



Palermo, Sicily; view from the sea ©Kate Stanworth

Cover photo

Map of Sicily in Fatimid times from the *Kitāb Gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulāḥ al-ʿuyūn* (the Book of Curiosities), University of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Arab. c. 90
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Organising Committee

Shi'i Studies Unit, Department of Academic
Research, The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Aslisho Qurboniev
Maria De Cillis
Nigina Mirbozhonova

Fatimid Sicily: History, Memory, and Legacy

Conference Programme
19–20 October 2026



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

AGA KHAN CENTRE

10 Handyside Street, London N1C 4DN
www.iis.ac.uk

Welcome

For some 150 years (909–1050s), Sicily formed a part of the Fatimid empire (909–1171). Initially a province of the Aghlabid emirate, Sicily fell to the Fatimids upon their conquest of Ifriqiya, and they fought hard to consolidate power on the island, leaving a lasting footprint. Yet the role of the Fatimids in the history of Muslim Sicily remains obscure, mainly due to the scarcity of written sources and archaeological remains from the period.

This international conference and the subsequent edited volume aim to bring fresh scholarly attention to the history and legacy of the Fatimids in Sicily. The eight panels included in the conference programme are arranged thematically and include the historiography of Fatimid rule in Sicily, state and society, real and imaginal communal boundaries, warfare and diplomacy, legal matters, technology, material culture and the lasting influence of the period. A photography exhibition is also part of the conference. The photographs are part of a multimedia project that explore the theme of memory of the Islamic past in modern Palermo.



Building on many important advances in recent decades, including the work of the IIS in editing and publishing primary sources from the Fatimid period, the conference invites a greater focus on Fatimid Sicily and its relationship and interdependence with Fatimid Egypt and Ifriqiya.

The conference is organised by the Shi'i Studies Unit at The Institute of Ismaili Studies, which seeks to promote a better understanding of Shi'i Islam. The history and legacy of the Fatimids' rule in Sicily, as a Shi'i Ismaili dynasty, are of particular interest to our colleagues and to the wider Ismaili community.

Aslisho Qurboniev

The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Schedule

Day 1: Monday 19 October 2026

08:00 – 09:00

Registration and refreshments

09:00 – 09:15

Welcome address - Prof Zayn Kassam, Director of the IIS

Introductory remarks - Aslisho Qurboniev, Convenor

09:15 – 09:50

Keynote — Tools with Which to Think: Some Recently ‘Discovered’ Sources for Sicily in the Fatimid Era

Alex Metcalfe

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

09:50 – 10:00

Health Break

10:00 – 11:30

Panel 1 —The Historiography of Muslim Sicily and the Fatimid Period

Chair: Ali Asgar H. Alibhai — *University of Texas at Dallas and the*

MENARAH Initiative

Salvatore Morso's *Descrizione di Palermo antico* and the Elision of Fatimid Sicily

Nida Jaffer — Brown University

Muslim Sicily in the European Imaginary Before 1861: Alterity and Civilisational Hierarchy

Giovanna Cuillo – Geneva Graduate Institute (IHEID)

Forgotten Sicilian Sultanas

Giuseppe Mandalà — University of Milan



11:30 – 13:00

Panel 2 — Governing the Island: Administration, Frontier, Fiscality

Chair: Hasan Al-Khoei — *The Institute of Ismaili Studies*

The Fatimids and Sicily: A Symbiotic Relationship

Shainool Jiwa — The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Managing the Border with the *Rām* in the Fatimid World (10th–11th Centuries): The Emirate of the Sicilian *thaghr*

Michelangelo Messina — École Française de Rome-section Moyen Âge

Fiscal Policy and Christian Communities in Kalbid Sicily (c. 948–1053)

Theodora Zampaki — Hellenic Open University (online)

13:00 – 14:30

Lunch break (Group photo)

14:30 – 16:00

Panel 3 — The Kalbid Family and the Fatimid Empire

Chair: Shainool Jiwa — *The Institute of Ismaili Studies*

Between Messina, Cairo, and Tripoli: The Life, Death, and Afterlife of al-Ḥasan b. 'Ammār al-Kalbī (d. 1000)

Aslisho Qurboniev — The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The Last Kalbids (1019–1053): Sicily and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Mediterranean

Giacomo Favaretto – Independent Scholar

Structural Ties that Bind: The Kalbid (and Other Sicilian Muslims') Connection to the Fatimids in the 11th Century

Ksenia Ryzhova – Princeton University

Schedule

Day 1: Monday 19 October 2026

16:00 – 16:10

Health break

16:10 – 18:10

Panel 4 — Space, Settlement, and the Fatimid Imperial Imagination

Chair: Delia Cortese — Middlesex University London

Fatimid Sicily in the Book of Curiosities

Yossef Rapoport – Queen Mary University of London

Porous Frontiers and Corrupted Bodies: Sicily as Lived Space in the Book of Curiosities

Muntazir Ali, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, United States (online)

Beyond the Frontier: mudun, ḥiṣn, raḥal—The New Settlement Pattern of Fatimid Sicily

Lucia Arcifa — University of Catania

Beyond the Quarter: Rethinking the Ḥārat al-Ṣaqāliba in Fatimid Palermo

Ali Asgar H. Alibhai — University of Texas at Dallas and the MENARAH Initiative



18:10 – 18:20

Introducing the Islamic Traces Exhibition

Kate Stanworth – followed by group viewing and free discussion

19:00

Dinner (Presenters and Chairs)

Schedule

Day 2: Tuesday 20 October 2026

08:30 – 09:00

Refreshments

09:00 – 11:00

Panel 5 — Mālikī Legal Scholars in Fatimid Sicily

Chair: Alex Metcalfe — Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

The Qāḍiship of Fatimid Sicily as a Doctrinal Chokepoint: Neglected Passages from Qāḍī 'Iyād's *Tartīb al-Madārik*

Sayyed Ibrahim Almahdaly — American University in Cairo

The Transmission of Mālikī Traditions in Fatimid Sicily: An *Isnād*-Based Analysis

Hossameldin Ali — Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

'Siculo-Fatimids' in the Scholarly Networks of Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (d. 1180)

Delia Cortese — Middlesex University, London

Some Little-Known Stories about Sicily and North Africa in Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī's *Sirāj al-Mulūk*

Josep Suñé — CSIC (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), Madrid

11:00 – 11:10

Health break

11:10 – 12:40

Panel 6 — Production, Technology, Trade and Mediterranean Exchange

Chair: Maria De Cillis — The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Pottery Production in Fatimid Sicily: Connectivity and Innovation

Viva Sacco — University College London, Institute of Archaeology

Glass Production and Mediterranean Connectivity: Sicily within Fatimid Economic Networks

Francesca Colangeli — University College London, Institute of Archaeology

Material, Memory, and Historiography in the Silk Production of Fatimid and Norman Sicily

Claire Dillon — Columbia University



12:40 – 14:15

Lunch break (AKC Atrium)

14:15 – 15:15

Panel 7 — War and Diplomacy in the Central Mediterranean

Chair: Mathew Barber – AKU-ISMC, Centre for Digital Humanities

War and Negotiation in the Central Mediterranean: Fatimid Attacks on Mainland Italy from Sicily (10th–11th Centuries)

Marco Di Branco – Sapienza University of Rome

‘The Domestikos Cast Away His Cross’: Reappraising the Battle of the Straits (965) through the Poetic Witness of Ibn Hānī’ al-Andalusī

Yusuf Umrethwala — Aljamea-tus-Saifiyah

15:15 – 15:30

Health break

15:30 – 17:30

Panel 8 — Fatimid Continuities through Material and Intellectual Culture

Chair: Umberto Bongianino – University of Oxford

Fatimid Influence on Sicilian Art and Architecture

Khalil K. Pirani – Independent Scholar

Against the Hyphen: The Palermo Formation

Seyed Abdolreza Hosseini – University of Vienna (online)

Habitus at the Kalbid, Norman and Hohenstaufen Courts of Sicily: From *Kuttāb* to *Notari*

Nicola Carpentieri — University of Padua

From Ifriqiya to Siqulliya: Materia Medica in the Medieval Islamicate Mediterranean

Robin S. Reich — Seattle University

17:30 – 18:00

Closing remarks

Abstracts and Bios

Tools with Which to Think: Some Recently ‘Discovered’ Sources for Sicily in the Fatimid Era

Alex Metcalfe

This paper opens with a brief survey of Fatimid-era sources that have shaped the historiography of Sicily in the past generation while pointing to new materials that are likely to guide scholarship in the next generation. It then examines a number of coins and seals which have surfaced in the past five years or so, each of which sheds light on a particular aspect, theme or problem in the political history of Fatimid Sicily (909–1072). Most are unpublished. They will be illustrated and discussed in turn, forming the basis for wider discussion.

