In early January 1071, after a siege lasting five months, Robert Guiscard and Roger of Hauteville conquered Palermo, the Madīnat Ṣiqilliyya, a great Islamic city fully integrated into the zone of Fatimid prosperity. The city had been the capital of Sicily, a province of the dār al-Īslām, governed from 947/8 until the early 1040s—in the name of the Fatimid caliphate—by an independent emiral dynasty, the Kalbids.

The years succeeding the fall of the Kalbid dynasty—which had involved the fragmentation of the emirate of Sicily into small territorial units—were marked by grave political instability. In a letter from the Cairo Geniza, a member of a family of Sicilian Jewish merchants, having emigrated to Tyre, paints a bleak picture of the state of the city in the mid-11th century. His correspondent learned of “the misfortunes that befell Palermo,” which were described as follows: “We witnessed events which I should have gladly done without, namely bloodshed. We trod on corpses as if it were common ground. (There raged) a heavy epidemic. The price for a thumn (of bread) rose to over a dinar and there was none to be had.” The merchant then went on to speak of his own misfortunes: “our warehouse containing over 1000 quarter dinars (worth of goods) was broken into. Sa’īd’s warehouse was also forced. Subsequently, two months before the death of my father . . . he bought orchards and a house from a Christian for 100 dinars. But when the turmoil increased, they became

---

1 As regards the Islamic city, see the chapters on Islamic Palermo by Annliese Nef and Alessandra Bagnera in the present volume, together with the respective bibliographies.
worthless.” Yet, despite the disorder and the difficult political phase through which Palermo was passing, it was still a great city, with a Muslim population composed of several communities of quite distinct origins, and with communities of Jews and Christians. At the time of the siege the city was governed by a council composed of members of the elites, with which the Normans negotiated the surrender.3

So far as urban morphology is concerned, Palermo in the late Islamic period was a complex city, with several hierarchised nucleuses.4 The generative nucleus, Madinat Balarm, subsequently Qaṣr al-qadīm (“Old Castle”), and hence the late medieval name Cassaro, corresponded to the Punic-Roman ancient city and occupied a narrow calcareous platform, delimited to the south and the north by two watercourses—known respectively as the Winter River and the Rūṭa, being named in the later sources as Sabucia/Kemonia and as Papireto—which formed, in the estuary, a large and well-protected basin (see Fig. 7.1).5 This nucleus had inherited from the ancient city the regular plan with rectangular framework still legible today, defined by a central axis running N-E/S-W (roughly corresponding to the western half of the present-day Corso Vittorio Emanuele and attested in the medieval sources with various different names: *simāṭ* in Arabic, *vicus marmoreus, platea, via* or *ruga marmorea* in Latin) and by a secondary road system at right angles to the axis.6 It is, however, unclear whether the two streets that, in the present-day layout, run inside

---


6 This is essentially the street plan that has survived to the present day, according to the hypothesis of Rosario La Duca, *Palermo felicissima* (Palermo, 1973) p. 24, revived and elaborated upon by Oscar Belvedere, “Appunti sulla topografia antica di Panormo,” *Kokalos* XXXIII (1987), 289–304, and confirmed by the recent archaeological excavations which have led F. Spatafora to date the layout of the city to the mid-4th century: Francesca Spatafora, “Dagli emporia fenici alle città puniche. Elementi di continuità e discontinuità nell’organizzazione urbanistica di Palermo e Solunto,” in Sophie Helas and Dirce Marzoli, eds., *Phönizisches und punische Städtewesen (Akten der internationalen Tagung in Rom*