. 14, fol. 1a, l. 30; Dropsie College, fol. 1a, ll. 33-34. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 791; III: 121,175, 247, 583; IV: 152, 168, 434, 458.

⁸ Al-Wansharīsī, *Mi'yār*, VIII:181, 131, 305; IX: 52

⁹ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat*, II: 597.

¹⁰ T-S 12.366, fol.1b, l. 3. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 743.

¹¹ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 122. Mohamed Ouerfelli, *Le sucre. Production, commercialisation et usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 25, 151.

¹² Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 122. Al-Mālikī, *Kitāb Riyād al-nufūs*, ed. Bashīr al-Bakkūsh (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1983), II: 294-5.

¹³ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 123. Idrīsī, *Nuzhat*, II: 590, 592, 593, 594, 597-598, 599, 600-1.

¹⁴ Bodl. Ms. Heb. c. 27. 82, fol. 1a, upper margin, l. 2; T-S 12.366, fol.1b, l. 3. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 559, 743.

¹⁵ T-S Ar 54.88, fol. 1a, l. 5; T-S13 J 28, f. 2, fol. 1a, l. 11-12; T-S Misc. 28.37d, fol. 1a, l. 8. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 69; III: 750, 922.

¹⁶ T-S 13 J 17, f.11, fol. 1a, l. 21-22. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 575.

deerskins, and hides of other types appear in the texts along with wax and honey.¹⁷ Sicily was also famous for its fishing activity. Ibn Ḥawqal writes that the fisheries of Sicily were leased, and al-Idrīsī is more precise by indicating that fishing for tuna, swordfish, and shad was practiced in Trapani, Termini, Caronia, Oliveri, and Milazzo (Figure 1).¹⁸ In Salso, geographers refer to the importance of fishing activity and the succulent taste of the fish. In Lentini, the river full of fish favored an important fishing activity. These fish were exported widely.¹⁹ Archaeological documentation attests that the salted fish from Sicily were exported to Ifrīqiya and probably also to Provence as analysis of ceramic jars from this period has shown.²⁰ Concerning jars and other kinds of ceramics, Sicily became a production area of jars exported full or even empty to serve as containers. Palermo jar sellers appear in Ibn Ḥawqal's treaty.²¹ Exportation of ceramics from Sicily is mentioned in the Geniza documentation and confirmed by archaeological evidence found in excavations made in Ifrīqiya, especially in the area of Şabra al-Manşūriya.²²

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¹⁷ Bodl. Ms. Heb. c. 27. 82, fol. 1a, l. 4-7. T-S 13 J 16, f.23, fol. 1a, l. 8. T-S 20. 69, fol. 1b, l. 7. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 556, 637; III: 282.

¹⁸ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Şūrat*, 130. Idrīsī, *Nuzhat*, II, p. 592, 594, 597, 599, 601.

¹⁹ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat*, II: 597.

²⁰ Soundès Gragueb et al, "Jarres et amphores de Şabra al-Manşūriya" in *La céramique maghrébine du haut Moyen Âge (VIII^e - X^e siècle)*, ed. Patrice Cressier, Elizabeth Fentress (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2011), 205-6. David Bramoullé et al. "Le mobilier céramique dans la Méditerranée des X^e-XII^e siècles," *Annales Islamologiques*, 51 (2018) : 196.

²¹ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Şūrat*, 119.

²² Bramoullé et al., "Le mobilier céramique dans la Méditerranée des X^e-XII^e siècles", 198-200.



Map 6.1: Ifriqiya and Sicily during the Fatimid Era

Some Sicilian jugs, usually used for olive oil, and jars of bigger size were bought empty by the Geniza traders who were often very concerned about the leakproof quality of these

pieces. Even though the letters are not always easy to interpret, one can see that the quality of the jars produced in the island was not always as good as the traders hoped.²³

