1071–1072: William of Apulia on the Norman Conquest of Palermo

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Abstract: This article examines the Norman conquest of Palermo in 1071/72, first on the basis of the Gesta Roberti Wiscardi, probably written in Apulia in the late eleventh century, then by considering the relevant parallel traditions. It explains how the conquerors subjugated the Sicilian capital, with an eye to how they negotiated the surrender of the city with its municipal representatives, how they transformed the mosque into a church, how fortifications were erected, and, finally, how the new rulership was proclaimed by minting coins in Arabic.

Source

Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard. Édition, traduction, commentaire et introduction*, ed. Marguerite Mathieu, Palermo: Istituto siciliano di studi bizantini e neoellenici, 1961, lib. 3, v. 321–351, pp. 180–182, trans. Theresa Jäckh.

Gens Agarena, videns se viribus omnibus esse / Exutam, tota spe deficiente salutis / Suppliciter poscit, miseros miseratus ut eius / Respiciat casus, neque dux condigna rependat. / Cuncta duci dedunt, se tantum vivere poscunt. / Deditione sui facta meruere favorem / Esorare ducis placidi; promittitur illis / Gratia cum vita. Nullum proscribere curat, / Observansque fidem promissi, laedere nullum, / Quamvis gentiles essent, molitur eorum.

When the Agarene people [i.e. the Muslims] saw that they had been abandoned by all their men, they lost all hope of rescue. They begged the duke [Robert Guiscard] to not retaliate and to have mercy on the wretched, and to consider their plight. When they completely submitted to the duke, their pleading brought about the favour and grace of the duke, who promised them their lives and his goodwill. He ostracised no one and, true to his promise, tried not to harm any of them, even though they were unbelievers.

Omnes subiectos sibi lance examinat aequa, / Glorificansque Deum templi destruxit iniqui / Omnes structuras, et qua muscheta solebat / Esse prius, matris fabricavit Virginis aulam; / Et quae Machamati fuerat cum daemone sedes, / Sedes facta Dei, fit dignis ianua coeli. / Munia castrorum fecit robusta parari, / Tuta quibus contra Siculos sua turba

He treated all his subjects equally and, to honour God, he destroyed all the structures of the enemy temple. And where before there was a mosque, he built a hall [i.e. church] for the virgin Mother. And what was the seat of Machamatus [i.e. Muḥammad] with the demon became the seat of God and a worthy gate of heaven. And with strong walls he prepared the strongholds so that they would be safe from the

maneret, / Addidit et puteos alimentaque commoda castris.

Sicilians, and he also equipped them with wells and sufficient supplies.

Obsidibus sumptis aliquot castrisque paratis, / Reginam remeat Robertus victor ad urbem, / Nominis eiusdem quodam remanente Panormi / Milite, qui Siculis datur amiratus haberi. / Omnes cum Stephano Paterano protinus Argos, / Qui Bari fuerant capti, permisit abire. / Sic impunitos quia dux placidissimus hostes / Dimittebat, eis ut amantibus ipse placebat. / Barinis, Calabris, dux obsidibusque Panormi / Militibusque suis vadit comitatus ad urbis / Moenia Melfensis. Caput haec erat urbibus illis / Omnibus, est et adhuc, quas continet Appula tellus.

After taking some hostages and reinforcing the strongholds, Robert returned victoriously to the city of Reggio. In Palermo he left a soldier in his own name, whom he gave to the Sicilians as their *amiratus*. He [Robert Guiscard] allowed all the Greeks (*Argos*) who had been captured in Bari to go with Stephen Paterano, because the most gracious duke preferred to let his enemies go unpunished, so that they would become his loyal supporters. Accompanied by the Bariots, the Calabrians, the prisoners from Palermo, and his soldiers, the duke went to the fortified city of Melfi, which was in fact the capital among all the cities of the Apulian countryside.

