1190: A Letter from al-Mahdiyya Reports on a Muslim Uprising in Sicily

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Abstract: In late summer 1190, Saladin's head of chancery al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil informed the Sultan, then busy with fighting the Franks in Syria, that a letter had arrived in Alexandria from Almohad al-Mahdiyya. Among the news it reported from the West was information on a Muslim uprising in Norman Sicily. The article aims at contextualizing this elusive revolt in a three-step analysis: first, the information given in the letter will be compared to alternative accounts in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the events. In a second step, the article will discuss why and by whom the news from the island would have been transmitted to al-Mahdiyya, and from there to Alexandria. Finally, it will ask whether the dissemination of this news to North Africa and Egypt had any effect on the situation of Sicily's Muslim insurgents.

Source

Abū Šāma, *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn fī aḫbār al-dawlatayn al-nūriyya wa-l-ṣalāḥiyya*, ed. Ibrāhīm Šams al-Dīn, 4 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, vol. 4, p. 127, trans. Eric Böhme.

وَرَدَ كتابٌ من المهدية إلى الإسكندرية ثاني رجب بعد ستةَ عَشَرَ يوماً من المهدية، وذكر من فيه أخباراً، وقد طولع بها، ولما تكرّرت عُلِمَتْ صِحَّتُها؛

On the second of Raǧab [5 August 1190], a letter from al-Mahdiyya arrived in Alexandria after sixteen days. It reported some news which was examined and, when it was repeated [elsewhere], was considered true.

وهو أن عساكر الغرب الإسلامية نازلةٌ على طُلَيْطُلَة، وقد افتتحت عِدَّة حصون كافرة، وأنّ يوزبا شوهد بالمهدية مُوثَقاً بالحديد، وقد نفَّذه قَرَاقوش إلى صاحب تونس ليسيّرَه إلى بلاد الأندلس موضع نزول ابن عبد المؤمن بالعساكر.

It said that the armies of the Islamic West are camping before Toledo after having taken a number of fortresses from the unbelievers and that Yūzabā has been seen in al-Mahdiyya in chains. Qarāqūš has sent him to the governor of Tunis to transfer him to al-Andalus, to the place where Ibn ʿAbd al-Muʾmin [i.e. the ruling caliph Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb b. Yūsuf al-Manṣūr, r. 580–595/1184–1199] is camping with the armies.

وأن أهل صِقِلِّية من المسلمين إلى الآن في حَربٍ قائمة بينهم وبين فرنجها، ومعتصمون بالجبال في أعمالها، وأن عسكر الفرنج قد خَرَجَ لإنجاد أصحابهم بصِقِلِّية والمسلمون بها على

[It also said that] the Muslims of Sicily are still at war with the Franks of the island and have taken refuge in its mountainous regions, that an army of the Franks has set out to help their comrades in Sicily and that

تَوَقُّعٍ ورِقْبَةٍ، وحذارٍ وخِيفَةٍ، نَصَرَ الله كلمة التوحيد، وأهلك كُلَّ جبارٍ عنيد.

the Muslims are in attentive anticipation, alertness, and fear. May God give victory to the word of monotheism (*al-tawḥīd*) and destroy every obstinate tyrant.

وأنَّ المراكب فيها أزواد للجنويين دخَلَتِ المهدية بأمانٍ من صاحبها، فباعت بها، وتزوَّدت منها، وأنها قاصدة الشَّام خَيَّبَ الله قَصْدَها.

[It also said that] Genoese ships loaded with provisions have entered al-Mahdiyya with a safe-conduct from its governor. They have sold their cargo, taken provisions, and set sail for Syria. May God frustrate their plan.

Authorship & Work

[§1] The letter paraphrased above has neither survived in its original form, nor as transcript, and is only known to us through another letter, which is quoted in the "Book of the Two Gardens" (*Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn*) by Šihāb al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ismāʿīl al-Maqdisī, generally known as Abū Šāma (d. 665/1268). He was born in Damascus in 599/1203 and spent nearly all his life in the city, only leaving it for two pilgrimages to Mekka, a short trip to Jerusalem, and for one year of study in Egypt. A learned man with a broad education based on Šāfiʿī traditions, he taught at two important Damascene madrasas from 660/1263 onward. Abū Šāma seems to have been a rather controversial figure within Damascene society, as he died in 665/1268 from injuries suffered during a violent assault, which had been executed to silence him. He is today mainly known for his writings on a number of different subjects, among them many historical works. The most extensive of them is the "Book of the Two Gardens" (*Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn*), a history of Syria and Egypt under the reigns of Nūr al-Dīn (r. 541–569/1146–1174) and Saladin (r. 567–589/1171–1193). Abū Šāma narrates the historical events in each year during these periods mostly in chronological order, citing a number of contemporary sources and documents, most of which are partly or completely lost today. His most important narrative sources are two biographies of Saladin—the *Barq al-Šāmī* written by the sultan's secretary (*kātib*) ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (519–597/1125–1201) and the *Sīrat Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn* by the Shīʿī historiographer Ibn Abī Ṭayyiʾ (575–627/1179 or 1180–1230). Moreover, he quotes numerous letters, mostly written by al-Iṣfahānī and Saladin's head of chancery, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (529–596/1135–1200).[1]

[§2] It is a letter written by al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, which paraphrases our letter from al-Mahdiyya. Born in ʿAsqalān (today Ashkelon, Israel), he received professional training in the art of chancery practice in the *dīwān al-inšāʾ* in Cairo, and in 556–557/1161–1162 entered the service of the viziers to the Fāṭimid caliphs. In 566/1171, the last official vizier, Saladin, appointed him head of the *dīwān al-inšāʾ*. After dethroning the caliph's family later that year, Saladin made al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil his chief adviser on matters of military and financial administration. In the following two decades, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil remained one of the Sultan's closest confidants and accompanied him on most of his campaigns to Syria, Iraq, and the regions under Frankish control. After his patron died in 1193, he continued to advise Saladin's sons but retired from active service already in 1195. Today, he is mainly known for the written correspondence he organized as chancellor to the Sultan and on his own behalf. The corpus consists of more than

[1] Antrim, Abū Shāma; cf. Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography*.

