840–866: al-Balāḏurī on Muslim Control over Bari

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Abstract: This article discusses the establishment of Muslim control over Bari (ca. 225/840 or 232/847) as reported in al-Balāḏurī's (d. 279/892) *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān*, the earliest extant account to document the enterprise from a Muslim perspective. Drawing on this source, the commentary explores the history of Muslim-ruled Bari, the likely backgrounds and affiliations of its rulers, and their efforts at administrative consolidation, especially under Sawdān (d. after 871). It also considers Sawdān's interactions with Christian and Jewish actors, as well as Bari's wider geopolitical context, including Frankish–Byzantine attempts to reclaim the city. While Arabic-Islamic texts only give a cursory narrative of this short-lived episode, southern Italian historiography has long emphasised its regional significance. Taken together, the case of Bari illustrates Christian–Muslim entanglements through warfare, migration, and diplomacy in the ninth-century central Mediterranean.

Source

Al-Balāḏurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. Michael J. de Goeje, Leiden: Brill, 1866, § 274–275, pp. 234–235; transl. adapted from: *The Origins of the Islamic State*, transl. Philip K. Hitti, New York: Longmans, 1916, pp. 371–372.

وبالمغرب ارض تعرف بالارض الكبيرة وبينها وبين برقة مسيرة خمسة عشر يوماً او اقلّ من ذلك قليلاً او اكثر قليلاً وبها مدينة على شاطئ البحر تدعى بارة وكان اهلها نصارى وليسوا بروم غزاها حبلة مولى الاغلب فلم يقدر عليها، ثم غزاها خلفون البربري ويقال انّه مولى لربيعة ففتحها في اوّل خلافة المتوكّل على الله.

There lies in *al-Maġrib* [lit. "the west"] a land known as *al-arḍ al-kabīra* [lit. "the big land", i.e. Italy], situated at a distance of fifteen days, more or less, from Barqa [i.e. Cyrenaica, Libya]. In it lies a city on the coast, called Bāra [Bari], whose inhabitants were Christians, but not Romans [*al-Rūm*, i.e. "(Eastern) Romans" or "Byzantines"]. This city was attacked by Ḥabla, the *mawla* [client] of al-Aġlab, who failed to take control it. It was later attacked by Ḫalfūn al-Barbarī, said to have been a client of the Rabīʿa tribe, who captured it in the early part of al-Mutawakkil's (r. 232–247/847–861) caliphate.

وقام بعده رجل يقال له المفرّج ابن سلّام ففتح اربعة وعشرون حصناً واستولى عليها وكتب الى صاحب البريد بمصر يعلمه خبره وانّه لا يرى لنفسه صلاة ومن معه من المسلمين صلاة الّا بان يعقد لَه الامام على ناحيته ويولّيه ايّاها ليخرج من حدّ المتغلّبينوبنى وبني

After Ḫalfūn there arose a man called al-Mufarrağ b. Sallām who conquered and brought under his control twenty-four forts. He then wrote to the Master of the post (*ṣāḥib al-barīd*) in Egypt, and informed him about what had happened and that he did not consider the (public) prayer as valid for himself nor for the Muslims with him, unless the imām [i.e. the caliph] appointed him over his district and officially appointed him to rule over it, so that he may not be included in the category of

مسجداً جامعاً، ثم إنّ أصحابه شغبوا عليه فقتلوه.

usurpers, and he erected a congregational mosque. Finally, his men rose up against him and killed him.

وقام بعده سوران (sic) فوجّه رسوله الى امير المومنين (sic) المتوكّل على الله يسئله (sic) عقداً وكتاب ولاية فتوفّي قبل ان ينصرف رسوله اليه، وتوفّي المنتصر بالله وكانت خلافته ستّة اشهر، وقام المستعين بالله احمد بن محمّد بن المعتصم بالله فامر عامله على المغرب وهو اوتامش مولى امير المومنين بان يعقد له على ناحيته فلم يشخص رسوله من سرّ من راى (sic) حتّى قتل اوتامش وولى الناحية وصيف مولى امير المومنين فعقد له وانفذه.

He was followed by Sawrān [corr. Sawdān] who sent his messenger to al-Mutawakkil ʿalā llāh, the Commander of the Believers (*amīr al-muʾminīn*), asking for a confirmation and a letter of appointment to a governorship. He (al-Mutawakkil), however, died before his messenger departed with the message to him [Sawdān]. Al-Muntaṣir bi-llāh (r. 247–248/861–862) died after holding the caliphate for six months. Then came al-Mustaʿīn bi-llāh Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Muʿtaṣim bi-llāh (r. 248–252/862–866) who ordered his governor (*ʿāmil*) over *al-Maġrib*—this was Ūtāmiš, a *mawla* (client) of the Commander of the Believers—to confirm him [Sadrān]; but no sooner had the messenger started from Surra-man-rāʾa [i.e. Samarra], that Ūtāmiš was slain. That region was governed by Waṣīf, a *mawla* (client) of the Commander of the Believers who confirmed him [Sawdān] in his position.