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Strategic materials were also part of the island's exports. Shipbuilding was a major activity of the Fatimid Caliphate in which Sicily played a significant role.²⁴ In the name of jihad, the Fatimids created one of the greatest navies of the medieval Mediterranean, victoriously raiding enemies from Alexandria to Almeria.²⁵ Sicily became a major source of supply for timber, pitch or iron. All medieval geographers refer to several logging sites around San Marco, Cefalú, and elsewhere.²⁶ However, logging was not always easy at a time when the struggle against the Byzantines was raging. In the 960's, it seems that many of the Christian loggers who worked for the Fatimids around Demone fled to the nearest Byzantine strongholds of Taormina and Rametta.²⁷ The difficulty of finding new loggers was a source of concern for the caliph. "You will insist with him [i.e. the governor of the island, Aḥmad b. al-Kalbī] so that he may display the greatest zeal in this matter," wrote al-Mu'izz to his secretary Jawdhar (d. 973) after receiving a message from the governor mentioning problems with the loggers.²⁸ Lumber, pitch, but also iron from the mines of Sicily was exported to Mahdiya, the main arsenal of the dynasty. Ibn Ḥawqal writes that the iron mine near a place called Gharbiya was in the hands of the sovereign (*sulṭān*), and the iron was sent to the shipyard for the navy.²⁹ He emphasizes the high quality of the papyrus produced on the island. While a part of it was used to make the documents needed by the local government, the rest was braided to make the cables for ship anchors.³⁰ Commercial letters as well as al-Idrīsī report pitch (*zift*) and cade oil (*qaṭrān*) -a medicinal oil made out of juniper (*Juniperus thurifera*) and used to treat skin diseases. This was produced around Aci and (p. 100) exported through Mazara, as described in a lengthy letter written at this last port on the 7th of September 1064.³¹

²³ Dropsie College 389, fol. 1a, ll. 36, 42. In Gil, *Kingdom*, IV: 458-459.

²⁴ David Bramoullé, "La Sicile dans la Méditerranée fatimide (X^e-XI^e siècle)", in *Les dynamiques de l'islamisation en Méditerranée centrale et en Sicile : nouvelles propositions et découvertes récentes*, ed. Annliese Nef, Fabiola Ardizzone (Rome: École Française de Rome-Edipuglia, 2014), 25-6.

²⁵ Bramoullé, *Fatimides*, 120-35.

²⁶ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'arif al-aqālīm*, ed. Michael J. De Goeje, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 232. Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat*, II: 592-3.

²⁷ Al-Dawūdī, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ed. Farhat Dachraoui. In *Études d'orientalisme dédiées à la mémoire de Lévi-Provençal*, (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962), 416-17.

²⁸ Al-Jawdharī, *Sīrat ustādh Jawdhar. Inside the Immaculate Portal*, ed. and transl. Husayn Hajjī (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 130.

²⁹ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 121-2.

³⁰ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 121-2

³¹ Al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat*, II: 596. Dropsie College 389, fol. 1a, ll. 36, 42. In Gil, *Kingdom*, IV: 458-9.

Several plants for textile crafts were also introduced to Sicily during the Fatimid period. The introduction of cotton thus seems to have occurred around the 10th century. Plantations were found especially in the regions around Agrigento and Mazara. Reported as early as the Byzantine period, the culture of the silkworm mulberry tree also experienced a certain boom from the 10th century. These plants allowed the development of quality textile crafts. The weaving of cotton and silk cloths is attested in Palermo, Syracuse, Demone, and in the region of Agrigento. The letters of the Geniza mention the many silks produced on the island. These were various pieces of fabric, as well as several types of dresses, blankets, scarves, and turbans. The oriental gentleman had to wear a Sicilian silk turban for which he did not hesitate to spend twice as much as for the main garment³². Among the other famous productions were also very high-quality rugs or silk twill mattresses. The reputation of these goods spread far beyond Sicily and North Africa. Like almost all of the island's manufactured goods, they were, of course, sent to Ifrīqiya, but above all they were exported to Yemen and India. Their prices, between five and ten dinars each, made them luxury products that only the elite could afford. However, the less-privileged could nevertheless experience the softness and comfort of Sicilian products by purchasing second-class silk fabrics, the so-called *lāsīn* silk, exported *en masse* to Ifrīqiya and to Egypt.³³ Sicilian productions enjoyed a great reputation and their exports contributed to the increase in maritime traffic between Sicily and Ifrīqiya but also more widely throughout the rest of the Mediterranean.

