

827: The *Chronicon Salernitanum* on the Muslim Conquest of Sicily

Theresa Jäckh



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Abstract: The *Chronicon Salernitanum* holds an important account on the beginning of the Muslim conquest of Sicily. It explains how this had been caused by a certain Euphemios, the commander of Western Sicily: his betrothed had allegedly been abducted by a Greek rival on the island. In an act of revenge, Euphemios entered into an alliance with the Aġlabid ruler of Ifrīqiya in order to punish him. This article contrasts the Latin narrative with extant Arabic and Greek sources, and contextualises them both with regard to the historical events as well as to the historiographical endeavour of explaining and potentially excusing such a large-scale conquest.

Source

Chronicon Salernitanum. A Critical Edition with Studies on Literary and Historical Sources and on Language, ed. Ulla Westerbergh (Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis. Studia latina Stockholmiensia 3), Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1956, cap. 60, p. 59, trans. Theresa Jäckh.

Per idem tempus Agarenorum gens Siciliam invaserunt. Sed quomodo terram illam ac triverunt, nunc materiam subministremus. Erat vir predives quidam in Sicilie finibus, Eufimius nomine; disposavit puellam, Homonizam nomine gerente, mire pulcritudinis. Illo denique tempore quidam Greculus Siciliam preerat. Accepta pecunia ab alio viro, disposatam Eufimii auferens atque alius viri eam denique tradidit.

Quod dum in patulo exiit atque Eufimii nunciatum fuisset, talia nimirum verba depromsit: „Meam namque fedastis uxorem; hoc pereat anno, si non fedare facio plurimorum uxores!“ Quapropter cum servis suis navem ascendit Africamque properavit, atque regi terre illius huius modi verba depromsit: „Multarum navium dirige mecum, quatenus spaciosa terra vestre dicioni

At that time the people of the Hagarenes invaded Sicily. Now we will give you an account of how they destroyed that land. On the outer edge of Sicily there was a very rich man called Euphemios. He became engaged to a girl named Homoniza, who was extraordinarily beautiful. Back then, Sicily was ruled over by a certain little Greek. After receiving money from another man, he robbed Euphemios' fiancée and then handed her over to the other man.

When this finally became known to the general public and was communicated to Euphemios, he openly proclaimed: “You have truly defiled my wife. This year shall perish if I do not have the wives of many ravished.” Therefore, he boarded a ship with his slaves, hastened to Africa, and submitted such words to the king of that country: “Send numerous ships with me, and I will put a great and wide land under your power.” And when the barbarian king heard

commictam. “ *Ut rex barbarus talia audiens, nimis gavisus est, atque sine mora omnis navalis exercitus iussit congregare in unum.*

this, he greatly rejoiced and ordered the whole fleet to assemble without delay.

Dum fuissent nimirum congregati in unum, rex ille barbarus huiusmodi exorsus verba: „Omne consilium ab isto meo viroque amico percipite, atque eius iussa quasi mea metuite.“ Et hec dicens, non exigua dona eorum scilicet condonavit, sed amplissima plus omnibus Eufimius dedit. Cum vero Siciliam properassent, protinus eam videlicet invaserunt, atque multaque opes ibidem silicet reppererunt; ingrediuntur, multorum populorum faciunt strages, vix paucis evadentibus, qui nuper (per) tutissima castra et moncium confugerunt iuga.

When they were gathered together, the barbarian king began with these words: “Take every instruction from this man and friend of mine, and fear his commands as if they were mine.” And as he said this, of course he gave them no trifling gifts, but [things] far more splendid than anything Euphemios had given. But when they hastened to Sicily, they evidently at once attacked it, and met, as it seems, with strong resistance. They advanced, subdued numerous peoples, and with difficulty escaped a few who had recently fled to the numerous forts and mountain ranges.

