



History of the Arabs in Calabria

Interview with Dr. Loiacono

Antonio Maurizio Loiacono was born in Reggio Calabria in 1981. He graduated in *Societies Cultures and Institutions of Europe* at the University of Messina. His thesis about the Arabs in Calabria during the Middle Ages won the *Anassilos Giovani 2016* prize, given to remarkable research made by young scholars of different fields. We from the Euro-Gulf Information Centre interviewed him for our series Lessons from History in relation to his recently published book: *Storia degli arabi in Calabria* (History of the Arabs in Calabria), edited by Città del Sole.

1) Can you give us a little bit of the political/geopolitical/historical context of the Arab settlements in Southern Italy?

The political history of Calabria in the Middle Ages, and Southern Italy at large, is crucial to the comprehensive understanding of the historical era. It is there that we can witness the actions and interests of the two superpowers of the time: the Arabs (specifically the Abbasid Empire) and the Byzantines. The two Empires were fighting over the control of strategic commercial routes and resources. They were ascending together on the stage of the imperialist fight over the control of the Mediterranean sea, with alternate moments of war and peace. Two other important points need to be highlighted, and they both go against common knowledge: in the Mediterranean basin, the Byzantines were not declining but instead they were a powerful entity in many moments of the early Middle Ages and the pillages made by the Arabs were not randomly executed but carefully planned and part of a grander strategic design to expand their power.

2) Indeed, as you just said and wrote in your book, there was a clear project implemented by the Arabs in order to expand their power over the Mediterranean sea, and those acts that were perceived as random pillages were instead carefully structured plans, can you elaborate more on this subject?

In order to understand the Arab strategy in Southern Italy, we should analyse the fundamentals of their actions in the area: Amantea immediately became a stronghold of the

Arab presence, ruled by a fleet commander; Santa Maria Capua Vetere (the former Roman Capua) was attacked, Brindisi was occupied; they had designed to capture Reggio. What do all these places have in common? They were strategic centers for the Romans. Therefore it is probable that the Arabs were studying the Roman geography in order to follow in the Romans' footsteps and enhance their power in the area: those cities were strategically relevant because they were vital crossroads of communication. For example, during the Middle Ages, Bari was the most important center in Apulia while Brindisi was a declining city. The decision of taking Brindisi first has to be connected to the importance the Romans gave to that city, even though they later understood the new commercial dynamics and decided then to move to Bari, a much more important trade center.

3) How do you think one could summarise the nature of the Arab ruling in Southern Italy? How did it end and which legacies (political, economic, cultural) did it leave behind?

It is hard to give you a comprehensive picture of the nature of the Arab ruling in Southern Italy, as, unfortunately, the historical sources are not very helpful in this endeavour. Michele Amari, the founder of the modern Oriental Studies structure in Italy, utilised the method of analogy with other areas ruled by the Arabs, such as Egypt or Crete, in order to understand the ruling of Sicily. Therefore, a comparison with those places can be useful, generally speaking. We do have some testimonies about some elements of the Arab ruling in Southern Italy, and specifically on the Emirate of Bari, that can shed a light over the policies implemented in the wider region. For example, we know that religious freedom was granted, and the Arabs tried to preserve the previously existing Christian institutions, so that Christian pilgrims headed towards the Holy Land were still departing from Taranto. Peaceful religious coexistence, rather than religious wars, was part of the culture, and the conquerors never tried to forcibly convert the local people to Islam.

With regards to their legacy, there are many evidences that Arab neighborhoods survived in all the port cities even after the Byzantine conquest. The use of Arabic as a mean of communication also survived until the eleventh century. Moreover, another important element that survived the end of the Arab ruling is the political and economic policy of redistributing large estates to small farmers.

4) The influence of the Arab culture over the Western one is certainly true but hardly known by the many, do you believe that a deeper knowledge of such a link between the two could be a useful tool towards a more peaceful and cooperative coexistence?

During the Middle Ages, arguably, Arabic was truly the international language. It was learned by the intellectuals of the time because it was the language of scientific innovation. The extension of the Arab Empire made possible to create a link between the

Mediterranean basin and the Far East. From this link, an intense exchange was created which furthered and strongly accelerated mutual development throughout the introduction of new technologies, innovative agricultural methods and financial tools. This sort of dynamic and productive exchange is proof that the encounter of different cultures does not imply only a fight over power, but can often be mutually beneficial. If it was possible for our ancestors to improve their lives through mutual acknowledgement and respect, I do not see how it is not possible for us. In this sense, the Middle Ages modus of how different cultures related to one another could be a model for us today.

5) How was the experience of Calabria different from that of other regions in Southern Italy? (Sicily, Apulia?)

The case of Calabria is interesting for several reasons. The area was never completely conquered by the Arabs and was therefore a land of fight and encounter between different cultures. Apulia, in this sense, is similar to Calabria, but the plain territory made that region more attractive for the establishment of the Emirate in Bari. Calabria was a land in which different people tried to open new trade and communication routes. Even more relevant is the fact that Calabria was a shelter for the dispossessed and persecuted. An example is the fight in Sicily between Sh'ites and Sunnis in 934 A. D., after which the latter, having been defeated, escaped to Calabria in great number, to the point that the sources state an almost total depopulation of the city of Agrigento. The geomorphological structure of the region made it a perfect place for hiding.