Authorship & Work

[§1] The *Gesta Roberti Wiscardi* is one of the most important Latin sources for the Norman conquests in southern Italy. The *Gesta*'s only surviving medieval manuscript (Avranches, Bibliothèque municipal, Ms. 162) names a certain William of Apulia (*Willelmus Apuliensis*) as its author, but little is known about him. The opening prologue, composed in hexameters, merely indicates that he wanted to be understood as a poet of a new era (*vates novus*) and as such sought to recall the deeds (*gestae*) and triumphs of the *gens Normannica* in Italy.[1] His literary ability and manner of expression indicate that he had enjoyed a good education and was familiar with a number of classical authors. It can also be surmised from the preface that he had some form of connection with both the papal curia and the ruling Norman family of the Hautevilles, which had established itself in Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily. According to his own account, William wrote his work at the suggestion of Pope Urban II (sed. 1088–1099) and dedicated it to Duke Roger Borsa (r. 1085–1111), the son of Duke Robert Guiscard. (r. 1059–1085).[2]

[§2] William's apparent proximity to Roger Borsa might also explain why the title of the *Gesta* refers only to his father, Robert Guiscard, although his deeds are by no means the work's only focus: Book I describes the arrival of the Normans in southern Italy around the year 1000 and recounts their conquests up to around 1042. From Book II onwards, William reports on Robert Guiscard, although he avoids discussion of his lineage, family relationships, and even on the exact chronology of his political and military successes. On closer inspection, William's treatment of his conquests seems rather eclectic, especially when compared to the conquest chronicles of Amatus of Montecassino (d. after 1080)[3] and of Geoffrey Malaterra (d. after 1099).[4] For example, in Book III, William deals with the twelve years between the Robert Guiscard's elevation to the dukedom (1059/1060) and the siege of Bari (1068–1071) in

[1]Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. Mathieu, Prologue, v. 1–5, p. 98.
[2] Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. Mathieu, Prologue, v. 6–13, p. 98.
[3] Aimé du Mont-Cassin, *Ystoire de li Normant*, ed. Guéret-Laferté.
[4] Gaufredus Malaterra, *De rebus gestis*, ed. Pontieri; for books I–II, see the new edition: Gaufredus Malaterra, *Histoire du grand comte*, ed. Lucas-Avenel.

less than 100 verses,[5] and he reports on the conquest of Sicily (which lasted more than two decades), only in connection with the aforementioned siege and capture of Palermo. Books IV and V then deal in much the same way with the campaigns in Apulia, Dalmatia, and the Balkans, which took place between 1081 and 1085. The *Gesta* ends with Guiscard's death and the failure of his enterprise against Byzantium.

[§3] Given that several passages speak positively about the Lombards, some scholars have suggested that William came from an Apulian Lombard family.[6] Nonetheless, by this reasoning he could equally have been of Norman origin. In any case, his writing makes it clear that Apulia was his central point of reference and that, in addition, his connection to this region played a formative role in determining his conception of his own identity. Thus, events and groups which held a significance for Apulia are predominantly at the centre of his narrative, while the author also drew on traditions and knowledge from local Apulian historiography (*Annales Barenses*, Lupus Protospatharius, *Anonymi Barensis Chronicon*).[7]

[§4] The date of the work's composition can only be vaguely surmised given the scant information concerning William's person: The prologue's reference to Pope Urban II suggests that the work was completed before his death at the end of July 1099 – an assumption which seems more likely in the context of a passage which reports on the departure of the Crusaders from southern Italy to the Holy Land (1096).[8] Herein, William does not seem to have been aware of the conquest of Jerusalem in mid-July 1099. Indeed, it is possible that the reference to the crusaders, whose stated aim was to liberate the Holy Sepulchre, even represents a topical reference to processes of crusader recruitment and mobilisation which were taking place at the time William wrote. In any case, any mention of events after 1085, or after the death of Guiscard, is unusual for the *Gesta*.