750 fragments and full documents which survive in original form, as transcriptions, or—as in our case—in quoted form.[2]

Content & Context

[§3] To provide more details to his narrative of the events in the year 586/1190–1191 Abū Šāma quotes the relevant letter alongside several others also written by al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil.[3] Although Abū Šāma does not state when or to whom they had originally been written, it is clear from their contents that al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil had sent them to Saladin some days or weeks after the respective events they refer to. The sultan, mainly occupied with fighting the Franks in Syria during that time, was thus informed about the situation in Egypt, news from Baghdad, embassies from Constantinople and Cyprus, and also received his chancellor's advice on the best strategy to defeat his enemies in Syria.[4]

[§4] In the letter quoted above, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil informs Saladin that a letter from al-Mahdiyya had arrived in Alexandria in early August 586/1190, sixteen days after it had been sent. The news it contained had been repeated through other channels, and was accepted as correct in consequence. According to the letter, Almohad armies were currently camping near Toledo after they had reconquered several fortresses from the Christians. Since the caliph himself was leading the troops, the Egyptian Mamlūk Qarāqūš sent a political prisoner via Tunis to the caliph's camp in al-Andalus. In Sicily, the Muslims were still at war with the Franks of the island and had taken refuge in the mountains. Since another Frankish army was on its way to help the Sicilian Franks, these Muslims were now in fear of being attacked. In this context, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil reiterates the Almohads' hope for victory in the terminology of the "Oneness of God" (*tawḥīd*), thus employing a term that stood at the centre of Almohad ideology. The letter also reports that Genoese ships had docked in al-Mahdiyya with a safe-conduct from its governor. Having sold their cargo and restocked their supplies, they had set sail towards (Frankish) Syria.[5]

[§5] The letter's contents and purpose can only be understood properly within the larger framework of events in Egypt and Syria, the Maghreb, and Sicily in the 1180s and early 1190s. After the news from al-Mahdiyya had been examined, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil forwarded it to Saladin to inform him about the latest events in the Western Mediterranean. Periodic intelligence reports like these were essential in wartime: after the Sultan had recaptured Jerusalem and most of the Frankish Levant in 1187, the papacy had urged the rulers of the Latin West to embark on a new crusade to reconquer the Holy Land—a call heeded by the kings of England and France as well as the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (r. 1152–1190). In late summer 1190, the Ayyūbids felt some relief when the emperor died in June 1190 while still on the march through Cilicia, thus rendering the German-Hungarian contribution to the crusade a failure. However, Philipp II of France (r. 1179–1223) and Richard I of England (r. 1189–1199) had just set out from France in early July, reaching Sicily in late September and deciding to spend the winter there. Their armies, to arrive in Syria in late spring or early summer 1191, represented a danger for the Ayyūbids.[6]

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[2] Brockelmann and Cahen, al-Ḳāḍī al-Fāḍil; al-Ḥafsī, *Correspondance*; Dağānī Šakīl, *al-Qāḍī l-Fāḍil*. Cf. also Böhme, 1174: Letter of Condolence.

[3] Abū Šāma, *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn*, ed. Šams al-Dīn, vol. 4, p. 124: "wa-li-l-Qāḍī l-Fāḍil – raḥamahu Allāh – min kutubin uḫarin yašraḥ lanā baʿḍ mā taqaddama, wa-mā lam yaḏkurhu aḥad min arbāb al-siyar."

[4] Abū Šāma, *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn*, ed. Šams al-Dīn, vol. 4, p. 124–131.

[5] Abū Šāma, *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn*, ed. Šams al-Dīn, vol. 4, p. 127.

[6] Möhring, *Saladin*, pp. 65–217; Lyons and Jackson, *Saladin*, pp. 279–363; Eddé, *Saladin*, pp. 238–270; Hosler, *Siege of Acre*.

[§6] In view of this uncertain situation, Saladin and his advisors spared no efforts to find allies against the crusader forces, even amongst former enemies as were the self-proclaimed Amāziġ caliphs of the Almohad dynasty, then almost at the zenith of their power. Based in Marrakesh since 1149, they ruled over an empire spanning Muslim al-Andalus as well as large parts of Sub-Saharan and North Africa as far west as the region of Ifrīqiya, where they had swept away the short-lived Siculo-Norman protectorate in 1160.[7] Ever since the Ayyūbid takeover in neighbouring Egypt, relations between the two major powers in North Africa had been turbulent. As early as 1173, Saladin had sent the Mamlūk emir Qarāqūš on a military expedition to subdue the Arab and Amāziġ tribes of the Barqa region in modern-day Libya as part of his early expansionist projects. During further campaigns in 1175, 1176, and 1179, Qarāqūš had brought parts of Ifrīqiya as far as Tripoli under his control and had established himself as a semi-independent warlord in the region. In 1185, he had joined in coalition with the pro-Almoravid Banū Ġāniyya. They had wrested further parts of Ifrīqiya from Almohad control, up to the point that Tunis and al-Mahdiyya remained the only major centres of Almohad resistance. In 1187, however, the new caliph, Yaʿqūb al-Manṣūr, had retaken the offensive and had reconquered Qābis and Qafṣa from Qarāqūš. In view of the difficult situation in Syria, Saladin and his advisors seem to have turned towards a temporary solution for this trouble spot in the West. In letters written to the caliph in September 1189 or 1190, the Sultan withdrew his support for Qarāqūš and asked Yaʿqūb al-Manṣūr to send the superior Almohad navy or at least men and money to support the *ǧihād* against the Franks and crusaders in Syria.[8]