ALEX METCALFE is perhaps best known for his work on Arab-Norman Sicily. His publications include *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (Edinburgh, 2009) and *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily, Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam* (London and New York, 2003). More recently, he has turned his attention to early medieval Sardinia with the publication of two edited volumes as well as a long article on medieval magic tricks and a forthcoming piece on the provenance of Arabic in Malta.



The Transmission of Mālikī Traditions in Fatimid Sicily: An Isnād-Based Analysis

Hossameldin Ali

The interplay between political power and legal authority was central to the formation of Mālikī presence in Sicily under Fatimid rule. The Sicilian Mālikī chains of transmission (*isnād*) highlight both Ifriqiyan and Sicilian geographical variants, linking the island to Ifriqiya from the mid-9th century to the end of Muslim rule in the mid-11th century. Judges (*quḍāt*) were primarily political appointments, integrated into the administrative structure, whereas jurists (*fuqahā'*) derived their authority from scholarly training, transmission, and recognition within learned circles. This distinction helps to explain the apparent tension between the Fatimid Ismaili agenda and the persistence of Sunni legal traditions in Sicily. The transmission of Mālikī legal sources from Ifriqiya to Sicily began towards the end of Aghlabid rule but continued under the Fatimids, whose control of both regions facilitated sustained intellectual and scholarly exchanges across the central Mediterranean. By mapping the circulation of scholars, texts, and teaching lineages, the paper traces the pathways through which Mālikī law moved from its principal centre in Qayrawān to Sicily.

HOSSAMELDIN ALI received interdisciplinary legal training in Islamic *sharia* and law, comparative law, and public law in Cairo, Egypt. He served as an administrative judge on the Egyptian State Council in several governorates, including Cairo and Luxor. He was awarded a doctoral scholarship by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and is currently pursuing his PhD at LMU Munich, where he researches legal infrastructures of landholding in Muslim Sicily under the supervision of Professor Daniel G. König and Professor Alex Metcalfe.

Porous Frontiers and Corrupted Bodies: Sicily as Lived Space in the Book of Curiosities

Muntazir Ali

This paper analyses the representation of Sicily—especially Palermo—in the 11th-century Egyptian Book of *Curiosities* as a paradigmatic Fatimid frontier. Rather than depicting Sicily as a stable geographic territory, the text constructs it as a deeply unstable and porous region within the Islamicate spatial imagination. Drawing on spatial theory (Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin), the paper reads the *Book of Curiosities* not as descriptive geography but as a work of spatial production, in which conceived, lived, and embodied spaces intersect and rupture.

Sicily is presented as both ‘the most honourable of Islamic islands’, defined by perpetual *jihād*, and as a site of moral and intellectual decline. This tension is articulated through layered spatial language. Palermo appears as an ordered, governable city—mapped through gates, quarters, and administrative divisions. Yet this order is repeatedly undone: markets proliferate beyond the city walls, populations intermingle across religious and ethnic lines, and urban life spills into spaces resistant to state control, producing a porous urbanism in which distinctions between inside and outside collapse.

Spatial instability is further inscribed onto the body. Environmental factors—especially water and diet (notably, onions)—are said to corrupt cognition, producing what might be termed a ‘gastro-geography’ of the frontier. Frontier space is not merely inhabited but ingested, actively generating frontier subjectivities. The text’s attention to Muslim-Christian hybridity reinforces Sicily’s liminal status, as mixed communities embody both the extension and erosion of Islamic norms. Finally, Sicily’s integration into a broader cosmological scheme—alongside Samarqand, Ardabil, Mecca, and Damascus—situates its ungovernability within the zodiacal rule of Leo.



Overall, the paper argues that Fatimid Sicily functions as a critical node in an Islamicate web of space, exposing the limits of political authority, cultural boundaries, and environmental determinism.

MUNTAZIR ALI is a Lecturer in Religious Studies and International and Global Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he also serves as Program Director for the Islamic Studies minor. His teaching and research lie at the intersection of Islamic intellectual history, spatial humanities, and critical approaches to time, narrative, and place in Islamicate societies. Drawing on thinkers such as Doreen Massey, his work explores how space is not a neutral surface but a dynamic ‘meeting-up of histories’, where multiple trajectories—social, political, and cosmological—coexist and contend.

Ali’s current research focuses on spatial imaginaries in premodern and colonial contexts, including frontier formations, travel narratives, and Sufi conceptions of place. He is particularly interested in how texts map space through embodied, sensory, and moral registers, as well as how narratives of globalisation and empire transform spatial difference into temporal hierarchy. His ongoing projects examine the relationship between environment, embodiment, and moral discourse in Islamic texts, alongside colonial reconfigurations of indigenous spatialities in regions such as Chitral.

Beyond the Quarter: Rethinking the Ḥārat al-Ṣaqālība in Fatimid Palermo

Ali Asgar H. Alibhai

When Ibn Ḥawqal visited Fatimid Palermo in 972, he described a city that had expanded beyond its walled nucleus of Balarm into extramural districts. The largest of these was the Ḥārat al-Ṣaqālība, conventionally understood as a quarter inhabited by Ṣaqālība military regiments. This paper challenges that assumption by re-examining ‘Ṣaqālība’ not as a fixed ethnic, geographic, or military designation, but as a fluid identity shaped by slavery, migration, language, and courtly culture in the 10th-century Mediterranean.

Drawing on medieval Arabic sources and recent scholarship, the paper situates Palermo within networks linking Ifriqiya, Sicily, and the Mediterranean. Through close readings of the *Sirat al-Ustādh Jawdhar*, it centres Jawdhar, a prominent Ṣaqalabī figure at the Fatimid court, in order to examine how Ṣaqalabī identity was constructed and internally differentiated. Evidence from al-Maqrīzī further illuminates the multilingual Fatimid court, where Arabic, Berber, Greek, and Ṣaqalabī languages functioned as markers of identity.

Rather than reading the Ḥārat al-Ṣaqālība as a straightforward demarcated ethnic enclave, this paper proposes understanding it as a spatial manifestation of layered Ṣaqalabī identities shaped by mobility, language, slavery, and Fatimid courtly structures. It reframes Palermo as a critical site for examining how race, language, material culture, and space intersected in Mediterranean Islamic urbanism.



ALI ASGAR H. ALIBHAI is Assistant Professor of Islamic Art History and Material Culture at the University of Texas at Dallas and the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History. He is also the founder and principal investigator of the MENARAH (Middle Eastern and North African Research of Art and History) initiative. He received his PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University. His research focuses on the art, architecture, and material culture of the medieval Islamic Mediterranean, particularly North Africa, Sicily, al-Andalus, and Egypt, with broader interests in mobility, courtly culture, and digital humanities. He examines the ways objects, architecture, images, and urban environments shaped social, political, and religious life across the world.

His forthcoming book, *Sacred Sound and Symbolism in Medieval Islamic Society: The Bell-lamp and the Adhān*, is currently in press (Arc Humanities Press). He is currently producing a documentary on the historic city of Fez, Morocco, as a spiritual and architectural centre of the Maghrib. He also leads the Historic Islamic Cities Archive project with the McDermott Library at UTD. This project is a public digital cultural heritage platform bringing together photographs, postcards, prints, maps, and other materials documenting the architectural, urban, and social histories of cities across the historic Islamic world.