Content & Context

[§5] This passage begins with a description of how, after a siege of five months, the Muslim defence of Palermo collapsed following an assault on the city's outer quarters which had been spearheaded by Guiscard's troops.[9] The source passage claims that this event forced the city's inhabitants to come to terms with the duke: they submitted to him, and begged him to spare their lives. Guiscard took pity on the population. William of Apulia emphasises that the duke made no distinctions between his subjects, although the inhabitants of Palermo were "infidels" (*gentiles*). However, he claims that Guiscard destroyed a building which is described as a "hostile temple" (*templum iniquus*) – apparently a mosque. In the same place, the duke is said to have built a church for the Virgin Mary. There is also talk of a *sedes Machamati*, which became a *sedes Dei*, although it must remain open whether *sedes* refers to one or more buildings. Furthermore, Guiscard fortified a series of strongholds and equipped them with wells to guarantee his soldiers protection from the local population. From other sources it can be concluded that Guiscard stayed in the city for several months to supervise these measures.[10]

[§6] The source further reports that the duke took hostages. According to the chronicle of Amatus of Montecassino, among them were the sons of the most important families of the entire

[5] Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. Mathieu, lib. 2, v. 384–479, pp. 152–158.
[6] Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. Mathieu, pp. 17–25; Chibnall, *Normans*, p. 117; Albu, *Normans*, pp. 133–135; Johnson, Normandy, p. 87; Brown, Gesta, pp. 162–179.
[7] *The Annales Barenses and the Annales Lupi Protospatharii*, ed. Churchill; Lupus Protospatharius, *Annales*, ed. Pertz (MGH SS 5), pp. 52–63; D'Angelo, *Storiografi*, pp. 198–215; *Anonymi Barensis Chronicon*, ed. Muratori (Rerum Italicarum Scriptores 5).
[8] Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. Mathieu, lib. 3, v. 100–105, pp. 168–169.
[9] Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. Mathieu, lib. 3, v. 205–320, pp. 174–180.
[10] Longo, First Norman Cathedral.

region.[11] Guiscard brought these individuals with him to Reggio on the South-Italian mainland, but according to William of Apulia, he left a soldier as his representative in Palermo. Guiscard apparently gave this individual the title of *amiratus*. The term *amiratus* is derived from the Arabic title *amīr*, which had previously referred to the Muslim ruler of Sicily.[12]

[§7] William of Apulia also reports that Guiscard released Greek prisoners on the southern Italian mainland whom he had previously taken with him to Palermo as reinforcements after the capture of Bari in 1071. Here, the Byzantine fleet commander, Stephan Pateranos (who had led a fleet from Constantinople to defend Bari in 1069) is specifically mentioned. During this engagement with the Normans he had been captured and it was probably in view of his position as a fleet commander that he had been taken to Palermo to support the impending siege.[13] Here, the release of such prisoners (who were only let go after they had served their military purpose), provides an interesting insight into Guiscard's planning and execution of warfare. Finally, with the contingents of Bariots and Calabrians, the prisoners from Palermo, and his own soldiers, Guiscard came to the Apulian castle town of Melfi.

[§8] Although the fighting in Sicily continued up until the subjugation of Noto in 1091, William of Apulia's account portrays the capture of Palermo as having decided the entire enterprise, or in other words: William of Apulia saw the conquest of Palermo as representative of the conquest of Sicily. The author mentions the island only once more, and that is in connection with Roger Borsa, who was granted all rights and privileges (*ius proprium*) over Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily by his father Guiscard in 1081. As such, he was thus designated his ducal successor.[14]

Contextualisation, Analysis & Interpretation

[§9] The conquest of Muslim-ruled Sicily had been a strategic priority of Robert Guiscard since he had been invested by Pope Nicholas II (sed. 1058–1061) at the Synod of Melfi in 1059 as *dux Apulie et Calabrie et utroque subveniente futurus Sicilie*.[15] The enterprise began in 1060 and was predominantly led by Roger I over the next 30 years. Palermo, as the political-military and economic centre of the island, exerted a special fascination for the brothers from an early period. Among other examples, this can be seen by the way in which they attempted to conquer Palermo several times. However, these attacks (1064, 1068) failed as the Normans had no naval power and could only besiege the well-fortified city from the land, while it continued to be supplied from the sea. Thus, the siege of 1071 had been preceded by the subjugation of the Byzantine port cities in Apulia. In Otranto, Guiscard succeeded in seizing ships (which he then tested against Bari). After the siege of Bari, he acquired further ships and crews from the Byzantines, which allowed the Hauteville brothers to move against Palermo in the late summer of 1071 – the former by sea, the latter via the interior of the island.