[§7] The Normans of Sicily, traditionally very interested in the political affairs of neighbouring Ifrīqiya, had not interfered in the events of the 1170s and 1180s. After Ifrīqiya had been lost to the Almohads in 1160 and Sicily had been shaken subsequently by a noble rebellion, William I (r. 1154–1166) had largely kept out of southern Mediterranean politics.[9] When his son William II (r. 1166–1189) came of age in 1171, he sought to reactivate Sicily's role as a dominant player within the southern and eastern Mediterranean scene, but pursued an agenda different to that of his predecessors. While the Fāṭimid caliphs had mostly been on good terms with Norman Palermo, their Ayyūbid hangmen had to defend Egypt's ports against several raids by the refurbished Norman fleet in 1174, 1175/1176, and 1177. Since the early 1180s, however, William II had increasingly turned his attention towards other issues, covering his back by concluding truces of ten years with the Almohads and the Ayyūbids respectively in 1181. Six years later, however, news of the fall of Jerusalem reached Sicily: William II took the cross and began preparations to go on crusade to the Holy Land, but died on 18 November 1189 before he could fulfil his vow.[10]

[§8] Upon his death, his kingdom fell into a crisis of succession. Since he left no offspring, the throne was likely to fall to his aunt Constance (r. 1186–1198), queen consort of the German king Henry VI (r. 1169–1197). In order to prevent the Hohenstaufen from taking over of the Norman Kingdom, a faction around the royal chancellor and influential members of the nobility, supported by Pope Clement III (sed. 1187–1191), elevated Tancred of Lecce (r. 1189–1194), an illegitimate grandson of Roger II (r. 1105–1154), to the throne on 18 January 1190. From the beginning, the new king found himself in a delicate situation. Besides having to defend his throne against rivals from the Norman nobility, he had to brace himself against threats from outside. The German king could be expected to assert his wife's claim to the

[7] King, *Dynasties*, pp. 166–186.
[8] Eddé, *Saladin*, pp. 85–89, 251–256; Baadj, Saladin; Baadj, *Saladin*, pp. 111–153, 174–179.
[9] Loud, William the Bad; Pio, *Guglielmo I d'Altavilla*.
[10] Schlichte, *König*, pp. 273–310; Hailstone, *Recalcitrant Crusaders*, pp. 134–148; King, *Dynasties*, pp. 188–189; Murray, From Alexandria to Tinnīs.

Norman throne in Palermo as soon as he had the capacities to launch a military campaign.[11] Moreover, the arrival of the crusading kings of France and England in September 1190 could be expected to cause even more trouble. They had not yet recognized Tancred's claims to the throne, and Richard I of England would likely try to assert the rights of his sister Joan of England (r. 1177–1189), widow of the late William II. In fact, Richard's stay on the island proved to be even worse than expected, as he plundered and burned down parts of Messina on 4 October and occupied the city as his base of operations until April 1191.[12]

[§9] For Sicily's Muslim population, the succession conflicts in 1189–1194 constituted a period of crisis. They were yet another catalysing factor in a long process of deteriorating living conditions. Many of the older community members would still have remembered at that time that the loss of Ifrīqiya to the Almohads in 1160 had caused grave repercussions in Sicily. In 1161, a noble rebellion, led inter alia by the same Tancred of Lecce against the king and the crypto-Muslim functionaries of his court (the so-called "Palace Saracens"), had allowed the existing anti-Muslim sentiments to escalate into dire pogroms throughout Sicily, forcing many families to seek refuge within the crown domain permanently.[13] In Palermo and its environs, the deeds of sale surviving for the years after 1161 attest to a trend in which properties were increasingly bought by Christians while Muslims acted as vendors. It has therefore been assumed that the latter were pushed into certain quarters within the city.[14] Although the reigns of William I and of his son William II did not witness such riots again, the Muslim population was pushed further to the margins of the Latin-Christian dominated society, where they were completely dependent on the king's goodwill. This became particularly evident during the late 1170s and early 1180s, when William II endowed the newly-founded abbey of S. Maria Nuova in Monreale near Palermo with generous estates from the royal demesne in west and central Sicily. The Muslim communities on these lands were now moved from the crown domain to the unfamiliar jurisdiction of Latin-Christian monks—a break with a decades-old tradition.[15]

[§10] Some remarkable observations on the situation of Sicily's Muslims some years before the events of 1189–1190/1191 were recorded by Ibn Ǧubayr (d. 614/1217), a functionary of the Almohad governor of Granada. He was stranded on the island between winter 1184 and spring 1185 during the return journey from his pilgrimage to Mecca. He saw largely functioning Muslim communities in Palermo and other parts of the Western-Sicilian Val di Mazara, where the call to prayer sounded openly from active mosques and Islamic judges (Arab. *qāḍī*, Pl. *quḍāt*)[16] dispensed justice according to the principles of the faith. All this was widely accepted under the rule of William II, a king known for his tolerance towards other faiths. He surrounded himself with a royal household of self-confident crypto-Muslim eunuchs whose adherence to Islam was an open secret. At the same time, the signs of growing oppression were obvious. To buy royal protection, the Muslims had to pay a poll tax similar to the Islamic *ǧizya*,[17] whereas the Friday sermon (Arab. *ḫuṭba*)[18] was restricted to feast days in order to reduce its potential for arousing social unrest. Conversion to Christianity was encouraged by the Christian

