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Sicily in a Mediterranean context: imperialism, Mediterranean polycentrism and internal diversity (6th-10th century)

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Résumés



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The article offers a re-reading of the role played by Sicily in the Imperial rivalry opposing the Byzantine and Islamic empires in the Central Mediterranean, stressing the island's specific Imperial dimension. With Justinian's "Reconquista", Sicily underwent a thorough ideological,

social, economic, and strategic integration into the Byzantine empire, ultimately becoming a uniquely “Imperial” province, a status preserved under Islamic rule. The concept of Imperiality and its evolution between the 7th and the 10th century offers a useful heuristic tool to analyse the ideological, political, and economic importance of Sicily for Constantinople and the role of the island as a source of legitimacy for the Islamic polities in the Central Mediterranean. The reassessment of the archaeological data sheds light on the concrete consequences of this Imperial struggle on the settlement patterns over the same period, with the creation of a specific frontier zone, paving the way to new research into the process of internal territorial diversification of the island.

L'articolo analizza il ruolo della Sicilia altomedievale nel contesto della rivalità tra arabi e bizantini nel Mediterraneo centrale, alla luce di una chiave di lettura che valorizza l'imperialità dell'isola. La riconquista giustiniana crea le premesse per una più stretta compenetrazione tra Sicilia e Costantinopoli, sul piano sociale, economico, strategico, premessa indispensabile per il suo riposizionamento in seno all'impero e per la costruzione di una idea di 'isola imperiale' successivamente ripresa e rivisitata in seno al mondo islamico. Il concetto di imperialità e la sua evoluzione nel tempo forniscono una specifica chiave di lettura per comprendere il forte investimento ideologico, politico e economico dei Bizantini da una parte e, sul fronte islamico, il suo uso quale fonte di legittimazione del potere acquisito nel Mediterraneo centrale. La stessa rilettura dei dati archeologici fornisce ulteriori punti di osservazione per valutare concretamente le ricadute sulle dinamiche insediative tra VIII e X secolo suggerendo nuove piste di ricerca per valutare i processi di diversificazione territoriale e la stessa formazione di un'area di frontiera in cui convergeranno gli interessi strategici ed economici dei due imperi.

Entrées d'index

Keywords : Imperiality, Sicily, Byzantium, Islam, frontier studies

Parole chiave : Imperialità, Sicilia, Bisanzio, Islam, frontiera

Notes de l'auteur

The paper is the result of common reflections; nonetheless, paragraphs I.A.1-3, II.A.1 and the beginning of II.B.1 are made by Vivien Prigent; paragraphs I.B.1-2 and II.A.2 by Annliese Nef; and paragraph II.B.1-6 by Lucia Arcifa.

Texte intégral

- 1 The objective of the research program entitled “La Sicile et la Méditerranée entre le VII^e et le XII^e siècle : diversité interne et polycentrisme méditerranéen”¹ is to take a new approach to investigate regional diversification in Sicily. The program includes the reinterpretation of known texts, especially in the light of new research on the first centuries of Islam in other parts of the Mediterranean, the renewed exploration of auxiliary sources, such as sigillography and numismatics, the production of new archaeological data, and a reflection on material culture. Each of these approaches follows an internal logic and sheds light on diverse mechanisms, dynamics, and processes. However, our understanding of regional diversification can only be renewed by synthesizing all these approaches.
- 2 7th- to 12th-century Sicily has traditionally been seen either as tripartite – thus researchers have sought to determine the genesis of this tripartition –, or as attracted by two opposite poles and spheres: Byzantium and South Italy, on one side, the world of Islam, and Africa (then Ifrīqiya) on the other. Both approaches are problematic as they underestimate the role that Sicily played as an inter-imperial frontier (between the Islamic Empire and Byzantium) at the centre of the Mediterranean from the 8th to 11th century (fig. 1). Consequently, the impact this role had on both the internal structure of the island and the ideological construction elaborated around the imperialism of Sicily has been underestimated. Obviously, this ongoing



confrontation was neither exclusive of non-military interactions between the areas under Islamic and Byzantine domination nor of shared representations.

- 3 Stemming from ongoing research, this paper proposes a new, two-fold, general interpretative framework. It will first insist on the importance of Sicily's imperialism, from an ideological and military point of view, which helps explain why Sicily has been disputed over by competing states whose rivalry simultaneously fuelled this very same imperial dimension. It will then highlight various aspects of the concrete incidences this rivalry had on Sicily's internal diversification.

Fig. 1 – The Central Mediterranean in the 9th-10th century: Sicily between Islamic Ifriqiya and Byzantium (by H. Renel, A. Nef, CNRS-Orient & Méditerranée).



I. Sicily and imperial Mediterranean rivalry: representations and ideology

- 4 Recent research, whether leaning on Byzantine and Islamic sources or archaeology, has shown that the frontier dimension of Sicily was both symbolic and concrete. The first dimension has even given birth to ideological formulations mirroring a reality that can be termed the “imperiality” of Sicily, strong imperial connotations, whose origins are found in the internal development of the Byzantine Empire during the 6th century. This dimension persisted through time, adapting to various reconfigurations related to the evolving role Sicily played as the main area of imperial military confrontation when the eastern regions became less active (9th century). Sicily retained this role with the resumption of military activity in the east (10th century).
- 5 Although the symbolic, ideological, political, economic, and military dimensions are tightly interwoven and fuelled by each other, for the sake of clarity, we will broach this theme from the Byzantine point of view and then from the world of Islam. Imperiality appears inseparable from a relatively intense confrontation and this entanglement is interpreted differently by each side.

A. The “imperiality” of Sicily: Byzantine ideological, political, and economical genesis

1. Milestones

- 6 The imperial dimension of the island and the decisive role the rise of Islam had on its redefinition can be illustrated through two episodes that occurred at the start and end of the period considered in this project².
- 7 In the mid-7th century, confronted with the impending threat of Islamic expansion toward the western Mediterranean, Emperor Constans II moved his headquarters and court to Syracuse³. We must discard the notion that the capital itself was also moved to the Sicilian shores⁴. The famous *ubi Caesar, ibi Roma* proverb had lost its relevance with the stabilization of the imperial government in Constantinople during the 5th century. “Rome” was no longer the place where the emperor resided: imperial power had become strictly embedded in the capital city on the Bosphorus⁵. Nonetheless, this move was unprecedented⁶, although Carthage had also been briefly considered as a possible alternative seat of the government⁷. The lasting memory of this move in medieval chronicles⁸ reveals the strong impression it made on contemporaries, which has led to its overvaluation in modern historiography. Even the murder of the Emperor was probably related to the fear amongst some political circles that his western adventure might endanger Constantinople⁹.
- 8 At the end of the period in 902, the city of Taormina was conquered by Ibrahim II¹⁰. Emperor Leo VI removed his crown in shame¹¹, as if the loss of this small city, which was seen at the time as the final loss of Sicily¹², had stripped him of imperial legitimacy. It is worth stressing here that the island is barely mentioned in the Byzantine chronicles of the 10th century. This stemmed from the convergence of two facts: first, the island had lost most of its importance to the Empire at the time of their writing; second, and more importantly, the loss of Sicily was the only failure of the external politics of the glorious Macedonian



dynasty which orchestrated this renewal of Byzantine historiography¹³ and had every reason to downplay the topic¹⁴. It is against this background that we should consider the fact that both imperial attempts to reconquer Sicily in the 10th century were ordered by Emperors (Romanos I Lekapenos¹⁵, Nikephoros Phokas¹⁶) who tried to highjack the legitimacy of the Macedonian dynasty¹⁷. A victory where these sovereigns had failed would have facilitated their ambitions¹⁸.

9 Other milestones can guide us between these two episodes. Emperor Theophilus staked the restoration of his legitimacy, marred by the conquest of Amorion, the cradle of his dynasty, on imperial victories against the Emir of Africa¹⁹. He sent his designated heir to take charge of the Sicilian front²⁰. One must also take into account the earlier, short-lived usurpation of Tiberios IV Onomagoulos in 717-718²¹. At this time, Sicily appeared as a credible and legitimate alternative to Constantinople which the local authorities had thought conquered by the Umayyad caliph armies²². As the last milestone, we should recall the attempted usurpation of Euphemios who envisioned his destiny as a legitimate Emperor in Constantinople and not as an independent Sicilian ruler²³.

10 The facts above clearly show that Sicily was considered as organically tied to the Empire, and this was true whether we observe the situation from the Bosphorus or Syracuse. Unsurprisingly, the island appears regularly in literary texts not specifically detailing western affairs but exalting the rise of the Empire, such as in the *De Creta capta*²⁴, or deprecating its humiliation, such as in the apocalyptic prophecies²⁵. In a way, Sicily was a benchmark of imperial success and legitimacy and its imperial dimension arose from numerous factors, both ideological and pragmatic.

2. An island tied to Constantinople

11 To fully appreciate this set of facts, we should also discard the false impression that originates from observing the Mediterranean map. As far as strategy and politics are concerned, time, not distance, is of the essence. Ancyra, in the Anatolian heartland, or Philippoupolis on the highway to the Danube, were undoubtedly the bulwarks of Constantinople. Similarly, Cappadocia is usually considered one of the core provinces of the Byzantine Empire, the cradle of the stalwart military aristocracy that came to dominate its political life²⁶. However, Syracuse was distant 15 days of travel from Constantinople, while it took 13 and 11 days to reach Ancyra and Philippoupolis, respectively, and 31 days to travel to Caesarea in Cappadocia²⁷. If we are referring to moving armies, not individuals, then these inland-bound strongholds of imperial power were actually far more remote than the island since land travel was much slower – and considerably more expensive – than navigation. We could argue that 7th-8th century Sicily should be envisioned as part of Constantinople's hinterland²⁸ if we focus on the intensity and ease of communications.

12 In a way, Sicilian imperialism stemmed precisely from the fact that the province was an island. The decision of Mu'āwiya to wage war on the seas in order to wrestle hegemony from the Empire entailed a fundamental change for the three main Mediterranean islands, Sicily, Crete, and Cyprus, whose roles evolved from commercial interchanges to military bulwarks. Controlling the islands was the prerogative and privilege of the sovereign who could muster the most powerful fleets. In the Mediterranean, this achievement entailed both technical skill and financial power. As such, thalassocracy crowned the most powerful state. Kekaumenos' assertion, in the heyday of the Empire, that “the fleet is the glory of the Romania”²⁹ must be read within this context. War fleets meant a strong demographic basis³⁰, diversified landscapes providing complementary resources³¹, mastery of highly specialized technical skills, both in the field of nautical engineering³² and general



administration³³, and a strong fiscal system and monetary economy which no petty principalities could flaunt. To understand the famous sentence of Nikephoros II Phokas who stated his superiority over the Ottonians by declaring that the “power over the sea” belonged to him, we should keep in mind the staggering costs of a naval expedition: attacking Crete in 911 involved an extra expenditure amounting to ca. 270.000 solidi³⁴ (10,5 million Carolingian denarii). This was more than ten times the famous tribute paid by Charles the Bald to the Vikings after his crushing defeat on the Seine River in 866. The King had to ask for a kingdom-wide special tax to meet the financial demands of the Vikings³⁵. In this framework, it is not surprising that the two periods when huge fleets were active in the Early Medieval Mediterranean, the second half of the 7th and the 10th centuries, correspond to two phases of acute struggle for hegemony between the rival imperial states³⁶. The navy is the trophy wife of an Empire.

13 This fact is common to all islands, but in the case of Sicily, it took a specific dimension because the island was key in asserting control over Italy and Rome, the fountainhead of imperial legitimacy. Since the landing of Belisarios, the island was the main military interchange of the western Mediterranean. Besides, the policy of the Isaurian Emperors demonstrates the enduring importance of Rome³⁷ as their efforts to reassume control of Italy were never matched by similar endeavours in Africa, even if the political instability prevailing in this region during the second half of the 8th century³⁸, must have offered interesting perspectives. Paradoxically, we can measure the importance of Sicily in the unforeseen consequences of the seizure of the pontifical patrimonies which freed the popes from the necessity to remain in the imperial fold and, as such, facilitated the rise of the Carolingian alliance and, ultimately the rebirth of the western Empire³⁹. Conversely, when Constantinople forfeited its hope to regain control over Rome⁴⁰, Sicily’s importance in the imperial scheme diminished, even if the *stratego*i of Sicily continued to play a key role in the diplomacy between the two Christian Empires⁴¹.

14 Beyond this insular dimension and its consequences, Sicily played a special part in the balance of the Empire. The 7th-century crisis led to a substantial redefinition of the Byzantine Empire from a polycentric state to one more strictly centred on Constantinople, the Emperor, and his immediate entourage⁴². The most striking aspect of this evolution was perhaps the shedding of the old senatorial hierarchy in favour of a new system whose cornerstone was the spatharaton, originating in the military eunuch palatine corps, a reform decided by Emperor Leo III⁴³. This change most certainly originated from the growing financial importance of the *cubiculum*⁴⁴. Sicily played a special role in this dynamic; since in 537 the island had been officially defined as something akin to a “private property of the emperor”⁴⁵, an asset managed by the eunuchs from the *cubiculum* to insure the survival of Constantinople⁴⁶. In the wake of the conquest, Emperor Justinian put in place institutional mechanisms to bind the island to the central institutions and the very person of the sovereign⁴⁷. This new hierarchical system also played a key role since the local elite had been bestowed high titles; they had to travel to Constantinople to receive the honour from the Emperor himself⁴⁸. Even the creation of the *thema* did not undermine these ties because the governors came from the immediate entourage of the emperor; personal ties compensated for the slackening of institutional control⁴⁹. The efficiency of this system can be seen in the continued obedience of the province toward the Empire⁵⁰. This obedience must be measured against the fact that the governor had stronger control over its riches and, as such, a superior capacity for rebellion than its counterparts in the other imperial provinces⁵¹.