Authorship & Work

[§1] Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Balāḏurī is one of the most important historiographers and genealogists of the third/ninth century. It is generally assumed that he was born no later than the second decade of the ninth century and died around 279/892. Of Persian descent, al-Balāḏurī is said to have derived his name from his frequent consumption of the marking nut (Arab. *al-balāḏur*, Lat. *semecarpus anacardium*), which was thought to enhance memory.[1] He spent most of his life in and around Baghdad, where he maintained close ties with the ʿAbbāsid court. Al-Balāḏurī enjoyed close relations with the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861), whom he served as secretary (*kātib*) and court companion (*nadīm*) and whose patronage enhanced his reputation and status.[2]

[§2] During his years of study, al-Balāḏurī learned from the great historiographers of his time, such as Ibn Saʿd (ca. 168–230/784–845), the author of a biographical history (*ṭabaqāt*) that played a decisive role in the development of this historiographical genre. Ibn Saʿd combined elements of prophetic biography (*al-sīra al-nabawiyya*) with accounts of the military campaigns and conquests of Muḥammad (*al-maġāzī*),[3] and appears to have influenced al-Balāḏurī's approach to history considerably. The latter's unfinished "Genealogies of Noble Men" (*Ansāb al-ašrāf*) is a biographical history that begins with the life of Muḥammad and extends into al-Balāḏurī's own era, with a particular focus on leading figures of the Umayyad dynasty.

[§3] Al-Balāḏurī's second major work spans the same chronological framework as the *Ansāb al-ašrāf* and focuses on the history of the Muslim conquests. The final form of his "Book on the Conquest of the Lands" (*Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān*) can probably be dated to the mid-250s/late

[1] Bos, Balādhur.
[2] Lynch, *Arab Conquests*, p. 14.
[3] Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, pp. 95–96.

860s,[4] although the extant work is merely an abridged version of a more detailed account under the same title which has not been preserved. The title, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān*, is programmatic in that the author organised the history of the Muslim expansion strictly by geographical regions and administrative provinces. In this, he followed the descriptive conventions of Islamic geographers. Consequently, al-Balāḏurī kept historical narrative at a minimum, so that individuals and events are often presented without being connected to each other in a coherent manner.

[§4] It must be noted, however, that the author's intention was likely not limited to simply documenting military expansion. The text also addresses the transformations set in motion by the conquests, such as gradual replacement of Greek and Persian with Arabic as the primary language of administration. Indeed, as Ryan Lynch has recently argued, the *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān* should not be viewed merely as a source for the history of the military conquests of the early Islamic period, but also as a kind of administrative handbook for the ʿAbbāsid administration. Lynch thus calls for a reassessment of the work's genre, proposing that it be understood not as "conquest literature" in the narrow sense, but as part of a broader textual tradition that discusses issues of taxation, geographical and administrative divisions, and their legal basis.[5] Given al-Balāḏurī's close links to the caliphal court, it seems reasonable to assume that the work was compiled with a solid understanding of bureaucracy, legal precedent, fiscal records, and territorial arrangements dating to the conquest period. This reflects the complexities of managing a vast empire that was, as the Bari episode illustrates, increasingly fragmented.

Content & Context

[§5] The *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān* begins with the Muslim takeover of the Arabian Peninsula and proceeds to cover the conquests in the regions of Syria, Armenia, then Egypt, North Africa up to al-Andalus, followed by Iraq and Ǧibāl as well as Azerbaijan, Persia, Khorasan, and Sind. The conquest of Bari, located in Apulia at the heel of the southern Italian peninsula, appears in the part that deals with the province of Ifrīqiya. To be precise, the entry on Bari comes after a very brief report on the conquest of al-Andalus, and the description of how Ibrāhīm b. al-Aġlab (r. 184–196/800–812) founded the Aġlabid capital al-ʿAbbāsiyya. In terms of geography, al-Balāḏurī locates Bari "as a city on the coast" in *al-arḍ al-kabīra* [lit. "the big land", i.e. Italy], which he understands as a part of al-Maġrib, that is the Muslim-ruled West consisting of the lands along the southern Mediterranean coast west of Egypt. Indeed, al-Balāḏurī even further specifies Bari's position by reference to its distance from Barqa (Cyrenaica, Libya), which he estimates as a journey of approximately fifteen days. The account on Bari is immediately followed by the section on the Mediterranean islands, beginning with the Muslim conquest of Byzantine Sicily, which had begun in 211/827 under Aġlabid leadership from Ifrīqiya.[6]

[§6] Al-Balāḏurī does not provide explicit dates for the events that took place in Bari, but anchors them indirectly through references to its local Muslim rulers—whose chronology can only be established with the help of Latin accounts—and the reigning ʿAbbāsid caliphs, namely al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861), al-Muntaṣir bi-llāh (r. 247–248/861–862), and al-Mustaʿīn bi-llāh (r. 248–252/862–866). Based on the latter, we can infer that the events cover a span from approximately 232/847 until before 252/866. This phase, we are told, began with a failed attempt to conquer Bari by a certain Ḥabla, followed by the city's capture under Ḫalfūn[7] and the establishment of rule by Mufarrağ b. Sallām. The latter is said to have brought twenty-