The Qāḍīship of Fatimid Sicily as a Doctrinal Chokepoint: Neglected Passages from Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's Tartīb al-Madārik

Sayyed Ibrahim Almahdaly

Tartīb al-Madārik records that the Fatimid state summoned two Mālikī scholars, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Abī Ṣubayḥ and his son Abū Bakr, demanded they enter the Ismaili *da'wa* as a pre-condition to serving as *qāḍīs* of Sicily, and tortured them when they refused. Neither capitulated. This passage has not been substantially analysed in scholarship on Fatimid Sicily, and since the Fatimids ordinarily retained Sunni Mālikī judges and did not compel conversion (Halm, Brett), the demand has seemed anomalous.

This paper argues that this event can only be understood in light of two bodies of evidence not previously brought into contact with it. The first is the Fatimid juridical template as al-Nu'mān himself formulated it: the investiture letter al-Mu'izz issued him, preserved in the *Ikhtilāf uṣūl al-madhāhib*. This text directs judges to establish rulings based first on the Qur'an, then on the Prophetic sunna; in cases where both are silent, rulings should be based on the *madhāhib al-a'imma min dhurriyyatihi l-ṭāhirīn*, referring the obscure to the Commander of the Faithful, the last two of which can only be obtained through the *da'wa*. The *Tartīb* therefore confirms that the island's *qāḍīship* was drawn into the caliph's own gift. The second body of evidence, from the *Kitāb al-Majālis* and the *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa*, establishes that Fatimid sovereignty in Sicily was sufficiently institutionalised to make the demand intelligible: *da'wa* appointments were managed by the caliph and declared policy across every island, including via caliphal address to the Sicilian population from the outset.



This episode does not settle the religious complexion of Fatimid Sicily, rather it qualifies the account of Fatimid tolerance and locates the confessional history of the Fatimid provinces in the staffing of those offices where, such as in in Sicily, the qāḍīship records a doctrinal demand made explicit and demonstrably refused.

SAYYED IBRAHIM ALMAHDALY is a Ryoichi Sasakawa Fellow completing an MA in Middle Eastern History at the American University in Cairo. His thesis, under Professor Nelly Hanna, follows the Khāṣṣakī Sulṭān *waqf* in Jerusalem across the 17th century, through *mühimme* orders, *sharia*-court registers, and Ḥanafī *fatwā* collections. He holds a BA in History (High Honors) from İbn Haldun Üniversitesi, with an Erasmus year at the University of Firenze. He is senior editor of the New York-based literary magazine *Kahf*, and works across Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and Jawi.

Beyond the Frontier: mudun, ḥiṣn, raḥal. The New Settlement Pattern of Fatimid Sicily

Lucia Arcifa

Archaeological research over the last decade into Islamic, and in particular Fatimid, Sicily, has been closely linked to the theme of the Arab-Byzantine frontier. Archaeological data reveal settlement patterns and different strategies of territorial organisation and defence. Territories under the Byzantine Empire between the 9th and 10th centuries are characterised by a strong hierarchy based on the main nodes of the settlement network, the *kastra*. During the Fatimid period, the conquest of eastern Sicily revealed a certain structural weakness in the maintenance of strategic nodes. In north-eastern Sicily in particular, fortified settlements were abandoned for more favourable positions, such as the re-establishment of rural settlements near the coast. Some Byzantine *kastra* evolved into urban centres which were included in the list of *mudun* (towns) known in the first half of the 10th century. Analysis of this urban phenomenon, however, reveals a highly varied pattern: significantly weakened in the eastern and central parts of the island, in contrast to a far more extensive and demographically robust network in western Sicily. This presentation will seek to analyse the structural causes of this process, which, over the course of a century and a half, substantially reverses the island's socio-economic landscape.



LUCIA ARCIFA is an Associate Professor of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Catania. She is especially interested on cultural interactions in the early medieval Mediterranean with a focus on Byzantine and Islamic Sicily. She has published studies about material culture and settlement dynamics and is currently preparing a publication on Arab-Byzantine frontiers in Sicily based on archaeological data from research over the last decades.

War and Negotiation in the Central Mediterranean: Fatimid Attacks on Mainland Italy from Sicily (10th–11th Centuries)

Marco Di Branco

From the 8th to the 10th century, Islamic incursions into the Italian peninsula formed part of a broader pattern of expansion and raiding across the central Mediterranean. Initially led by forces connected to North African polities, and later systematised under the Aghlabids, these operations combined maritime raids, temporary occupations, and the establishment of strategic bases – most notably in Sicily. By the early 10th century, this long phase of interaction had reshaped the political and military landscape of southern Italy, creating conditions in which conflict, tribute, and diplomacy coexisted.

This paper examines the Fatimid attacks on mainland Italy from their Sicilian base between the 10th and 11th centuries, focusing on military strategies, political objectives, and diplomatic interactions with the powers of southern Italy. It contextualises these campaigns within the broader evolution of Islamic expansion in the central Mediterranean, comparing Fatimid approaches with earlier Aghlabid incursions. Particular attention is paid to the complex relationships between the Fatimids and the Lombard principalities, as well as with Byzantine authorities.



MARCO DI BRANCO is Associate Professor of Religious History of Islam at Sapienza University of Rome. He received advanced training in Byzantine epigraphy at the Italian Archaeological School of Athens and later earned a diploma in Arabic Language and Culture from IsIAO. He has held fellowships at the Italian Institute for Human Sciences in Florence, the Program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton University (as Visiting Fellow), the German Historical Institute in Rome, and the American University of Beirut (Marie Curie Fellow). He has taught Byzantine Civilization and Byzantine Archaeology at the University of Milan, the University of Basilicata, and the School of Specialization in Archaeology of Matera. His research focuses on Late Antique Athens, the Muslim presence in early medieval Italy, and Islamic perspectives on Graeco-Roman history. His publications include the annotated edition of the *Kitāb Hurūshiyūsh*, the Arabic translation of *Historiae adversus paganos* by Paulus Orosius, which was awarded the Sheikh Zayed Book Award 2025 in the translation category.

*Habitus at the Kalbid, Norman and Hohenstaufen Courts of Sicily:
From Kuttāb to Notari*

Nicola Carpentieri

This talk examines the formation and transformation of a courtly *habitus* in medieval Sicily through the lens of poetry, tracing its trajectory from the Fatimid–Kalbid court to the Norman and Hohenstaufen courts. It begins in 10th- and 11th-century Palermo, where Arabic poetry, cultivated within the wider Fatimid cultural sphere, stood at the centre of courtly life as a medium of performance, sociability, and elite self-representation. Within this milieu, poets developed shared repertoires of imagery, themes, and rhetorical strategies that structured both the production and reception of verse.

Rather than treating the Sicilian Romance lyric of the Hohenstaufen court as a sudden emergence or as primarily shaped by Occitan models, this talk argues that it took shape within a longer continuum of poetic practice. The courtly conventions elaborated in Arabic—its metaphors of desire, absence, praise and refinement, as well as its performative settings—provided durable frameworks that continued to inform later literary production on the island.

The shift from Arabic *kuttāb*/poets to Romance *notari*/poets thus marks not a rupture, but a rearticulation of poetic *habitus* across languages and courts. By foregrounding poetry as a social and performative practice, this talk situates the rise of the Italian lyric within Sicily’s multilingual environment and underscores the lasting imprint of the Fatimid–Kalbid court on its forms and sensibilities.



NICOLA CARPENTIERI is Professor of Arabic at the University of Padua, where he directs the ERC Consolidator Grant *SIQILLIYA*, a project dedicated to the study of Sicilian lyric production from the 10th to the 13th century across Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Romance traditions. He received his PhD from Harvard University and holds a BA *summa cum laude* from Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He is the author of *Writing the Twilight* (Brepols, 2023), as well as numerous articles on Arabic poetry and poetics, the history of medicine, and the cultural history of Islamic, Norman, and Hohenstaufen Sicily.

Glass Production and Mediterranean Connectivity: Sicily within Fatimid Economic Networks

Francesca Colangeli

This paper investigates glass production and use in Fatimid Sicily, exploring its value as a historical proxy for economic connectivity and technological practices.