THE GROWTH OF MARITIME TRADE IN SICILY

In spite of the relative silence concerning maritime traffic between Sicily and North Africa during the eighth and ninth centuries, it seems, nevertheless, that the military operations launched in Sicily by the Aghlabids did not substantively alter a dynamic that favored Mediterranean trade to an **(p. 101)** increasing degree. Recent scholarship has challenged Pirenne's assertion that the Muslim conquest of the southern shores represented a disruption to Mediterranean trade. Piracy is no longer seen as a sign of the disappearance of commercial traffic but evidence, rather, that commerce remained robust.³⁴ In fact, maritime trade can be attested from the 8th century, when the Aghlabid dynasty (800-909) came to power in Ifrīqiya. As it has been shown for the other territories subject to Muslim powers such as al-Andalus or

³² Shelomo D. Goitein, "Sicily and Southern Italy in the Cairo Geniza Documents," *Società di Storia Patria per la Sicilia Orientale*, 67 (1972), 14.

³³ T-S 12.250, fol. 1a. l. 4; BM Or 5542, f. 22, fol. 1a, l. 6; AIU VII F 1, fol. 1a, l. 4, right margin, l. 5. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 447, 492, 827, 829.

³⁴ About this topic, see the preface by Christophe Picard to the new French reedition of Henri Pirenne's most famous book. Cf. Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, rev. ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), v-xlv.

the principalities of the central and western Maghreb which had little by little implemented a sea policy, there is no reason to think the Aghlabids could not do the same.³⁵ The account of the conquest of Sicily by the emirs of Kairouan is a proof of the existence of at least one truce signed a little before 817 between the Aghlabids and the Patrice of Sicily.³⁶

If it was obviously a question of silencing the weapons, the text of the truce, as it is reported, stipulated that the Sicilian authorities not undertake to retain any of the Muslims who went to the island and wished to return home. In diplomatic terms, it was a good idea to let the Ifrīqiyan merchants go to Sicily to trade. We can assume that the reverse was true as suggested by a *fatwa* from the first half of the 9th century issued by the Sunni jurist Saḥnūn (d. 854) or his son (d. 869). It says it was illegal for Ifrīqiyan freebooters to raid Christian ships captured near Muslim ports or on the high seas and "known to trade with Muslims (*miman 'urif bi-l-tijāra ilā' al-muslimīn*)."³⁷ Evoking the law of war at sea and what it was possible to capture or not, the author thus indirectly highlights the regular presence of Christian ships near the Muslim ports of Ifrīqiya and the existence of maritime relations between Christian and Muslim shores of the Mediterranean. The proximity of Sicily to Ifrīqiya made the existence of commercial relations between these two territories before 827 likely. Such a situation, although poorly documented, was amplified when the Aghlabids took control of Sicily, particularly the ports of the western part of the island whose resources and wealth were well known to Muslims.³⁸ In another *fatwa*, composed at the end of the 9th century, the jurist Yaḥyā b. 'Umar (d. 901) used an example referring to trade between Ifrīqiya and Sicily to explain how Islamic jurisprudence addressed nautical rental contracts.³⁹ This example also demonstrates how regular journeys between the two territories were (Maps 6.1 and 6.2).

After 910, the rise of Sicilian productions and the commercial traffic that passed through the island therefore owed nothing to chance. The local and, more broadly, the Mediterranean context was generally favorable to trade. From the 9th century, the raids on Italian cities and the influx of gold from sub-Saharan Africa encouraged the monetization of the Sicilian economy and the minting of highly prized quarter dinars,

