CHAPTER 11

State, Aggregation of the Elites and Redistribution of Resources in Sicily in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries

*Proposals for a New Interpretation*

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Sicily was a province of the Byzantine Empire until 827, whereafter it progressively came under Islamic domination (in 976 the eastern part of the island would come to be definitively controlled by the Arabo-muslims), before being conquered, between 1061 and 1091, by troops that came from Calabria under the leadership of the Hautevilles, who claimed a Norman origin. This history provides a particularly fertile field for investigation in the framework of this volume. Indeed, the presence in the island of groups who, prior to the mid-eleventh century, had experienced systems in which the State played an important role, and of others who originated from Southern Italy, where regions presented varied situations, yet where feudal trends were developing, suggests the possibility of bringing to light convergences between Islamic State and elite organisation and feudalism.1

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* Translation by Abigail Jamet.
Until now this question has mainly been addressed from a specific angle: that of the supposed transition from one system to another (the Weberian notion of an ideal-type is undoubtedly of great utility here, to avoid pointillistic criticisms based on the differences between documented realities and a model). To take up the distinctions that Sandro Carocci and Simone Collavini developed, the conquest led by the Hautevilles and the progressive installation of the new dynasty was accompanied by the passing from an ideal-type in which the role of the State, of state fiscality and administration, was central to both the extraction of resources and to the aggregation of elites (the Islamic State), to a feudal model (generally attributed to Sicily under the Hautevilles), in which land grants became the major instrument of these two processes.

Indeed, historians agree in considering the Sicily of the Hautevilles as a transitional stage between an Islamic State and a feudal State, presenting a certain number of specificities: a central administration, writing documents in Arabic and in Greek, co-existed with feudalism; and a Latin-speaking aristocracy, descending from the eleventh-century conquerors, revolved around the sovereign along with eunuchs of Arabo-muslim origin, and also Greek-speaking and Arabic-speaking Easterners. This divided state of affairs nevertheless has given rise to opposing interpretations depending on whether the maintaining of previous structures or strong discontinuity from the Islamic period is emphasised. Thus, for some, Sicily in this period was already fundamentally connected with the Latin West on administrative, institutional and political levels, while

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(an expression which here describes all the individuals belonging to a culture that defined itself as of Arabic language and Muslim religion, but which included non-Arabophones and non-Muslims), made up the majority of the population, and were for this reason less defined as a "group"; see A. Nef, *Conquérir et gouverner la Sicile islamique aux xié et xiié siècles*, B.E.F.A.R. (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2011), Introduction.

2 For more on this central concept of Weber's, we simply refer back to the enlightening presentation of S. Kalberg, *Max Weber's Comparative-Historical Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), cc. 3 and 4.

3 The names given to these ideal-types may vary: Weber would probably have spoken of patrimonialism and feudalism.

4 If we adopt the concept of ideal-type, we do not necessarily adopt what Max Weber put forward concerning the Islamic state. On this point, see *Max Weber and Islam*, ed. T.E. Huff & W. Schluchter (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999). There is still work to be done on the definition of the medieval Islamic State, and the research currently under way, notably in Egypt, ought to alter our understanding perceptibly.

5 A good representative of such a point of view is Carlo Alberto Garufi, a prolific medievalist who lived across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.