3. An island at the centre of imperial circulations

15 Even more important than the institutional ties stated above, Byzantine Sicily was imperial because, very probably, the “default setting” of its population was “Roman” and not “Sicilian”. To clarify this rather obscure affirmation, we should stress that the island benefited from various influxes of refugees, whether from Africa⁵², Italy⁵³, both the Latin- and Greek-speaking areas of the Balkans⁵⁴, or the Middle East⁵⁵. The very fact that Euphemios took a 6th-7th century icon of Middle Eastern origin as the symbol of his imperial ambitions exemplifies this reality⁵⁶. The majority of landowners, whether members of the old senatorial elite⁵⁷ or court officials whom Constans II encouraged to buy lands in Sicily⁵⁸, belonged to the upper class of imperial society, but, conversely, they had weak roots in the island. They were men whose status and wealth were tightly dependant on the fortunes of Byzantium and who could not maintain their position outside of the Empire. The Sicilian elite were regularly given high titles by the Emperor, titles that could not be supplemented by falling back on obsolete senatorial or lower military titles, as was the case in Italy or Istria, for example⁵⁹. What did all these men from distant lands have in common if not their imperial identity, their common adherence to the set of laws and values defined, or at least approved, in Constantinople? The identity of each man was certainly a tale of (at least) two cities but in each case, Constantinople was one of these cities and offered them common ground. Furthermore, we should remember that southern Italy acted as a conservatory of Classical culture, as exemplified by the capacity of Sicilian and Calabrian exiles to influence the Macedonian Renaissance⁶⁰. As such, the common political reference could be tempered in and reinforced by a common, truly “Roman” culture. This is a fundamental dimension of Sicily, one which marked the insular society as specifically imperial, but unfortunately, one especially difficult to investigate with the available sources.

16 We must also consider that, although the integrated Mediterranean economy of the Later Roman Empire progressively gave way to more regionalized exchange systems⁶¹, Sicily’s economy continued to work on an empire-wide scale for a longer time⁶², the state enacting policies to insure that its riches benefited the whole imperial polity. We should recall how the eparchs of Illyricum, faced by famine around 610, sought authorization from the imperial government to send ships to Sicily to buy grain⁶³. Slightly later, Alexandria itself similarly sought relief from famine by purchasing cereals on the island⁶⁴. The lack of sources makes it difficult to identify similar policies at a later date. However, we should keep in mind that Emperor Constans II probably enlisted local merchants in a compulsory freight service and we cannot assume that only Constantinople benefited from this service⁶⁵. The discovery of a Sicilian *kommerkion* seal in Cyprus suggests the intervention of an administrative department that has been linked, albeit under various modalities, to annonarian strategies⁶⁶.

17 Moving away from the scarce literary sources, the best data is provided by numismatics. This is the only source to give information beyond what type of goods circulated (a question better answered by ceramic artefacts) to help identify the government’s economic policy and the results it sought to achieve⁶⁷. The island’s monetary economy maintained a unique strength until the end of the 9th century⁶⁸. Although it would be a mistake to consider that this choice reflected the intensity of trade between the two areas in a direct way the imitation of Sicilian coinage in northern Syria, under Islamic rule, in the 670s, demonstrates the reach of the island’s coinage⁶⁹ even better than stray finds in regions as distant as England or northern Germany⁷⁰.

18 Many specific traits of this monetary economy are worth highlighting. A salient point of the imperial character of Sicily is the steady increased output of the island’s mint which correlated with a reduced output of the Italian mints⁷¹, and maybe also, to a lower degree, of the African mint⁷². Furthermore, as demonstrated by the circulation of dies, at the end of the 7th century, the Sicilian mint even took over operations in Sardinia, despite this province being part of the prefecture of Africa⁷³. The imperial government did not intend to diminish the use of gold coinage in other provinces, due to the coin’s importance for political



control, but it probably sought to increase the centralization of gold coin production in the west, following a model set by Heraclius in the east around 630⁷⁴. During the first half of the 7th century, most of the coinage used in Sicily came directly from the mint of Constantinople, whether as old coins bearing a countermark⁷⁵ or new coins especially produced in the east for the island⁷⁶. At the turn of the century, under Constans II, the production of the mint of Catania suddenly replaced almost all coins produced outside the island. However, this should not be seen as a sign that economic ties weakened. More probably, the local economy asked for a different metrology of the copper coinage, requiring foreign coinage, whether eastern, African or Italian, to be adapted through re-striking. The rationale behind adopting a different metrology should be sought, in all probability, in a different set of values for the three metals used by the Byzantine monetary system (gold, silver, and copper)⁷⁷. During this period, the mint played on the presence or absence of the SCL mint-mark to signal periods of alignment or divergence between eastern and Sicilian metrology⁷⁸. Double marks of value were used to stipulate exchange rates between these coinages, but nothing of the sort was ever put in place with Africa or Italy⁷⁹. In the field of gold coinage, imaginative systems were developed until the second half of the 9th century to insure that the diverging economic trends did not impact the circulation of coinage and precious metals, or standardized application of tax scales⁸⁰. Nonetheless, the 730s marked a clear watershed. Prior to the reform of Leo III, the policy aimed at facilitating the circulation of precious metals, whether as coins or bullion. After the reform, the state seemed more interested in facilitating accounting practices⁸¹. At first glance, this difference hints at a growing regionalization of the Sicilian monetary economy, but this could simply mean that Constantinople claimed a smaller part of the island's fiscal revenues in the context of developing local armed forces⁸². Nonetheless, this entails an extremely important departure from standard imperial practice in the management of provinces. Usually, taxes were sent to the capital from which salaries were issued, preventing the governor from controlling its province's fiscal revenues⁸³. Clearly, this model was discarded in Sicily and, as previously stated, this decision demonstrates the Emperor's trust in the island's *strategoï*, usually recruited amongst his trusted eunuchs or favourites.

- 19 To conclude, Sicily was a prime asset to assert both thalassocracy, the real trademark of a Mediterranean Empire, and control over the fountainhead of imperial legitimacy, Rome. The Sicilian elite closely identified itself with the Empire. Institutions in the province were more strictly controlled by Constantinople compared with other provinces and the Sicilian economy reached far beyond what can be observed in the other Imperial provinces. All these factors converged to give the island a significant "imperial dimension". In a way, the history of 9th-10th century Byzantine Sicily can be read, or told, as a progressive loss of imperialism. The memory of distant origins faded in the mind-set of its elite while a series of modifications in the territorial equilibrium of Byzantium eroded the importance of the island in the internal balance of the Empire, as well as the imperial authorities' interest in enacting policies to insure a tight control over its dwindling resources⁸⁴.

B. The Islamic conception: Sicily's imperialism revisited

- 20 The fading of Sicilian imperialism understood through a Byzantine perspective did not completely diminish Sicily's imperial dimension: it was taken up and reinterpreted in the new Islamic framework which Sicily progressively integrated over the same period. As we saw, Sicily was clearly associated with imperialism in Byzantine conceptions and policy before Islam even appeared; thus, it does not come as a surprise to see that this dimension was taken up in Islamic texts. Two phases might be distinguished here: the first is associated with the initial expansion of Islam in the 7th century or rather with the period when its



narrative (or at least the texts transmitted down to us) was written down from an Islamic perspective (9th-mid 10th century); the second is associated with a renewed investment in imperial ideology when the Mediterranean became not only the “sea of three caliphs”⁸⁵ but concurrently witnessed the resurgence of Byzantine imperial power from the middle of the 10th century onwards.

1. The legitimizing past: re-reading 7th-century events in 9th-century sources

21 An attenuated echo of Sicily’s imperial dimension and its importance in the global elaboration of Islamic universal ambitions is found in Arabic sources, in relation to the above-mentioned maritime strategy. Islamic sources are difficult to use because they were written relatively late after the earliest facts they refer to. Nonetheless, this temporal gap is a common feature of the canonization of the genesis of new social worlds, especially when this narrative entails a religious dimension⁸⁶. In the specific case of the Islamic Empire, we must keep in mind that its very emergence was based on a military conquest. Thus, the epics following this conquest, the *kutub al-futūḥ* (books of conquests) tend to picture a God-driven territorial expansion. Arabic accounts dating from the 7th century are not available; however, the link established between the events occurring in the eastern and central parts of the Mediterranean has been underlined by Walter Kaegi, based on the Christian pseudo-Methodius’ *Apocalypse*, a non-Arabic, but Islamic (some would say Islamicate) source if we consider its context of production⁸⁷. This text is fundamental in apocalyptic literature, especially because it was translated very early into Greek and Latin (the earliest Latin manuscript is from 727) and it played a key role in the development of this type of literature throughout the Middle Ages. In particular, Kaegi insisted on one passage describing military operations in the central Mediterranean (V, 4)⁸⁸. Surprisingly, Sicily is not mentioned in this extract, but we should keep in mind that other passages do name the island. The rationale behind this omission could be that the first passage refers to the past (to the 5th millennium and the first invasion by the Ishmaelites, stopped by Gideon, V, 2-8⁸⁹), a point obscured by the English translation⁹⁰, whereas Sicily appears in the future, in XI, 10 and XIII, 6. Sicily is also evoked in the 7th millennium and the second invasion by the Ishmaelites, who go onto defeat the Persians and the Romans, before the latter’s ultimate victory over them (XIII, 11-13)⁹¹. As such, the island is linked to the final Christian victory rather than with the first moment of Ishmaelite domination, which was supposed to be brief according to the anonymous author. This narrative is certainly more congruent with the actual historical context of the redaction, dated around 690. Sicily is thus mentioned among the regions classically referred to in contemporary apocalyptic literature, contrary to the ones mentioned in the passage referring to Sardinia. Two elements are clear: the link between apocalyptic and imperial universalism, the last sovereign being the key to defeating the Adversary, and the territorial dimension of both themes.

22 It is no small matter that from the 630s, the two polities the conquerors came into contact with were two empires that had coexisted with the inhabitants of the Arabic Peninsula for a long time. Above all, Imperial rivalry opposed the new Islamic Empire to Byzantium, a competitor and source of inspiration, since the Sassanid Empire had been destroyed over a few years. The failure to conquer Constantinople occurred in a second phase and the gradual disappearance of the Sassanid Empire allowed the Persian past to be revisited and reinterpreted, offering an alternative imperial model to the new Abbassid dynasty in power from 750 onwards⁹². The empire of Constantinople, although relegated and shaken, remained the main military rival of the Islamic Empire⁹³, although the intensity of the conflict waned until the 10th century, except in the central Mediterranean.



23 This area offers quite an interesting context from the point of view of imperial confrontation in the 9th century, during which the first *kutub al-futūḥ* were written, contemporary to Aghlabid intervention on the island⁹⁴. The central Mediterranean was the

stage of a threefold power game which saw the Lombards, the Carolingians, and the Byzantine competing with each other against a background of Islamic expansion⁹⁵, first through mercenaries, and then political emancipation, of small groups which eventually gave birth to emirates in Puglia and Calabria⁹⁶. In a way, the central Mediterranean was, by then, relatively rich in imperialism; each of the Christian competitors tried to build up its legitimacy by fighting against the Muslims and, conversely, criticizing the others on the ground of their wavering commitment to the fight⁹⁷. A similar dynamic was present in the Islamic side, through the south Italian *jihād*, as detailed later. Although this rhetoric was not new, it was significantly strong in this context and might be seen as a consequence of the ongoing association of Sicily with imperialism.

- 24 Here, we summarize data that will be analysed more thoroughly elsewhere⁹⁸. First, let us note that many of the main preserved texts of early Islamic historiography (9th- to early 10th-century) evoke Sicily in a 7th-century context⁹⁹. They do so in two ways which might reflect distinct transmission channels. A first group establishes a causal link between three elements (a maritime Byzantine defeat dated around 655¹⁰⁰, Constans II's arrival in Sicily, and his murder in Syracuse¹⁰¹) and does not generally report any attack against Sicily (except for Ibn A'tham):

Ibn A'tham (9th-10th century)¹⁰², *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*¹⁰³
 Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 871), *Futūḥ Miṣr*¹⁰⁴
*Crónica mozárabe de 754*¹⁰⁵
 'Abd al-Malik ibn Ḥabīb (d. 853), *Tā'riḫ*¹⁰⁶
 Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), *Ta'riḫ*¹⁰⁷

- 25 A second group mentions one or several attack(s) against Sicily attributed to the caliph Mu'āwiya, attacks variously dated depending on the text:

Ibn A'tham (9th-10th century), *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*¹⁰⁸
 Ibn al-Khayyāt al-'Uṣfurī, *Tā'riḫ*¹⁰⁹
 Al-Balādhurī (d. 892), *Futūḥ al-Buldān*¹¹⁰

- 26 This panorama of the first sources mentioning Sicily lists some of the earliest Islamic historiographical texts which have been preserved. These texts show that both Near-Eastern and Andalusī authors mention Sicily in the 7th century and relate the island with imperialism. The first group does so by associating the island with the imperial figure of Constans II, although his arrival in Sicily is interpreted as the consequence of his naval defeat and his murder as a punishment caused (and deserved) by his incapacity to defend the empire.