[11] Schlichte, *König*, pp. 319–326; Palumbo, *Tancredi*, 113–120; Reisinger, *Tankred von Lecce*, pp. 73–138; Houben, Elezione.
[12] Malý, Two Treaties of Messina.
[13] Fernández-Aceves, *County and Nobility*, pp. 79–104; Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 181–192; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 210–221.
[14] Constable, Cross-Cultural Contracts, p. 84; Metcalfe, *Muslims*, 276; Birk, *Norman Kings*, p. 277; Jäckh, *Raumgeschichte*, pp. 270–276.
[15] Schlichte, *König*, pp. 186–196; Johns, *Arabic Administration*, pp. 151–152; Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 210–214; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 239–243.
[16] Tyan and Káldy Nagy, Ḳāḍī.
[17] Cahen, D̲jizya (i).
[18] Wensinck, K̲hu̲ṭba.

authorities, promising social advancement and thus constituting a constant temptation (Arab. *fitna*),[19] to which many Muslims of the younger generation succumbed.[20]

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§11] Having outlined the backdrop of political events in the southern and central Mediterranean during the 1180s, we can now turn back to the letter sent from al-Mahdiyya to Alexandria and ask why the situation of Sicily's Muslims figured so prominently in it. This will be done in three steps: first, the information given in the letter will be compared to alternative accounts in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the events in Sicily and to ascertain how much the letter's author actually knew about them. Second, it will be discussed why and by whom the information could have been transmitted from Sicily to al-Mahdiyya, and from there to Alexandria. Third, an outlook on the aftermath of the events will answer the question whether the transmission of this news to Ifrīqiya and Egypt ultimately had any repercussions on the situation in Sicily.

[§12] The only surviving source observing the events from an "inner-Sicilian" or at least closely related perspective is the so-called *Epistola ad Petrum*. It was addressed to a Palermitan cleric and written, probably in spring 1190, by an unnamed author well-acquainted with the political situation in Sicily. The identity of this enigmatic person—often referred to as "Hugo Falcandus" according to a sixteenth-century print—remains debated.[21] In his letter, the author deplores the poor relations between Sicily's Christians and Muslims and speaks of a missed opportunity: if both groups would only act in concert and were led by an able king accepted by all, they could very well defend their island against the invasion of the German emperor. Yet, the present crisis left the Christians no other choice than to oppress the Muslims. Since the latter had no [proper] king to fear, they might very well seek revenge for the many injuries received at the hands of the Christians in the past decades. If the Muslims seized Christian fortresses at the coast or in the mountains, the Christians would have to fight against the Germans while fending off attacks by the Muslims. Given their wretched situation, they would only be too happy to join ranks with the foreign invaders. The [Christian] "Sicilians" were thus between the hammer and the anvil.[22] Although these thoughts only allude to the tense situation produced by Tancred's usurpation without referring to specific events, they corroborate the information in the letter from al-Mahdiyya, i.e. that Muslims and Christians were in conflict.

[§13] News about the situation in Sicily also reached the Italian mainland. For the year 1189, the "Annals of Montecassino" (*Annales Casinenses*), written in a monastery some hundred kilometres north of Naples, likewise recorded information on the events. King William II of Sicily had died without leaving heirs or even a testament. In Palermo, strife (*dissensio*) had broken out between the Christians and the Muslims. Many Muslims had been massacred (*strage*

[19] Gardet, Fitna; Birk, Crucible of Faith.
[20] Ibn Ǧubayr, *Riḥla*/*Travels*, ed. Wright and de Goeje, 319–343; Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 214–224; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 243–250.
[21] [Hugo Falcandus], Epistola, ed. D'Angelo; cf. Panarelli, Ancora sullo pseudo Falcando; Engl, Hugo Falcandus.
[22] [Hugo Falcandus], Epistola, ed. D'Angelo, pp. 334–335: "Certe si regem sibi non dubiae uirtutis elegerint nec a Christianis Saraceni dissentiant, poterit rex creatus, rebus licet quasi desperatis et fere perditis, subuenire et incursus hostium, si prudenter egerit, propulsare. (…) At uero, quia difficile est Christianos in tanto rerum turbine, sublato regis timore, Saracenos non opprimere, si Saraceni multis illorum iniuriis fatigati ab eis ceperint dissidere et castella forte maritima uel montanas munitiones occupauerint, ut hinc cum Teutonicis summa sit uirtute pugnandum, illinc Saracenorum crebris insultibus obuiandum, quid putas acturi sunt Siculi inter has depressi angustias, et uelud inter malleum et incudem multo cum discrimine constituti? Hoc utique agent, quod poterunt, ut se barbaris miserabili conditione dedentes in eorum se conferant potestatem. O utinam plebis ac procerum Christianorum et Saracenorum uota conueniant, ut regem sibi concorditer eligentes, irruentes barbaros totis uiribus, toto conanime totisque desideriis proturbare contendant!"

facta) and had left the city to settle in the mountains (*exeunt et inhabitant montana*).[23] Written in the prosaic style typical for monastic annals, this short entry does not provide many details. Yet it reiterates many facts provided in our letter and even suggests a causal connection between the king's death and the rising tensions.

[§14] More news circulating in this region on the northern border of the Norman Kingdom only survives in later accounts. From 1216 onwards, Richard of San Germano (fl. ca. 1165–1244), a public notary and imperial functionary from a town near the monastery of Montecassino, wrote a continuation of the "Annals of Montecassino," which reports on regional political events. Generally reliable and frequently citing sources, a later recension of his chronicle adds interesting details on the events after the death of William II, which stands at the beginning of the chronicle's narrative.[24] The chronicle records that five Muslim "kinglets" (*regulos*) had fled to the nearby mountains (*ad montana confugerant*), "out of fear of the Christians" (*ob metum Christianorum*). After becoming king in January 1190, the chronicle claims, Tancred forced these Muslim leaders to return to Palermo against their will (*coegit inuitos*).[25] Deducing from what we know about the hierarchies within Sicily's Muslim communities, these leading figures were not "kinglets" but members of the communal elite, typically comprising the heads of the most distinguished families (Arab. *šayḫ*, Pl. *šuyūḫ*/*mašāyiḫ*),[26] one or more community leaders (Arab. *qāʾid*, Pl. *quwwād*),[27] and the chief *qāḍī*.[28] In the negotiations about the Muslims' return to Palermo, they had probably taken on the responsibility of representing the claims of the community vis-à-vis Tancred. Although the chronicler asserts that they had been forced to comply against their will, the conditions of the agreement remain unclear.[29]