Sed et ipsum Greculum ibidem negaverunt [rather: necaverunt?] ceterisque illius sequaces, atque ab illo tempore Siciliam dominare ceperunt. Audito hoc, princeps Sico valde est exinde mestus, atque coronam in suo capite iam minime posuit, predicens futurum gladium inter agmina Longobardorum. Pro una denique puella sunt aliorum multaque denique viduate. Et qui antea omnes in unum inter se epulabant et exultabant, postmodum pro unum Greculum immensas lacrimas effundebant.

But there they also disowned [killed?] the little Greek and his other companions, and from that time they began to rule over Sicily. After hearing this, Prince Sico was finally very sad, and he hardly wore the crown on his head, predicting that in the future, the sword would be drawn amongst the Lombards [themselves]. After all, because of one girl, others and soon many [more] became widows. And those who had once all dined and rejoiced together, later shed numerous tears because of a Greek girl.

Authorship & Work

[§1] The *Chronicon Salernitanum* recalls the history of the Lombards from the later sixth to the later tenth century, with a particular focus on the Duchy of Benevento and the Principality of Salerno. The anonymous author prefaces his work with three lists of rulers, which classify the text both politically and chronologically: first, the Lombard kings from Albuin (r. 560/568–572/573) to Desiderius (r. 757–774); second, the Frankish kings, beginning with either Pippin I the Elder or Pippin II (r. 615/625–640 and 679–714 respectively) through to Charlemagne (r. 768–814) and, following him, the Saxon rulers up to Otto III (r. 983–1002); and thirdly, the Lombard rulers of Benevento from Zotto (r. 571–591) to Radelchis II (r. 881–900). The narrative part of the work begins during the pontificate of Pope Zachary (sed. 741–752). For the early coverage of Frankish-Carolingian politics, the author heavily relies on information drawn from the *Liber Pontificalis*. His primary interests, however, are the internal conflicts of the Lombards and the secession of the principalities, especially Salerno (851), and their

subsequent developments in the power network of the South Italian peninsula. In several sections, the author makes extensive use of passages from the *Origo Gentis Langobardorum*, the *Historia Langobardorum*, and the *Chronica Sancti Benedicti Casinensis*. As such, the source value of the *Chronicon Salernitanum* was long underestimated after the publication of its *editio princeps*. In more recent years, however, research has generally agreed that the chronicle – even though it is partially compiled from other sources – is of considerable importance for historical research on southern Italy.¹ It has been shown how, for the period from about the middle of the ninth century onwards, the anonymous author took on a more independent writing style, and reported on events with a remarkable breadth and vividness. This style has sometimes been dismissed as “folk tales.”² However, in-depth analysis has done much to highlight how such images feed into the narrative’s argumentative logic and offers a Latin perspective on the activities of the Muslims in southern Italy and their brief establishment of emirates in Bari and Taranto. Furthermore, the *Chronicon Salernitanum* gives unique insights into the relations of the competing cities of Salerno, Naples, and Amalfi. Herein, it is notable that the chronicle ends by abruptly breaking off during a report of how the Salernitan prince-brothers Gisulf I (r. 978–981) and Pandulf (r. 981) fought with the Amalfitans, who would eventually seize Salerno for a time under Manso (r. 966–1004 as Duke of Amalfi, r. 966–983 as Prince of Salerno).

[§2] We know very little about the author. On the basis of a handful of clues, it seems that he was writing in Salerno, and that he drew on its archives and monumental inscriptions for his work.³ He was apparently a clergyman and, since he praises the Abbey of Montecassino several times, it has been suggested that he himself was a Benedictine. As such, the author has been associated with the Abbey of San Benedetto in Salerno.⁴ There has been much speculation as to whether, or to what extent, he enjoyed relations with the Longobard court of Salerno.⁵ In this context, it is worth mentioning that the only autobiographical note in the chronicle recalls that the author’s ancestor, a certain Radoald, had to flee from Benevento to Naples due to tensions with Rofried, a loyalist of Duke Sicard of Benevento (r. 832–839).⁶ While this has led scholars to conclude that the author was of noble descent,⁷ it could also be further assumed that this may also point to a certain distance from the Beneventan line of Lombard rulers. Taviani-Carozzi suggested that the author was the abbot of San Benedetto in Salerno: he appears in documentary evidence between the years 986 and 990, and bore the same name as the aforementioned ancestor Radoald. Although this interpretation would seem to correlate with the *Chronicon*’s possible composition period – between 973 (last event mentioned) and 996 (Otto III is already referred to as emperor) – this suggestion has been strongly rejected in Italian (local) research.⁸