6) What made Calabria so important for so many different powers like the Arabs, the Byzantines, the Norsemen?

First of all, Calabria was not a single unified region at that time. There were different parts with different appeals. Reggio was a crucial crossroad for the silk trade and therefore the Arabs wanted it. The area around Amantea was rich in wood and quality pitch, considered as one of the best in Mediterranean area until the XVII century. If we take into account the fact that both the Byzantines and the Arabs developed as thalassocracies (that is to say societies built over the control of the sea), and that both pitch and wood were necessary for the building and maintenance of the fleet, it is clear how vital such area was. Moreover, Calabria was strategically important because its coasts were on the one side, the necessary route for Sicily, on the other, the way to the European continent. The role played by the region was that of connecting different worlds.

7) Do you believe that the theory expressed by Henri Pirenne at the beginning of the twentieth century, which says that the expansion of the Arabs in the Mediterranean sea was the trigger of a complete change from the Ancient Era to a new one, is still a useful one to understand our past?

Henri Pirenne's theory, despite its great contribution to this field of research, is now perceived as outdated. Archeological evidences and historical research, such as that of Paolo Delogu, challenged the idea that the Arab expansion in the Mediterranean sea was the cause of the permanent change in the area. Alongside his study, my research on Calabria follows a new approach expressed by Franco Cardini, Amedeo Feniello, Alessandro Vanoli e Marco Di Branco to whom I am indebted for their continuous support. Trade did not decrease because the Arabs imperiled trade routes, those routes simply changed because of the fall of the Roman Empire and the subsequent atrophy of society. Moreover, the Arabs were not a monolithic entity: during the Middle Ages many different Arab polities fought against one another, and often they had Christian allies, like in the case of the Umayyad Emirate of Cordoba strengthening its relationship with the Byzantine Empire to the point that the Emperor and the Emir had a personal correspondence, exchanged scientific books and even exchanged scholars to promote the translation of those scientific texts.

8) How would you describe the relationship like between the Arab settlers and the local population in Calabria?

The sources related to the contacts between settlers and locals are quite rare. We do see a significant presence of Arabic - or Arabic-derived - terms in various local Calabrian dialects, still today. These are mostly related to the agricultural lore, to weights and measures, to fishing and irrigation. The Medieval man was, most of the times, a farmer, and therefore the survival of these terms in those specific fields gives evidence of a strong relation based on locals working side by side with Arab settlers. Moreover, the high number of surnames of Arabic origin in the area reveals a relevant presence of settlers.

9) How important was the religious difference between Christians and Muslims in Calabria during the Middle Ages and how was it managed? Can we draw any lessons for today?

A fundamental aspect, usually overlooked, is the perception people had of religion itself during the Middle Ages. On the one hand, religious otherness was perceived as heretic, a deviance from the right path. However, on the other hand, there was a certain fluidity in religious self-perception. Until the seventeenth century a Catholic would have perceived Islam as a Christian heresy, rather than a false religion and Muslims would have always considered Christians with familiarity, as one of the people from the book (*Ahl al Kitab*). This religious fluidity seems odd for the contemporary Western way of sharp rationalization but the more we go back in time, the more differences become unclear. Therefore, religious coexistence was not an issue between the two religions. However, the fight within the Muslim world, between Sunnis and Shi'ites, was a problematic one that led to war and massacres even during the tenth century in Sicily. On the other hand, the legacy of the Christian/Muslim religious encounter is still present nowadays, in Sicily and is testified by

similar religious practices and the transformation of Kuranic verses into Sicilian popular proverbs.

10) Is there an overall lesson to learn from the history of the Arab ruling in Calabria and Southern Italy in general about coexistence between different cultures?

The message from the Middle Ages Calabria is extremely useful for the modern public. As a scholar of the centuries-long war between Byzantines and Arabs, I never found a fight that was not transversal. And by transversal I mean that there were always Christian polities supporting Muslim polities, and vice versa, in the war over the control of the Mediterranean sea. There was no clash of civilizations. The study of Medieval history demonstrates that there was no such thing as a religious war during the Middle Ages between Christians and Muslims even as religion has been a fundamental propaganda tool for centuries. Moreover the history of Calabria clearly proves that it is possible to peacefully coexist and benefit from this coexistence. A popular legend in Calabria, not historically relevant but certainly interesting as an oral tradition, says that the Dolphins' fountain in Stilo was built for a specific reason: the victorious alliance between Arabs and Byzantines against the invasion of Otto II, the Holy Roman Emperor. If this is why the fountain was built, to symbolise an alliance between Muslims and Christians against a Christian invader, this monument can serve as a unique, clear lesson for us: that coexistence between people of different culture and religion tend to be peaceful, while political and economic interests break this order, supporting fundamentalism and prejudice.

Interview by: Leone Radiconcini

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