[§15] Another source may shed light on these negotiations. Roger of Howden (d. 1201), a cleric and court chronicler in service of the Anglo-Norman Crown, accompanied King Richard I on the Third Crusade and thus also spent the winter 1190–1191 in Sicily.[30] According to his two works of historiography—the *Chronicon* and the *Gesta regis Ricardi*—the year 1190 saw more than 100,000 "pagan men" (*paganorum virorum*) retreat to the mountains (*abierunt in montana*) with their wives, children, and livestock. Former servants (*servi*) of the late king William, they had been unwilling (*indignati*) to serve Tancred, whose kingship was contested by the German emperor and whose realm had been invaded by the King of England. Having settled in their refuge, they did much harm to the Christians (Gesta: *multa* [*mala*] *fecerunt*; Chronica: *opprimentes Christianos, et multa mala eis facientes*). But when they heard that peace and concord between Tancred and Richard I had been restored, they reverted to servitude (*redierunt in servitutem*) under Tancred and provided hostages (*obsidibus*) as a guarantee for maintaining peace (Chronica: *de pace servanda*). Returning to their old homes, they continued to cultivate the land as they had done in the reign of William II.[31] Although the number of Muslim refugees

[23] *Annales Casinenses*, ed. Pertz (MGH SS 19), p. 314, ad a. 1189: "Wilielmus rex Siciliae sine liberis et testamento moritur. Panormi oritur inter christianos et Sarracenos dissensio; Sarraceni multa suorum strage facta, exeunt et inhabitant montana."

[24] Hamm, *Chronik*.

[25] Richard of San Germano, *Chronicon*, ed. Garufi, pp. 8–9: "Qui postquam assumptus est laborauit pro uiribus qualiter regni fines in pace disponeret et sibi, rebelles et aduersarios subiugaret. Et primum quidem quinque Sarracenorum Regulos, qui ob metum christanorum ad montana confugerant, de montanis ipsis Panorum redire coegit inuitos; (…)."

[26] Geoffroy, Shaykh.

[27] Colin, Ḳāʾid.

[28] Tyan and Káldy Nagy, Ḳāḍī; cf. Nef, *Conquérir et gouverner*, pp. 463–586.

[29] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, p. 276 interprets Richard of San Germano's account as if Tancred could have exempted the Muslims from paying the head tax and bribed them with money from the royal treasury. This is not backed up by the exact wording, however, cf. Birk, *Norman Kings*, p. 267 and Engl, *Verdrängte Kultur*, p. 72 FN 272.

[30] Gillingham; Writing the Biography; Gillingham, Roger of Howden.

[31] Roger of Howden, Gesta Regis Ricardi, ed. Stubbs, p. 141: "Eodem anno, plusquam centum millia paganorum virorum ac mulierum, qui in regno Siciliæ erant servi Willelmi regis Siciliæ, post mortem ejus indignati sunt

given by Roger is certainly exaggerated many times over, his account confirms the details given in the other sources. Similar to the Annals of Montecassino, he connects the events to the death of William II, confirms our letter's statement about the Muslims' fear of a foreign army, and anticipates Richard of San Germano's report that Tancred ultimately succeeded in forcing them to return to Palermo.

[§16] The Muslim uprising can be observed from four alternative perspectives in addition to the one provided by our letter. Notwithstanding this, many aspects of the events remain unclear. While we can infer that the revolt must have started sometime after the death of William II on 18 November 1189, we can only speculate on the motives behind it. It might be reasonable to agree with the author of the *Epistola ad Petrum* that Muslim discontent had increased in view of their deteriorating living conditions—an observation already made by Ibn Ǧubayr during his visit in 1184–1185. According to the "Annals of Montecassino," a new wave of Christian mob violence in Palermo provided the igniting spark in a chaotic situation marked by the king's death and the imminent usurpation of Tancred. One should keep in mind that he was one of the ringleaders of the 1161 massacres who was not yet in the position and probably not inclined to maintain the crown's protection of its Muslim subjects. Moreover, preparations for the Third Crusade were already in full swing, also in Sicily. This might have increased the potential for confrontation between the island's religious communities. In such an unpredictable and explosive situation, the leaders of Palermo's Muslims—the "kinglets" mentioned by Richard of San Germano—probably found it reasonable to move their community to an autonomous and easily defendable mountain retreat until the situation had calmed down. Roger of Howden claims that violence between Christians and Muslims continued after the Muslims' retreat. A later, somewhat elusive reference to damage done during the past insurgence (*seditio*) in the diocese of Agrigento, far in the island's southwest, may corroborate this.[32]

[§17] Eventually, the uprising ended when Tancred was in the position to compel the Muslim leaders to surrender. According to Richard of San Germano, this was the case already shortly after his accession to the throne in January 1190. If we believe Roger of Howden, Tancred first had to reach an understanding with Richard I of England. However, it is unclear if he refers to the first treaty concluded on 6 October 1190, or the second and final agreement reached on 4 March 1191.[33] Despite this ambiguity, his version seems much more credible than that of Richard of San Germano, especially with regard to the conditions under which the Muslims agreed to return to Palermo. According to Richard, Tancred "forced" the Muslims to return "against their will." According to Roger, Tancred convinced them to come back by vowing to grant royal protection to the community, thus offering a return to the legal status they had enjoyed before 1189. Confronted with zealous English and French crusader forces and the imminent invasion of Henry VI's army, it seems plausible that both sides were ready to make concessions.[34]

[§18] Against this backdrop, it is possible to assert that the information conveyed in our letter from al-Mahdiyya is fully corroborated by the other accounts at our disposal. All sources agree that the Muslims had taken refuge in the mountains. The arriving "army of the Franks" (*ʿaskar al-Faranǧ*) feared by the Muslims can probably not be identified with the imperial army of

servire regi Tancredo, tum quia rex Alemannorum calumniatus est regnum Siciliæ, tum quia rex Angliæ infestavit regem Tancredum: et abierunt in montana cum mulieribus, cum filiis et filiabus et pecoribus suis, et habitaverunt ibi, et multa [mala] fecerunt Christianis. Sed cum audissent quod pax et finalis concordia esset inter regem Angliæ et regem Tancredum, redierunt in servitutem Tancredi; et datis ei obsidibus reversi sunt in domos suas, colentes terram sicut consueverant." Almost identical: Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, ed. Stubbs, vol. 3, p. 69.