The analysis operates on two levels: first, it examines archaeological evidence from Sicily through an integrated typological, technological, and compositional approach, reconstructing production practices and patterns of supply and distribution. Second, it situates the Sicilian evidence within a broader Mediterranean framework, comparing it with coeval assemblages from Egypt and Ifriqiya through a combined typological and technological assessment of production, circulation, and the transmission of technical knowledge across the southern Mediterranean.

Archaeometric analysis shows that the spread of soda-ash glass technology across the Islamic Mediterranean between the 9th and 10th centuries extended to Sicily, where, from around the mid-10th century, imported glass was accompanied by growing evidence of local adoption of the technology. Levantine glass is attested alongside Egyptian and Iberian productions and represents the most widely distributed import across the Sicilian contexts considered.

Glass evidence from Sicily thus reveals connections with a Levantine production sphere not documented in ceramic assemblages, consistent with broader patterns of large-scale Levantine glass production and distribution documented by archaeological and written sources.



FRANCESCA COLANGELI is a British Academy International Fellow at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. She is a medieval archaeologist specialising in the study of glass, with particular expertise in Sicily and Southern Italy, and in integrating typological and analytical approaches to reconstruct changes in medieval glass production and trade, and their role within the Mediterranean economy. She has collaborated with institutions such as the University of Genoa, IRAMAT-CEB (CNRS), EEHAR, and CCHS-CSIC, and has contributed to national and European research projects. She is the author of *Oltre la ceramica. Il vetro come indicatore socioeconomico della Sicilia medievale (VI–XIII secolo)*.

‘Siculo-Fatimids’ in the Scholarly Networks of Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (d. 1180)

Delia Cortese

The term ‘Siculo-Fatimids’ recalls a label employed by the distinguished historian of Muslim Sicily, Umberto Rizzitano (d. 1980), to describe those Sicilian Muslim scholars whose personal and intellectual trajectories unfolded between Sicily and Fatimid Egypt. This paper examines a selection of such figures who interacted directly with the renowned Alexandria-based Shāfi‘ī scholar Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī.

The analysis is based primarily on al-Silafī’s best-known work, *Mu‘jam al-safar*. Covering the years 1117–1164, the *Mu‘jam* may be regarded as a rich digest of intellectual life in late-Fatimid Alexandria and, to a lesser extent, Cairo. Within its entries, al-Silafī provides substantial information about the predominantly Mālikī Sicilian scholars with whom he came into contact. He records anecdotes about their lives, evaluates their scholarly credentials, and in some cases preserves verses and literary material transmitted through them.

By focusing on these Sicilian scholars in al-Silafī’s networks, this paper highlights the enduring strength of the relationship between Sicily and Fatimid Egypt after the Norman conquest of the island. It argues that, despite the rule of a Shi‘ī Ismaili dynasty in Egypt, Sunni scholars from Sicily continued to regard the region as a preferred destination for study, patronage, and settlement.



DELIA CORTESE (PhD School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) is a Senior Research Fellow at Middlesex University, London. Her main areas of research are medieval Islam, particularly Ismaili, Fatimid and Nizari studies, as well as Ismaili codicology. Her work focuses on a range of domains in the field of medieval Islamic social history, encompassing topics spanning from interrogation of gender issues in Ismaili history to questions relating to the transmission and dissemination of knowledge during the Fatimid period and the representation of the Fatimids in contemporary culture. Besides her latest monograph, *The Fatimids: Portrait of a Dynasty* (2025), her books include *Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam* (with S. Calderini) (2006), *Arabic Ismaili Manuscripts: The Zāhid ‘Alī Collection* (2003), and *Ismaili and Other Arabic Manuscripts* (2000). She is also the author of over fifty articles published in academic journals worldwide, as well as numerous encyclopaedia entries.

*Muslim Sicily in the European Imaginary Before 1861:
Alterity and Civilisational Hierarchy*

Giovanna Cuillo

This paper examines how the memory of Muslim Sicily was mobilised in foreign writings within broader discourses of Southern difference and inferiority in the decades leading to Italian Unification. Drawing on a corpus of approximately thirty Northern European travel writings from the early 19th century to 1861, the paper analyses how these travellers articulated perceptions of difference and inferiority, mainly through civilisational lenses.

Within an imagined hierarchy in which Islam was cast as the antithesis of ‘European’ civilisation, and Southern Europe as its backward periphery, Sicily, geographically and symbolically at the margin of the continent, occupied its most peripheral point: the closest to Africa and the furthest from ‘European’ modernity. Against this backdrop, references to the island’s Muslim past further intensified claims of temporal backwardness and civilisational distance.

The paper argues that references to Muslim Sicily operated as a discursive amplifier within a layered structure of alterity, rendering the island not merely ‘oriental’ and primitive — that is, both outside ‘European’ civilisation and inferior to it — but positioned beyond the limit of such civilisational self-definition. In tracing this trajectory, the paper offers insights into the memory and afterlife of Muslim rule in Sicily.



GIOVANNA CUILLO is a PhD researcher in International History and Politics at the Geneva Graduate Institute. She completed an MPhil in Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge in 2023. Her dissertation, titled: ‘The Reconquista in the Discourse of Vox’ explored the memory of al-Andalus in contemporary Spanish politics. She previously graduated from King’s College London in 2022, with a dissertation titled ‘The Permeability of Sexual Relations Boundaries in Medieval Iberia’. She has also worked in the Research Unit of the International Organization for Migration.

Material, Memory, and Historiography in the Silk Production of Fatimid and Norman Sicily

Claire Dillon

The history of silk production in medieval Sicily has been continually reconfigured between fragmentary material evidence and shifting historiographical frameworks. Scholarship has long emphasised a turning point in 1147, when Roger II was said to have introduced silk weaving to the island through the abduction of Byzantine artisans. Recent research, however, points to continuities of production within Arab and Muslim communities before and during Norman rule. This paper offers a more integrated account of silk production between Fatimid and Norman Sicily, examining the persistence of Ifriqiyān textile traditions and the role of Ifriqiyān communities in Norman-era textile production. It then turns to the historiographical constructions of the textiles and weavers associated with these communities, who are virtually unknown but are nevertheless central to the modern study of the hundreds of surviving silk fragments that are—or once were—attributed to the “Saracens” of medieval Sicily.

Thus, this paper illustrates how the history of Sicilian silk has been shaped as much by modern interpretive frameworks as by surviving evidence, alternately over and under-emphasising the contributions of Muslim Sicilians and obscuring the broader networks connecting the island to Ifriqiya and Egypt, and to the Iberian and Italian Peninsulas.



CLAIRE DILLON is an art historian studying silk fragments attributed to the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and their historiographies, examining how narratives of cultural exchange and diversity have been formed and reinterpreted across time. This year, she will complete her PhD in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, during which she held fellowships at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Academy in Rome. She recently published research in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (JSAH) and *Speculum* on the 20th-century Cathedral of Mogadishu and its appropriation of medieval Norman Sicilian architecture to represent the Italian colonisation of Somalia.

The Last Kalbids (1019–1053): Sicily and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Mediterranean

Giacomo Favaretto

The final generation of Kalbid rule in Sicily has often been approached primarily as a phase of political fragmentation leading to the Norman conquest. This paper proposes instead a reassessment of the reigns of Aḥmad al-Akḥal (r. 1019–1036) and his brother al-Ḥasan Ṣamṣām al-Dawla (r. 1040–1053) as a crucial period for understanding the reconfiguration of Fatimid power in the central Mediterranean. The paper examines how the last Kalbid generation negotiated shifting relations with the Fatimid court in Cairo and the Zirids of Ifriqiya. Drawing on later Arabic historiographical sources, diplomatic evidence, and recent studies on Mediterranean trade networks, it adopts a triangular framework linking Palermo, Mahdiyya and Cairo. Particular attention will be paid to Zirid intervention in Sicilian affairs, the evolving balance between local factions such as the Ahl Ṣiqillīyya and the Ahl Ifriqiya, and the continued symbolic claims of Fatimid sovereignty visible in titulature and political allegiance.

