973: Ibn Ḥawqal on Christian-Muslim Marriages in Sicily

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Abstract: In 363/973, the geographer Ibn Ḥawqal visited the island of Sicily, then a province of the Fāṭimid caliphate. The traveller was not only interested in the island's geography and topography, but also sought to characterise its inhabitants and their traditions. In so doing, he criticised the Sicilians and their religious practices. In this context, Ibn Ḥawqal speaks about interreligious marriages between Christian women and Muslim men. He disputes the legitimacy of their union by using the term *al-mušaʿmiḏūn* to describe male children born of such marriages. This article analyses Ibn Ḥawqal's statements against the background of processes of transculturation in multi-religious Sicily. Furthermore, it discusses the etymology and meaning of the term *al-mušaʿmiḏūn*.

Source

Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, ed. Michael J. de Goeje, Johannes H. Kramers (Bibliotheca geographorum Arabicorum 2a), Leiden: Brill, 1938, p. 129, trans. Theresa Jäckh.

المشعمذون اكثر اهل حصوفهم وباديتهم وضياعهم، رأيتهم التزويج الى النصارى على ان ما كان بينهم من ولدٍ ذكر لحق بأبيه من المشعمذون وما كانت من انثى فنصرانية مع امها، لايصلّون ولا يتطهرون ولا يزكون ولا يحجّون. وفيهم من يصوم شهر الرمضان ويغتسلون اذا صاموا من الجنابة. وهذه منقبةٌ لا يشرَكهم أحد وفضيلة دون جميع الخلق، احرزوا بها في الجهل قصب السبق (…).

Most inhabitants of their fortresses, rural areas, and villages are *mušaʿmiḏūn*. I have seen that they enter into marriage with Christian women, which leads to the boys being assigned to their fathers as *al-mušaʿmiḏūn* and the girls becoming Christian women with their mothers. They do not pray, they do not perform acts of ritual purification, they do not give alms, and they do not go on pilgrimage. Some of them fast in the month Ramaḍān and thus achieve purification after great ritual impurity (*al-ǧanāba*). This [practice] is a curiosity they do not share with anyone else in the world, and with this trait they have won the trophy in the race of stupidity (…).

Authorship & Work

[§1] Ibn Ḥawqal (d. after 378/988) was one of the major contributors to Arabic-Islamic geography and cartography in the 4th/10th century. He authored an extensive work which is based in the tradition of the Balḫī school and enriched by the experiences of his own travels. His aim was to cover the regions (*iqlīm, pl. aqālīm*) of the world and their borders, whilst also describing the inhabitants and their customs based on personal observation (*ʿiyān*). Originally from Nisibis in Upper Mesopotamia (known today as Nusaybin in southeastern Turkey), Ibn

Ḥawqal set out from Baghdad to al-Mahdiyya in May 943 (Ramaḍān 331), where he stayed at the Fāṭimid court, before embarking on years of travelling. His journey brought him first to al-Andalus, North Africa, and the Southern Sahara (336–340/947–951) before he went east, as far as Armenia and Azerbaijan (ca. 344/955), and onward to Persia and Transoxiana (350–358/961–969 resp. 358/969). His last destination was Sicily, which he visited in the year 363/973, when the island was already under the suzerainty of the Fāṭimid Caliphate. It has been speculated, that Ibn Ḥawqal travelled on behalf of the Fāṭimids which would prompt the question as to what extent such an affinity to the Shiite-Ismāʿīlī dynasty might have ideologically influenced his writing.[1]

[§2] Ibn Ḥawqal's account has survived in three different versions dating to three different decades. The standard edition by Kramer offers a combination of all three textual traditions. One of them is known as "Book of Routes and Realms" (*Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*) which—as the very title suggests—is still strongly influenced by the geographer al-Istaḫrī (d. mid-4th/10th c.) who had inspired Ibn Ḥawqal during his years of study. A later version bears the title "Face of the Earth" (*Ṣūrat al-arḍ*). It was written between 367/978 and 378/988 and is dedicated to a certain Abū l-Sarī al-Ḥasan b. al-Faḍl al-Iṣfahānī. Yet another version was intended for Sayf al-Dawla (r. 333–356/945–967), the Hamdānid ruler of Aleppo, who must have been deceased at that time, as Ibn Ḥawqal refers to events and developments, which occurred well after his death. Noteworthy are the twenty (respective twenty-one) cartographic depictions or maps, which are included in the later redactions of Ibn Ḥawqal's work.