[32] *Die Register Innocenz' III.*, vol. 1, ed. Hageneder and Haidacher, ep. 180, p. 268 (12 May 1198).

[33] Malý, Two Treaties of Messina.

[34] Cf. also Metcalfe, *Muslims*, 276; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 266–272; Engl, *Verdrängte Kultur*, pp. 65–76; Engl/Jäckh, Muslims, pp. 43–44; Jäckh, *Raumgeschichte*, pp. 277–278.

Henry VI but rather with the English crusaders under Richard I. Considering that our letter conveyed only these two vague facts, one could infer that its author was not particularly well-informed about the events. There is of course the possibility that al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil paraphrased only those pieces of information he deemed most useful to Saladin while omitting the rest. But given that Sicily was a hub for Latin Europe's crusading armies, any news from the island was of potential importance. Consequently, it is quite likely that al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil faithfully transmitted all significant details contained in the original letter. The lack of information on the further course and final outcome of the uprising can be clearly explained with reference to the letter's dating. Although neither of the alternative accounts allows to draw definite conclusions on the exact timeframe for the events, it is quite likely that the uprising had not yet ended when the letter was written in July 1190. At this time, the English and French crusaders had already departed from France but were expected to reach Sicily no earlier than in late September. Only after Tancred had come to terms with Richard I, either in October 1190 or in March 1191, was he able to increase pressure on the Muslim rebels and ultimately force them to surrender. In the summer of 1190, these events were still unpredictable.

[§19] The available amount of knowledge obviously depends on the observer's position and perspective. This perspective, conveyed in the letter, allows us to turn to the question of who could have transmitted the news from Sicily to al-Mahdiyya, and from there to Alexandria. Since the Qāḍī al-Fāḍil did not reveal the identity of his informant to Saladin, all considerations about the letter's authorship remain speculative. Judging from the range of observations on the Almohad campaign against Toledo, a political prisoner sent to the caliph by a Mamlūk from modern-day Libya, the uprising in Sicily, and the interaction between Genoese merchants and the governor of al-Mahdiyya, the correspondent was well-informed about the affairs of the Almohad realm and probably belonged to the political elite of al-Mahdiyya. Unfortunately, his relations to al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, Saladin, and other members of the Ayyūbid elite in Alexandria remain as elusive as the reasons and motivations behind his letter.

[§20] How he had gained access to the news about Sicily is also a matter of speculation. Rumours and possibly precise information about the Muslims' retreat to the mountains and the coming of a Frankish army were probably widely diffused among members of different social groups connecting Sicily with North Africa. These include travelling merchants, Almohad informants on the island, or even Sicilian-Muslim refugees seeking shelter in al-Mahdiyya. Since the letter emphasizes that the Muslim insurgents feared the coming Frankish army,[35] their leaders may have sent envoys and letters to Ifrīqiya to seek help from the Almohads. This hypothesis can be supported by some cases before 1189 when Sicilian Muslims corresponded and interacted with possible allies in North Africa: in 1166, Peter/Barrūn, the chief crypto-Muslim functionary and close advisor of the Queen Regent Margaret (r. 1166–1171), had become so entangled in faction conflicts amongst Christian court functionaries that he feared for his life. With his entourage and, possibly, a part of the royal treasure, he defected to Tunis, where he openly reverted to Islam under the name Aḥmad al-Ṣiqillī. Somewhat later, he entered the service of the Almohad caliph in his previous profession of navy commander, where we can still find him in 1185.[36] Others did not go so far: Abū l-Qāsim Muḥammad b. Ḥammūd b. al-

[35] "(…), wa-anna ʿaskar al-faranǧ ḫarağa li-l-inǧād aṣḥābihim bi-Ṣiqilliyya wa-l-muslimūn bihā ʿalā tawaqquʿ wa-raqba, wa-ḥiḏār wa-ḫifa, (…)".

[36] On Peter/Barrūn's defection see [Hugo Falcandus], *De rebus circa regni Siciliae curiam gestis*, ed. D'Angelo, pp. 210–213 and Romuald of Salerno, *Chronicon*, ed. Garufi, p. 254; on Aḥmad al-Ṣiqillī: Ibn Ḫaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, ed. al-Šaddādī, vol. 2, pp. 31–32, Ibn Ḫaldūn, *Tārīḫ*, ed. Zakkār and Šaḥāda, vol. 6, pp. 254, 327. The connection between both has already been noticed by Amari, *Storia*, vol. 3/2, pp. 505–506 and is still widely accepted today. On his career in general, see Johns, *Arabic Administration*, pp. 222–228; Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 174–175, 197–198, 200–203; Nef, *Conquérir*, pp. 330, 335–336, 341, 611–613, 616–618; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 182–184, 211–112, 223–226.