- 27 Without entering into details, the imperialism of Sicily is evoked diversely by the three other texts. They narrate attacks against the island led by the most famous admirals of the early empire, under the authority of Mu'āwiya. Arabic sources depict Mu'āwiya as the caliph who realized the importance of the Mediterranean for the construction of the Islamic Empire. Here the conflict between universal pretenders is clearly a source of imperialism for the places fought over because they came to embody the prize of the struggle. This second group can in turn be divided into two. Two authors were interested in dating the expeditions they refer to. Khalifa ibn Khayyāt, although writing in Baṣra, had a broad interest in events throughout the Islamic world¹¹¹ and he wrote a relatively detailed narrative about Sicily, dating the events to 679-680. Al-Balādhurī did not propose a date in his famous *Futūḥ al-buldān*, but later authors, such as Ibn 'Idhārī (13th-14th century) and al-Nuwayrī (1279-1333), took up his version and dated these events to 653-654 and 669-670. Furthermore, al-Balādhurī is the only one to refer to the



Aghlabid advance in the island, which he closely links with Abbassid policy, following his political positioning. Finally, Ibn A'tham's *Kitāb al-Futūḥ* proposes an openly fictitious account of an undated conquest of Sicily under the authority of Mu'āwiya (661-680). This version of the conquest mobilizes the whole arsenal of *futūḥ topoi*, usually rare in texts about Sicily, and underlines the imperialism of the island, described as one of the three seats of imperial power, together with Rome and Constantinople, because of the six-year residence of Constans II in Syracuse. In this case, the two notions of imperialism are clearly merged.

28 Thus, the link between imperialism and military confrontation is always present, although evoked in different ways. This dimension is associated with the history of early Islam, but in the specific case of Sicily, also reflects issues contemporaneous to the redaction of these texts in the 9th-10th century and issues linked with the role the island played in the inter-imperial confrontation.

29 Sicily's imperialism was not only tied to its earliest contacts with Islamic armies; it continued to fuel the representations and ideological legitimization of the dynasties which took control of the insular territory in the 9th and 10th centuries.

2. The 10th century: Sicily, a gateway to Byzantium?

30 The title above summarizes how the confrontation in Sicily was conceived in the 10th century. The *jihād* led by the Aghlabids in Sicily is present in Arabic sources, but it is treated in a relatively "generic" way. Only one episode at the very end of the 9th century links the *jihād* more directly with the imperial dimension.

31 The episode takes place during the final phase of Ibrāhīm II's controversial reign (875-902). This Ifrīqiyan emir was famous for his melancholia and his violence. At the end of his life, he was put under pressure by Ismaili propaganda, which finally facilitated the fall of the Aghlabids and the advent of the Fatimids, and he decided to abdicate the power and fight for the *jihād* in Sicily in 899. This fight was explicitly led against Byzantium in the central Mediterranean, a region which was regarded as the gateway toward Constantinople¹¹². The competition with the Fatimids played a role in these conceptions, as well as the general eschatological atmosphere they fostered. The Fatimids also conceived the *jihād* led against the non-Muslims as an important dimension of their legitimacy: they argued that the two other califates did not assume their duty from that point of view, whereas they did. We find various expressions of these ideas in different types of texts: *fiqh*, poetry, geography, and califal proclamations intended to be read in public. The two latter sources explicitly mention Sicily as a land of *jihād*.

32 The Qāḍī al-Nu'mān copied in the *Kitāb Iftitāḥ al-da'wa*¹¹³, his famous chronicle of the beginning of the dynasty, a text which is an appendix to the *amān* (concession of safety) granted to the Ifrīqiyan population once they defeated the governing Aghlabid dynasty. This appendix was specifically intended for the Sicilians and was composed on the order of the *dā'ī* Abū 'Abd Allāh in 909. Its content is quite revealing:

And you, the people of the island of Sicily, have a greater right and are (even) more deserving of benevolence than I have awarded; all the more so, since your land is closer to that of the polytheists (*li-qurbi dārikum min dār al-mushrikīn*) and because of your *jihād* against the unbelieving sinners. I will fill your island, if God be willing, with horsemen and foot soldiers, who are believers, and these have the task of fighting the just cause of the *jihād* in the name of God¹¹⁴.



33 As all empires, and in particular the Islamic Empires¹¹⁵, the Fatimid Empire gave birth to a geography that expressed a conception of the world and Empire. In the late 980s, in one of the versions of his geographical text probably intended for the Fatimids, a version which dedicates a chapter to Sicily¹¹⁶, Ibn Ḥawqal described Sicily as a *thaghr*¹¹⁷ (a frontier-zone) and the permanent military mobilization of the Sicilian population for *jihād*.

34 Half a century later, an anonymous cosmographer, explicitly pro-Fatimid, took up Ibn Ḥawqal's description of Sicily and updated it in his *Kitāb Gharā'ib al-funūn*, known in English as the *Book of Curiosities*¹¹⁸. He developed the same idea, not only in his text but also in his map of the Mediterranean. Both were framed in a worldview that presented Constantinople both as a commercial partner and as the main adversary of the Fatimids¹¹⁹. The beginning of a section of text dedicated to Sicily, accompanied by a map of the island, reads:

The island of Sicily is the largest of the Islamic islands (*jazā'ir al-islāmiyya*) and the most honourable on account of its continuous military expeditions against the enemy –may God forsake them– and the perennial efforts of its people and governors in this respect¹²⁰.

35 All the main islands (Crete, Rhodes, etc.) which have been disputed over by Muslims and Byzantines through time appear on the map of the Mediterranean which precedes it by two folios. Sicily and Cyprus are located close to one another; they are larger than the other islands and are represented by rectangles with a supporting legend. The legend for Sicily reads:

The island of Sicily, in which there are fifteen fortresses. Between it and Ifriqiyah are six days; and between it and the Italian mainland (*al-arḍ al-kabīra*) – the land of Byzantium (*arḍ al-Rūm*) – there is one or two miles. Its length is twenty *farsakhs*, and its width ten *farsakhs*. It is continuously engaged in military raids (*maḡhāzī*)¹²¹

36 The didascalia of Cyprus specifies, quite differently, the island's size and enumerates the names of the fortresses. It does not mention military activity between Muslims and Byzantines, as if Cyprus' 10th-century conquest by Byzantium was accepted as a fact.

37 Thus, this long-term legitimizing confrontation between imperial powers had a conceptual dimension, but also concrete repercussions in the military, political, and economic fields.

II. Military issues and frontier dynamics

A. A military confrontation at the heart of the Mediterranean

38 All these conceptions both fed and were fuelled by a military confrontation whose strategical rationale, funding, and political motivations and justifications evolved over time.



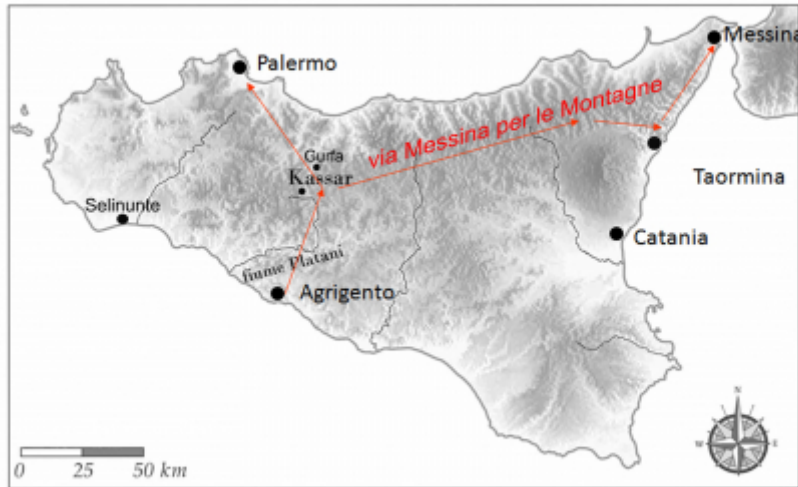
1. The rise of the Sicilian bulwark

39 In 698, the fall of Carthage, whose economic effects can be best exemplified through the climactic changes in the two contexts of the famous Crypta Balbi in Rome¹²², dramatically altered the position and role of Sicily in the equilibrium of the Byzantine Empire. The island became the bulwark of the western Mediterranean and the outpost guarding access to Italy. To define the exact role of Sicily in this key historical situation, we must momentarily forget the outcome of the two decades which followed 698 and culminated in the conquest of Spain, to return to its initial rationale¹²³. However important, what happened ultimately and how it occurred must be provisionally discarded in favour of why it happened in the first place.

40 Although the available literary sources are almost silent on the subject¹²⁴, the massive investments consented by the imperial state in the central Mediterranean at this time can be inferred through various complementary clues. Around 700, there was an unprecedented upsurge in the production of Sicilian mints: even taking into account debasement, the value of gold production in Syracuse reached ca. two-thirds of its Constantinopolitan counterpart¹²⁵. Simultaneously, the appearance of the first *strategoï* of Sicily reveals a reform of local administration which entailed militarization¹²⁶, even if its exact nature remains a *vexata quaestio* for byzantinology¹²⁷. The impressive defensive structures of the kassar of Castronovo (fig. 2), which encompassed 90 hectares, exemplifies the strengthening of the island's defences¹²⁸. Likewise, sigillographic evidence demonstrates the deployment of military units of the central army¹²⁹, a strategy reminiscent of the garrisoning of the elite Opsikion imperial field army in Sicily in the 660s¹³⁰. These efforts were based on the prosperity of the island and the importance of the public lands managed in western provinces by the *cubiculum*¹³¹. Therefore, the Empire invested greatly to strengthen the defences of the Sicilian Straits in response to the fall of Carthage¹³². Ultimately, it is very probable that the reliance of Islamic armies on fleets coming from Egypt up until 718 at least insured the victory of the imperial squadrons whose bases were in Sicily¹³³. These efforts blocked the islamic expansion towards the north; the only road still open for further conquests led toward Spain through Mauretania.

Fig. 2 – Location of the Kassar (late 7th-early 8th century) in connection to the main roads within the island.





41 Importantly, these investments continued unabated until the very end; between 827 and 902, no less than fourteen armadas were sent from the east to reinforce the resistance, one every five years, against a mere five to recover Crete, for example¹³⁴. If we keep in mind the price of such expeditions¹³⁵, the investment was massive. Even if these Sicilian expeditions had been on average half the size of the Cretan endeavour, we would be contemplating a cumulated cost of nearly two million *nomismata* (1.864.000), nearly 25.000 *per annum*. To put these rather abstract numbers into perspective, the annual expenditure, paid over 75 years, would have been equivalent to the annual income of the famous south Italian pontifical *patrimonium* or the tribute to the Frankish Viking in 866. Over 75 years, the Empire spent more to keep Sicily in the fold than the total amount of silver known to have been paid to the Danes as a tribute or levied to pay the army fighting them, by the Anglo-Saxon kings during the second Viking Age, between 991 and 1041¹³⁶. Or, even more strikingly, the annual cost for the Empire of the war for Sicily would have been greater, by no less than 25%, than the annual income given to the Emir of Palermo in the 10th century by the *Book of Curiosities*¹³⁷. And we posited here expeditions on average only half the size of the Cretan one, even if Sicily was a much more important province; and we did not take into account the military expenditures for the Sicilian imperial forces. Therefore, even if we can only offer orders of magnitude, these figures show the considerable efforts made to protect the island. The annual cost ultimately exceeded the income derived from the island; this goes a long way to explain the final issue of the conflict.

42 As mentioned above, the arrival of Constans II in Sicily paved the way for the final militarization of Sicily through deploying troops from the imperial field armies on the island. Ultimately, this strategy created specific Sicilian elite units, known to us by the seals of their commanders. The seizure of pontifical estates most probably played a key role in financing these new units. The link with former papal estates is revealed by the location of the units and the yearly cost of these units would have been similar to the new revenues that were accrued to the state¹³⁸.



43 A very similar evolution can be observed with the Sicilian Navy. The island was initially defended by naval forces (whether the units brought back to Constantinople by the *patrikios* Seberos¹³⁹ or the *Karabisiano* squadrons¹⁴⁰) that were based in Sicily but did not constitute a specifically Sicilian navy. The island was initially a logistic base for forces originating from abroad, for both the land and sea forces. At a later stage, a proper *stolus Siciliae* was born from four factors: a major reform of the imperial naval forces resulting from civil strife in the east, the renewed threat from the Islamic fleets from Ifrīqiya, the Italian “apostasy” championed by the popes, and the new financial means unlocked by the fiscal and monetary reforms enacted at the beginning of the 730s¹⁴¹. To some extent, Sicily embodies the global policy of the Isaurian Emperors who decreed an all-out mobilization which led to a confrontation with the Church¹⁴².