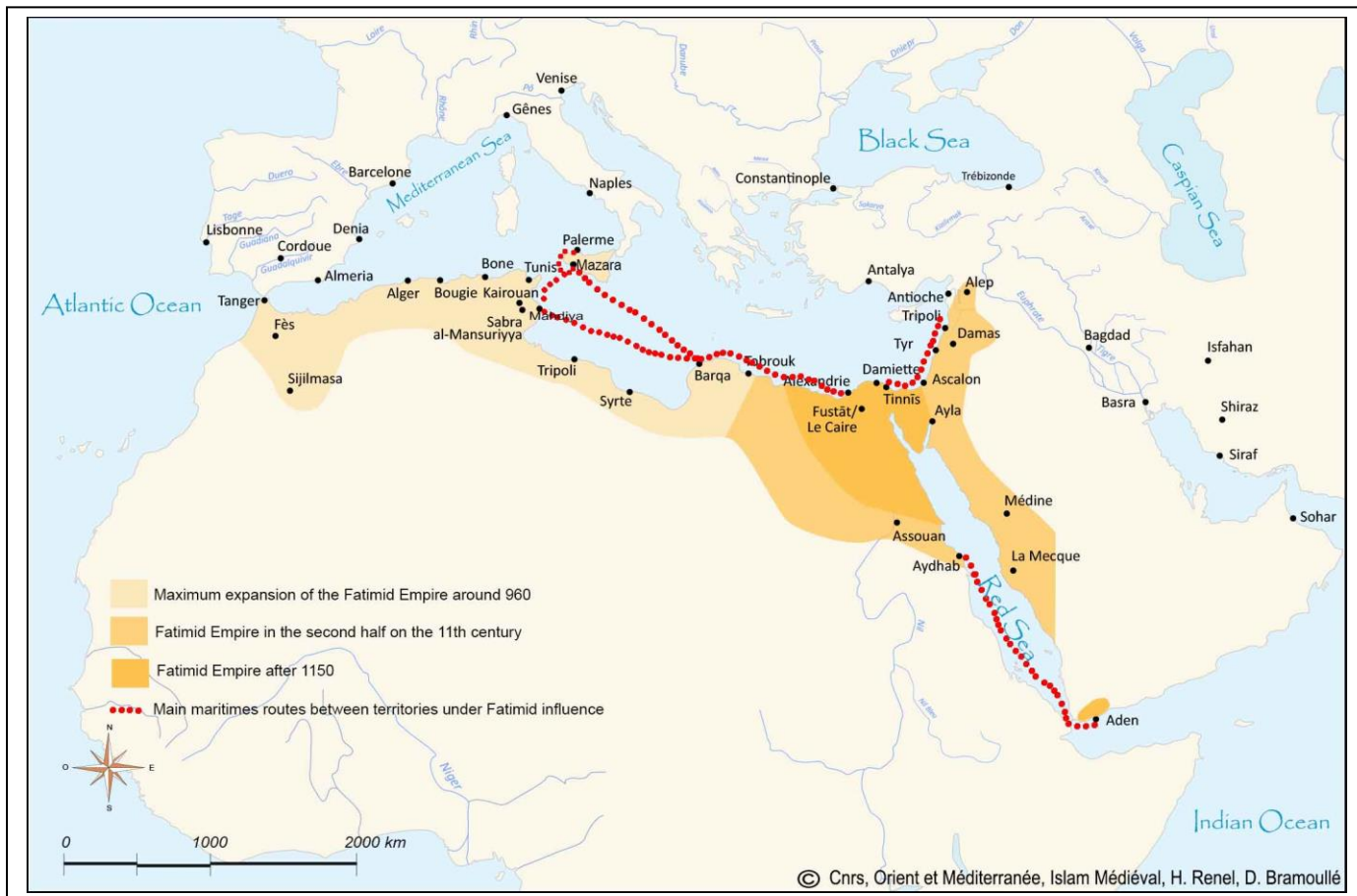
³⁵ Christophe Picard, *Sea of the Caliphs* (Cambridge-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 236-55.

³⁶ Al-Mālikī, *Riyād*, I: 270-1. Muhammad Talbi, *L'émirat aghlabide, 186-296/800-909* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1966), I: 402. Nef, "Comment," 195.

³⁷ Saḥnūn quoted by al-Qayrawānī (d. 996), *Al-Nawādir wa-al-ziyādāt 'alā al-Mudawwana min ghayrihā min al-ummahāt*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥajjī (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1999), III: 132.

³⁸ Al-Istakhrī, *Kitāb masālik al-mamālik*, ed. Michael J. De Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1927), 70.

³⁹ Al-Wansharīsī, *Mi'yār*, VIII: 310-11.



Map 6.2: The Fatimid Empire between the 10th and the 12th centuries.