Content & Context

[§3] Ibn Ḥawqal's *Ṣūrat al-arḍ* does not follow his travel itinerary but is structured according to geographical regions and provinces.[2] The section about Sicily is inserted between the description of al-Andalus (the first detailed geographical account of the Iberian Peninsula under Islamic rule) and that of Egypt. The author only gives a short paragraph relating to the island's geography, before describing the topography of its capital city, Palermo. Ibn Ḥawqal names and locates the city walls and gates, the quarters and marketplaces. Furthermore, he goes into great detail on the resources of the city's water supply, such as streams, springs, and wells. An extensive part of Ibn Ḥawqal's report on Sicily, however, consists of his first-hand observations concerning the Sicilians and their specific characteristics. These seem to have fascinated him to such an extent, that he claims to have written a whole book about them.[3] Unfortunately, this has not survived.

[§4] On several occasions, Ibn Ḥawqal uses anecdotes to illustrate just how foolish and impure the Sicilians were, how depraved their customs, how perverted their religious practices. His depiction and condemnation of interreligious marriages amongst Sicily's rural population should also be seen in this context. According to Ibn Ḥawqal, Muslim men from Sicily's rural population married Christian women, their marital unions producing Christian daughters on the one hand, and sons defined as *al-mušaʿmiḏūn* on the other. Here, it is significant that the term *al-mušaʿmiḏūn* cannot be traced back to any Arabic root and has often been translated as "bastards".[4] Furthermore, the way in which Ibn Ḥawqal describes the *mušaʿmiḏūn*, appears to

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[1] Wiet, L'importance; Miquel, Ibn Ḥawqal; for a more recent critique see: Benchejroun, Requiem.

[2] As for Ibn Ḥawqal's report on Italy and Sicily, see König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, p. 207, and Ducène, *L'Europe*, p. 290, and pp. 61–64, 79, 95–96, 150–151, 160–161.

[3] Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, p. 129.

[4] Gabrieli was first to translate the term as "bastardi" in Gabrieli, Ibn Ḥawqal, p. 249. Similarly, Kramers and Wiet, *Configuration*, p. 128, translated "bâtards." Metcalfe, *Arabic Speakers*, p. 16, translated as "bastardised Muslims," and adds in note 51 that "[t]he translation in English seems to lie somewhere between mongrels, half-

deny them the status of Muslims: they did not adequately fulfil their religious duties such as the mandatory prayer *(ṣalāt),* almsgiving *(zakāt),* and the pilgrimage *(ḥaǧǧ).* As a result, most of the *mušaʿmiḏūn* lived in ritual impurity *(ǧanāba),* since only some of them purified themselves through fasting during Ramadan *(ġusl al-ǧanāba).*[5]

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§5] The above quoted source passage provides an important insight into the socio-cultural landscape of tenth-century Islamic Sicily. Ibn Ḥaqwal suggests that the island's population can be discerned between rural dwellers in the villages or strongholds and the urban residents of Palermo. Both groups are harshly criticized for their religious and cultural customs. As for Sicily's capital, Ibn Ḥawqal claims that the city was overcrowded with mosques and schools, which he, however, does not attribute to the fact that Palermo's inhabitants were particularly religious, but to the reason that they did not even pray with their brethren and, furthermore, wanted to shirk their duties of fighting *ǧihād* and paying taxes by teaching in schools instead.[6] In addition, their legal scholars and their justice was, according to Ibn Ḥawqal, highly corrupted.[7] These statements are probably influenced by the tensions which existed between the province of Sicily, where Sunnī Islam was prevalent, and the Shiite-Ismāʿīlī Fāṭimids in Ifrīqiya, on whose behalf Ibn Ḥawqal might have travelled. After violent revolts against the Fāṭimid representatives in Sicily, the Fāṭimid caliphs were forced to station a contingent of Kutāma guards—a Berber military unit, which had distinguished itself by absolute loyalty to the dynasty—on a permanent basis at Palermo. In order to be shielded from the hostile environment in the city, the Fāṭimid governors withdrew to the purpose-built citadel *al-Ḫāliṣa* on the outer edge of the Palermitan city walls. Their relationship remained, however, strained.[8]