At the same time, the economic interdependence between Sicily and Ifriqiya, especially in grain supply and maritime logistics, suggests that the weakening of Kalbid authority must be read within a broader western Mediterranean crisis affecting both Zirid and Fatimid strategies. Rather than a simple narrative of dynastic decline, this paper argues that the last Kalbid generation reveals a dynamic process of political and economic realignment, thereby challenging conventional chronologies and understandings of the Fatimid period in Sicily.

GIACOMO FAVARETTO completed his PhD in Religious Studies (DREST – Italian Doctoral School of Religious Studies, XXXVIII cycle), carried out in collaboration with the University of Palermo and the Fondazione per le Scienze Religiose Giovanni XXIII (FSCIRE). His research focuses on medieval Islamic history, with particular attention to Fatimid Sicily, the Kalbid dynasty, and the political, religious, and historiographical dynamics of the central Mediterranean.

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His doctoral project examines the relationship between the Kalbids and the Fatimid caliphate, with special attention to Ismaili political thought, administrative structures, and the interplay between Sicily, Ifriqiya and Cairo. He has presented his research at international conferences including MESA, EuARE, and IQSA, and organised the international conference ‘Harmonizing Sources, Reframing Narratives: Islamic Sicily in the Mediterranean Context’ (Palermo, 2025). He was also a visiting researcher at the Institute of Ismaili Studies under the supervision of Professor Nuha al-Shaar.

Against the Hyphen: The Palermo Formation

Seyed Abdolreza Hosseini

This paper re-examines Palermo's 12th-century Royal Gardens, arguing that they represent a coherent 'Palermo Formation' emerging from sustained Fatimid and Norman dialogue.

Architecturally, Romanesque tripartite façades were reworked into cubic palatial compositions within gardens. Lateral towers became multi-storied residential volumes; the central narthex functioned analogously to the *iwan*. This enabled the integration of Islamic hydraulic features—*salsabils*, axial water channels, and basins—redirecting movement from the longitudinal basilican model toward a centralised, sensorial environment structured around water, cooling, and controlled vistas.

Islamic orchard-gardens with intensive cultivation and sophisticated irrigation intersected with Norman hunting parks oriented towards aristocratic leisure, producing an integrated park-garden system: enclosed environments combining agricultural productivity, redesigned hydraulic infrastructure, and courtly display.

Despite this coherent form, scholarship persists in framing these spaces through vocabularies of mixture and mediation, seeking origins through binary genealogies. This is entrenched through institutional discourses—UNESCO's 'Arab-Norman Palermo' and the label 'Norman-Arab-Byzantine culture'—which reproduce hyphenated identities. While hybridity anchors cultural forms in presumed origins and liminality suspends them in perpetual transition, Palermo's gardens evidence a stabilised, recognisable formation that transcends both frameworks.



SEYED ABDOLREZA HOSSEINI is a sociologist of art and knowledge (PhD, ATU, Tehran) and is currently active in art history studies at the University of Vienna. His research focuses primarily on Iran and the wider Persianate world, with a focus on artistic transmission, copying and reusing techniques, and material/textual knowledge transfers across Islamic contexts. He is particularly interested in the processes of interaction between cultures, examining how such encounters generate new spatial and aesthetic formations.

Salvatore Morso's Descrizione di Palermo antico and the Elision of Fatimid Sicily

Nida Jaffer

This paper situates Salvatore Morso's *Descrizione di Palermo antico ricavata sugli autori sincroni e i monumenti de' tempi* (1827) within the historiographical and political landscape that gave rise to the origins of the subfield of Fatimid Sicily. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as Bourbon centralisation threatened Sicilian autonomy, local intellectuals turned to the medieval past to articulate a distinct historical identity. Within what Karla Mallette has termed "Sicilian Orientalism", Arabic-speaking Sicily and the Arab-Norman court became central to narratives of the island as a site of Mediterranean cultural synthesis. Yet this recovery privileged Norman Palermo as the primary material locus through which Sicily's Arabic past was understood, often obscuring the historical specificity of earlier periods. Reading Morso's *Descrizione* within this historiographical framework and as an intervention in the study of Muslim Sicily, this paper examines how Morso introduced the study of Arabic into an established practice of chorographic reconstruction of *Palermo antico* and, in doing so, helped establish the historiographical and methodological foundations for the later study of Muslim Sicily. By tracing the consequences of this methodological synthesis, the paper identifies both the intellectual interventions and the historiographical red herrings that have continued to shape the reconstruction of Fatimid Sicily.



NIDA JAFFER is a PhD student in the History of Art and Architecture at Brown University, where she studies the art and architecture of the medieval Islamic and Mediterranean worlds under Dr Margaret Graves. Her current research centres on the eco-phenomenology of Islamic art and the materialisation of human–nature relationships in art and architecture. Nida earned her BA in History and MA in Art History from the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History at the University of Texas at Dallas under Dr Ali Alibhai, with whom she co-founded MENARAH, a digital research hub dedicated to Islamic art and architecture.

The Fatimids and Sicily: A Symbiotic Relationship

Shainool Jiwa

This paper aims to examine the manifold ways in which Sicily became integrated into the Fatimid state following its establishment in Ifriqiya in 296/909. Sicily's proximity to the Fatimid capital city of al-Mahdiyya and its strategic position in the Mediterranean, where the Fatimids were ambitious to establish their naval supremacy, meant that the Fatimids not only continued to rule over Sicily but extended their influence beyond the political and economic spheres that have been well documented.

A case in point is the grand circumcision ceremony held by the fourth Fatimid Imam-caliph, al-Mu'izz li-Dīn Allāh, in 351/962, during which three of his sons were circumcised. To commemorate this event, al-Mu'izz provided the cost and the means for all eligible boys in the Fatimid state to be circumcised and for their families to receive gifts according to their status and economic situation. This month-long ceremony also took place in Sicily, with the sources recording that some 500,000 dinars were sent to the island for the purpose, in addition to robes and other items of clothing. By providing for the fulfilment of this ancient Abrahamic tradition that is common to Judaism, Eastern Orthodox and Coptic Christian communities, as well as Muslims, Fatimid munificence reached every Sicilian household that had young boys. This paper will explore this case study, among others, to argue that during the Fatimid period, Sicily can indeed be considered as truly integrated into the Fatimid realm.



SHAINOOL JIWA is Associate Professor at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. She is a scholar of Fatimid and Ismaili studies, with research interests in Islamic history, Ismaili history, Fatimid political and intellectual culture, and the medieval Mediterranean.

Her work examines the Fatimid dynasty in relation to questions of authority, governance, religious legitimacy, pluralism, material culture, and cross-cultural exchange. She has authored, edited, translated and contributed to several publications on Fatimid history, including *The Fatimids: The Rise of a Muslim Empire*, *The Fatimids 2: The Rule from Egypt*, *The Founder of Cairo*, and *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire*.

Forgotten Sicilian Sultanas

Giuseppe Mandalà

A gendered history of Islamic and post-Islamic Sicily remains yet to be written. The scarcity of available written sources, and even more so the widespread prejudice that everything has already been said and written—what I have defined as the ‘Amari complex’—has constituted a major obstacle to advancing beyond what is currently known.

Today more than ever, it is necessary to ask what forms of integration existed between Islamic society and the island’s local population, the *Rūm*, that is the Graeco-Byzantines, and, to a lesser extent, the Jews. Occasional testimonies, such as that of Ibn Ḥawqal (973 CE), shed light on mixed marriages between Muslims and Christians within the urban population.

What were the processes through which the Sicilian population was integrated into the new Islamic society? And, more importantly, what happened to the island’s elites? The available sources—Arabic, Greek and Latin—frequently refer to slavery, whether as war booty or as the result of raids, which certainly constituted a means of moving individuals or groups within the Mediterranean space dominated by Islam. This phenomenon, well known in other regions of the Islamic world, reminds us that the Islamic conquest of the island was a long and complex process, lasting a century and a half (827–965), and gradually shifting the so-called frontier from the western to the eastern part of the island.