Ḥağar, one of the most influential Muslim figures on the island with a high reputation in many Muslim communities and likewise good connections to the royal court, relied on written correspondence. In 1175, he asked the visiting traveller ʿAlī al-Harawī, then about to leave Sicily for Egypt, whether he was willing to deliver letters to Saladin, calling on the latter to consider reconquering the island for Islam. However, al-Harawī's ship capsised on the journey to the effect that he lost most of the documents he had carried with him. Thus, Abū l-Qāsim's letters might have never reached their addressee.[37] Despite this setback, he might have stuck to the long-term goal of enlisting external help to free Sicily's Muslims from the Christian yoke: during his meeting with Ibn Ǧubayr in early 1185, he lamented that he had fallen out of favour with the king because his enemies had spread "untrue stories, including that of [him] corresponding with the Almohads" (*aḥādīṯ muzawwara nasabūhu fīhā ilā muḫāṭabat al-muwaḥḥidīn*). Although such an act of high treason would have cost him his head, the King had contented himself with imposing a heavy fine on Abū l-Qāsim, confiscating his properties, and placing him under house arrest. Although William II had taken him back in his favour and assigned him a post at court, Abū l-Qāsim nevertheless felt like having been reduced to slavery.[38] Such evidence allows us to envision contacts between Sicilian Muslims and Ifrīqiya involving such persons as Abū l-Qāsim and Aḥmad al-Ṣiqillī who pursued the goal of working against the recent Almohad-Sicilian rapprochement initiated by the truce of 1181.[39] In any case, Ibn Ǧubayr's account of his meeting with Abū l-Qāsim makes clear that he met a disempowered leading figure who had been economically, politically, and psychologically broken—not only because he had been humiliated by the king but also because of the constant pressure to convert to Christianity.[40] It might thus well be possible that Abū l-Qāsim had taken a leading role during the Muslim uprising in 1189–1190/1191, but his life after 1185 remains a complete enigma.[41]

[§21] Neither the Ayyūbids nor the Almohads were in the position to support Sicily's Muslims, at least not to an extent significant enough to be mentioned in the sources presented above. The diplomatic rapprochement between both North African powers reached its climax in January 1191 when a high-ranking Ayyūbid delegation travelled to Ifrīqiya to negotiate with the caliph, Yaʿqūb al-Manṣūr. When its chief ambassador returned to Alexandria on 11 July 1191, a day before the fall of Acre to the Franks and crusaders, he was unable to fulfil Saladin's high hopes for Maghrebi reinforcements.[42] After another year of warfare, the Third Crusade ended with the Treaty of Jaffa in September 1192 while the Ayyūbid Near East entered a new political era upon Saladin's death in March 1193.[43] In the West, the struggle for dominance between the Almohads and the Banū Ġāniyya coalition intensified again in 1195 and continued to shake

[37] Al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-Išārāt*, ed. Meri, cap. 4–5, pp. 142–143: "wa-aḥsana hāḏā l-qāʾid ilayya wa-kataba maʿī kutuban ilā l-sulṭān taḥuṯṯuhu ʿalā aḫḏ hāḏihi l-ǧazīra wa-ġariqa l-markab ʿinda ḫurūǧī min hāḏihi l-ǧazīra (…)".
[38] Ibn Ǧubayr, *Riḥla/Travels*, ed. Wright and De Goeje, p. 341: "wa-kāna fī hāḏihi l-mudda taḥta hiǧrān min hāḏā l-ṭāġiya alzamahu dārahu bi-muṭālaba tawaǧǧahat ʿalayhi min aʿdāʾihi iftaraw ʿalayhi fīhā aḥādīṯ muzawwara nasabūhu fīhā ilā muḫāṭabat al-muwaḥḥidīn ayyadahum Allāh fa-kādat taqaḍḍā ʿalayhi lawlā ḥāris al-mudda wa-tawālat ʿalayhi muṣādarāt aġramathu nayyifan ʿalā l-ṯalāṯīn alf dīnār muʾminiyya wa-lam yazal yataḫallā ʿan ǧamīʿ diyārihi wa-amlākihi l-mawrūṯa ʿan salafihi ḥattā baqiya dūna māl fa-ttafaqa fī hāḏihi l-ayyām raḍiyā l-ṭāġiya ʿanhu wa-amarahu bi-l-nufūḏ al-muhimm min ašġālihi l-sulṭāniya fa-nafaḏa lahā nufūḏa l-mamlūk al-maġlūb ʿalā nafsihi wa-mālihi (…)".
[39] Cf. Metcalfe, *Muslims*, p. 220.
[40] Ibn Ǧubayr, *Riḥla/Travels*, ed. Wright and De Goeje, pp. 341–342.
[41] Johns, *Arabic Administration*, pp. 35, 133, 206, 234–242, 252–254, 289–290, 292; Metcalfe, *Muslims*, 205, 209, 215–221; Nef, *Conquérir*, 324–326, 344–346; Birk, *Norman Kings*, 248–249.
[42] Möhring, *Saladin*, pp. 192–209; Eddé, *Saladin*, pp. 255–256; Baadj, Saladin, 276–278; Baadj, *Saladin*, pp. 149–153.
[43] Möhring, *Saladin*, pp. 210–217; Lyons and Jackson, *Saladin*, pp. 331–363; Eddé, *Saladin*, pp. 262–270, 360–363.