[§6] To Ibn Ḥawqal, the lifestyle in the hinterland appeared even worse. The rural population in the strongholds and villages of the remote areas are said to stand out with regard to their marriage practice and the resulting male offspring. The latter are considered to be *mušaʿmiḏūn* who do not put the fundamental tenets of Islam into practice. From this statement one may infer that Palermo had experienced a higher level of Islamization and Arabization than the remote regions of Sicily. Indeed, the Muslims had conquered the city early on (215–16/831), whereas the impassable Sicilian hinterland was subdued slowly and with great difficulties. Some of the eastern parts of the island resisted the Islamic conquerors into the tenth century and continued to be shaped by Christian and Graeco-Byzantine influences long after their conquest. Interestingly, Ibn Ḥawqal's suggestion that there was a connection between settlement and societal structures can also be deduced from sociolinguistic and landscape studies. Archaeological evidence, for example, suggests that some of the fortified hilltop-towns of Byzantine Sicily had functioned as retreats for the Christian population.[9] In addition, toponyms indicate how certain rural settlements or villages developed from military or Berber settlements, e.g. when the terms *ribāṭ, maḥalla, manzil* or *raḥl* are connected to a personal attribute or name, such as in *manzil Zammūr* which refers to the Zammūr tribe.[10] This ethnic composition and its influence on the Sicilian society could also be reflected in Ibn Ḥawqal's claim that the Sicilians' Arabic was poor and almost unintelligible—a fact which supposedly further promoted false

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castes, buffoons and imposters"; the idea of pretence is found in the translation "trickster" in Lewis, Ibn Hauqal, p. 99.
[5] Juynboll, Djanāba, pp. 44–45; Bousquet, Ghusl, p. 1104.
[6] Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, pp. 126–127.
[7] Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, pp. 128–131.
[8] Halm, *Mahdi*, pp. 164–167, pp. 253–255, 295–297.
[9] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 35–36.
[10] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, p. 38.

doctrines.[11] Whilst for Ibn Ḥawqal this was certainly intended to further discredit the Sicilians, studies have traced the influences which Greek and North African dialects and languages had on Sicilian Arabic up until the Norman period.[12]

[§7] Aside from the ideological bias and the resulting distortion of Ibn Ḥawqal's account, it is, therefore, quite conceivable that Muslim Sicily witnessed complex and locally differing forms of social assimilation or "transculturation," which eschew common categorization in terms of cultural affiliation.[13] In the context of interfaith marriages, Ibn Ḥawqal branded the male representatives of corresponding practice with the word *al-mušaʿmiḏūn*. This term requires further contextualization.

[§8] Alex Metcalfe was first to point out that the word *al-mušaʿmiḏūn* derives from the Hebrew word *meshumadim*;[14] Giuseppe Mandalà supported this statement with further evidence and concluded that the term meant "apostates."[15] However, from the perspective of Jewish law (*Halakha*) the matter is more complicated:[16] the root *sh-m-d* has Hebrew and Aramaic origins. It can be found in the Tanach (i.e. the Hebrew Bible) in a number of instances, in which God punishes infidels or insurgents with destruction (חשמיד / *hishmīd*, i.e. "he has destroyed").[17] In the Babylonian Talmud, the term *meshumad* (pl. *meshumadim*) refers to a Jew who transgressed the boundaries of religious law—consciously, under pressure or, sometimes, voluntarily.[18] As such, the *meshumadim* are not necessarily apostates in the sense of "apostasy from the faith" (*apostasia a fide*), but rather Jews whose religious practice is regarded as deviant or "corrupted," but who are still deemed to be part of the Jewish community.

[§9] There are, however, cases in which derivations of the root *sh-m-d* were also used to characterize those Jews, who had indeed defected from Judaism, namely due to external pressure and persecution. Evidence for this can be found in the Tosefta and the Talmud, where e.g. the reign of emperor Hadrian (r. 117–138) is referred to as "The Time of Oppression", *sha'at ha-shemad* in Hebrew.[19] If *ha-shemad* is deemed as oppression or persecution, the *meshumadim* could be considered as those who gave up Judaism because of repressive political measures.[20] In a similar vein, *shemad* and *meshumadim* can also be found in the writings of Maimonides (d. 601/1204), namely in his "Letter of Repression/Apostasy" (*Iggeret ha-shemad*), in which he addresses the Jews living under Almohad rule after 1161.[21]

[§10] Interestingly, the *meshumadim* play a specific role in the prayers of the Arabic-speaking Jews in the eastern and central Mediterranean. Evidence for this is contained in fragments from the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. One of the eighteen benedictions (*brachot*) of the *Amidah* (the central prayer in Jewish liturgy) condemns converts. The benediction or, rather, curse known under the name *Birkat ha-minim* ("Benediction/Curse against Heretics") was probably initially directed against Jews guilty of heresy, including those who had joined Christianity (so-called Jewish Christians).[22] In the prayers of the Babylonian congregation Ben

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[11] Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, p. 130.

