FROM A SMALL TOWN TO A CAPITAL: THE URBAN EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC PALERMO (9TH–MID-11TH CENTURY)

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Conquered in 831, we must suppose that Palermo's characteristics as the important capital of the dār al-islām took shape gradually, though it is only from the last quarter of the 10th century that we find it described in the Arabic sources. Only a lengthy process of development can in fact have given rise to the image of the city that is evoked in the first systematic description that has come down to us, thanks to Ibn Ḥawqal, who probably visited it in 973. This author in fact depicts the unmistakeable features of a Mediterranean capital with a high demic density, characterised by an advanced urbanistic fabric and by vibrant economic and social structures integrated into the Fatimid economic and political framework. The city's image would retain such features both in the description made by al-Muqaddasi in 985 and in the later, enhanced one furnished, around the middle of the 11th century, by the Kitāb Gharā’ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-ʿuyūn (The book of the curiosities of the sciences and of marvels for the eyes), an anonymous treatise of cosmography featuring, amongst other things, a profoundly interesting map of Sicily. As is already intimated by the account of al-Idrīsī (circa 1160)—who, since he was resident at the court of Roger II, certainly provides us with first-hand information—the urban form developed in Palermo in the Islamic period continued to shape the Norman city.

It is not a simple task, however, to reconstruct the duration, scale and nature of the various stages of the Islamic city’s development, on account of a more general lack both of written sources and of reliable archeological markers = archeological evidence allowing us to document from

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4 Al-Idrīsī, BAS it., 1: 59–62. On the Norman city see, in the present volume, the chapter by Elena Pezzini, with bibliography.
an early date the transformations affecting Sicily from the Islamic con-
quest onwards. As in the rest of the island, so too in Palermo, much of its
history in this period is in shadow. We know all too little, in particular,
about the 9th century, when the city was the seat of government of the
Aghlabids of Ifrīqiya (831–909)\(^5\) and again about the first half of the 10th
century when, the latter having come under the newly constituted author-
ity of the Fatimids, Sicily too became one of the territories subject to the
powerful caliphs of the Shi‘ite faith (910–948). So far as the immediately
subsequent period is concerned, notable difficulties are occasioned by, in
particular, the discrepancy evident between a picture that the sources jus-
tify us in representing as the outcome of a progressive process—with the
direct intervention of the Fatimids seeming to be a decisive moment in
the new urban structuration = urban form of the Sicilian capital—and the
perspective derived from the archaeological evidence. The fact that the
latter tends in the main to date from the second half of the 10th century
leaves us with a monolithic picture of a reality in which almost all the
events would in essence relate to the government of the Kalbids, a
dynasty which was autonomous, though loyal to the Fatimids, and which
ruled uninterruptedly from 948 to c. 1040. This situation derives from the
system currently in use for the dating of the various phases within the
Islamic period, a system which ties the main archaeological marker of
such Islamic phases, namely glazed pottery with polychrome decoration,
to the second half of the 10th century onwards. On the other hand, we are
not yet in a position to assess whether, and if so, how some recent proposals
to revise ceramic chronologies may give rise to new understandings of the
history of urbanistic development in Palermo.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) On the reasons for such a choice, see in the present volume, Annliese Nef, “Islamic
Palermo and the dār al-islām: politics, society and the economy (from the mid-9th to the
mid-11th century).”

\(^6\) For the proposed revision of the pottery chronologies, see Lucia Arcifa, Alessandra
Bagnera, Annliese Nef, “L’archéologie de la Sicile islamique: un bilan en forme de ques-
tions,” in Philippe Sénac, ed., Villa 4, Histoire et archéologie de l’Occident musulman (VIIe–
XVe siècle) (Toulouse, 2012), pp. 241–74, in particular paragraph 2, pp. 245–56; Alessandra
Bagnera and Annliese Nef, “Histoire et Archéologie du domaine fatimide: la Sicile et
Palerme (début du Xe–milieu du XIe siècle),” in Patrice Cressier and Mourad Rammah,
eds., Sabra al-Mansūriyya. Capitale fatimide, Collection de l’Ecole Française de Rome,
Rome, in press, in particular paragraph IV. A summary of such arguments may be found
in Alessandra Bagnera, “La ceramica invetriata di età islamica,” in Alessandra Bagnera, ed.,
Archeologia dell’Islam in Sicilia, catalogue of the exhibition (Gibellina, 2012), pp. 24–35 and
web-publication (www.islaminsicilia.it) (March 2012).