[4] Lynch, *Arab Conquests*, p. 10.
[5] Lynch, *Arab Conquests*, pp. 151–187.
[6] Talbi, *L'Émirat*, pp. 385–386; Nef, Reinterpreting; Jäckh, 827: Chronicon Salernitanum; Jäckh, 827: al-Nuwayrī.
[7] Di Branco, Strategie, p. 155.

four additional outposts under his control. He also commissioned the construction of a Friday Mosque and eventually sought formal recognition from Caliph al-Mutawakkil in Baghdad. However, Mufarrağ was apparently killed due to unrest amongst his supporters, and al-Mutawakkil also died before such a confirmation could be issued. Rule in Bari then passed to Sawdān, who was granted the title of *wālī* (governor) under the caliphate of al-Mustaʿīn (r. 248–252/862–866). Of lesser relevance to the situation in Bari, but of importance to the ʿAbbāsid centre, are the references to Ūtāmiš (d. 255/869) and Waṣīf (d. 256/870), two prominent Turkish military commanders and court officials who rose to power as part of the emerging slave-soldier elite under the ʿAbbāsid caliphs in the ninth century. Both served as influential political figures during the turbulent period following al-Mutawakkil's assassination in 247/861 before they themselves were killed in ongoing power struggles.[8]

[§7] We can assume that al-Balāḏurī, given his close connections to the ʿAbbāsid court, obtained his information about Bari from his contacts with the administrative elites. This proximity to political circles enhances the significance of the passage. Given that al-Balādhurī frames the events in Bari with reference to successive caliphs, concluding with al-Mustaʿīn, it is probable that the account was written prior to the ruler's death in 252/866. This inference is supported by the fact that the account contains no reference to the decline or collapse of Muslim power in Bari: Only five years later, in 871, the city was overthrown by a Frankish-Byzantine alliance, Sawdān was taken prisoner, and Muslim rule in Bari came to an end.

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§8] Al-Balāḏurī's brief report gains particular importance as the only surviving contemporary Arabic-Islamic account, and possibly the earliest overall, on Muslim rule in Bari. The analysis that follows uses al-Balāḏurī's narrative as a point of departure to explore three interrelated dimensions of the episode: first, the broader context of Muslim expansion across the central Mediterranean (§§ 9–11); second, the internal processes of governance and legitimisation in Bari, with particular attention to the background of its rulers (§§ 12–18); and third, the forms of interreligious interaction from warfare to diplomacy that emerged in the Apulian frontier zone during this period (§§ 19–23).

[§9] Scholarship on the Muslim presence in Bari has often focused on whether the city operated as a small autonomous emirate[9] or under the authority of the Aġlabids in North Africa.[10] While Giosuè Musca described Bari as an autonomous emirate, reckoning that the Aġlabid emirs were antagonised by the ethnic, i.e. Amazigh origin of Bari's rulers,[11] Alex Metcalfe and Di Branco argued that the Muslim rulers of southern Italy should best be understood as "warlord adventurers" who acted independently of Aġlabid directives.[12] From a broader geopolitical perspective, however, the Muslim advance into southern Italy appears closely tied to the conquest of Sicily, which was initiated in 211/827 and driven by Aġlabid ambitions to extend their authority across the sea. In the following decades, Sicily served as a launchpad for further naval and military activity on the Italian mainland.[13] Indeed, the *Chronicon Salernitanum*, composed in the second half of the tenth century, holds that "the Agarenes [i.e. the Muslims] made an expedition and went to Calabria, raiding places around it." It further records that "they came to Taranto and captured it immediately; then they went to Apulia and depopulated almost

[8] Gordon, *Breaking*.
[9] Musca, *L'emirato*, p. 51.
[10] Talbi, *L'Émirat*, pp. 443–459; Marazzi, Geopolitica.
[11] Musca, *L'emirato*, p. 51.
[12] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, p. 20; Di Branco, Strategie.
[13] Di Branco and Wolf, Hindered Passages.

all cities".[14] From the Muslims' perspective, Ibn al-Aṯīr (d. 630/1233) reports for the year 225/839–840 that "many Sicilian strongholds surrendered to the Muslims," and adds that "a Muslim fleet sailed to Calabria and took it."[15] Although or perhaps because the *Chronicon* and Ibn al-Aṯīr's history were written in retrospective, they link the incearsing number of Muslim attacks on the mainland directly to the Muslim conquest of Sicily, possibly interpreting the Apulian incursions as part of a broader Aġlabid strategy.

