Palermo was conquered in 831 by Ifrīqiyan troops summoned to the island by the rebel Euphemios, a Sicilian tourmarch who, when threatened with punishment, usurped the imperial function and, in 827, solicited the backing of the Aghlabids. It may have taken only four years to seize control of the city, but the difficulty is deciding exactly when it became the capital of Sicily and the seat of an emirate. Indeed, the available sources are late and predicated on the assumption that, no sooner had Palermo been conquered by the Arabo-Muslim troops than it was considered to be the island’s capital and Sicily itself an emirate. We are faced here with an a posteriori proof of the city and the island’s successful integration into the Islamic world, and of the fact that Palermo was one of the important capitals of the dār al-islām from the 10th century onwards. While the
geographical sources from the end of that century (Ibn Hawqal, who visited Palermo around 973, and al-Muqaddasi, who completed his geographical survey in 988) provide abundant proof of these facts, we lack historical sources which might enable us to retrace the necessarily gradual transformation of the city and the island.⁴

The fact that Palermo, which had been neither the Byzantine capital of the island nor a particularly important city, should little by little have become the seat of government—and, in the context of a conquest that had not been either easy or swift, this development can only have been gradual—seems to be due to reasons that were first and foremost military.⁵ The resistance of Sicily’s Byzantine capital, Syracuse, up until 878, but also the difficulty of holding a fair number of localities in central Sicily, Enna among them,⁶ and the island’s general instability in military terms up until the end of the 9th century,⁷ forced the Aghlabids to favour a base of operations which, whilst not being too far to the west, could not be located in a region regarded as somewhat unsure either. The choice of Palermo was therefore due to its geographical situation. If the city’s conquerors set such store by Palermo, its high value certainly had something to do with the ease of access from Ifrīqiya, along with the city’s qualities as a port. These factors explain why it was that over time the status of Palermo evolved.

Conquered in 831, the city would only fall into the hands of the Hauteville in 1072. Between the middle of the 9th century, to persist with a very

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⁴ Sicily must be the only region in which the process was so swift, even though the conquest was itself unusually protracted (827–976). The sources never bring out this point, and imply that it happened of its own accord. Adalgisa De Simone, for her part, assumes that the transformation of Palermo occurred during the two years following the capture of the city, see Adalgisa De Simone, “Il periodo arabo. Palermo araba,” in Rosario La Duca, ed., *Storia di Palermo. II. Dal tardo antico all'Islam* (Palermo, 2000), pp. 78–113, p. 80.

⁵ Ibn al-Athīr’s assertion that, prior to the Arabo-Muslim siege, Palermo had 70,000 inhabitants (but after it only 3000!) is open to doubt; Ibn al-Athīr, *Kitāb al-kāmil*, BAS ar., 1: 272 and BAS it., 1: 368–69.

⁶ The other important city in Byzantine Sicily, to which a part of the defensive (and perhaps also governmental) resources had been transferred in the face of the Aghlabid advance (Ibn al-Athīr describes it as ”seat of the king of Sicily” (dār al-malik bi-Ṣiqillyya), Ibn al-Athīr, *Kitāb al-Kāmil*, BAS ar., 1: 279 and BAS it., 1: 379); Enna was thus the principal target of numerous attacks in the course of the early 830s. The city’s fall in 859 therefore caused a great stir, see Ibn al-Athīr, *Kitāb al-Kāmil*, BAS ar., 1: 279–281 and BAS it., 1: 379–380.

⁷ A point I cannot elaborate upon here, for want of space.