[§10] The siege and ultimate capture of Palermo by Duke Robert Guiscard and Count Roger I between 1071 and 1072 is the most extensively described event found across the three main sources for the Norman conquest of Sicily: besides William of Apulia's work, these are the *Ystoire de li Normant* of Amatus of Montecassino (d. before 1105) and the *De rebus gestis* by Geoffrey Malaterra (d. after 1101).[16] Considered against these varied traditions, which refer to the strategic and symbolic importance of the city, William of Apulia's account allows us to

[11] Aimé du Mont-Cassin, *Ystoire de li Normant*, ed. Guéret-Laferté, lib. 6, cap. 23, p. 434.
[12] On the origin and use of the title in the Islamic world, see Al-Dūrī, Amīr. On the change of the title and its responsibilities in Norman Sicily, see Ménager, *Amiratus–Ἀμηρᾶς*; Takayama, Amiratus.
[13] Brown, *Mercenaries*, pp. 57–61.
[14] Guillaume de Pouille, *La Geste de Robert Guiscard*, ed. Mathieu, lib. 6, v. 185–194, p. 214.
[15] Deér, *Papsttum*, pp. 112–113; Hoffmann, Langobarden.
[16] Aimé du Mont-Cassin, *Ystoire de li Normant*, ed. Guéret-Laferté, lib. 5, cap. 14–23, pp. 397–404; Gaufredus Malaterra, *Histoire du grand comte Roger*, ed. Lucas-Avenel, lib. 2, cap. 45, pp. 382–387.

trace the Norman conquerors' dealings with the conquered in great detail and on several levels: firstly, the conquest or subjugation of the population, secondly, the immediate takeover of the urban structures and thirdly, the establishment of rule through organisation and administration. This three-step process is indicated by William of Apulia by way of the pardon of the population, the military reinforcement of the city (forts, walls), through the establishment of Christian institutions (a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary), and finally the appointment of a local administration (*amiratus*) and the removal of certain hostages to the mainland.

[§11] With regard to the population, William of Apulia first emphasised that Robert Guiscard spared the people of Palermo after they had surrendered. Here, the duke's leniency may have been warranted by the fact that the city surrendered voluntarily after a long and bitter resistance, thereby gaining its inhabitants a certain amount of room for manoeuvre in negotiating terms. In addition to questions concerning life and property, this assuredly also concerned the legal status of the Muslims under Norman rule.[17] Even though William of Apulia does not directly refer to such negotiations, the submission he describes implies a certain minimum of communication: in addition to ritual acts, there is talk of requests and promises on the one hand, and of promises and compliance on the other. Geoffrey Malaterra describes such negotiations more precisely: he describes how Palermo surrendered after Guiscard's soldiers had penetrated one of the quarters inside the outer ring of the wall. There the Palermitans sent some urban leaders (*primores*) to negotiate with the brothers. They agreed to surrender when they were promised that they would be allowed to keep their religious rules, and that they would not be forced to adopt a new religion. In return, they promised to give up the city, to be loyal to their new masters, and to pay tribute. This agreement was sworn to by the *primores* upon their law (*lex*) and their holy scripture.[18] Such a concession of religious coexistence alongside a subordinate legal-fiscal position is reminiscent of the *ḏimma* system enshrined in Islamic law which formed the basis of the protective treaties concluded between Muslim conquerors and non-Muslims.[19] However, in the case of Palermo, it is unclear whether reference to tribute payments describe the situation of the Muslims alone, or rather the inhabitants of the city as a whole.[20]