[§10] Another geopolitical dimension and, indeed, a driver of Muslim expansion into southern Italy was the fractured and highly competitive political landscape of the region in the mid-ninth century. Al-Balāḏurī notes that the inhabitants of Bari were Christians, but not to be classified as *al-Rūm* (i.e. East Romans or Byzantines). This may indicate his awareness that, from the late eighth century onward, the city was increasingly pulled into the expanding Langobard sphere of influence, while southern Apulia remained under Byzantine control.[16] The Langobards, however, became entangled in conflicts with local rivals whilst also struggling with internal discord. This ultimately led to the fragmentation of the principality of Benevento in 839.[17] This conflict is captured in the late ninth- to earlier tenth-century *Chronica Sancti Benedicti Casinensis* and the later tenth-century *Historia Langobardorum Beneventanorum* of Erchempert (d. after 889). Both connect the arrival of Muslim forces in southern Italy to the outbreak of the so-called Langobard civil war, following the assassination of Prince Sicard of Benevento (r. 832–839) and the subsequent division of the principality. This saw the rise of Radelchis as duke of Benevento (r. 839–851) and the proclamation of Siconulf, brother of the murdered Sicard, as prince of Salerno (r. 839–849).[18] Indeed, the *Chronica Sancti Benedicti* and Erchempert suggest that the fall of Bari was a direct consequence of this struggle—specifically, of Radelchis's decision to employ Muslim troops in his fight against Siconulf.[19] While it is well established that Muslim forces were hired as mercenaries during this conflict, this narrative also serves a moralising function, portraying internal Langobard strife as the cause of Muslim incursions.

[§11] Both the Sicilian–central Mediterranean and the south Italian contexts suggest that Muslim activity in the region should not be interpreted as a centrally planned or coordinated strategy. Rather, a confluence of factors likely operated simultaneously or built upon one another. First, the strategic extension of Muslim operations from Sicily onto the mainland possibly aimed at undermining Byzantine reinforcements or securing spoils and intelligence. Second, the employment of Muslim forces as mercenaries took place against the backdrop of geopolitical issues in southern Italy—the highly fragmented and shifting conflicts among the Langobard principalities as well as the rivalry between the Byzantine and Frankish spheres of influence. And third, certain Muslim commanders, who, having secured a foothold in the region, began to assume a higher level of authority, which led them to launching independent campaigns further into southern and even central Italy. Here, it remains almost impossible to

[14] *Chronicon Salernitanum*, ed. Westerbergh, cap. 80b, p. 79: "Agarenorum gens generalem faciens monicionem, Calabrie finibus adiunt, circumquaque loca pervadunt. Tarentum veniunt eamque sine mora ceperunt; idipsum in Apulie finibus perveniunt, pene omnes civitates Apulie depopularunt, homines, qui ad istar segetum excreverant succidunt."

[15] Ibn al-Aṯīr, *Kitāb al-Kāmil*, ed. Tornberg, vol. 6, AH 223 [sic!], p. 350 / ed. al-Tadmurī, vol. 6, p. 49: "wa-fī sanat arbaʿ wa-ʿišrīn wa-miʾatayn istaʾmana ʿiddat ḥuṣūn min ǧazīrat Ṣiqilliya ilā l-muslimīn (…) wa-sāra usṭūl al-muslimīn ilā Qulūriya fa-fataḥahā (…)."

[16] Corsi/Fonseca, Caduta.

[17] Zornetta, *Italia Meridionale*, pp. 211–231.

[18] Jäckh, 848: Decision, §1, with a table of the respective rulers.

[19] Chronica Sancti Benedicti, ed. Waitz (MGH SS rer. Lang. 1), pp. 471–472; Erchempert, Historia, ed. Waitz (MGH SS rer. Lang. 1), p. 240.

discern whether they might have been inspired by more durable ambitions, or just showed a readiness to exploit unstable local conditions when opportunities arose.

[§12] Another debate concerning the history of Muslim-held Bari is the issue of chronology, particularly regarding its ruling leaders. Al-Balāḏurī places his Bari episode "in the early time of al-Mutawakkil's reign" (*fī awwal ḫilāfat al-Mutawakkil*) but also refers to an initial failed attempt to conquer the city by a certain Ḥabla. Reading this detail alongside the Latin sources, which link the activity to the outbreak of the Langobard civil war, and the earlier-cited passage from Ibn al-Aṯīr, it is plausible that the first Muslim campaign against Bari took place prior the reign of al-Mutawakkil. Indeed, the first Muslim assault on Bari has traditionally been dated to 840.[20] More recently, however, Lorenzo Bondioli has argued that the successful conquest of Bari itself should be dated to 840 rather than 847.[21] On the one hand, he draws on the information provided by the Venetian historiographer John the Deacon (d. 1018). Writing his *Istoria Veneticorum* in the early eleventh century, this author seems to backdate the conquest to 840 by referring to its duration: he notes that Bari's fall in 871—which is confirmed by other sources—marked the thirty-first year of Muslim rule.[22] On the other hand—and this is the novel element—Bondioli's argument is based on a previously overlooked table of rulers found in the *Codex Casinensis 175*, a manuscript of the *Chronica Langobardorum seu monachorum de monasterio sanctissimi Benedicti* from 873. According to this table, the accession to power of *Calfon de Barim* (i.e. Ḫalfūn) is assigned to the year 840, his rule ending in 844.[23] In this context, it should also be noted that, according to Erchembert, Ḫalfūn had been part of Radelchis's "Saracen" auxiliary troops stationed around Bari who, at this point, had already tried to take the city once before.[24]