However, Arab-Islamic societies also developed other models of integration and did not exclude the possibility that a male or female “captive” could reach the highest ranks. Unexpectedly, we find Sicilian women in the most unlikely roles, even as the wives or mothers of Muslim caliphs—a reality hitherto little known, but which I intend to investigate in this paper, focusing on three case studies.

GIUSEPPE MANDALÀ is Associate Professor of the History of Islamic Countries at the University of Milan, where he teaches Cultural History of the Mediterranean. His research interests focus on intellectual history and the cultural transmission of texts, as well as on the processes of production, dissemination and reception of knowledge. He has published numerous studies from a transcultural perspective, with particular attention to Sicily and the Mediterranean, and has directed and participated in several national and international research projects. Among these, he led the Italian-Spanish mission at the Hospital of San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi in Palermo (2014–2021).

Managing the Border with the Rūm in the Fatimid World (10th–11th Centuries): The Emirate of the Sicilian thaghr

Michelangelo Messina

Recent studies of institutional frameworks and settlement patterns in 10th and 11th-century Sicily enable us to outline the social and administrative characteristics of this “frontier region [bordering] the Romans” (*thaghr min thughūr al-Rūm*) within the Fatimid *dawla*. Following the gradual consolidation of the power of the *dāʿī* ‘Abd Allāh, the administration of this insular emirate was entrusted to individuals and family groups who played a significant role in consolidating the dynasty across Ifriqiya, Sicily and Egypt. This emphasises its political significance for the caliphate in terms of establishing its legitimacy as a Mediterranean power.

In this paper, based on the cross-reading of various types of written sources – Arabic, Greek and Latin – and the study of settlement patterns and specific institutions linked to the diverse socio-economic networks of the island, two intertwined aspects of the administrative history of this Fatimid frontier will be discussed:

- 1) The social tension between the centralisation of the sultan’s administrative and military instruments and the management of relations among the diverse Muslim aristocracies on the island.
- 2) The coexistence, throughout the period in question, of Islamic and Byzantine institutions in the *thaghr*, and the repercussions for the island communities of the shifting political balance between the two empires in the Mediterranean region.

This analysis of society, institutions and administrative systems of the ‘frontier region’ is important for a better understanding of the specific contributions of the Fatimid Imamate to the history of the medieval Islamic world. In particular, this paper will present the changes in the ideologies and practices of *jihād* and *ribāṭ* within the sociological framework of the confrontation between pro- and anti-Fatimid aristocracies, by comparing what emerged on these topics from Sicily with accounts from other regions of the Fatimid Caliphate.

MICHELANGELO MESSINA is an archaeologist and researcher specialising in the medieval Islamic world; during his undergraduate, doctoral and post-doctoral studies, he focused on the frontier between Byzantium and the Islamic world in Sicily. He completed his PhD under the joint supervision of the University of Catania (L. Arcifa) and the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (J. P. Van Staëvel), with a thesis entitled *Dinamiche insediative e paesaggi produttivi in un contesto di frontiera: per un approccio sociologico all’archeologia della Sicilia orientale tra Bisanzio e Islam (secoli IX-XI)*. He is a member of the Medieval Studies section at the École Française de Rome, where he is currently conducting a research project on the role of the island’s natural resources in shaping the settlement dynamics and military strategies of the two Mediterranean empires.

Fatimid Influence on Sicilian Art and Architecture

Khalil Pirani

Sicilian architecture is a layered and diverse heritage, reflecting centuries of cultural exchange and adaptation originating from ancient Greek temples to Arab (including Fatimid) and Byzantine influences, then Norman cathedrals, Baroque extravagance and modern architectural innovation. The island offers a unique lens into Mediterranean history and design, making it a rich destination for the exploration of art and architecture. This paper aims to examine the influence of Fatimid rule on the art and architecture of Sicily. It will research the influence of Arab Muslims on the island before the Fatimid conquest of 909, and how Fatimid rule affected its art and architecture.

The Arab-Norman architecture in Sicily is a harmonious blend of Islamic, Byzantine and Norman styles. This architectural fusion is visible in the Palatine Chapel, where Byzantine mosaics and Arabic *muqarnas* ceiling styles co-exist, and the Monreale Cathedral, which features golden mosaics and Arab-style geometric motifs. These structures are part of the Arab-Norman heritage trail and collectively form a UNESCO World Heritage site that showcases the architectural achievements of the Islamic period.

There are examples of the use of Arabic inscriptions alongside Latin ones, symbolising the peaceful co-existence of different cultures during Islamic rule, a hallmark of the Fatimid dynasty. Research for this paper has been undertaken in collaboration with Professor Attilio Petruccioli in Italy.



KHALIL PIRANI is a practising architect with over thirty years of experience in Boston, MA. He currently works as a senior project manager at DCAMM and is a member of the American Institute of Architects and the Boston Society of Architects. Khalil has been a visiting scholar at MIT, has written several articles about architecture and cultural sensitivity, and has co-edited a book, *Understanding Islamic Architecture*, with Professor Attilio Petruccioli (2000).

Between Messina, Cairo, and Tripoli: The Life, Death, and Afterlife of al-Ḥasan b. ‘Ammār al-Kalbī (d. 1000)

Aslisho Qurboniev

This paper revisits the primary sources for the life of Ḥasan b. ‘Ammār al-Kalbī (d. 1000), the most prominent member of the Sicilian ruling family in Egypt, who led the Fatimid army to victory in eastern Sicily and Egypt. Most Arabic chroniclers present Ḥasan as a tribal leader of the Kutāma and overlook his kinship with the rulers of Sicily – a connection crucial in his alliance with the Kutāma, loyal followers of the imam-caliph and the backbone of the early Fatimid army. His intermediary position between the Fatimid state and the Kutāma followers culminated in a brief ministerial tenure early in al-Ḥākim’s reign, followed by his ‘fall from grace’ and assassination (or execution, according to most sources), for which his family in Sicily received a written explanation from Cairo.

Bringing all extant sources together, this paper sheds light on the religious dimension of Ḥasan b. ‘Ammār’s affiliation with the Fatimid state, which is absent from the Arabic chronicles, as are the implications of his death in the turbulent years of al-Ḥākim’s reign. Ḥasan’s legacy is similarly shrouded in mystery. His supposed descendants, the Banū ‘Ammār, later emerged as rulers of Tripoli (in al-Shām). Meanwhile, a modern tourist legend in Messina attaches his name to the folkloric giant Grifone, a ‘Saracen’ pirate who, after converting to Christianity, married a local giantess, Mata, and together they founded the city. This curious afterlife of the Fatimid general who died in Cairo, but who in legend was reborn as the founder of a contested frontier city in Sicily, highlights how deeply the Islamic past is woven into Sicilian memory.



ASLISHO QURBONIEV is a Research Associate at The Institute of Ismaili Studies and holds a PhD in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Cambridge. He is a specialist in Fatimid and Ismaili history with a broader interest in the social history of learning and the production of culture, particularly manuscript traditions. He works mainly with Arabic and Persian sources and is interested in the movement, survival, reuse, and loss of texts over time. His published works include articles on Fatimid history, Ilkhanid manuscripts, and various topics in digital humanities.

Fatimid Sicily in the Book of Curiosities

Yossef Rapoport

The Fatimid *Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels for the Eye* contains a unique map of the island of Sicily, which is drawn as an unfamiliar oval.

The main focus of the map is the walls of Palermo, the towers and the palace, which are enlarged out of proportion and with no attention to scale. The V-shaped indentation at the top of the map represents the port of Palermo, flanked by twin towers from which a chain could be lowered to block access. The domed structure, labelled the ‘Ruler’s palace’, represents the palatial compound of al-Khālīṣa built in 937 to house the ruling dynasty.

Beyond Palermo, Sicily is mere background. The mountains shown inland are only the peaks of the valley of Conca d’Oro near Palermo, and all the rivers and villages shown inland are also in the near environs of the capital city. It is only along the coast that we find labels for other Sicilian ports, such as Syracuse. Along the coast are a series of isolated peaks, with the volcanic Mount Etna shown on the lower left of the map, that is, to the south-west of the island, away from its correct position.