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which greatly facilitated trade⁴⁰. Moreover, the cities of Sicily experienced notable growth. Palermo was gradually endowed with new districts. A "quarter of the Slavs" and even a "new quarter" made their appearance.⁴¹ The map of Sicily in the *Kitāb gharā'ib al-funūn wa mulāḥ al-'uyūn* shows several of these quarters outside the walls of Palermo.⁴²

⁴⁰ Michael Brett, "Ifriqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century A.D.," *The Journal Of African History* 10, 3, 1969, 347-64. Samuel M. Stern, "Tari. The Quarter Dinar," *Studi Medievali*, 11 (1970), 177-207.

⁴¹ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 119.

⁴² About the conception of the book and the maps in it cf. Yossef Rapoport, Emilie Savage-Smith, *The Lost maps of the Caliphs* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago-London, 2018), 1-27.

The Kalbid Emir Ja‘far b. Yūsuf (r. 998-1019) was inspired by Fatimid Cairo to subdivide a district in his name, the Ja‘fariya.⁴³ In Arabic and Judeo-Arabic literature, Palermo often appears as "the city" (*al-madīna*) or the "city of Sicily" (*madīnat Ṣiqīliya*) and simply *Ṣiqīliya*, a sign of its political and economic weight on the island⁴⁴. There were many artisans and markets linked to court consumption. In the countryside, many farms belonged to the princes, and agricultural estates were in the hands of senior officials since, certainly, the tenth century.

In general, the Mediterranean context experienced a boom in maritime traffic increasingly controlled by the Italian cities interested in the profits they could derive from the resale of oriental products which arrived in large quantities in Egypt at first but were also shipped in mounting volume from Sicily when the northern Italian elites wanted to follow oriental fashion and sought a closer source than Alexandria. This vibrant commerce and the human network that flourished between Sicily, Ifrīqiya and Egypt is concretely reflected in numerous Geniza business letters. Nahray b. Nissīm, one of the most famous merchants in the Jewish community of Fuṣṭāṭ and recipient of Labraṭ's letter in 1061, was himself concerned about the changing political conditions on the island. As many others, Nahray was native to Ifrīqiya where members of his family were still living. His own brother and uncle were active in Mazara and, like many Jewish (p. 104) merchants in Egypt, thanks to his network, he certainly did more business with Sicily and Ifrīqiya, a 13-50 days journey by sea, than with the ports of Palestine and Syria, about 5-7 days away by sea from Tinnīs, the main Egyptian port on the eastern branch of the Nil delta⁴⁵. This is not to suggest that there was no trade between Egypt and Syria, but that the trade players were not exactly the same.

The Geniza letters testify to the central place that Sicily played in the Ifrīqiyān economy and, we can add, in the Egyptian as well. According to the Geniza letters, the messages written in Sicily and intended for Alexandria or Fuṣṭāṭ are more numerous than the letters written in

⁴³ Alessandra Bagnera, "From a small town to a capital: The urban Evolution of Islamic Palermo," in *A Companion to Medieval Palermo*, ed. Annliese Nef (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), 74-80.

⁴⁴ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat*, 118. *Kitāb gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-'uyūn*, ed. Yossef Rapoport, Emilie Savage-Smith (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2014), fol. 34A, 130-131. TS-12. 270, fol. 1b, upper margin, l. 4. In Gil, *Kingdom*, IV: 483.

⁴⁵ About Nahray family links see Jessica L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institution in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 33-45. For examples of length of such journeys see T-S 13 J 19, f. 20, fol. 1a, l. 8-9; T-8 J 20, f. 2, fol. 1b, l. 6; T-S 13 J 15, f. 9, fol. 1a, ll. 9-10. In Gil, *Kingdom*, III: 30, 653, 815.

Ifrīqiya.⁴⁶ In 1047, Nāṣir-ī Khusraw, a Persian traveler in Egypt, confirms this. When he mentions Alexandria, he points out the commercial links between this port city and Sicily but is silent regarding trade with Ifrīqiya.⁴⁷ Sicily was the main base for the departure and arrival of commercial vessels that traded between Egypt and the Siculo-Tunisian space. The maritime traffic between Sicily and Ifrīqiya apparently consisted more either of a concentration of Ifrīqiyān products in Sicily, mostly olive oil, before export to Egypt or, on the contrary, of the redistribution of goods imported into the island.⁴⁸ However, the links between Sicily and Ifrīqiya were undoubtedly closer than what seems to emerge from the Geniza letters mentioning Sicily.