[§13] The table contains inconsistencies and even errors in its chronological details, as Bondioli has pointed out, and should therefore be approached with caution. Indeed, other scholars have proposed alternative timelines. Marco Di Branco dates Ḫalfūn's rule to the period between April 848 and September 852, while Musca places the conquest in autumn 847.[25] Nonetheless, the table offers compelling insights that merit closer attention. Notably, it records the names of two otherwise unattested rulers—written in Latin as "Ali" and "Aiu"—who briefly held power in Bari between the attested reigns of Ḫalfūn and Mufarrağ.[26] If credible, this detail may be crucial for understanding the fragility of Muslim rule in the immediate aftermath of the conquest. It may reflect a period of disunity, in which power fragmented or failed to consolidate—possibly even involving competing factions or divergent affiliations within the Muslim ranks. The omission of this information from al-Balāḏurī's account may reflect his selective focus on rulers who sought caliphal recognition, or it may simply indicate that he was unaware of these short-lived regimes. Either way, their presence in the Latin source points to a moment of political instability, in which local authority appears to have fractured or to have collapsed altogether, before re-stabilising under Mufarrağ b. Sallām who was later also murdered by "his men" (*aṣḥābuhu*).

[§14] There is also very little information, if any, about the otherwise attested leaders of Bari. Considering the individuals named by al-Balāḏurī, his account appears to support Alex Metcalfe's interpretation, namely that the Muslim rulers of Bari operated independently of Aġlabid directives. Indeed, there is no indication of formal ties between Bari's leadership and

[20] Musca, *L'emirato*, p. 169.
[21] Bondioli, Islamic Bari.
[22] Giovanni Diacono / Ioannes Diaconus, *Istoria Veneticorum*, ed. Berto, p. 132.
[23] Bondioli, Islamic Bari, pp. 475, 478.
[24] Erchempertus, Historia, ed. Waitz (MGH SS rer. Lang. 1), cap. 16, pp. 240–241.
[25] Musca, *L'emirato*, p. 169; Di Branco, Strategie.
[26] Bondioli, Islamic Bari, pp. 475, 478–479.

the Aġlabid emirs of Ifrīqiya. In the case of the unsuccessful conqueror Ḥabla, however, it might be conceivable that he acted in coordination with broader Aġlabid interests. He is described as the "*mawlā* of al-Aġlab," a designation implying his status as a client and military subordinate of an Aġlabid ruler. However, both Ḥabla's precise affiliation and the identity of the specific Aġlabid figure mentioned by al-Balāḏurī remain uncertain. As such, Ḥabla may have operated under direct orders, acted in informal alignment with regional policy, or pursued independent aims as a renegade commander. The term *mawlā* is also applied to Ḫalfūn, whom al-Balāḏurī identifies as the conqueror of Bari. He further notes that Ḫalfūn bore the epithet *al-Barbarī*, suggesting indigenous North African ("Berber") origins. As for Bari's last ruler, Sawdān, Alex Metcalfe has speculated that he may also have been a *mawlā*, possibly of sub-Saharan African descent,[27] as one source reportedly refers to him as Sawdān "al-Māwrī" which could derive from the Greek *μαυρός or μαῦρος*, meaning "dark", or from the Latin name for the Roman provinces of *Mauritania*. However, another reading might be "al-Māzarī," which would link him to the city of Mazara in Sicily.[28] In both cases, these leaders appear to have emerged from the *mawāli*, i.e. clients of Muslim lords who formed a distinctive social and political stratum within Islamicate societies and often fulfilled important administrative or military functions.

[§14] Considerations about the leaders' backgrounds can lead to a discussion of potential regional and ethnic divisions within the Muslim ranks which were by no means confined to the leadership alone but also played out among larger contingents. As mentioned earlier, Latin sources attest that Muslim troops were recruited by both factions of the Langobard civil war. Erchempert reports that Siconulf employed *Hismaelitas Hispanos* (Muslims from *Hispania* / al-Andalus) to counter Radelchis' *Agarenos Libicos* (Muslims from Libya / North Africa).[29] Erchempert's reference to the presence of Andalusī mercenaries on mainland Italy is particularly noteworthy, given the documented tensions between Andalusī and Aġlabid troops during the early, concurrent campaign in Sicily.[30] All this suggests that tensions between distinct ethnic and regional groups were not only present but possibly even instrumentalised in the local power struggles of southern Italy, which also demonstrates how such rivalries were embedded within a wider Mediterranean context.