[12] On the socio-linguistic landscape of Muslim and Norman Sicily, see Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, pp. 93–122.

[13] Epstein, Hybridity.

[14] Metcalfe, Wandel, p. 72.

[15] Mandalà, Minoranze, pp. 107–109.

[16] See the discussions in Zeitlin, Mumar; Teppler, *Birkat*; 'Langer, *Cursing*.

[17] 2 Kings 21: 9; Deuteronomy 2: 22; 1 Chronicles 5: 25; the basic meaning of the word is "to spoil/ to perish."

[18] Talmud Bavli, Chullin 5a:10, 11, 13, 14; Chullin 5b:1; Avodah Zarah 26b:1–3, Horayot 2a:15; Horayot 11a:12.

[19] Langer, *Cursing*, p. 50; according to Grossberg, *Heresy*, pp. 120–121, this is, however, not a contemporary designation.

[20] Teppler, *Birkat*, p. 67.

[21] Kraemer, *Maimonides*, pp. 104–111.

[22] See the fundamental studies by Langer, *Cursing*, and Teppler, *Birkat*.

Ezra in Cairo, the word *minim*, which by that time commonly applied to converts, was substituted with the word *meshumadim*.[23] Some Judeo-Arabic scholars of the eleventh and twelfth century tried to explain this by the fact that *meshumad*, by way of a phonetic change from ʿayn to šīn etymologically derived from the Arabic *al-maʿmūdiyya* (baptism).[24] Although phonetically the word *meshumad* might sound as if it somehow refers to the ritual of baptism, research regards this derivation as a misinterpretation. In fact, it would appear that Jews in the Arabic-Islamic sphere decidedly saw the *meshumadim* as sinners, transgressors but still as Jews.[25]

[§11] From the perspective of historical linguistics and etymology, the common translation "bastards" for Ibn Ḥawqal's *al-mušaʿmiḏūn* seems inaccurate, and also the translation of "apostates" is at least ambiguous. In fact, the translation "bastards" would ultimately not carry the implications inherent in Ibn Ḥawqal's criticism, given that a "bastard" is usually defined as the offspring of an illegitimate union. In the Qurʾān, marriages between Muslim men and Christian women are not objectionable.[26] According to Islamic law, the offspring of these marriages should invariably adhere to the religion of the father. From this point of view, a violation of the norm would be, firstly, that girls born from Muslim fathers in Sicily became Christians with their mothers and not Muslims, and secondly that the *mušaʿmiḏūn* did not perform their Islamic duties in a correct manner. Therefore, the "bastardization" does not refer to the parentage, but—as with the halakhic meaning of *meshumadim*—to the corruption of religious practice. Thus, instead of witnessing a process of consecutive Islamization, Sicily saw a "production" of Christian women and male *mušaʿmiḏūn*, but not of "proper" Muslims. It is interesting to note that this marriage practice with its gender-specific regulation of religious affiliation, which is also attested in other sources that pertain to Sicily,[27] was apparently free of conflict on the island itself.[28] Instead, indignation at the violation of the norm is reflected through the outside perspective of the traveler Ibn Ḥawqal—who used a word, which the Arabic-speaking Jews of this period linked with a lax practice of faith, and maybe even with an ideological proximity to Christianity.

[§12] Considering Ibn Ḥawqal's biography and travel itinerary, it is conceivable that he became acquainted with the term *meshumadim/mušaʿmiḏūn* through personal contact with Arabic-speaking Jews and adapted it in an Arabicized form as part of his vocabulary. As such, this is a fascinating example of linguistic, more specifically, of Hebrew–Arabic language transfer in the medieval Mediterranean. In the same time, by making use of this neologism, Ibn Ḥawqal provides an important piece of evidence that allows us to refine our understanding of the heterogeneous or transcultural population of tenth-century Sicily, not only in terms of its religion and Christian-Muslim contacts, but also in terms of ethnicity, language, and cultural practices.

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[23] Langer, *Cursing*, pp. 46–47.
[24] Langer, *Cursing*, p. 48.
[25] Langer, ibid.
[26] According to Q 5:5; on the prohibition for Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men see Q 2:221; 60:10; 4:141.
[27] See Metcalfe, Transkultureller Wandel, pp. 79–81.
[28] On children of interreligious marriages, also see König, Caught Between Cultures, pp. 65–68, with a comparison of the "martyrs of Córdoba" and the Turcopoles (τουρκόπουλοι); idem, *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen*, pp. 84–90.

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