The map of Sicily/Palermo, together with the treatise’s maps of Mahdiyya and Tinnīs, conveys a political, military message about the power of the Fatimids over these nodes of Mediterranean commerce. Ironically, the grandiose depiction of walls and palaces could not prevent the imminent demise of the Fatimid caliphate as a Mediterranean power. These maps may have been useful as pieces of propaganda, but they were no substitute for military might. Drawing thick walls does not stop a Norman onslaught. Within decades of the composition of the *Book of Curiosities*, this trio of Fatimid Mediterranean ports fell in quick succession. Palermo was lost to the Normans in 1072, and the last Muslim stronghold in Sicily capitulated in 1091.



YOSSEF RAPOPORT is a historian of the social, cultural, and legal aspects of life in the Islamic, Arabic-speaking Middle East in its Middle Ages, from about 1000 to 1500 AD. He was trained at the universities of Tel Aviv, Princeton and Oxford, before joining Queen Mary in 2008.

His work mostly relates to the history of the Islamic Middle East under the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk dynasties. His main focus is the history of everyday life and the relatively unexplored history of women, slaves and peasants. He is also interested in the history of Islamic medieval maps. His publications include *Lost Maps of the Caliphs* (with Emilie Savage-Smith) and *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe. The 'Book of Curiosities'* (with Emilie Savage-Smith).

From Ifriqiya to Siquilliya: Materia Medica in the Medieval Islamicate Mediterranean

Robin S. Reich

This paper explores the relationship between Sicily and central North Africa through the pharmacology of al-Idrīsī, arguing that it is through the continued engagement with Islamicate pharmacology that Sicily remained culturally and intellectually Fatimid, even through the Norman period. Sicily and central North Africa (modern-day Tunisia and Libya) had long been vital to the production of medicinal substances in the region and the dissemination of knowledge about them. Building on the Greek legacy and spurred by the mercantile ventures of traders displaced from Qayrawān, the *materia medica* tradition in Sicily was thoroughly Mediterranean-focused and speaks to the region's continued connectivity during a period of dramatic political change. Most indicative of Sicily's position in the *materia medica* tradition is the pharmaceutical text *Kitab al-Jāmi'* by al-Idrīsī. While the author is best known for his geographical works written for the Norman King Roger II, he also composed this work on medicinal substances, which is similarly grounded in a geographical view of the Islamicate world, from a vantage point in Sicily. The text builds on the approach of Qayrawānī physician Ibn al-Jazzār, whose influential text on *materia medica* was one of the foundations of the Salernitan school. Both works offer a view of medicine organised by geography within the Islamicate world.



ROBIN S. REICH (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of History at Seattle University. Her work sits at the intersection of medical history and material culture in the medieval Mediterranean. Her doctoral thesis, “Materials of Science in Norman Sicily: Translation, Transmission, and Trade in the Central Mediterranean Corridor” (2022) explored the many ways in which knowledge of science moved across languages beyond texts. She is currently developing this into a monograph on the material and textual transmission of the idea of essence in the medieval central Mediterranean.

Structural Ties that Bind: The Kalbid (and Other Sicilian Muslims') Connection to the Fatimids in the 11th Century

Ksenia Ryzhova

The extent of Fatimid rule in Sicily after their permanent move to Egypt in 972 is still a point of scholarly debate. Kalbid rule over Sicily disintegrated by 1036 and was confined to Palermo; their hold on Palermo did not last long, but the actual timeline of events remains obscure. The extent of Kalbid independence from the Fatimids in the 11th century is also an open question. Using Latin chronicles and a previously misdated Geniza letter, this paper will argue that the period of Kalbid rule in Palermo extended at least until the Normans first arrived in Sicily in 1061 and that there was direct contact between the Fatimids and Kalbids as late as the 1050s. The paper will conclude by examining the Kalbids and their ties to the Fatimids in the broader context of the fragmentation of power in Sicily in the 11th century. A succession of Muslim Sicilian leaders, especially rulers of Palermo, pursued a relationship with Fatimid Egypt to legitimise their rule. The need to maintain a connection with Egypt was in part driven by a desire to maintain the lucrative trade between the two regions, specifically the vast imports of Egyptian flax for the textile manufacturing industry in Sicily.



KSENIA RYZHOVA is a socio-economic historian of the medieval Mediterranean currently working at the Princeton Geniza Project. She completed her PhD at Princeton in 2025, where her work examined Fatimid economic structures in Sicily and their afterlives under Norman rule. Specifically, she looked at the development of triangular trade in bulk commodities among the Fatimid-ruled regions of Ifriqiya, Egypt and Sicily, and how the Normans pursued the economic connection with Egypt in the 12th century. More broadly, she is interested in how premodern societies navigate crisis and change through their development of economic and administrative infrastructures.

Pottery Production in Fatimid Sicily: Connectivity and Innovation

Viva Sacco

The conquest of Sicily by Islam integrated the island into a vast, interconnected geographical space in which people, goods and ideas circulated widely. This transformation triggered significant changes at multiple levels, including material culture, reflecting shifts in both social practices and production systems. Rather than a sudden rupture, this process unfolded gradually, beginning in Palermo with the Aghlabid conquest and continuing to evolve during the Fatimid period.

This paper analyses changes in pottery production and consumption during the Fatimid period, a phase that witnessed the full Islamisation of Sicily's material culture. From the 10th century onwards, the Islamic Mediterranean experienced a commercial revolution in which Sicily played a key role. This context not only stimulated local production for export and encouraged the circulation of new products, but also fostered the adoption of new fashions, techniques, and consumption habits. Artisans, however, were not passive recipients of external influences; they actively reworked and adapted them within local skillsets and traditions. These transformations are particularly evident in connection with the relocation of the Fatimid capital to Egypt. The triangular network linking Egypt, Ifriqiya, and Sicily, well documented in the Cairo Geniza, had significant repercussions for pottery production and circulation. From the late 10th to the 11th century, new wares and techniques emerged, especially in glazed tableware, but also in cooking vessels. Pottery production thus offers a key lens through which to understand processes of Islamisation, connectivity, and cultural transformation in Fatimid Sicily.



VIVA SACCO is an Associate Lecturer (Teaching) at UCL and a former British Academy International Fellow (2023–2026), as well as an Ancienne member of the École française de Rome (2018–2021). She is an archaeologist specialising in Islamic pottery and an expert in archaeological science approaches to ceramic analysis, with particular expertise in Sicily and North Africa. Her research explores pottery's potential as a source for reconstructing economic history in the medieval Mediterranean, with particular emphasis on production, exchange, and connectivity. She is the author of *Dalla ceramica alla storia economica: il caso di Palermo islamica* and has published widely in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes.

*Some Little-Known Stories about Sicily and North Africa
in Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī's Sirāj al-Mulūk*

Josep Suñé

Around 1122, the distinguished Andalusī jurist Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī completed his *Sirāj al-Mulūk*, a political treatise intended to shape the governing practices of contemporary emirs. Despite its author's origins, the work was dedicated to the Fatimid vizier of Egypt, al-Baṭā'ihī. At barely twenty-five years of age, al-Ṭurṭūshī had left his native al-Andalus and settled in Alexandria, where he produced most of his intellectual work, criticising—among other issues—the innovations that, in his view, the Fatimids had introduced into Islam. Yet al-Ṭurṭūshī's distance from al-Andalus did not mean that his homeland had faded from memory. On the contrary, a significant proportion of the stories he collected in the *Sirāj al-Mulūk* as exempla for future Egyptian rulers recount events that had taken place in al-Andalus. These anecdotes have long been known; less familiar, however, are other stories alluding to North Africa and Sicily. These latter accounts provide insights into the illicit desires of Islamic rulers, the workings of destiny, and the struggle against the Christians. The aim of this study is to compare these anecdotes with those from al-Andalus and to integrate them into al-Ṭurṭūshī's broader political and moral thought.