[§12] In addition to the treatment of the population, all the Latin sources pay special attention to the church which was dedicated to the Virgin Mary – a foundation which symbolises the triumph of Christianity over the formerly Islamic capital. It is no coincidence that this church is located where the main mosque of the city is said to have been. According to William of Apulia, this mosque was destroyed by Guiscard and the church was rebuilt for the Blessed Virgin. Geoffrey Malaterra and Amatus of Montecassino, on the other hand, appear to suggest that a transformation of the building had taken place, in that the former mosque was "purified" or re-consecrated through worship and ceremonies. In so doing, they imply that the building was only remodelled in parts. Given the problem of resources that the Normans encountered in the immediate aftermath of the five-month siege, this would appear the more convincing account.[21] It also underlines the self-constructed image of the Normans as restorers and not founders of the Christian faith in Sicily. Thus, in parallel traditions, the mosque is also identified as the former church of the city and even as the archiepiscopal seat. This interpretation is also consistent with the Arabic sources of the tenth and eleventh centuries, which equate the location

[17] Johns, *Arabic Administration*.
[18] Gaufredus Malaterra, *Histoire du grand comte Roger*, ed. Lucas-Avenel, lib. 2, cap. 45, pp. 382–387, here p. 385.
[19] For *ḏimma*, see Cahen, Dhimma; Cahen, Djizya.
[20] On the incorporation of Muslims into structures of Norman rule, and concerning their legal status during the conquest and in the early years of Norman rule, see Johns, *Arabic Administration*, pp. 34–39; Aspinwall and Jäckh, 1091: A Diploma.
[21] Cf. Longo, First Norman Cathedral.

of the mosque, if not with the building itself, with the former basilica of the Byzantine city.[22] Both Malaterra and Amatus, alongside other documentary evidence, testify how the conquerors installed an archbishop in the mosque-cathedral immediately after the capture of the city in order to "restore" the Christian faith. For this they took a local Greek-Christian clergyman who had served under Islamic rule in a village near the capital. This established Sicily's first archbishopric under Norman rule. Confirmed in office by the pope, this archbishop, Nicodemos, was only replaced by a Latin in the later 1080s.[23]

[§13] In addition to the church, the city structure was subject to a number of interventions that, according to William of Apulia, also included the construction or fortification of strongholds. These were to support the defence of the still fragile structures of Norman rule which had spring up in the predominantly Muslim metropolis. William remarks that the forts provided protection for those loyal to Guiscard from the Sicilian population. Through other sources, these forts can be more precisely located: One was located at Palermo's harbour and one on the city's former acropolis.[24] The troops stationed in Palermo were to be presided over by a soldier after the duke's departure – this individual was given the title *amiratus*. By reference to certain documents, he can be identified as Petrus Vidonis/ Bidonis.[25] That this title is a Latinised form of the Arabic has already been mentioned. It is also noteworthy that William apparently associated the rule or supervision of the city of Palermo with this title. This would suggest that not only the title, but also the significance of Palermo as the capital (which was intrinsically attached to the place) was carried over from the Muslim period. For several decades after Petrus Vidonis, the office of *amiratus* was in the hands of Arabic-speaking Greeks, who were largely responsible for establishing the Norman administration in Sicily according to models borrowed from Fatimid administrative practice.[26] Thus, royal documents in Sicily were frequently issued in Arabic until the middle of the twelfth century and sporadically until the time of Frederick II. However, Arabic as the language of the Norman-Sicilian rulers had already been experimented with a few months after the capture of Palermo, when coins (*ṭarī*) with Arabic ruler titulatures were minted for Robert Guiscard and Roger I. These have a mixed form of Arabic-Islamic titles with the Arabic transliteration of Latin titles (*al-dūqat* for *dux*, *al-qūmis* for *comes*)[27] and also include the Islamic profession of faith (*šahada*). Both the coinage and Arabic titles point to the ways in which the new rulers sought to conceptualise and represent their rule in the immediate aftermath of the conquest.