44 Sicily acquired a new military organization between the 730s and the 780s, whose essential characteristic was a capacity for offensive warfare, contrasting with standard Byzantine provincial forces. The extremely expensive combination of naval forces and elite units continually under arms must have found its rationale in a policy aimed at aggression. Paradoxically, naval forces were useless in defending Sicily. The ships could not stay for prolonged periods at sea and because of their technical characteristics, the look-out could not watch over more than a 15-20-kilometer radius¹⁴³, that is ca. two-three hours of travel, much less in the context of an offensive that justifies maximum oar-speed¹⁴⁴. This meant that, barring some exceptional events, there was no time to intercept an incoming enemy fleet. The fleet’s units had to be dispersed for efficient surveillance and therefore they could not converge in time to engage the enemy¹⁴⁵. Maritime defensive warfare demanded a strategic depth that was lacking in the Strait of Sicily. Consequently, the *stolus Siciliae* was clearly the offensive weapon decried by the popes¹⁴⁶ and we must keep in mind that on the eve of his usurpation Euphemios was campaigning in Ifrīqiya¹⁴⁷, where defensive “ribats” had been developed on the coast¹⁴⁸.

45 It is also important to highlight that the militarization entailed a greater circulation of gold coinage in the countryside. The creation of the elite regiments was a clear departure from the model generally agreed upon for Asia Minor and the Balkans, based on a large dispersion of part-time military forces over the imperial territory. However, Sicilian soldiers, or at least families owing military service, were present in the countryside as illustrated by a striking account of the *adnouvion*, the call to arms, given in the *Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina*¹⁴⁹. The text offers a clear picture of the double structure of the 8th-century Sicilian army, an elite nucleus of professional soldiers permanently underarms in a city, supplemented by numerous part-time forces dispersed all over the territory¹⁵⁰. The author also explicitly mentions that the part-time forces were paid in gold. We stress that this influx of gold in the countryside had the mechanical effect of lowering the fiscal burden on the tax-payers, as the price of the *solidus*, both a commodity and a means of exchange, decreased. This obviously helped the fiscal system to function properly. It also had an impact on the availability of copper coins. Coin finds are much more frequent in the eastern part of the island than in its western part¹⁵¹. If a north-south line is drawn passing between Enna and Agrigento, the respective percentage of coin finds is roughly 15%/85%, and this percentage increased in the eastern part during the 8th century (ca. 10%/90%, 7%/93% under Constantine V and 11%/89% under Leo V)¹⁵². Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to interpret this difference only in terms of general economic prosperity or access to trade opportunities. In this context, the property structure is of paramount importance because a greater number of taxpayers implies a stronger influx of copper coinage in an area through the collection of the taxes, independent of the prosperity of the area¹⁵³.



2. From the interchange of the “islands’ road” to the central Mediterranean stronghold

46 From an Islamic point of view, three phases can be distinguished in this military confrontation. First, the Umayyad period, we alluded to above¹⁵⁴, was characterized by attacks initially launched from Syria or Egypt, and increasingly from Ifrīqiya from the first half of the 8th century onwards. These interventions aimed to control the Mediterranean “Islands’ road”¹⁵⁵.

47 A second period opens with the Aghlabids’ intervention in Sicily. This decision was taken very autonomously¹⁵⁶ and was motivated in part by the hostile political environment, as the Sunnite dynasty was surrounded by independent Ibadi imamates which were established at the end of the 8th century. Another set of motivations was internal: the military expeditions in Sicily were conceived as a way for the *jund* to vent its growing frustration as the end of the Umayyad *jihād* State¹⁵⁷ and the geopolitical evolutions in Maghrib at the end of the 8th century abruptly curtailed opportunities to make booty¹⁵⁸.

48 As for the Fatimids, in a way they inherited Sicily from the Aghlabids, and the island not only played an important role in their legitimacy but also in the enactment of their imperial ambitions. Their choice to establish their califate in Ifrīqiya was partly dictated by the fact that the Aghlabids had by far the largest army and fleet in the Maghrib. Moreover, as an entity Sicily and Ifrīqiya were the richest provinces in the region¹⁵⁹. The central Mediterranean simultaneously offered a strong basis from which to oppose the Umayyads of al-Andalus and a foundation for the Fatimid expansion toward the Orient.

49 This confrontation also had important internal consequences which must be investigated at a local level.

B. Changing scale: reading the Sicilian archaeological data

50 This new approach to Sicily in the 9th-10th centuries demands to revisit the dynamics at play within the framework of frontier studies. These dynamics were developed a few decades ago, and have benefitted from recent progress¹⁶⁰. This involves envisioning Sicily as one of the frontier-zones (*thughūr*) of the inter-imperial confrontation, a zone which combines military confrontation with intense exchanges and circulations, along the lines of the situation prevailing on the Anatolian frontier along the Taurus Mountains¹⁶¹. Such an ambivalence, well-known in other contemporary regions, had a political and diplomatic, as well as an economic and material dimension¹⁶².

1. From *valli* to frontier zone (*thagr*): re-thinking territorial diversification

51 Obviously, the military “frontier” was not linear and this term should cover the area always threatened and attacked without forewarning by enemy raids. As such, we must keep in mind that this frontier area would have covered a substantial part of the island and contained most of its population. As explained earlier¹⁶³, a naval raid would usually strike by surprise and, after landing, the attackers could travel ca. 20 km inland in a day. Therefore, roughly two-thirds of the island, including the more economically developed coastal areas, were constantly under threat. Similarly, if we consider that Roman forts were normally ca. 50 km apart, to provide regularly spaced shelter to the patrolling cavalry, a cavalry raid (the *μονόκουρσον*, described as the basic form of warfare in the *De Velitatione*¹⁶⁴) launched from Enna would have directly threatened ca. one-third of the island’s territory. By cumulating both areas¹⁶⁵, we can envision how embattled the insular territory was. These are only estimates and it does not mean that this area was constantly under attack; however, the area was always under an immediate threat of attack, whether from the Islamic or Byzantine forces. These considerations help us to envision the “next door” warfare experienced by



the Sicilian population and its potential implications for the economy; for example, husbandry could have taken the fore over grain farming, viniculture, and arboriculture¹⁶⁶. Similarly, for strategic reasons¹⁶⁷, the troops could not be garrisoned directly in contact with the enemy; thus, representatives from both states retreated from many areas of the island, with obvious consequences for the local societies.

52 A hypothesis that should be refuted is that the island was divided between an eastern Byzantine part and a western Islamic part. This vision is as traditional as the *tre valli*'s distinction and it can lead to excessive simplifications, if only because the official political border was constantly moving further east. The project aims to explore the dynamics of the frontier from the perspective of the eastern part of the island rather than the contraposition between two “worlds”. The research was originally focused on the western area of the island, which provided most of the explanatory models that were extrapolated to the whole island¹⁶⁸. The focus has now shifted to the part of the island which was the last to be definitively conquered by the Islamic armies. The aim is not so much to underline “specific oriental Sicilian features” as to differentiate the regional dynamics which characterized the integration of various regions into the Islamic Empire at different stages of the conquest. This aim required access to data relating to the period preceding this integration.

2. Imperiality and early medieval landscapes: archaeological issues

53 Archaeological research needs to use a specific interpretative grid to address the multi-faceted topic of the transformation of the Sicilian landscape during the Early Middle Ages because of the complex socio-economic background in the region.

54 The formation of new urban and rural landscapes, strongly related to the imperial dimension of Early Medieval Sicily, and the parallel strengthening of sub-regional diversification provide two research topics that can provide complementary insights on the political, symbolic, and ideological realities suggested by the documentary, sigillographic, and numismatic evidence mentioned earlier. This evidence requires that important questions are re-examined: the interplay between monetary economic trends, evolving trade networks, and the militarization of the territory; the role of the cities, as reflected by the transformation of their urban structure, in relation to the strengthening of defence systems and the maintenance of control over their original hinterland; the fate of the great imperial and ecclesiastical estates and their potential role in the garrisoning of troops.

55 Furthermore, archaeologists must evaluate the evolving significance of Sicily's insularity. Sicily was an essential component in the well-defined 6th/7th-century Byzantine insular system¹⁶⁹, and it evolved in the following two centuries toward a more autonomous position as the linchpin of the central Mediterranean communication system and the key area between the Strait of Messina and the Strait of Sicily. The fall of Carthage and the subsequent need to reinforce imperial control over the Straits of Messina triggered a series of territorial dynamics that emphasized the pre-eminence of Sicily's eastern part. In this context, archaeology can contribute specific insights due to the use of Early Medieval archaeological markers that trace a process of reinforcement, or rather recovery, of urban and rural settlements between the end of the 8th and the first decades of the 9th centuries.

56 Two fundamental research topics stand out: the importance of the investment consented, probably implicating various components of the Byzantine world, and its impact on territorial dynamics. Although much research needs to be conducted, the processes of territorial differentiation at play have been demonstrated. These processes created a specific border area, whose limits were constantly evolving as it became an area of endemic warfare during the 9th and 10th centuries. As such, the topic of



the frontier is one of the most promising for Early Medieval archaeology in Sicily, even if it is often overlooked. New heuristic tools must be developed to address this issue and to understand the complexity of this specific socio-economic context. New approaches must be taken to highlight the integration of various trends in the material culture that suggest the coexistence and interplay of technologies, knowledge, and productions, as opposed to a sudden, radical substitution of two distinct sets of features and artefacts.

57 This approach requires that we improve our knowledge of 8th/early 9th century Sicilian material culture. Archaeological data reveal new ceramic productions and new building types which supplement existing models. Although there is no current consensus, discussions demonstrate that the social framework of Byzantine Sicily should be re-evaluated. The objective is not to relate any given feature or artefact to a specific human group through ethnicity, at the same time highlighting differences with a specific “Sicilian” group, but to highlight and analyse the island’s complex society. This society mirrored the Empire’s complexity and simultaneously contributed to the Empire’s ideology which the island drew strength from.

58 The emerging picture based on archaeological evidence, together with the connected hypotheses regarding the enforcement of specific demographic policies and the strengthening of territorial defences, confirms and contributes to a deeper understanding of the imperial dimension of the island described earlier. In addition, new issues arise regarding the long-term strategies of the Empire. As demonstrated by the massive investments consented, Sicily remained at the forefront of Constantinople’s attention; in the first decades of the 9th century, military units coming from other areas of the Empire were garrisoned in the island¹⁷⁰.

59 The concept of “imperiality” is also instrumental in finding new approaches to address the issues of post-classical archaeology in Sicily. The concept can provide a new global interpretation of the 6th and 7th centuries, in which the elements of Late Antique continuity have been repeatedly stressed along the lines of a still prevalent historiographical vulgate¹⁷¹. The elements of continuity cannot be denied, especially as far as socio-economic structures are concerned (importance of the great estate, the survival of an aristocracy with ties to the senatorial order, pre-eminence of the Roman Church’s influence, mainly embodied in the administrative apparatus of the *rector patrimonium Sancti Petri*). Nonetheless, they should not overshadow the important new dynamics set in motion by Justinian’s administrative reforms in 537, dynamics which determined the importance of the island in the Empire’s internal equilibrium for centuries. Even for the Islamic period, approaching the island’s history from the angle of its “imperiality” can revisit its supposedly strictly provincial and peripheral position, as a kind of annex of Ifrīqiya, which has characterized the majority of archaeological studies of the period.

3. *The urban elite and Constantinopolitan models between the 6th and the 7th centuries*

60 The detailed analysis of the available archaeological data for the first two centuries of the Byzantine dominion over Sicily, even if it is scarce and often poorly contextualized, reveals the steadily increasing Constantinopolitan influence over the local aristocracy from the onset of Byzantine dominion in the 6th century. Jewellery and gold hoards found on the island demonstrate the elite’s wealth and their adoption of models elaborated in the capital city of the Empire¹⁷². Architecture, liturgical furnishings, mosaics¹⁷³, and bronze artefacts¹⁷⁴ were inspired by eastern models, when not directly imported. This evolution built on previous contacts through trade networks spanning from Sicily’s eastern coast to Asia Minor and the Middle East, as exemplified by underwater discoveries made along the Ionian coast¹⁷⁵. This background frames the diffusion of the architectural model of the Triconch Church in south-eastern Sicily¹⁷⁶. Likewise, the famous case of the Marzameni II shipwreck should be re-



assessed keeping in mind that the precious cargo of prefabricated marble architectural elements was potentially destined for Sicily¹⁷⁷.

61 The eastern area and the two great cities of Syracuse and Catania are important case studies that should be investigated along these lines of inquiry¹⁷⁸. In the case of Syracuse, the recent re-examination of partly unpublished data demonstrates that the neighbourhoods extending beyond Ortygia remained vital, especially Achradya, until the beginning of the 9th century. Excavations along the main thoroughfares reveal the global stability of urban structures that were planned in a unified way. The street grid was centred on the *decumanus* of Piazza della Vittoria and the *cardus* of viale Cadorna, with essential secondary roles for the street between via Epicarmo and corso Gelone-via Brenta and the important axis linking the modern train station to the ancient forum. This system was conceived during Late Antiquity when the north-south street, discovered under the modern corso Gelone, was built. It remained in use at least during the Protobyzantine period¹⁷⁹. Constantine II's stay in Syracuse arguably played an important role to insure the survival of the urban fabric, as exemplified by the construction of *thermae* adjacent to the forum. These specificities make Syracuse an exceptional, though little explored, case of Late Antique urban continuity or restoration. The presence of the imperial court also contributed to strengthening the specificity of the island of Ortygia, confirming its role as a religious, administrative, and political centre, going back to the archaic period¹⁸⁰. The majority of the island was very likely a personal asset of the Emperor during most of the Byzantine period. Due to its topography, Ortygia could replicate some of Constantinople's features with an isolated palatial district protected by the sea, well-connected to harbour and arsenal (Lacchios) facilities. The transformation of the Athenaion in the city's cathedral (which entailed the Emperor donating the building to the local bishop) seems to date from this period, as the relocation of the imperial court entailed vast investments. Similarly, the garrisoning of Constantinopolitan troops may even have involved the refurbishing and strengthening of Castello Eurialo at this early date. The presence of eastern units could have played a role in the diffusion of eastern cults such as the Forty Martyrs, well-attested by archaeology and hagiography in both Syracuse and Catania¹⁸¹.