[§15] The Muslim polity of Bari was apparently in need of legitimisation—possibly even more so due to the backgrounds of its rulers. This becomes especially visible in the transition from Ḫalfūn to his successor, Mufarrağ b. Sallām. While Ḫalfūn left behind no tangible signs of institutional governance, the reign of Mufarrağ—dated by Di Branco to September 852–December 854 and by Bondioli to ca. 848–850[31]—marks a shift toward efforts at territorial expansion and political consolidation. According to al-Balāḏurī, al-Mufarrağ brought twenty-four outposts under his control and commissioned the construction of a congregational mosque (*masǧid ǧāmiʿ*), the latter being a gesture that can be interpreted as an effort to formalise governance and assert legitimacy. In Islamic urban settings, the congregational mosque served not only as a place of communal prayer (*ṣalāt*) but also as a site to publicly perform sovereignty. The (local) ruler himself could do so by leading the Friday prayer or being at least present in order to embody the ruling power. The Friday sermon (*ḫuṭba*) was delivered in the name of the reigning caliph, thus affirming local political power through ritualised reference to the highest

[27] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, p. 21.
[28] Di Branco, Strategie, pp. 160–161.
[29] Erchempertus, Historia, ed. Waitz (MGH SS rer. Lang. 1), cap. 17, p. 241; Talbi, *L'Émirat*, p. 435.
[30] Bondioli, Islamic Bari, p. 477.
[31] Bondioli, Islamic Bari, pp. 475, 482; Di Branco, Strategie, p. 155.

(acknowleged) Islamic authority.[32] It is against this backdrop, that al-Mufarrağ is said to have requested formal confirmation from the caliph in Baghdad.

[§17] Al-Mufarrağ's aim to secure external recognition through formal appointment by the caliph may also reflect, again, broader dynamics in the geopolitical landscape. As Bondioli notes, al-Mufarrağ's affiliation with the Rabīʿa, an Arab tribe, connects him to the so-called *ğund* rebellion in Ifrīqiya during the 820s–830s. This military uprising posed a serious threat to Aġlabid rule, and al-Mufarrağ is known to have played an active role in it.[33] In this light, his appeal to Baghdad may not only have been a pragmatic bid for legitimacy, but also an attempt to bypass regional spheres of influence and to forge a direct connection to the caliphal centre. This is all the more likely as his quest to affiliate Bari to Baghdad would have fallen into a phase in which the Aġlabids sent support to the Muslim polity of Taranto (ca. 840–880) and were, thus, present on the Apulian peninsula.[34] However, al-Mufarrağ's efforts were ultimately cut short: an uprising among his followers led to his assassination, bringing his brief rule to an abrupt end.

[§18] Under the rule of Sawdān (datable according to the table in the *Chronica Langobardorum* examined by Bondioli to ca. 851–February 871),[35] Muslim control over Bari apparently entered its most stable and institutionalised phase. Al-Balāḏurī's reference to Sawdān's request for confirmation from the caliph, along with his eventual recognition as *wālī*, reflects at least nominal integration into ʿAbbāsid frameworks of authority. Under Sawdān, the polity indeed appears less as a rough frontier outpost and more as a small Muslim polity in the process of establishment that combined military force with institutional forms of legitimacy and regional diplomacy. The common designation of the polity as an "emirate", however, remains somewhat misleading, as it implies a formalised administrative structure where there was likely an adaptive arrangement, without dynastic continuity or a bureaucratic apparatus. Furthermore, al-Balāḏurī appears to suggest that Bari was administratively and conceptually tethered to *al-Maġrib*, or at least treated as part of the jurisdiction overseen by the *ʿāmil* (governor) of that region, rather than as a directly appointed emirate. This may imply that, for al-Balāḏurī or his informers, Bari's status was conceived as dependent from *al-Maġrib* which would also explain the geographical anchor in his account which describes Bari as lying in *al-arḍ al-kabīra*, a land within *al-Maġrib*. In this context, however, it is important to emphasize that the notion of *al-Maġrib* as a functioning province was an imagined ideal rather than a reflection of political reality.

[§19] Situated on the margins of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, Bari received only limited attention in Arabic-Islamic historiography. By contrast, contemporary southern Italian sources provide many detailed accounts.[36] This disparity reflects the direct impact of Muslim incursions on the political and social realities in that region. Indeed, the raids extended far beyond Calabria and Apulia: throughout the ninth century, numerous cities including Rome (846 and 849), Naples (856), Conza (858 and 862), and Ascoli (861) were attacked and major abbeys plundered, including San Vincenzo al Volturno (861) and Venafro (862). The former as well as the Abbey of Montecassino were even compelled to pay a tribute of 3,000 gold dinars.[37] On the one hand, many of these sources are characterised by a prevailing fear of the "Saracens" and highlight the intensity of maritime raids and inland campaigns. Yet, particularly in the time of Sawdān, some

[32] Calder, Friday Prayer.
[33] Talbi, *L'Émirat*, pp. 482–483.
[34] Bondioli, Islamic Bari, p. 483.
[35] Bondioli, Islamic Bari, pp. 475–476, 484, 487.
[36] Berto, Musulmani; Wolf, Handling.
[37] Metcalfe, *Muslims*, p. 19.

evidence points to episodes of diplomatic engagement, economic exchange, and the—albeit asymmetric—integration of non-Muslims into the legal framework of Muslim rule.