The close distance between the two areas makes this easy to understand. This link can be noted in several sources. Among them, are Islamic legal texts, mainly ship rental contracts from Ifrīqiya to Sicily or contracts between Ifrīqiyān traders willing to send or buy products to or from Sicily. Several *fatwas* from the end of the 10th century and the beginning of the 11th allude to juridical problems that occurred after the rental of ships between Sicily and the port of Sousse, north of Mahdiya, because storms (p. 105) deflected the ships from their initial destination.⁴⁹ These references to Sicily document regular traffic between the two territories. Another very interesting document emphasizes this link: an anonymous map of Mahdiya which appears in the *Kitāb gharā'ib al-funūn wa mulāḥ al-'uyūn*, a book certainly made in Cairo sometime between 1020 and 1050.

This map shows the strong maritime ties between not only Mahdiya and Sicily but between the coasts of Ifrīqiya and those of Sicily. The drawing was clearly made to show the strength of the walls of the Fatimids's first capital, standing proudly on the Mediterranean shore

⁴⁶ Annliese Nef, "La Sicile dans la documentation de la Geniza cairote (fin X^e – XIII^e siècle) : les réseaux attestés et leur nature", in *Espaces et réseaux en Méditerranée, VI^e–XVI^e siècles, I, La configuration des réseaux*, ed. Damien Coulon, Christophe Picard and Dominique Valérien (Paris: Bouchène, 2007), 276-83.

⁴⁷ Nāṣir-ī Khusraw, *Book of travels*, ed. Wheeler M. Thackston (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 55.

⁴⁸ T-S 10 J 20, f. 12, fol. 1a, ll. 14-15. In Gil, *Kingdom*, III: 640.

⁴⁹ Al-Wansharīsī, *Mi'yār*, VIII : 310, 299-300.

against the enemies of Islam⁵⁰. Technically and officially, when the map was drawn, Mahdiya was under Zirid control, and Sicily was the realm of the Kalbids rulers of Palermo. Both dynasties were representatives of the Fatimid sovereign in the central Mediterranean area, with the Emirate of Barqa in eastern Libya.⁵¹ The most original and interesting aspect of the image is the very clear link established between Mahdiya and Sicily, especially Palermo. In the notes that the author added just next to the drawing of Mahdiya's closed port, the administrative capital of Sicily is clearly referred to as *Ṣiqīliya*, which is usually the generic name of Sicily in Arabic. Under a note entitled "[list of] Ports (*marāsī*) from Mahdiya to Palermo (*Ṣiqīliya*)," he traces a maritime route which leads along the Ifrīqiya coast to Kalibia then, from this point, to Pantelleria, Mazara and, in a few more stages including Trapani, up to Palermo/*Ṣiqīliya* (Figure 1)⁵². After 1052, when the situation in Ifrīqiya worsened because of the arrival of the Arab Bedouins (the Banū Hilāl) sent by the Fatimids and while Sicily gradually came under Norman rule, the island remained a major supply center for North African cities and, more surprisingly, maybe, a more secure place for some Ifrīqiyān inhabitants as it appears in some *fatwas* and the Geniza letters like the one Barhūn b. Mūsā al-Tāhīrtī wrote to Nahray after his settlement in Trapani, around 1053.⁵³

Reading these letters, it appears that even if the Jewish traders were sometime in shock or frightened because of the very dangerous situation (p. 106) they had to face, they almost never ceased their business. Among the conditions that provoked anxiety were the import taxes—regarded with almost as much apprehension as the report of the killings in Ifrīqiya. Because it was not a general rule in the Fatimid area, when a tax or extra tax was required from the traders in Sicily, it was always underlined with great concern and even some exaggeration as we can note in a passage that refers to how people, because of the new tax, “preferred death to life.”⁵⁴ In 1056, two letters to Nahray b. Nissīm report a tithe (*‘ushr*), here referred as an import tax, suddenly demanded from merchants in Palermo. “Our friends in Sicily [i.e. Palermo seems to be meant here] have great misfortune since a tax was taken from the people of the city (*ahl al-balad*)” says the first one.⁵⁵ The second, written in Palermo on the 18th of August is more precise, “I’m unable to sell anything at this moment since our friends here were asked to pay an extra import tax [....].... This was the cause of the Sultan’s demand for the tax. He heard

⁵⁰ Bramoullé, David, *Les Fatimides et la mer*, 459-461.