4. At the outset of the *thema*: a barycentric strategy

62 Militarization, especially its early 9th century phase, provides us with the clearest and most diversified evidence for the massive, long-term investment of state resources in urban and rural contexts. The construction of the Kassar is the very symbol of this new historical phase¹⁸². Based on the few available archaeological indicators, it has been provisionally dated between the end of the 7th and the early 8th century, which would fit perfectly with the current consensus on the chronology of the creation of the *thema Sikelias*. The walls enclose a 90-hectare area at the top of a plateau overlooking today's settlement of Castronovo. The construction technique, involving mortar, reveals the intervention of various groups of craftsmen specialized in specific techniques, in clear contrast with the defensive works built later during the 9th century to reinforce the protection of Enna, Catania, and Lentini. The period immediately after the fall of Carthage offers a very convincing context for an endeavour of such magnitude. It suggests that the goal was to capitalize on the strategic value of this area at the heart of the island, from which the southern coast and the Ionian Sea could be easily reached because of the road running along the Madonie and Nebrodi mountain ranges, and the Strait of Messina (fig. 2).



63 As such, the characteristics of the Kassar (its size, relative isolation, central position along the main thoroughfares) are reminiscent of the Micrasiatic *aplekta* linking Constantinople with the eastern border. These military structures were conceived

as focal points for the troops, equipped with the necessary logistical infrastructures¹⁸³. The large granary identified in the Gulfa complex must also be interpreted in this context: located a few kilometers from the Kassar, this underground structure was excavated to store grain and protect it from the air due to the production of carbon dioxide by the grain. The sheer capacity of the original infrastructure, roughly 500 salme (ca. 137,544 litres) and the fact that it probably already existed before the Islamic period suggest a connection between the two sites¹⁸⁴.

64 On the southern coast, the fortification built on Selinunte's acropolis can offer new information on this little-known phase of the settlement. The rectangular structure which took advantage of the walls of the A and O temples, finds parallels in North African Byzantine forts¹⁸⁵. It belonged to a good-sized settlement already active in the 4th and 5th centuries, as exemplified by the baptistry identified near the mouth of the Modione River, directly connected to the harbour¹⁸⁶. The datation of the fort ranges between the Byzantine and Islamic period, but the stratigraphy supports the former since Islamic walls offer a *terminus ante quem* for the previous fortification phase. A 7th-8th century datation is congruent with the necessity to reinforce the southern defences after the fall of Carthage¹⁸⁷.

65 These defensive endeavours were probably conceived in connection with the evolution of the long-distance road network within the island. In the 9th century, the transversal road along the Nebrodi and the Madonie (called the "*via Messina per le Montagne*" in Medieval documents¹⁸⁸) came to the fore, but the origins of this change can be traced back to the previous century. At the same time, the old Roman network lost its importance, especially the section of the Catania – Termini road passing through the Imera and Torto valleys¹⁸⁹. This evolution mirrors the strategical pre-eminence of the Straits of Messina with the important strongholds of Taormina and Messina, bulwark of the imperial resistance after the fall of Syracuse. The construction of the Kassar and the need to insure fast communication between the shores and the hinterland resulted in the new strategic importance of the Platani valley, linking Palermo and Agrigento, while the Roman road passing through Corleone, to the west, fell into disuse. The contact between these two main thoroughfares was insured by a road called the *magna via francigeni Castronovi* in Norman times which linked the Madonie with the Platani valley through the crossing of Vallelunga, where the roads coming from Enna arrived¹⁹⁰. The crucial role of this area for military circulation is confirmed by the discovery of the 9th-century seal of Theoktistos, *strategos* of Macedonia, near the Serre di Villalba, a few kilometers from the crossroad of Portella Vallelunga¹⁹¹.

5. An eastward shift: towns and rural settlements in the early 9th century

66 The barycentric corridor function of the upper Platani valley evolved during the first decades of the 9th century when a greater differentiation between sub-regional areas began to emerge, with the Platani valley as a demarcation area. The identification and analysis of this second phase lean on a series of archaeological markers from the excavations of Rocchicella-Mineo which date the phase to the first decades of the 9th century. The lack of a clear 8th-century phase determines the period of the changes documented at this site. Even if research in Sofiana¹⁹² has revealed a substantial continuity of this site, inserted in a network of regional exchanges, large-scale surveys suggest a sharp decrease in the number of rural settlements.

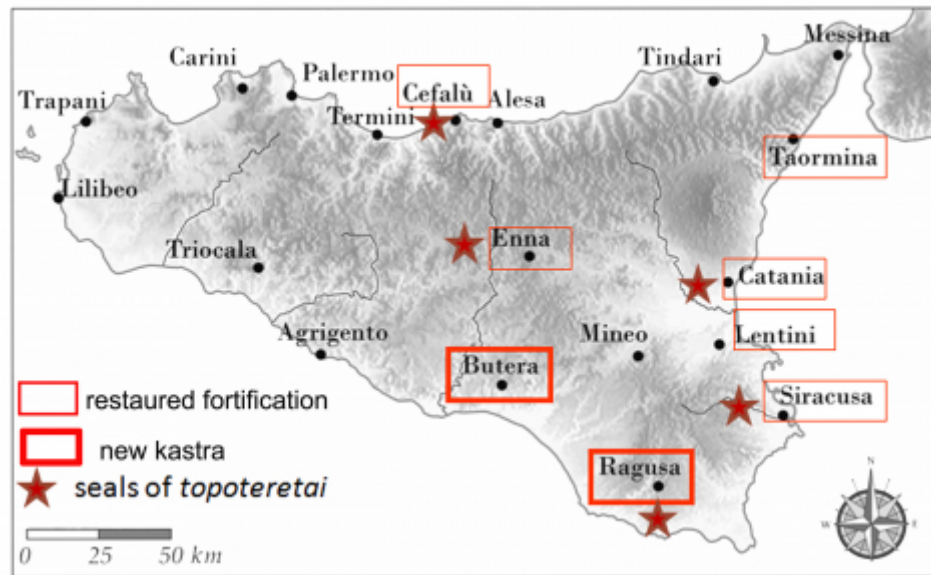
67 This drastic decrease, in connection with a probable demographic decline, is particularly evident from surveys around Calatafimi and Entella. In the area of Calatafimi, the majority of the population was concentrated in the two large villages of *Acquae Segestanae* and Rosignolo; however, poor 8th-century chronological indicators have indicated that few sites survived to



the 7th century¹⁹³. Similarly, the survey in the area of the Monti di Trapani showed a decrease in the density of settlements during the 6th/7th century. This phenomenon gained momentum during the late Byzantine period¹⁹⁴. In the southern territory of Contessa Entellina, only five out of thirteen sites from the 7th century show clear continuity¹⁹⁵. Further indications emerge from the survey of the Imera valley where only the village of Burgitabis seems to offer an 8th-century phase¹⁹⁶. The Platani Valley surveys stress similar difficulties in isolating evidence for the 8th and 9th centuries¹⁹⁷. Finally, the Jato Valley presents only sporadic 8th-century evidence, in line with the very limited picture that emerges from research in the western area¹⁹⁸. The current data suggest, therefore, a generalized reduction in the number of settlements. A connection could be made with the abrupt decrease in cereal farming, revealed by the palynological analyzes carried out at Lake Pergusa (Enna), an important area for grain production since ancient times. A picture of demographic crisis and economic stagnation emerges, whose causes must be investigated taking into account possible sub-regional rationales¹⁹⁹.

68 The presence of military contingents is attested from the mid-8th century by sigillographic evidence in various eastern urban centres: Cefalù, Enna, Catania, and Syracuse²⁰⁰. As such, the quartering of elite troops organized along the lines of the Constantinopolitan *tagmata* concerns the eastern part of the island, east of the Platani. Archaeology has also revealed that some of these centres benefited from a strengthening of their defences between the 8th and early 9th century²⁰¹. More precise data available for the first decades of the 9th century confirm this trend. The network of fortified strongholds was complemented with the development of Butera and Ragusa in the southern area²⁰². This last stronghold received yet another elite unit led by a *topoteretes*; contemporarily, ancient centres such as Lentini and Mineo had their Greek walls restored²⁰³ (fig. 3).

Fig 3 – Distribution of *topoteretai*'s seals, actually known, between the 8th and 9th centuries, related to the archaeological data on urban fortification and new *kastra* during the early 9th century.

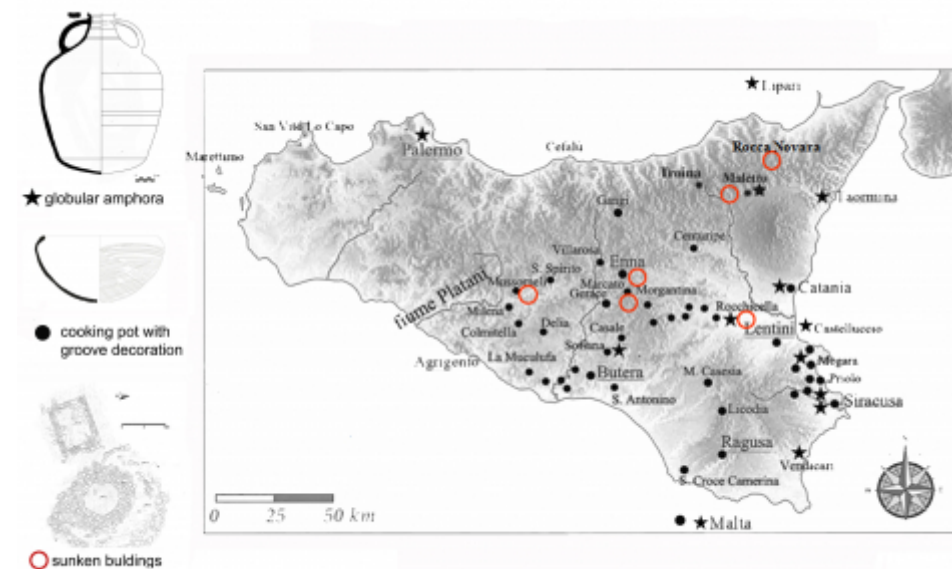


69

These urban data can now be supplemented with information on rural settlements. A series of small and medium-sized settlements located along several important roads have been identified. Their distribution often seems to be related to the

strategic function of the urban centres mentioned above, which would have had control over the locality. The case of Rocchicella is exemplary in this respect²⁰⁴. The settlement is a point of reference for a large area and occupies the site of the great Greek sanctuary dedicated to the *Palicoi* gods. The area dominated by Rocchicella is located in a position of great interest at the confluence of the road networks from Catania, along the Margi Valley, and from Lentini towards Piazza (Armerina). During the 6th and 7th centuries, the site was re-occupied by a *conduma* serving the nearby monastery of Favarotta; a new settlement was built after an apparent 8th-century caesura, characterized by the collapse of the village's houses. It appears to have had a relatively short life, as the numismatic evidence is circumscribed to coins of Constantine V (r. 717-741), Michael I (r. 811-813) and Michael II (r. 820-829), to the exclusion of the abundant emissions of Theophilos (r. 829-842). It is thus probable that the settlement was only active during the first decades of the 9th century. The restoration of the fortifications of the nearby urban centre of Mineo, a hilltop site, underlines its renewed structuring role for the surrounding area. The investigations refined some reliable archaeological indicators for the beginning of the 9th century: transport amphorae (from the Aegean Sea or Asia Minor), cooking pots with groove decorations and slab technology, and sunken buildings with circular or rectangular plans (fig. 4). These markers offer a first provisional, large-scale map of this phase.

Fig. 4 – Framework of the main archaeological markers in the 9th century: Oriental globular amphorae; *ollae* with groove decoration; dry-stone round buildings (sunken-hut)




70 The presence of polycandela and chafing dishes clearly frames the site of Rocchicella within Byzantine material culture, but the in-depth study of these finds highlights a level of complexity that defines this phase more precisely. Among the most interesting indicators is a cooking pot with combed decoration that almost completely replaced wheel-made twin-handled artefacts as the main kitchenware in 8th-century layers²⁰⁵.