JOSEP SUÑÉ has a PhD in Medieval History from the University of Barcelona (2017). During his doctoral research he studied Arabic at the Barcelona Drassanes Official Language School, obtaining the advanced certificate in 2016. After completing his PhD, he received the AIHM Young Researchers Award (2018) and taught geography and history in secondary education for nearly five years. In 2023 he obtained a research scholarship from the University of Münster. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the CSIC Institute of History within the ERC project ‘Medieval Appetites’ and has published academic and outreach works.

‘The Domestikos Cast Away His Cross’: Reappraising the Battle of the Straits (965) through the Poetic Witness of Ibn Hānī’ al-Andalusī

Yusuf Umrethwala

The *Waq‘at Majāz*, or the Battle of the Straits (965), represents a pivotal point in regional politics that has been silenced in traditional historiography. Fought in the Straits of Messina, this naval collision resulted in a catastrophic Byzantine defeat and the final collapse of Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas’s ambitions to reclaim Sicily from the Fatimids. The records of this event are ostensibly absent from Byzantine chronicles, possibly owing to the humiliation of the loss, and remain on the periphery of primary Muslim chronicles. This paper seeks to navigate this scholarly gap by bringing to light a source previously relegated to the realm of “mere” literature: the work of Ibn Hānī’ al-Andalusī (d. 973). As the chief court poet to the Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz, Ibn Hānī’ composed at least three Arabic *qaṣā’id* specifically to celebrate this victory. This study provides the first historical reconstruction of the battle using these poems as primary data, arguing that they offer crucial details omitted by chroniclers. In doing so, the paper demonstrates that in instances where the “official” record is silent, literary sources become indispensable historical material, providing the “Lion’s Pen” necessary to reclaim a lost chapter of Fatimid and Byzantine history.



YUSUF UMRETHWALA teaches at Aljamea-tus-Saifiyah in Surat, India, and is a researcher with the Princeton Geniza Project. A graduate of Aljamea-tus-Saifiyah, he later completed an MA in Islamic Studies and Muslim Cultures through the joint program of Columbia University and the Aga Khan University. His master's thesis, written under the supervision of Marina Rustow and Sarah Savant, was entitled: *The State's Negative Imprint: Unpublished Fatimid Petitions from the Cairo Geniza and the Administration of Justice in Fatimid Egypt*. His research work mainly focuses on Arabic-script Geniza documents, Judaeo-Arabic, and the social and legal history of the medieval Islamic world. In an earlier work, Yusuf has researched a trans-regional migratory history of his community, the Dawoodi Bohras, and published his findings as *Travel and You Shall Prosper: The History of Migrations of the Dawoodi Bohras (1815-1975)*. He has recently published two studies on Geniza fragments, including a survey of unpublished Arabic legal documents. His most recent article on Fatimid petitions is forthcoming in the journal *ʿUṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*.

Fiscal Policy and Christian Communities in Kalbid Sicily (c. 948–1053)

Theodora Zampaki

The aim of this paper is to examine the fiscal policy and the Christian communities in Sicily under the Kalbid emirate (c. 948–1053), arguing that the effectiveness and evolution of taxation were fundamentally dependent on the integration of Christian populations into the island's economic and administrative systems. It situates Sicily within the broader Fatimid fiscal framework, while emphasising the localised adaptations that emerged under Kalbid rule. The study concentrates on the fact that rural Christian communities formed the backbone of agricultural production and, consequently, of land-based taxation. Their continued presence ensured the stability of revenue streams, particularly through the *kharāj*, while their status as protected subjects under the *dhimma* system structured their obligations and rights.

It also argues that, under the Kalbids, fiscal administration became increasingly decentralised, with tax collection often mediated through local elites and communal authorities. This reliance on intermediaries not only facilitated governance but also tied the fiscal system closely to existing social hierarchies.

As military pressures and political fragmentation intensified, these dynamics became even more pronounced, reinforcing the interdependence between state revenue and local communities. By integrating fiscal and social analysis, the study highlights how Christian communities were not peripheral but structurally embedded in the functioning of the Kalbid state, revealing a model of governance grounded in pragmatism, negotiation and regional adaptation.



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Islamic Traces Photography Exhibition

Photographs by Kate Stanworth and audio by Kate Stanworth and Giulia Liberatore

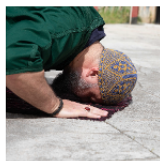
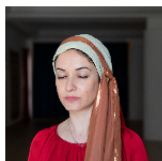
In 831 Palermo was conquered by Ifriqiyan troops, after which Sicily became a province within the Islamic Empire, first under the Aghlabids and subsequently the Fatimids. It was in this period that Palermo became one of the most important cities of the Fatimid Empire and the seat of government.

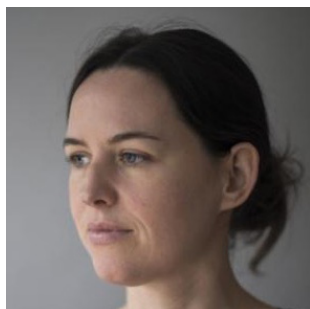
How is the Islamic past imagined in contemporary Palermo, Sicily? *Islamic Traces* follows a small number of Palermo's inhabitants – both Muslim and those of other faiths or none – as they search for remnants of the city's Islamic past. Through architecture, landscape, sensory experiences, religious practices, language and the arts, they bring their imaginaries of the past to life, recounting it and giving it meaning in the present.

Islamic Traces prompts reflection on the absence of this history in official heritage-making and in many contemporary representations of the city and its Muslim populations. What emerges from this work are visions of Palermo in which the Islamic presence is central both to narratives and memories of the medieval past and to people's present experiences and sense of belonging in the city.

Islamic Traces is part of Absent Presence, a larger digital project co-produced with Ammara Maqsood (University College London) and Leslie Fesenmyer (University of Birmingham) that explores imaginings of and relations across difference in Karachi, Nairobi and Palermo. It was funded by the ERC grant Multi-Religious Encounters in Urban Settings (MEUS, 2019-2025).

See the full stories via the QR codes below:





Kate Stanworth

Kate Stanworth is a London-based artist using photography to tell stories exploring human resilience, identity and the search for belonging.

Through her work on editorial stories and long-term personal projects she has built relationships of trust and collaboration with individuals and communities as far and wide as Italy, Jordan, Somaliland and Argentina. She is motivated by a desire to connect with the people she photographs and to understand their struggles, dreams and aspirations.

Her work has been published by *The Guardian*, *Tate Publishing*, *The Sunday Times*, *BBC News*, *Al Jazeera*, *Time Out*, *The Economist*, *CNN*, *Internazionale* and many more.

She has led photography workshops for diverse groups including young Somalis at the Hargeisa International Book Fair, summer school students at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, young displaced people in Jordan and the UK, and her neighbours in South London.

She has a BA(Hons) Degree in Fine Art from Norwich University of the Arts and a master's in Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths College, University of London.



Giulia Liberatore

Giulia Liberatore is Lecturer in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies and Social Anthropology and Deputy Director of Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World at the University of Edinburgh. She researches, teaches and writes about religion (Islam and Catholicism), migration and the politics of difference in Europe. She is the author of *Somali, Muslim, British: Striving in Securitized Britain* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and is currently co-authoring with Eugenio Giorgianni a book tentatively titled *City of Saints: Ethnographies of Coexistence from Europe's Margins*. The book is based on research conducted in Palermo for an ERC-funded project on Multi-religious Encounters in Urban Settings (MEUS).



Fatimid quarter-dinar (*rubā'ī*) from Sicily. Courtesy of the IIS Special Collections.

Reverse (above): *There is no God but God, Muḥammad is the Messenger of God, 'Alī is the Vicegerent of God* (centre, forming the hexagram design); *In the name of God. This dinar was minted in Sicily in the month of Rabī' al-Awwal, the year 409 [July–August 1018 CE]* (margin).

Obverse (right): *The Imam Abū 'Alī al-Ḥākim, Commander of the Believers* (centre, forming the hexagram); *Quran 9:33* (margin).

Source: N.D. Nicol, *A Corpus of Fāṭimid Coins* (Trieste, 2026), p. 138, no. 961.