[§20] Of particular interest in this context is the account of the Frankish monk Bernard, who passed through Bari in the late 860s on his way to the Holy Land. Referring to Bari as *civitas Sarracenorum* ("city of the Saracens"), Bernard reports that he requested safe passage from its leader, whom he calls *princeps Suldanus*.[38] *Suldanus* probably represents a corruption of the name Sawdān or a Latinisation of the Arabic title *sulṭān* (leader), which only becomes attested frequently from the tenth century onwards.[39] If the latter, it remains unclear whether this designation derives from Bernard's informants or reflects Sawdān's own self-fashioning. Bernard also reports on receiving two letters addressed to the *principes* of Alexandria and Babylonia (referring to al-Fusṭāṭ / Old Cairo), which were intended to facilitate his voyage by explaining his identity and itinerary. He further notes that these *principes* were under the authority (*sub imperio*) of the *Amaromin*, "who rules over all the Saracens and resides in Bagada and Axia, which lie beyond Jerusalem."[40] These remarks are revealing not only for what they tell us about Bernard's journey and the apparent practicalities of governance in Bari—particularly its dealings with foreign travellers—but about his geographical and political knowledge. The mention of *Bagada* (Baghdad) as the seat of ʿAbbāsid power and the reference to *Amaromin*—clearly a corruption of the caliphal title *amīr al-muʾminīn* ("Commander of the Faithful")—suggests that Bernard possessed more than superficial information. Indeed, he appears to have understood a hierarchy of Islamic authority, in which the governors of Egypt functioned as local administrators subordinate to the caliph in Baghdad. Interestingly, Bernard uses the same title, *princeps*, for Sawdān, implying that he did not distinguish between Sawdān's position in Bari and that of the Egyptian officials, to which—according to al-Balāḏurī—al-Mufarrağ b. Sallām of Bari first turned to receive official recognition. However, Bernard's letters from Bari were not accepted in Alexandria, and the local official demanded thirteen dinars to issue a new letter to the *princeps* of Babylonia.[41] It is unclear whether this refusal reflected Bari's uncertain political status or simply served to extract money from an incoming traveller. Another aspect worth mentioning is that Bernard observed the trafficking of Christian captives from Benevento (presumably the city and duchy) on his way to and out of Taranto. He speaks of thousands of captives in ships bound for Africa and Tripoli.[42] These references almost certainly imply the existence of a slave trade, which was likely crucial to the economic survival of Taranto as a Muslim-held outpost. One may further speculate as to whether Bari itself either directly participated in, or at least profited from, this trafficking and its revenues.

[§21] Equally instructive is the later so-called *Chronicle* of Aḥimaaz b. Paltiel (d. 1054/1060), an Italo-Jewish narrative genealogy composed in Oria in the first half of the eleventh century.[43] Known in Hebrew as *Megillat Aḥimaaz*, this complex text contains a story about an exile from Baghdad, referred to as Rabbi or Abū Aharon, who had been sent on a journey of repentance to southern Italy in the late ninth century.[44] In the course of this narrative, Abū Aharon is said to have resided in Bari, which sets the scene for a rare literary glimpse into Sawdān's administration. Aḥimaaz describes Sawdān as "king of the Ishmaelites" (*melech Yishmaʿelim*),[45] who held court and summoned representatives of non-Muslim communities—

[38] *Itinerarium*, ed. Ackermann, pp. 100, 116.
[39] Kramers et al., Sulṭān; Kennedy, Evolution.
[40] *Itinerarium*, ed. Ackermann, p. 116.
[41] *Itinerarium*, ed. Ackermann, pp. 56–57.
[42] *Itinerarium*, ed. Ackermann, p. 106.
[43] On the genre, see *History and Folklore*, ed. Bonfil, pp. 11–16.
[44] *History and Folkore*, ed. Bonfil, pp. 53–66.
[45] *History and Folkore*, ed. Bonfil, cap. 22, p. 277 (HEB), p. 276 (EN).

in this case, the Jews of Oria. He is also said to have relied on Abū Aharon as an advisor, whom he reportedly loved and respected.[46] While the author's focus is clearly on the moral rehabilitation of Abū Aharon, not on the rule of Sawdān, the reference suggests that Aḥimaaz—in contrast to other local authors—found it plausible to depict a moment of political stability in which Jewish actors could even gain influence. As such, the story, although shaped by other motives, provides a valuable retrospective on Sawdān's engagement with local non-Muslim communities or non-Muslim travellers in the region. Together, these external perspectives suggest that Sawdān's regime, while not necessarily seen as legitimate by such observers, was nonetheless characterised by somewhat ordered governance. Both texts point to a new quality of Muslim–Christian–Jewish interaction in Apulia during Sawdān's rule as the enclave was beginning to become part of the political and social fabric of southern Italy.[47]

[§22] The rise of Muslim Bari also brought the Carolingian rulers to the forefront, forging new alliances in Italy's south.[48] In response to cases of Muslim–Christian collaboration in the Langobard territories, King Louis II (r. as king of Italy 839/40–875, king of the Lombards 844–875, and Roman emperor 855–875) issued a *Capitulare* in 848 calling for the pacification and unification of the Langobard rulers, with the explicit aim of expelling all Muslims from Apulia.[49] This document represents one of the earliest attempts to articulate a coordinated Christian strategy, portraying the Muslim presence as a shared threat that required collective action. Yet despite Louis II's ambitions, initial military responses proved ineffective. From the mid-860s onwards, operations against Bari were resumed, with Louis II seeking to forge an alliance with the Byzantine emperor Basil I (r. 867–886), who promised to provide naval support for an assault on the city from the sea. However, this Frankish–Byzantine alliance remained largely dysfunctional, and Bari ultimately fell to Louis II in February 871 after months of siege, without direct aid from the Byzantine navy.[50] Following the conquest, Sawdān was captured and taken to Benevento.[51]