- 71 The production of these *ollae*, whose lower walls display groove decorations, called for a specific slab and coil technique and local clays characterized by calcitic fabric. The pots were baked in a reducing atmosphere inside a pit kiln. Parallels suggest significant contact with the north-eastern areas of the Empire, Armenia, and the Caucasus, whose productions exhibit similar surface treatments.
- 72 In Rocchicella and Contrada Edera, on Etna's northern slope, these artefacts are coupled with a new architectural model: dry-stone buildings with circular plans. They can be stand-alone buildings or associated with rectangular rooms, but they always display the same specific technical features: lowered internal walking surfaces, equipped with manholes/storage room, and megalithic walls. No previous examples of this construction method have been found in Sicily, but Middle-Byzantine building techniques offer significant parallels from other areas, especially around the Crimean Peninsula²⁰⁶. Astonishing quantities of Sicilian copper coins of Leo V have also been discovered in this region, suggesting population transfer, a staple of Byzantine provincial control policy²⁰⁷. Even if the assessment of these data is still in its preliminary stage, it starts to identify a complex and variegated social environment reflecting considerable mobility within the empire at the time²⁰⁸.
- 73 The broader picture emerging from these new archaeological data for the beginning of the 9th century concerns both urban and rural contexts. The continued importance of the defensive role of cities leaned on the development of small and medium-sized rural settlements along the main thoroughfares. This process seems to be linked to the immigration of new populations which may have settled in great imperial and/or formerly ecclesiastical estates, following settlement strategies already enacted with the garrisoning of elite units on the sequestered *patrimonium Syracusanarum partium* in the second half of the 8th century²⁰⁹. Hypothetically, this policy could have been a response to the desertion of extensive tracts of land in areas whose workforce had been depleted by the 747 plague²¹⁰. We should keep in mind the description of Lentini in the *Vita* of the three brothers of Lentini, Alphios, Philadelphos, and Kyrenos, precisely written at the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries. Formerly the richest agricultural basin of the island, the hinterland of the city now appears as a land of sheep husbandry²¹¹. If this was the case, the strategic locations of the new settlement could hint at military duties demanded by the newcomers.
- 74 The hypothesis of a demographic policy implemented by the Empire at the beginning of the 9th century demands a re-examination of monetary circulation between the 8th and 9th centuries. As proposed by E. Vaccaro, the available data illustrate the continuing complexity of the exchange networks and the economic strength of the island at this stage²¹². Furthermore, the Syracusan mint had been relatively inactive for decades, but the production of copper coinage peaked during the first decades of the 9th century, corresponding to the appearance of the archaeological indicators mentioned earlier²¹³. This fact suggests a link between the settlement of new populations and increased monetary circulation. For instance, the daily expenditure of troops living in the countryside and the cost of provisioning the army could account for the increased state expenditures in the territory. This hypothesis could be confirmed by the discovery of globular amphorae of eastern origin on a rural site such as Rocchicella²¹⁴.

6. The making of the frontier: archaeological framework and new issues

- 75  The present, provisional distribution of sites, urban and rural, for this period highlights an important historical phase we were unaware of a decade ago. It illustrates the formation of an area characterized by unique features, an evolution whose rationale must be linked to the specific role of Syracuse, the Byzantine capital of Sicily.

76 The comparison of these first data with the archaeological and documentary evidence of the second half of the 8th century identifies this phase as a real turning point. Archaeological surveys and numismatic data reveal the crisis, both demographic (especially of rural settlements) and economic, Sicily went through – and more specifically western Sicily – in the second half of the 8th century. The impact of the 747 epidemic plague, especially on the economic exploitation of the former *Patrimonia romanae ecclesiae*, certainly contributed to a systemic crisis that awaits a more thorough analysis. While this crisis most certainly had a more severe effect in areas far from large urban centres, such as Syracuse and Catania, the first half of the 9th century displays new features, especially in eastern Sicily. This new historical phase is characterized by an evident Byzantine investment in urban fortifications and an increased agricultural exploitation which allowed the continuity (e.g., Sofiana) or even reoccupation of settlements that had been abandoned at the end of the 7th century (e.g., Rocchicella). The dynamics leading to the expansion of the settlements seem relatively specific to the eastern and south-eastern parts of the island. The comparison with the scarce evidence available for the western area would indicate a deliberate strategy on the part of the Byzantine Empire to strengthen the sector of the island more closely connected to the other Italian territories of the Empire (Terra di Otranto and Calabria) and benefiting from tighter economic ties with the eastern provinces (the Aegean, Asia Minor) and Constantinople.

77 Currently, archaeological data, and its chronology, do not allow us to determine if these reforms responded to the 827 Islamic landings or if they reflect policies enacted before this event. In the first case scenario, the obvious rationale would have been a consolidation of the imperial hold over the eastern side of the island after the fall of Agrigento and Palermo, a tactical retreat beyond a line coinciding, at least partially, with the Platani River. On the other hand, we cannot exclude a deliberate choice to concentrate forces in eastern Sicily in the years preceding the Aghlabid landing. After all, the weakened imperial control over the Strait of Sicily after the fall of Carthage (699) could have triggered a reorganization of the island's defences hinged more exclusively on the eastern areas better connected to Calabria, whose duke became a subordinate of the *strategos* of Sicily. The rationale of such a measure could have been to increase control over the Strait of Messina and the Ionian Sea through which passed the "Great Trunk Road" linking Rome to Constantinople²¹⁵. The distribution of *topoteretai* seals (fig. 3) supports this second hypothesis as these elite units were garrisoned exclusively in the urban centres of eastern Sicily and Calabria from the second half of the 8th century. In this second option, this progressive militarization of the island could be directly connected to the reorganization underway from the second half of the 8th century in Africa. The arrival of the Abbassid *jund's* forces to suppress the Berber kharijite revolts turned Ifrīqiya into a strong military province. After 800, the political and social stabilization resulting from the rise of the Aghlabids paved the way for expansion. Although the African threat offers the most probable rationale for the military reforms, one cannot exclude, however, the parallel impact of the turmoil affecting mainland imperial Italy, which faced eastern Sicily more directly.

78 Whatever the exact rationale and chronology beyond these reforms, it is obvious that this imperial military and economic investment in eastern Sicily explains the strenuous resistance of the eastern regions and of the capital itself, conquered only in 878, half a century after the 827 Aghlabid first military intervention and the conquest, in 831, of Palermo, chosen as the capital of the Sicilian emirate.

79 Envisioning Sicily as a borderland in the framework of the essentially defensive Byzantine thematic organization and taking into account the well-known demographic policies enacted elsewhere by the empire offer good grounds to propose, albeit hypothetically, that soldiers or colonists accepting military duties from other parts of the empire could have settled in specific areas of the island to protect the major thoroughfares leading to Syracuse, stimulating demographic and economic growth.



80 As such, improving our understanding of this phase is paramount to understand the formation of the Sicilian frontier and ascertain whether a precise strategic plan was deliberately implemented through the commitment of new economic and demographic resources. A comparative approach offers the best heuristic perspectives²¹⁶.

81 Currently, we know very little about the dynamics that affected this area during the 9th and 10th centuries. To reassess the dynamics at play during the conquest, we must envisage the frontier not only as a conflict zone between two competing armies but as the location of a much-diversified set of interactions generating specific institutions, habits, and values, not to mention a specific material culture. As such it would be meaningless and methodologically wrong to search for a *limes*: the objective, however difficult to reach, is achieved by sieving through the evidence to investigate a society modelled by endemic, low-key warfare and its institutional, societal, moral, economic, and fiscal consequences. The archaeological approach, through the study of landscape, of economic resources and their exploitation, allows us to examine the functioning of a complex society “from within”, presenting features neither specifically Byzantine nor Islamic, and to compensate the substantial void of historical and archaeological documentation for these centuries²¹⁷.

Conclusions

82 Our improved knowledge of the Byzantine realities allows us to re-assess the testimony of the written sources detailing the first Islamic attacks on Sicily. This in turn offers the opportunity to develop a new narrative of the history of Sicily between the 6th and the 10th century. This narrative’s most salient point is that the island can now be inserted into the global framework of historical dynamics involving the whole Mediterranean. The lure of imperialism enticed both the Byzantine and the Islamic worlds, albeit under different modalities. Notably, imperialism came to be embodied in various specific places. Amongst these, Sicily played a special role both for practical historical reasons and for the symbolic value attached to sea-power. As such, notwithstanding the apparent peripheral position of the island both for Byzantium and the Islamic world, an intense imperial rivalry fuelled the military struggle for its control, earning it a special place in political and even eschatological representations. Along the way, warfare engulfed the island for a century and a half and Sicily went from being on the border to a borderland.

83 This protracted struggle determined specific concrete evolutions, illustrating the performative power of strong symbols. Archaeology sheds light on the impact of militarization in both urban and rural contexts, allowing for a new assessment of the transformation underwent by Sicily, as resilient exchange networks and settlement patterns adapted to an evolving territorial organization.

84 As such, jointly studying imperialism and frontier dynamics develops a new interpretative framework for well-known as well as new sources, both textual and archaeological. This assertion cannot, however, go unqualified and two caveats have to be highlighted. First, emphasizing this global frontier dimension of the island should not underestimate Sicily’s inner regional diversity and polycentrism. Second, it is paramount to stress that the creation of the border society, the growing internal diversification and the rise of a polycentric Sicily are dynamic processes whose chronology needs to be clarified. This is all the more important since to reinsert Sicily into the broader narrative of Mediterranean history, and its current problematics, we have to calibrate the chronology of phenomena identified in Sicily against the dynamics affecting other areas: Ifriqiya and Italy obviously, but also more distant places such as Syria, Egypt, Bithynia, and Crimea. Mediterranean history works as a system; therefore, Sicilian history cannot be isolated if the movement of the system, and its impact on its specific Sicilian component, is



to be interpreted correctly. These research topics need to be studied more thoroughly, and this paper aims to pave the way for future research.

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Notes

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2 Cosentino 2018, 2019 offers an excellent background to the analysis proposed here.

3 A classic but somewhat exaggerated and excessively Italo-centric account is found in Corsi 1983. For a more recent and global approach, see Howard-Johnston 2010, p. 225-226 and 491-492. On the specifically Sicilian dimension of this policy, see Prigent 2010a.

4 It is important to note here that personnel from the Constantinopolitan mint was active on the island alongside the provincial mint, which would make no sense if the capital city had been Syracuse. This idea was first formulated in Hendy 1985, p. 421 n. 216, after J.M. Fagerlie had drawn attention to the features shared by the Sicilian *nomismata* and contemporary Constantinople coinage (Fagerlie 1974, p. 179). Moreover, Sicilian gold production diminished when the court arrived in Syracuse, which can only be explained by the simultaneous activity *in situ* of personnel from the “central mint”. It also explains the Constantinopolitan features of the usurper Mezezius’ coinage (Prigent 2016).

5 On the progressive affirmation of a stable government in Constantinople, see Dagron 1985 and for the previous period of itinerant government the well-documented Destephen 2016, 2020.

6 Emperor Heraclius was also absent from Constantinople for many years during the Persian wars, but he was mainly campaigning. Even if he was certainly surrounded by courtiers, the situation contrasted with the stable settlement of the emperor in Syracuse.

7 *Nikephoros patriarch* 1990, § 8, p. 48; trad. p. 49, narrates how the despondent Emperor wanted to move to Libya and how he sent part of his treasure on a boat which sunk. See Kaegi 2003, p. 88-89 and 111, who envisions this scheme as blackmail to obtain the Church of Constantinople’s compliance to his religious and financial policy.

8 Even, as we will see, in the Islamic chronicles, here I.B.1.

9 See Prigent 2010a, p. 175-185. For the historical background characterized by the imminence, or even the contemporaneity, of the first Muslim siege of Constantinople, see Jankowiak 2013 and Prigent 2016. For a more general study, see Motta 1998.

10 See for instance, an-Nuwayrī, in Amari 1982, II, p. 150-152, and on the conqueror and his motivations Nef 2011a.



11 Ibn al-Athīr, in Amari 1857, I, p. 394.

12 Byzantium orchestrated a “come-back” some thirty years later (Prigent 2010a), but it must have appeared as such in 902 and it is still considered as such in modern historiography (Vasiliev 1968, p. 152; Halm 1996, p. 177). The conclusions on the 10th century come-back expressed in Prigent 2010a have been discarded by Kislinger – Maurici 2014. Zuckerman 2014, p. 201 n.23 rightly pointed out that Zeldes 1988 (in Hebrew) changed the datation of one key-piece of evidence, but he is wrong in affirming that “this re-dating removes Prigent’s only tangible evidence for the Empire’s involvement in Sicily during the rebellion”, as Ibn al-Athīr (in Amari 1857, I, p. 415) expressly states this involvement. The author nonetheless stands by his general overall conclusion on the Byzantine come-back for four reasons: Ibn al-Athīr mentions the intervention of ships full of troops and provisions sent by the “King of Constantinople”; the armada’s leader described in the *De Ceremoniis*, Cosmas, was *strategos* of Longobardia and Sicily; most of the 10th-century imperial coins found in Sicily dates from 931-944; the eighteen Panormitans accompanying the armada must be identified as Sicilians since Bandirma troops would have counted as soldiers of the Opsikion.

13 For a general overview, see Treadgold 2013.

14 As such one cannot receive the straightforward assessment of Signes Cordoñer 2014, p. 321: “evidence of the secondary importance of Sicily [...] lies in the absolute silence of the Greek authors”; for this issue see Prigent 2018.

15 Prigent 2010a.

16 There is no specific study on this expedition, but see *PmbZ* II, 24884, Cheynet 1995, p. 306 and the notes in *Léon le diacre* 2014, p. 103-105. On Rametta, the key of this last offensive, see Kislinger – Maurici 2014.

17 Cheynet 1990, p. 321-329 and von Falkenhausen 2004.

18 Similarly, Basil II’s plan could have been conceived as part of his general policy of reaffirmation of Macedonian legitimacy.

19 *Ioannis Scylitzae* 1973, p. 79.

20 On the very complex context and chronology of the western expedition of Alexis Mousele, see Prigent 2019. Up until the reign of Basil I, many *strategoī* of Sicily remained important people, very close to the emperor and even kin to the sovereign: Photeinos (*PmbZ*, 6241), Alexis Mousele (see previous reference), Constantine Kondomytes (*PmbZ*, 3929), and Bardas Kontomytes (*PmbZ*, 793).