Content & Context

[§3] Chapter 60 of the *Chronicon Salernitanum* reports on the conquest of Sicily by the Muslims. Here, for the first time, the author mentions the central Mediterranean island as well as the Greeks (i.e. the Byzantines) and Muslims, who are given a more prominent narratological role in the subsequent descriptions of political developments in southern Italy. At this point, however, these groupings and the political entities to which they belong, together with their

¹ Delogu, *Mito*, pp. 237–277. Pohl, *Werkstätte*, pp. 55–67.

² Manitius, *Geschichte*, p. 199.

³ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. Westerbergh, pp. 202–203, and pp. 219–220.

⁴ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. Westerbergh, p. XIII.

⁵ Kreutz, *Normans*, p. 95.

⁶ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. Westerbergh, cap. 68, pp. 65–66.

⁷ Manitius, *Geschichte*, p. 198; *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. Westerbergh, p. XIII.

⁸ Taviani-Carozzi, *Principauté*, pp. 85–91; against: Palmieri, *Identità*, pp. 225, 232; Delogu, *Conquista*, pp. 213–214.

role in the forthcoming narrative, are not further elucidated. As such, the chapter may initially seem somewhat isolated. The Muslims' entire conquest of Sicily (827–902) and the subsequent establishment of their rule is dealt with in one section, so that the author covers several decades in a few lines. His main focus is not on the military successes of this political and religious expansion, but rather on an incident that preceded the conquest. The central character of these events is a certain Euphemios, whose fiancée Homoniza is said to have been stolen by a so-called “little Greek” in exchange for money from another man. The “little Greek”, who is described as the head of Sicily, seems to refer to the *strategos* (στρατηγός) of the Byzantine administrative unit (*thema/θέμα*) of Sicily. Euphemios subsequently swore revenge, asked the “barbarian king” (*rex barbarus*) in Africa for military support and promised him rule over large swathes of land in return. They then entered into an alliance, marched together against Sicily and subjugated the island.

[§4] In addition to the *Chronicon Salernitanum*, Byzantine sources also report on Euphemios. According to these, Euphemios was the administrator (τουρμάρχος) of western Sicily and commander of the Sicilian-Byzantine fleet. He was first recorded in a campaign against North Africa in 826. Euphemios is said to have rebelled against the Byzantine authorities, killed the *strategos* of Sicily named Konstantinos and proclaimed himself ruler in Syracuse. A seal that describes Euphemios as “King of the Romans” would seem to confirm this.⁹ The so-called *Theophanes Continuatus*, John Skylitzes as well as the *Chronicon Salernitanum* all cite a woman as being the cause of Euphemios' rebellion: In the Greek texts she remains nameless and is described as a godly nun whom Euphemios is said to have stolen and married against her will. When Euphemios was to be punished for this offence, he started the rebellion.¹⁰ Nonetheless, given that *Theophanes Continuatus* also refers to other men acting in concert with Euphemios, it can be assumed that a sole focus on Euphemios appears to mask the formation of a broader secessionist movement in the courtly environment of Byzantine Sicily.¹¹

[§5] To support his project, and due to the fact that Constantinople had apparently begun to move against him, Euphemios seems to have sought the help of the Aġlabid Emir Ziyādat Allāh (r. 201–223/817–838) in Ifrīqiya. In this context, Euphemios can be traced in Arabic-Islamic narratives under the name “Fīmī.”¹² A joint attack was agreed upon, and in 827, under the leadership of Asad b. al-Furāt (d. 213/828), the Aġlabid fleet landed in Mazara together with Euphemios. This date is considered the beginning of the Muslim conquest of Sicily, which dragged on until the early tenth century.¹³