Ifrīqiya into the first decades of the thirteenth century, when the Almohads gradually lost grip on al-Andalus.[44]

[§22] In Sicily, Tancred of Lecce further consolidated his rule: in March 1191, his kingship was officially recognized by the kings of England and France. In summer of the same year, a first military campaign of Henry VI's imperial army failed before the walls of Naples while Tancred succeeded in taking the empress Constance as prisoner temporarily. In 1192, these successes brought him official recognition by Pope Coelestin III (sed. 1191–1198) and others. However, his reign proved to be as short-lived as it had been turbulent when he died already in February 1194. His widow, Sibylla of Acerra (r. 1189–1194), governing for their underage son William III (r. 1194) was unable to resist the imperial army invading the kingdom for a second time already in the summer of the same year. On Christmas Day 1194, Henry VI and his wife Constance were crowned King and Queen of Sicily, which from now on would form part of the Hohenstaufen empire in the *unio regni ad imperium*.[45] The island's Muslims seem to have largely abided by the agreement reached in 1190/1191, as we have no knowledge of any further conflicts on a comparable scale. In 1194, Muslim contingents even participated in battle against the imperial coalition, thus connecting to a tradition of Muslims fighting in Norman armies established more than 130 years ago.[46]

[§23] The Hohenstaufen takeover does not seem to have changed the situation significantly, as Henry VI and Constance apparently respected the existing rights and privileges of Sicily's non-Christian communities.[47] During an ephemeral revolt against the emperor in 1197, Latins, Greeks, and Muslims alike rallied in common "Sicilian" support of Constance.[48] After her husband's death in the same year, the daughter of Roger II of Sicily began emphasising her Norman heritage by attempting to revive the Arabic chancery practice in the royal *dīwān*, which had seen its heyday between c. 1130–1189. While the original role model for the production of documents had been the Fāṭimid chancery, Constance's functionaries now apparently turned to the Almohad court for inspiration.[49] Upon her death in November 1198, however, parts of Western Sicily's Muslim population made use of the political chaos during the minority of her son Frederick II (r. 1198–1250) and rose in rebellion again. This time, they managed to assert independence for more than two decades, even establishing communication channels to both the papacy and the Almohads.[50] Only when Frederick had consolidated his rule over the Hohenstaufen empire and had been crowned emperor himself was he in a position to subject Western Sicily to his control. Unable to find a sustainable agreement by diplomatic measures, the emperor—widely known and even condemned for maintaining his own good relations to the Ayyūbids and Almohads and being unduly fond of Arabic-Islamic culture[51] – resorted to an

[44] Baadj, *Saladin*, pp. 154–173, 179–191; García Fitz, Batalla.

[45] Palumbo, *Tancredi*, 125–207; Reisinger, *Tankred von Lecce*, pp. 138–184; Ertl, Regierungsantritt.

[46] Ottobonus Scriba, Annales Ianuenses, ed. Belgrano and Sant'Angelo, pp. 50–51: "(…), Ianuenses cum exercitu suo uersus Cathanensium ciuitatem, que reddiderat se et impugnabatur a Sarracenis et exercitu reginae uxoris quondam regis Tanclerii, tenuerunt, et Sarracenorum exercitum inde eiecerunt de campo et fugauerunt." Cf. Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 33–66.

[47] Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, ed. Stubbs, vol. 3, pp. 269–270: "Venerunt etiam ad prædictum Romanorum imperatorem omnes pagani et Judæi qui erant in regno Siciliæ, et satisfacientes illi remanserunt in regno, unusquisque in locum suum, sub ea conditione qua ante fuerat."

[48] *Ignoti Monachi Cisterciensis S. Mariae de Ferraria Chronica*, ed. Gaudenzi, p. 32: "(…) Siculi, tam latini quam greci et sarraceni, rebellati sunt omnes contra imperatorem." In general on the situation after 1194, cf. Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 272–279; Engl, Der lange Weg in den Süden; Engl, *Verdrängte Kultur*, pp. 76–78.

[49] This hypothesis rests on a single bilingual privilege from 1198 whose Arabic part resembles an Almohad *ẓahīr*: Jamil and Johns, New Latin-Arabic Document. On the royal dīwān in general, see extensively Johns, *Arabic Administration*.

[50] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 277–278; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 279–286; Engl, *Verdrängte Kultur*, pp. 78–92; Smit, Increase.

[51] Hann von Weyhern, 1245: Matthaeus Parisiensis.

iron fist policy. In a series of military campaigns between 1223–1246/1247, he reconquered the rebel territories and deported Sicily's entire Muslim population to Lucera on the Apulian mainland.[52] While the more than 400 year-long history of Muslim presence on Sicily had thus reached its abrupt end, this artificial colony in an alien environment survived for another six decades. In 1300, however, Charles II of Anjou (r. 1285–1309) gave in to papal exhortations and forcibly dissolved the community by massacring, enslaving, or displacing its inhabitants.[53]

[§24] The Muslim uprising of 1189–1190/1191 only represented a small stepping-stone in these long-term developments. Although it can be regarded as a large-scale and violent climax to the social tensions growing since 1161, it proved to be a rather ephemeral episode, elusive to modern analysis because it left only very few traces in the sources within Sicily and beyond. However, our letter from al-Mahdiyya proves that events on the island were noted and discussed in nearby Almohad Ifrīqiya as well as in rather distant Ayyūbid Egypt and Syria. This was a particularly turbulent period on many shores of the Mediterranean. Norman Sicily entered its final critical years before the Hohenstaufen takeover; Almohad Ifrīqiya was torn apart in civil war; and the Syrian Levant once more became the battlefield of a major crusade. Against this backdrop, spectators in the Muslim world apparently perceived the events on the island not as outstanding but rather as yet another crisis, locally confined but nevertheless connected to the wider developments in the Mediterranean. As al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil's report to Saladin implies, Sicily's Muslims fought on their own front against the "Franks," just as did the Almohads on the Iberian Peninsula, and the Ayyūbids in Syria. As each of them had to focus on their own theatre of war, Sicily's Muslims were left on their own for the time being.

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[52] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 278–287; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 286–290; Engl, Religionskonflikt; Engl, Muslimische Perspektiven, pp. 185–196; Engl, Verdrängte Kultur, pp. 93–195.

[53] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, pp. 277–278, 287–294; Birk, *Norman Kings*, pp. 303–317, Engl, *Verdrängte Kultur*, pp. 197–297; Engl, 1269: Unterwerfung; Engl, Resilienz; Engl, Muslimische Perspektiven, pp. 196–202.

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