21 *PmbZ*, 849; Caruso 1996, p. 87-95; Prigent 2007.

22 We could hypothesize that the choice of the name Tiberios reflected a memory of a previous project to entrust the island to the authority of Constantine IV’s brother, Tiberios (Jankowiak 2013).

23 Prigent 2006a. Quite different was the revolt of Elpidios (Kislinger 2000).

24 Théodose le diacre (2017, p. 160, v. 990-992, trad. p. 161): “Danse donc, Sicile des Africains ! / Annonce à tous la bonne nouvelle de ton allégresse : / Le souverain va te libérer sous peu !”.

25 To the classic Alexander 1973, we can add Magdalino 2002, p. 394, l. 17-18 and commentary p. 396.

26 Métivier 2005, 2008, as well as the prosopographical studies of the main Cappadocian families in Cheynet 2008.

27 Calculations made using <http://orbis.stanford.edu/>. See also, von Falkenhausen 2018.

28 On this point, see Nef – Prigent 2006, p. 37-42.

29 Kekaumenos (online ed., 101.34). Similarly, Picard 2015 shows the importance of the arsenal and sea-power in the construction of Umayyad imperial discourse. See below, I.B.2.

30 218 people were aboard a dromon at full complement complement, so even a small fleet of 20 ships would have accounted for nearly 4500 enlisted men. On this problem see Zuckerman 2015.

31 The Islamic fleet had to attack Asia Minor to cut timber (*Theophanis Confessoris* 1883-1885, p. 385. See Meiggs 1982, Dunn 1992, Lombard 1959, p. 244 and Lombard 1958, p. 79-81. Sicily and Calabria were especially rich in good navy-grade timber (Ventura 1998, p. 307). The beam used in Roman basilicas came from Calabria and Gregory I gave some beams to Eulogius of Alexandria to build ships (Grégoire le



Grand 1982, VI, 61, XIII, 43). al-Dāwudī's *Kitāb al-Amwāl* mentions the wood-cutting *corvée* demanded from Agrigentans for the Emir's arsenal (Abdul-Wahab, Dachraoui 1962, p. 436). A similar topic is found in the *Life of Ustadh Jawdhar* in the Etna area (*Vie de l'Ustadh Jawdhar*, 1958, p. 183 and n. 408), a region Leo the Deacon describes as covered by very deep forests (*Léon le diacre* 2014, p. 104).

32 Pryor – Jeffreys 2006, p. 175-303.

33 Even if the equivalent documentation does not exist for the Byzantine Empire, we can check the papyrological evidence for the mobilization of the crews in Egypt (Rāgib 1981). On the basis of the *Liber Pontificalis*' testimony, it has been proposed that this method was copied by Constans II (Zuckerman 2006, although chronology would lead to an inversion of the proposal. See also the alternate hypothesis proposed in Prigent 2006b), who prefers *corvées* linked to annonarian practices. The famous accounts of the Cretan expedition conserved in the *De ceremoniis* shed light on the level of administrative *minutia* a naval expedition demanded (Haldon 2000, Zuckerman 2015). On the Islamic side, see Bramoullé 2017a.

34 Around 37 *kentenaria*, see calculations in Haldon 2000 and the very important progress made by Constantine Zuckerman who managed to solve most of the remaining problems in the text: *De Cerimoniis*, IV, p. 807-854.

35 Coupland 1999, 2000, p. 62-63. The sum amounted to 4000 pounds *ad pensam*, that is around 1.056.000 *denarii* and documentary evidence put the exchange rate with the Byzantine *nomisma* at 40 *denarii* for a gold coin. As such the Viking tribute would have been worth 26400 *nomismata* against 266,400 for the cost of the Cretan expedition.

36 Not to minimize naval warfare in the 8th-9th centuries, but expeditions were more endemic than massive if we discard the struggle for Sicily. See Pryor – Jeffreys 2006, p. 34-70 and Picard 2015, p. 251-312 (note p. 423 the 40 years gap in attacks between the 890s and 930s). The struggle flared up when the rise of a new Islamic imperial power, the Fatimid (Bramoullé 2019), collided with the ambitions of *basileis* whose legitimacy could not lean on the dynastic principle and who had thus to prove themselves as victorious rulers.

37 Obviously, the rise of the rival Carolingian power goaded the *basileis* into a more active policy, see for instance, Auzépy 1995.

38 Kennedy 2018a; Chapoutot-Remadi 2018. The consequences of the rebellions which took place in the Maghreb from the 740s until the 780s were ambivalent. On the one hand, two thirds of the regions ended under the authority of rulers who contested the Abbassid legitimacy; but, on the other hand, Ifrīqiya concentrated numerous troops and was among the most militarized provinces of the Islamic Empire by the end of the 8th century.

39 Prigent 2004, p. 593.

40 It is obviously something difficult to date, but it is evident that no Emperor entertained such an ambition after Constantine V. We can consider the submission of the Lombard principality of Benevento to Charlemagne and the imperial defeat of 788 (*Theophanis Confessoris* 1883-1885, p. 464) as the turning point, see for the context Zornetta 2018.

41 McCormick 1994 and Nichanian – Prigent 2006.

42 See Haldon 2016a, p. 189-192. The loss of the great eastern metropolis, Antioch, Alexandria, as well as Carthage played a key role in this evolution.

43 On this evolution, see Nichanian 2013.

44 This growing importance was probably determined by Justinian's policy after the conquest of the western provinces, as the *domus divina* inherited most of the *patrimonia* of the Vandals and Gothic dynasties, Prigent 2020, p. 160-173.

45 The novel of 537 on the administration of Sicily states "*semper quasi peculiare commodum accessit imperatoribus*" (Novelle 75 [= 104], *Corpus iuris civilis* 1993, p. 378, §2), translation from *The novels of Justinian* 2018, p. 534: "Sicily has always accrued to the emperors as a form of personal asset".

46 Prigent 2010c, p. 207-212.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 202-207.

48 Nef – Prigent 2006, p. 25-26. For the trip to Constantinople for the higher dignity, our best evidence comes from the placitum of Rizana: *Ab antiquo tempore, dum fuimus sub potestate Graecorum imperii, habuerunt parentes nostri consuetudinem habendi actus tribunati,*



domesticos seu vicarios necnon locoservator et per ipsos honores ambulabant ad communione et sedebant in congressu, unusquisque per suum honorem, et qui volebant meliorem honorem habere de tribuno ambulabat ad imperatorem, qui ordinabat illum ypato (Guillou 1969, p. 304, l. 109-p. 305, l. 117).

49 Nichanian – Prigent 2006, p. 132-133.

50 This idea is intimately interwoven with nationalistic trends in Italian historiography, see for instance Caputo 1955, Devoto 1957, Arias 1976, and especially Cosentino 1998. For Sicily as a “riottosa provincia”, see among others Guillou 1977, p. 117-120, whose conclusions are difficult to endorse.

51 See below § 18.

52 In 827 the Aghlabid general still justified the attack against Sicily by his right to hunt down African populations who had fled to the island after the fall of Carthage, al-Mālikī, in Amari 1857, I, p. 295-298 and 307, Ibn al-Athīr, in Amari 1857, I, p. 355-356.

53 Browse the *registrum* of Gregory the Great who refers to many refugees.

54 As exemplified by the presence of the population in the island who left Patras and was later sent back to the Peloponnesus after imperial victories at the beginning of the 9th century, as mentioned in the *Chronicle of Monembasia* (Kislinger 2001).

55 A staple of Sicilian historiography, it has even been tracked using DNA approaches, see for instance, Mc Cormick 1998, p. 24-31. We should keep in mind V. von Falkenhausen’s *caveat* who stressed that the significance of this Oriental migration must have been more “qualitative” than “quantitative” (von Falkenhausen 1978-79, p. 146-147).

56 Prigent 2006a.

57 The *registrum* of Gregory the Great reveals the importance of this Sicilian senatorial diaspora not through the number of letters addressed to them but through the proportion between the various ranks which underscore the high frequency of the superior ranks of the senatorial order.

58 *Chronicon ad annum Christi* (1234, 137, p. 220, l. 3-4).

59 See n. 48. Brown 1984, p. 130-135 noted that the new titles well-attested in Sicily were rare in mainland Italy, a difference of paramount importance. See also Martin – Peters-Custot – Prigent 2012.

60 For an intriguing snapshot of south Italian, and most probably specifically Sicilian, culture during the “Dark Ages”, see Ceulemans *et al.* 2011; for an attempt of a synthesis on this important topic Prigent 2017.

61 McCormick 2001 and Wickham 2005 as well as Lavan 2013.

62 While waiting for the full publication of the results of the ERC program *SicTransit*, important information and a rich bibliography can be found in Vaccaro 2013b, Arcifa 2018a, Cacciaguerra 2018 and Drieu – Carver – Craig 2018.

63 Lemerle 1979, 75-78, p. 107-108, trad. p. 103-105. For the datation, p. 79.

64 Léontios de Néapolis 1974, XI, l. 74-77, p. 359; trad. p. 459-460.

65 Prigent 2006a, p. 295-298.

66 Prigent 2014, p. 195-200, Haldon 2016a, p. 258-266 and Montinaro 2013 opted for a more conservative approach returning to the management of indirect fiscality, but, although the documentary dossier is impressive and many analyzes enticing, their conclusions are not totally convincing. Another attempt at synthesis seems more anecdotal (Ragia 2009, Ragia 2011 and Ragia 2012).

67 This is mainly done through metrology as it directly reflects the deliberate policies enacted by the government independently of their results.

68 Prigent 2012. Interesting thoughts on internal diversification in Vaccaro 2013b.

69 Schindel – Hahn 2009-2010 and Clive Foss’ answer (Foss 2012).

70 Morrisson 1998.



71 As expressed by Grierson 1982, p. 130: “Both in gold and copper the output of Syracuse far exceeded that of all mainland mints of Italy put together. (...). The copper coinage of Sicily, in the last decades of the seventh century, is far commoner today than the corresponding issues of Constantinople, and the coins are in general of higher weight and better struck”. See also the bibliography in the next footnotes.

72 Prigent 2015a.

73 *Ibid.* p. 73.

74 Hendy 1970.

75 Prigent 2006b, p. 273-290.

76 Prigent 2013.

77 Prigent 2015a, p. 77-83. Although obviously, Sicily did not strike silver.

78 Prigent 2013, p. 148-153.

79 Prigent 2008.

80 Prigent 2012, p. 394, 404-409 and for an important consequence of this system on the economy of mainland Italy, Prigent 2014a.

81 Prigent 2015a.

82 See below. One should keep in mind that this evolution was balanced by a recruitment of governors in the immediate entourage of the sovereign.

83 Prigent 2014a, p. 212-215.

84 Prigent 2018 broached these topics, but much research remains to be conducted.

85 Picard 2015, p. 313-332.

86 Borrut 2011a, 2011b, among others.

87 *Die Syrische Apokalypse* 1993a-b or the Syriac text and its German translation; Alexander 1985 for the English translation. On the text itself, Hoyland 1997, p. 263-267 and 295-297 (Greek version).

88 Kaegi 2004 and more specifically Kaegi 2001: “When the sons of Ishmael have seized power over every land and wasted cities and their districts and gained dominions in all islands, then they will build ships for themselves in the manner of birds and will fly over the waves of the sea. Then they will go up even to lands of the west as far as Rome the great and Illyricum and Githis and Thessalonica and Sardinia the great, which is beyond Rome” (trad. p. 5).

89 For an outline of Pseudo-Methodius’ Apocalypse’s chronology, cf. *Apocalypse Pseudo-methodius* 2012, p. XIV-XVIII.

90 Kaegi 2004 translates in the future what is in the past tense in German; cf. Alexander 1985, p. 38-39, who also translates this passage from the Syriac in the past tense.

91 In the translation of G.J. Reinink: “And after these calamities and chastisements of the sons of Ishmael, at the end of that week, when men will be lying in the peril of chastisement and will have no hope that they may be saved from that hard servitude, being persecuted and oppressed and suffering indignities, hunger, and thirst, and being tormented by the hard chastisement, whereas these barbarian tyrants will delight themselves with food and drink and rest and will boast of their victory, how they had laid waste and destroyed Persia and Armenia and Cilicia and Isauria and Cappadocia and Africa and Sicily and Hellas and the inhabited parts of the country of the Romans and all the islands of the seas...”, (Reinink 1992, p. 150-151).

92 On the rewriting of the Persian past, cf. Savant 2013.

93 Haldon 2016b.

94 Started in 827, the conflict lasted until the end of the dynasty, which never controlled the entire island.

95 For the general context, see for instance Noyé 1998.



96 Di Branco – Wolf 2014, Di Branco 2018 and Martin 2018.

97 Gantner 2018, p. 301-305.

98 Nef (in press).

99 Some of them were put to the fore for the first time by Michele Amari, but have not been properly exploited until now.

100 One might think that it has to be identified with the battle called *Dhāt al-Ṣawārī* in Arabic. Let us underline, however, that the battle referred to in relation with Sicily is seldom mentioned by this name. The ‘Battle of the Masts’ is, moreover, not precisely dated (al-Tabarī hesitates between 651-652 and 654-655). It is even difficult to distinguish history from legend from the accounts written about it, and which probably group distinct successive events (Canard 1926, p. 63-67). From the “Byzantine” point of view, Stratos 1980, Christides 1985 and more recently, Zuckerman 2006, p. 114-117 and Howard-Johnston 2010, p. 474-481. In apocalyptic literature, Cosentino 2008.