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§6] At first reading, the *Chronicon Salernitanum*'s account of the conquest of Sicily by the Muslims seems unrelated to the previous and subsequent details given by the Salernitan Anonymus. The Sicilian narrative follows the account of how Duke Sico of Benevento (r. 817–832) laid siege to the city of Naples, transferred the relics of St Januarius to Benevento and also established a dynasty of gastalds in Capua.¹⁴ The sections following chapter 60 are again entirely concerned with developments among the Longobard elites. The consequences and further course of the establishment of Muslim rule in Sicily are not reflected upon: It is not until twelve chapters later that the conquerors of Sicily are again reported on, namely when they

⁹ Prigent, Pour en finir.

¹⁰ Theophanus Continuatus, *Chronographia*, lib. 2, cap. 27, p. 81; Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, cap. 20, pp. 46–47.

¹¹ Prigent, Carrière.

¹² Nef, Reinterpreting; see also Jäckh, 827: al-Nuwayrī, concerning an Arabic narrative on the beginning of the Muslim conquest of Sicily.

¹³ Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 4–43.

¹⁴ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. Westerbergh, cap. 57–58, pp. 57–58.

begin to establish themselves on the mainland.¹⁵ It is here worth mentioning that in this section the Muslims (*gens Agarenorum*) are described neutrally and without judgement. In contrast to the negative portrayals of the Muslims who conquer Sicily in chapter 60, they are described as most cunning or crafty (*astutissima Agarenorum gens*) at the moment when they become an imminent threat on the southern Italian mainland. That said, the author is by no means consistent in this attribution. This is demonstrated when he describes the Muslims, with whom Salerno was in versatile exchange and maintained trade relations, in other contexts.¹⁶ Perceptions and descriptions of the religious “other” in the *Chronicon Salernitanum* are thus often context-dependent and flexible in terms of circumstances and evaluations.¹⁷

[§7] That Euphemios initially appears to the anonymous author as a wronged man who only seeks revenge through a pact with the king in Africa after experiencing injustice, differs from the Byzantine and Arabic-Islamic accounts. In these, he is characterised as a criminal and traitor, or as a defector. In the *Chronicon Salernitanum*, “the other man” and especially the “little Greek” are judged as evildoers who through their lust and greed brought about a war which inflicted terrible suffering on the population. The derogatory use of the diminutive *Greculus* for the Byzantine representative underlines the Salernitan author’s negative perception, or even contempt, of their political leadership. The “barbarian king” appears as an outside third party who profited from the inner-Sicilian conflict and saw the alliance with Euphemios as a welcome opportunity to expand his territory. The anonymous author emphasises that the people of Sicily met the invaders with resistance. Indeed, the claim that the population retreated into castles and fortresses has been referred to in Sicilian research as *incastellamento*.¹⁸ Especially in the east of the island, Greek Christianity endured in these fortifications until beyond the end of Muslim rule.

[§8] The conquest of Sicily in the *Chronicon Salernitanum* ends with the apportionment of blame: a single villain, the “little Greek,” was the cause of much lamentation and division where unity had formerly reigned. The author puts this summary assessment of events into the mouth of Duke Sico of Benevento (r. 817–832), who ominously predicts that the Lombards will also become divided by the sword. With this prediction, the anonymous author does not seem to be alluding to the strengthening of the Muslims and the resulting military confrontations. Rather, he appears to be referring to the later revolts of Sico’s son Siculf (described in detail in the following chapters), which led to the secession of the principality of Salerno. Thus, the author derives a moral lesson from the Muslim conquest of Sicily and projects onto it the political developments of his own homeland. Indeed, the way in which the anonymous author described how the struggle over a woman was the reason for war is a motif that can also be found in other conquest narratives.¹⁹

Edition(s) & Translation(s)

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¹⁵ *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. Westerbergh, cap. 72, pp. 70–71.

¹⁶ Kreutz, *Normans*, pp. 18–101; Cicco, Langobardi, pp. 78–84.

¹⁷ Kreutz, *Normans*, pp. 49–54.

¹⁸ Maurici, *Castelli*.

¹⁹ König, 711: Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam.

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