⁵¹ David Bramoullé, « L’émirat de Barqa et les Fatimides : les enjeux de la navigation en Méditerranée centrale au XI^e siècle, » *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 139 (2016), 51-2.

⁵² *Kitāb gharā’ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-‘uyūn*, fol. 34A, 130-131.

⁵³ Al-Wansharīsī, *Mi‘yār*, IX : 545. ENA NS 18, f. 24, fol. 1a, ll. 2-3; BM Or. 5542, f. 9, fol. 1a, l. 10; T-S J20, f. 12, fol. 1b, ll. 12-14. In Gil, *Kingdom*, II: 124; III: 629, 642.

⁵⁴ ENA 4009, f. 4, fol. 1a, ll. 17-18. In Moshe Gil, ed., *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634-1099)*, (Tel-Aviv: University of Tel-Aviv), II: 76.

⁵⁵ TS-12. 270, fol. 1b, upper margin, ll. 4-11. In Gil, *Kingdom*, IV: 483.

rumours that people of the city were having partnerships with foreigners and disguising the goods as their own.”⁵⁶

This measure was taken because the foreign merchants sought to avoid paying certain duties by making agreements with locals who paid lower import taxes, so the emir imposed a tithe on foreigners. It was experienced as a real injustice by the Geniza actors but, in fact, it concerned all foreigners and not only non-Sicilian Jewish merchants. This account testifies to the regularity of the presence of non-Sicilian merchants on the island. Because of this extra tithe, no profit was expected and, as a result, trade with Sicily came to a standstill. Maymūn, the author, clearly express his will to Nahray not to send anything to the island and urges that those he calls “their friends” or “their people”, meaning their business partners, should leave for Mahdiya where the situation was more favourable even though it was a second-choice destination. Thus, we can assess the role of Sicily in trading activity. The island was clearly a stopover for anyone trading in the central Mediterranean. During the 11th century, the prospect of finding in Sicily a certain number of local and oriental products encouraged people from al-Andalus and Italian cities such as Amalfi, Pisa, Naples and Venice to frequent the Sicilian (p. 107) ports.⁵⁷ The presence of so-called *Rūm* merchants is also attested by the Geniza letters. A letter written in Trapani about 1053 mentions the sale of pepper and perhaps also lacquer to the *Rūm*.⁵⁸ Another letter, written in Mazara in September 1064, confirms this information and provides some important details: “*Last year I went to Palermo after the ships arrived. I got a bundle of pepper there, inside of which I found a bundle of very poor-quality black ginger. By God! No one here will take the value of a dirham from me, neither the Rūm nor anyone else [...]*” and further on, the author specifies that in order to sell his ginger he had to resolve to enter into a partnership with a colleague who was going to “*the land of the Rūm*”.⁵⁹

Ships generally left the Maghreb coasts loaded with the finest Ifrīqiyān products, mainly olive oil, bound for the ports of Sicily, according to a hierarchy which evolved over this period. At first, the increasingly unstable Sicilian context did not penalize trade but, instead, favored a reorganization of the Sicilian port network. Ports like Trapani and especially Mazara strengthened their role to the detriment of Palermo.⁶⁰ With its “flax market” (*sūq al-qattānīn*), Mazara became the main port for ships sailing between Sicily, Ifrīqiyā, and Egypt. Egyptian raw flax was exported in large quantities to the island where it was processed and re-exported to Ifrīqiyā and all around the Mediterranean. Egyptian merchants anxiously watched for news of the flax’s price in Mazara. This allowed them to adjust exports so as not to lower prices even

⁵⁶ DK 230d, fol. 1a, l. 29, fol. 1b, ll. 3-4. In Gil, *Kingdom*, III: 858, 860.

⁵⁷ Wilhelm Heyd, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au Moyen-Âge* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1885), I: 121-2.

⁵⁸ ENA NS 18, f. 24, fol. 1b, l. 13. In Gil, *Kingdom*, III:130.