[§23] By no means did the victory over Bari bring about Frankish control of the city, nor did it put an end to Muslim (maritime) activity in the region.[52] Instead, it resulted in conflicts between Frankish and Langobard powers, particularly Prince Adelchis of Benevento (r. 854–878), who reportedly even dared to temporarily imprison the emperor Louis II—an act that asserted both his political strength and aspiration for independence of Frankish control.[53] Furthermore, the fall of Mulim-held Bari also paved the way for a renewed Byzantine presence in the *Terra di Bari*, where they (re)established and maintained an Apulian base in 876 until the city was captured by the Normans in 1071.[54] This revived Byzantine presence in Bari explains why Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (r. 913–959) gives a detailed account of the events surrounding the end of Muslim rule in Bari in his *De administrando imperio* (*Πρὸς τὸν ἴδιον υἱὸν Ῥωμανόν*). He frames the episode as a Muslim usurpation of a Byzantine locality, followed by a brief period of uncertainty, and culminating in its rightful reconquest by the Byzantines.[55] In narrating these complex developments, Constantine introduces a conspicuous episode involving Sawdān's imprisonment, referring to him as *Σολδανοῦ* or ὁ *Σολδανός*—forms that, like in Bernard's *Itinerarium*, either corrupt his name or reflect the Arabic title *sulṭān*. Sawdān

[46] *History and Folkore*, ed. Bonfil, cap. 19–26, here cap. 20, pp. 273, 275 (HEB), pp. 272, 274 (EN).
[47] On the interpretation of his rule as a predominantly violent period, see Heath, Violence.
[48] For an overview, see Gantner, Interessante Zeiten.
[49] Hlotharii capitulare de expeditione contra Sarracenos facienda, ed. Boretius and Krause (MGH Capit. 2), pp. 65–68.; Jäckh, 848: Decision.
[50] Kislinger, Sieger; Böhm, Role.
[51] Bondioli, Islamic Bari, p. 487.
[52] Di Branco and Wolf, Hindered Passages.
[53] Böhmer, RI I,3,1, no. 328, with references.
[54] Von Falkenhausen, *Dominazione*, p. 21.
[55] Constantine VII, *De administrando*, ed. Moravcsik, transl. Jenkins, cap. 29, pp. 127–135.

is depicted as continuing to exert influence over both Louis II and the Langobard nobles of Capua and Benevento. This portrayal suggests a particular fascination on Constantine's part with a Muslim figure who embodies both political threat and ideological foil to Byzantine authority, challenged and overcome by Emperor Basil I, Constantine VII's own grandfather. At the same time, the narrative reflects anti-Frankish and anti-Langobard sentiment. The Langobards are portrayed as naïve and easily manipulated, seeking Sawdān's advice on matters such as "the treatment and care of animals"[56]—questions he allegedly exploited to sow mistrust between them and Louis II. This manipulation nearly results in Muslim reinforcement, underscoring the image of Sawdān as a cunning destabilising agent of foreign intrusion.

[§24] Al-Balāḏurī does not record the final chapter of Muslim control over Bari, nor its eventual loss. This omission may simply reflect the chronological limits of his narrative, which ends during the reign of Caliph al-Mustaʿīn (r. 248–252/862–866). However, as with his account of al-Andalus, it also aligns with al-Balādhurī's broader interest in the moments and practicalities of establishing Muslim power. Despite its peripheral status, the inclusion of Bari in the *Kitāb Futūḥ al-buldān* suggests that al-Balāḏurī considered it relevant to the broader picture of caliphal authority and frontier governance. His focus on legitimacy, institutional gestures, and local rulers' appeals to the caliph may tie in with a concern for the norms and reach of Islamic order at the edges of the *dār al-Islām* and it might also aim to demonstrate an alledged extension of ʿAbbāsid influence in a period in which their authority had already begun to wane. From a reading of the Latin chroniclers, the case of Muslim-ruled Bari as well as the Muslim incursions in south Italy in general, show how such military activity could also become a driver of interreligious interaction and communication. The case of Muslim-held Bari, then, is not only relevant for understanding the dynamics of Muslim–Christian encounter in Apulia, but also illustrates how these could facilitate a complex entanglement of war, diplomacy, and, eventually, forms of cohabitation.

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[56] Constantine VII, *De administrando*, ed. Moravcsik, transl. Jenkins, cap. 29, p. 130 (EL), p. 131 (EN), translates the term ἄλογον as "cattle" in the sense of "livestock." However, as Zachary Chitwood has kindly pointed out to me, in Byzantine Greek this term over time became increasingly associated with "horse" instead of "livestock" or "animals" more generally.

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