[§14] It is also important to consider the Palermitan prisoners whom Guiscard took with him to Apulia. These hostages have received little attention in scholarly debate. On the one hand, they are not identified by William of Apulia, and on the other it has generally been assumed that no political leaders were active in Palermo at the time of the conquest. However, some Judaeo-Arabic documents from the Cairo Geniza suggest that Palermo was controlled by a municipal council (*šūrā*), which in turn was presided over by representatives and leaders, in the years before the Norman conquest.[28] Such leaders would seem to be identifiable with the *primores* who negotiated the surrender of Palermo in Malaterra's account, as well as with the leaders described by Amatus (*cayte*, from Arab. *al-qāʾid*) who are said to have led the Normans into

[22] Aimé du Mont-Cassin, *Ystoire de li Normant*, ed. Guéret-Laferté, lib. 6, cap. 19, pp. 431–432; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, ed. Kramers, p. 119; Al-Muqaddasī, *Kitāb Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, ed. de Goeje, p. 225.
[23] Gaufredus Malaterra, *Histoire du grand comte Roger*, ed. Lucas-Avenel, lib. 2, cap. 45, p. 387; *Documenti latini e greci del conte Ruggero I*, ed. Becker, no. 27, pp. 125–126; Becker, *Roger I*., pp. 68–172.
[24] Jäckh, Space and Place, pp. 72–79.
[25] Ménager, *Amiratus–Ἀμηρᾶς*, pp. 23–26, 181–184; *Documenti latini e greci*, ed. Becker, no. 6, pp. 53–55; Becker, *Roger I*., pp. 168–172.
[26] Johns, *Arabic Administration*.
[27] Johns, Titoli arabi.
Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, ed. Fawwāz and Fawwāz, vol. 24, p. 498; Nef, Islamic Palermo, pp. 49–51, especially FN 57.

the city. As already mentioned, Amatus of Montecassino described the prisoners as sons of the most important families of the whole region. This reference suggests that the duke was deliberately trying to remove those military-political as well as symbolic-authoritative persons (or groups) of the city and its surroundings who might prove rallying points for future resistance.

[§15] With regard to the establishment of rule, it is also worth mentioning that Palermo, together with the Val Demone in the north-east of the island, was explicitly assigned to Guiscard's direct rule. His brother, Roger I, was granted control of the rest of the island. This could be explained on the one hand by the fact that the Val Demone, with its connection to the Calabrian mainland, was of particular strategic importance to the latter, especially as this region was already largely under Norman control and also had a stronger Christian influence. In the case of Palermo, on the other hand, the symbolic significance of the city seems to have played a role: rule over Sicily's formerly Islamic capital was associated with power and prestige. In the 1090s, Roger Borsa granted his uncle co-rule (*condominium*) over Palermo in return for Roger I's support in suppressing a revolt on the mainland. Considering that the *Gesta* was probably written during this period, the tense situation between the nominal and the de facto power in the most important city in Sicily could also be reflected in the fact that Roger I is perhaps deliberately not mentioned in William of Apulia's account of the capture of Palermo. Hereby, no claim to power could be derived from his military involvement.

[§16] In addition to these inner-Sicilian and inner-Norman dynamics, it should finally be stressed that the conquest of Sicily can be contextualised by reference to the Latin-Christian expansion of the eleventh century. As such, scholars have drawn a number of parallels between this enterprise and the development of later crusading ideas: Guiscard and Roger I saw themselves as Christian fighters, fighting Muslims under the papal blessing and banner in order to conquer, indeed liberate, land that they considered legitimately Christian. At the same time, the chronicles of the Norman conquest of Sicily also contain narratives and figures (e.g. the appearance of St. George) that connect such traditions to crusade historiography.[29]

[§17] With regard to the history of trans-Mediterranean and Christian-Islamic relations, it is also important to emphasise the role that the Norman conquest of Islamic Sicily played in the geopolitical web of the central Mediterranean. After Palermo had functioned as the seat of Sicily's Islamic rulers, and as one of the most important centres of Mediterranean trade since at least the middle of the tenth century, the island, with its political, economic and socio-cultural communication networks, was fully integrated into the Arab-Islamic world. After the capture of Palermo in 1071/1072, Sicily, as a significant hub of processes of Mediterranean exchange, was henceforth increasingly integrated into the Latin-Christian world, while the border with the Arab-Islamic sphere began to shift towards the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

(Translator: John Aspinwall)

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