⁵⁹ Dropsie College 389, fol. 1b, ll. 5-7. In Gil, *Kingdom*, IV: 466

⁶⁰ Goldberg, *Trade*, 319

if demand was strong. In August 1063, a letter sent from Mahdiya to Fuṣṭāṭ cites several partners of both the writer of the letter, Mūsā b. Barhūn al-Tahertī, and the receiver in Fuṣṭāṭ. It shows how information, documents and goods traveled easily between these places. More precisely Musa explains how he learned that an accounting document (*hiṣāb*) he was expecting from Egypt appeared to be in Sicily while he was thinking it was on its way directly from Alexandria to Mahdiya, and that one of his partners told him he would forward this bill to Mahdiya once he commuted to Sicily. Musa also informs his colleague in Egypt, Yesu‘a b. Ismā‘īl, about the level of flax prices (too low), and spices (too high), on the Mahdīyan and Sicilian markets, that were (p. 108) clearly linked, at this very precise moment, by the same economic conditions because both of them were dependent on the ships coming from Egypt with raw flax and spices.⁶¹ As already noted, letters show not only that Egyptian flax arrived in Sicily and Mahdiya in huge quantities, but also oriental goods from the trade across the Indian Ocean. Pepper, cinnamon, ginger but also dyeing substances essential for textiles such as brazilwood, indigo, or even fragrant and pharmaceutical products like aloe wood, rose oil, myrobalan, lacquer, camphor were loaded in the holds of ships bound for Sicily and Ifrīqiya. Hundreds of ships made the trips each season to and from Sicily, commuting from there to Ifrīqiya. For example, in two letters of 1053 and 1056 written in Alexandria, the authors allude to the same boats commuting between Sicily, Ifrīqiya, and Egypt. The letter of 1056 announces the arrival of ten ships from Sicily, each carrying 500 people⁶². There was nothing exceptional about such a convoy at the time. The names of the owners of the ships are all cited. Among them were some governors of Syro-Palestinian coastal towns; also mentioned was a boat simply called the “boat of the Sultan (*markab al-sultān*)”, that is to say certainly, the ruler of Ifrīqiya at that time, al-Mu‘izz b. Badis (r. 1016-1062) or maybe the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir (r. 1036-1094). Both of them had boats active in the trade between Sicily, Ifrīqiya, Egypt and Syria.⁶³ The letter clearly shows that the island was in fact at the heart of a commercial network linking the entire Muslim world from al-Andalus to Syria and even well beyond.

CONCLUSION

Despite an increasingly troubled Sicilian context, Sicily’s role as an alternative trade hub between East and West strengthened over the period between the ninth and eleventh centuries. The ideal position of the island in the center of the Mediterranean, the development of a court concerned with consuming luxury products, as well as the privileged links with Cairo, favored

⁶¹ T-S 16.163, fol. 1a, l. 36, right margin, ll. 1-12, 13-15, fol. 1b, ll. 3, 6, 9, 20. In Gil, *Kingdom*, III: 249-52.

⁶² BM Or. 5542, f. 9, fol. 1a, l. 9; ENA 2727, f. 38, fol. 1a, ll. 4-5. In Gil, *Kingdom*, III: 629, 636.

⁶³ Bramoullé, *Les Fatimides et la mer*, 670-5.

local products as well as imports of the best products from Ifrīqiya and more broadly from all over the Muslim world. Trade between Ifrīqiya (p. 109) and Sicily flourished not only because of the historical relations but also because the island played a major role in the Fatimid economic and ideological strategy and because the pattern of Mediterranean trade between Egypt and the central Mediterranean privileged Sicily over Ifrīqiya once the Fatimids moved to Egypt. This context made the trip to Sicily more than worthwhile for some Italian merchants hoping to avoid the long and dangerous journey to Almeria, Alexandria or Tyre. The safe bet of obtaining there, almost as neighbors, goods in great demand in Europe undoubtedly compensated for the price or perhaps less choice and even the inferior quality of some of the goods compared to those that would have been possible to find in Egypt. The building of the Norman state did little to change Sicily's role, even if a growing number of Christians were likely to sail directly to Alexandria in the 12th century.

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