101 The respective dates of these two events are 663 and 668. In the texts evoked here, all three events form a cluster whose chronology is not specified, although it is suggested that they converge to around 655.

102 We will not enter into the discussion of the dating of the text: Conrad 2015 and Lindstedt 2014.

103 Ibn A‘tham 1968-1975, I, p. 354-356.

104 Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam 1922, p. 191.

105 *Crónica mozárabe* 2009, § 24.

106 Abd al-Malik ibn Ḥabīb 1991, p. 114.

107 Al-Tabarī 2003, III, p. 831. Year 35H (655-656 a.C.).

108 Ibn A‘tham 1968-1975, I, p. 361-366; Italian translation of the passage: Lo Jacono 1985, p. 354-361.

109 Ibn al-Khayyāt 1967, p. 278; English translation in *Khalifa ibn Khayyat’s History* 2015, p. 91.

110 Al-Balādhurī 1987, p. 235; English translation in al-Balādhurī 1916, p. 375.

111 Khalifa Ibn Khayyāt, *Tārīkh*. On which, one can now see: Marsham – Andersson 2017 and Andersson 2018.

112 Nef 2009.

113 Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān 1970.

114 Pellitteri 1994, p. 148 for the Arabic and the English translation.

115 On the link between empire and geography in the world of Islam, see Miquel 1967.

116 Benchekroun 2016.

117 Ibn Ḥawqal 1964, p. 116 and Nef 2013, p. 116.

118 *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide* 2014; for a new reading of the map, see Bramoullé 2017b.

119 Picard 2015.

120 *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide* 2014, p. 145; Arabic; English, p. 457, and for the bibliography. See also Rapoport – Savage-Smith 2018.

121 *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide* 2014, p. 148; Arabic; English, p. 454.

122 Sagui 2002; Romei 2004.

123 The latest, and very detailed, study of the conquest of North Africa is in Kaegi 2010, to be completed with Kaegi 2016 and for the cultural background with Conant 2012. Important new information on the province’s administrative framework can be gathered from the sigillographic material, see Morrison – Prigent 2018 [2020].



124 We should keep in mind that the crucial years, from 695 to ca. 720 saw an incredibly fast turn-over of seven emperors and sources focused on this political struggle.

125 This assertion relies on an unpublished (but see Prigent 2015a, p. 71-72) die study but check the more subjective views expressed by Grierson 1968, I, p. 45, who considered that Sicilian production could have matched or even surpassed Constantinople's at the time. Metcalf 2001, p. 119 estimates that, over eleven years, hundreds of reverse dies were used. One can complement these data on gold with the opinion of Grierson on the copper coinage: "The copper coinage of Sicily, in the last decades of the seventh century, is far commoner today than the corresponding issues of Constantinople, and the coins are in general of higher weight and better struck" (Grierson 1982, p. 130). For more details on this coinage, see Prigent 2013.

126 Oikonomidès 1964; Nicheanian – Prigent 2006.

127 See, with previous bibliography, the last attempt at clarifying the problem in Haldon 2016b.

128 Vassallo 2009; 2010 and for preliminary results of *SicTransit* project see infra, note 182.

129 Prigent 2015b.

130 Prigent 2010a, p. 166-175.

131 See above, n. 45 et 46.

132 Even if very probably part of the precious metal stocks was transferred in Sicily, see Prigent 2014a, p. 217-218.

133 The compulsory service of the Egyptian population in the navy (*kourson Αφρικῆς*) is mentioned in a papyrus registering the order of Qurra b. Sharīk, governor in Egypt, dated September 19, 709 (Morelli 1996, p. 106). During the second siege of Constantinople, in 717-718, two fleets attacked, one built in Egypt, the second in Africa, composed exclusively of transport ships. Nonetheless, when narrating how the crews fled to join the Byzantines, Theophane mentioned clearly the "Egyptians of these two fleets" (*Theophanis Confessoris* 1883-1885, p. 397). Furthermore, when Leo III sent the *patrikios* Paul in Sicily to suppress the usurpation of Tiberios IV, the new *strategos* won over the local army by announcing the destruction of these fleets whose threat obviously scared the island (*ibid.*, p. 398). So, notwithstanding the development of an arsenal in Tunis in the very first years of the 8th century (Pryor – Jeffreys 2006, p. 28; Talbi 1966, p. 384), the importance of the Egyptian fleets and crews remained paramount even in the west.

134 Nef – Prigent 2013; Makrypoulias 1999; 2000.

135 See above § 12.

136 Cohen 2018, p. 20, gives a total expenditure for both *gafol* and *heregeld* between 991 and 1041 of £240.500, that is ca. 1.4 million *nomismata* (and probably even less considering the alloy of the coins). It would amount to ca. 28.000 *nomismata per annum* against 25.000.

137 Johns 2004, p. 435: 20.000 dinars against an estimated Byzantine expenditure of 25.000 *nomismata*.

138 Around 25.000 *solidi* for six units totalling ca. 1500, , men whose salaries would have been around 8 *nomismata* a year, total 12.000, to which one must add the cost for arms, horses, barracks, officers, etc. Obviously, the calculation is only an estimate, but as an order of magnitude, the new revenues could have roughly matched the new military expenditures. Furthermore, before the 730s-740s, gold stocks left the shores of Sicily through two channels: the rents paid to Rome and Ravenna and the taxes paid to Constantinople. The combination of the seizures and monetary reforms probably insured that the outflow diminished significantly. Furthermore, the militarization increased the circulation, and as such global availability, of the gold coinage in the countryside, see § 45.

139 *PmbZ* 6696.

140 Prigent 2008, p. 135-139.

141 Prigent 2004; 2015a. Even if, strictly speaking, there was no increase of the tax burden, the use of a new currency increased the tax profit for the state as debased coins could not be given in payment as full-value *solidi*.

142 Auzépy 2008.

143 Pryor – Jeffreys 2006, p. 388.



144 *Ibid.* (p. 339 and 351).

145 As such the surveillance of the coast mentioned in Ibn al-Athīr (in Amari 1857, I, under the year 752-753, p. 363) as a defence against small-scale, piratical, endeavours, is an interesting point as this type of low-intensity warfare does not appear in our sources.

146 Nichanian – Prigent 2006, p. 109-1116, 118-122.

147 Ibn al-Athīr, in Amari 1857, I, p. 363.

148 Hassen 2001; Djelloul 2011; Picard 2015.

149 Vivien Prigent is preparing a specific commentary of this passage.

150 Stallman – Pacitti 2018, p. 114-118.

151 Vaccaro 2013b, p. 50.

152 Prigent 2006, p. 215. We give figures for these two emperors because of their high monetary production. Obviously, the inquiry has to stop with Michael II.

153 Prigent 2014a. When taxpayers had to pay more than 2/3 of a gold coin, they had to pay one full gold coin and received the change in copper from the administration. As such, the greater the number of small-scale payments, the more frequent this operation and the stronger the influx of copper coinage in an area.

154 Cfr. § 21-29.

155 Picard 2015, p. 219-250.

156 Nef 2011a.

157 Blankinship 1994.

158 Nef 2018.

159 As demonstrated by the Gheniza corpus: Nef 2007 and Goldberg 2012.

160 See for instance Toubert 1972, p. 8-17 and the reflexions in Kennedy 2018b.

161 For the eastern border: Bonner 1996, Haldon – Kennedy 1980, and Dagron 1988 and the rich historical commentary in Dagron – Mihăescu 1986.

162 Hagiography is especially useful here: Efthymiadis 2006, Re 2011, Re – Rognoni 2014.

163 See § 44.

164 Dagron – Mihăescu 1986, p. 178. For instance, the famous and tragic “Raid of the Thousand” in 865/6 (Ibn ‘Idharī, in Amari 1982, II, p. 13) follows this model.

165 Even if obviously, there is a part overlapping.

166 Because this type of infrastructure is especially vulnerable to scorched-earth tactics (Dagron 1976, p. 179-182), which were used in Sicily (Nef – Prigent 2013, p. 18).

167 One needs a minimum of strategic depth to make the most of limited numbers.

168 Molinari 2013. Here, we cannot address the settlement dynamics fueled by the Islamic conquest in the western territories where some preferential directions can be identified (see for example Alfano 2015).

169 Michaelides – Pergola – Zanini 2013; Cosentino 2019a; 2019b.

170 Cfr. Arcifa *et al.* 2020.

171 Cracco Ruggini 1980; Mazza 1986.



172 See the general presentation in Baldini Lippolis 2010a and 2010b.

173 Ultimately, see the analysis of the mosaic floor of the Basilica of Nunziata near Mascali proposed in Buda – Taormina 2014. On the mosaic floor of Kaukana, see Di Stefano 1997; for comparisons with the eastern area of the empire and the participation to Justinianic cultural trends, see Ralli 2018.

174 Pedone 2015. On bronze artefacts, see Baldini 2015.

175 See Malfitana 2002 for the analysis carried out on the Late Hellenistic and Roman period and the particular reference to the distribution of amphorae and Oriental RSW; for the phases of the 6th to 9th centuries, see the research of Tortorici 2002.

176 Buscemi 2016.

177 Paribeni – Castagnino Beringhieri 2015.

178 Arcifa 2016a, 2016b.

179 Lanteri 2020; Cacciaguerra 2020; Sgarlata 2010.

180 Arcifa 2016a.

181 Arcidiacono 2019; for the relation between military saints and specific segments of Byzantine society, especially the military, see Coates-Stephens 2006, and more specifically his argument on the Oratory of the Holy Forty Martyrs in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome.

182 Vassallo 2009, 2010. For updates on the results of the ERC *SicTransit* program (P.I. M. Carver, A. Molinari) see Carver – Molinari 2016; Carver *et al.* 2017, 2018.

183 Asa Eger 2015, p. 255.

184 Arcifa 2020.

185 Beyond the possible morphological convergences, however, we should stress that in Africa the Byzantine defensive system leaned on both fortified cities and isolated forts, in connection with the threat posed to the territory by the local Berber tribes. Its scale resulted in a much more significant impact on the territory, see Leone 2019, p. 288.

186 Greco 2016.

187 Molinari 2002; contra Maertens 1989, who considers it an Islamic fortification.

188 Al-Idrīsī in Amari 1982, p. 112: from Palermo to Vicari, through Misilmeri; from Vicari to Petralia, Sperlinga Nicosia Cerami Troina, Randazzo, Castiglione, Taormina, Messina. At the end of the 18th century the Bourbon route followed the initial segment of this route, up to Vallelunga.

189 See the reconstruction of this segment of the route suggested in Uggeri 2004. For archaeological data on the Imera and Torto valley see Belvedere, Burgio – Cucco 2014.

190 See reconstruction in detail in Arcifa 2018b.

191 Prigent 2015b, specially p. 171-172.

192 Vaccaro – La Torre 2015.

193 Molinari – Neri 2004; Molinari 2014.

194 Only the site of Baida – Testa dell'Acqua shows little evidence circumscribable to the 8th century : Rotolo – Martin Civantos 2012 and Rotolo – Martin Civantos 2014.

195 Corretti – Facella – Mangiaracina 2014.

196 See also the sites of S. Antonino and Passo Grande, in the Imera valley where amphorae with median groove handles are attested : Belvedere, Burgio – Cucco 2014.

197 Rizzo 2004, p. 154 e ss.



198 Alfano 2015.

199 See Molinari 2018, p. 305. Among the possible causes, the incidence of the plague attested in the middle of the 8th century should be investigated: on this topic see Stathakopoulos 2016, p. 382-385. See also the various papers in Little 2007.

200 Prigent 2006d, p. 149.

201 For Enna cfr. new data in Giannitrapan – Valbruzzi – Nicoletti 2020; on Catania, see Arcifa – Giuffrida – Trapani 2018.

202 Lastly, see Fiorilla 2020 and Fiorilla – Gueli 2020.

203 Cfr. data in Arcifa 2016.

204 Bibliography on the site, Arcifa – Longo 2015.

205 On other sites such as Contrada Edera, near Bronte (CT), the *ollae* are associated with a wheel-made Byzantine saucepan with everted rims.

206 Arcifa 2019.

207 For data in detail see Arcifa *et al.* 2020; on coins see Guruleva 2017. For a reassessment of the evidence and the hypothesis of a population transfer see the communication of V. Prigent, *Coins, at SICTRANSIT Project. Second Plenary Seminar*, Roma 8th-10th July 2019.

208 Charanis 1961. More recently see the figure of migration movements within the empire: Stouraitis 2020. For an analysis of the relationship between documentary sources and archaeological data, Curta 2020.

209 See above § 42.

210 See n. 199

211 Prigent 2006, p. 79-83.

212 Vaccaro 2013b.

213 Prigent 2012 and here § 70-72.

214 Arcifa 2018a.

215 On this essential communication axis, see McCormick 2001.

216 Haldon – Kennedy 1980 emphasize the importance of a better archaeological knowledge to compare archaeological reality with documentary sources.

217 The newly-demonstrated importance of eastern Sicily led us to supervise doctoral research on *Productive landscapes in a frontier context: for a history of material culture in eastern Sicily between Byzantium and dār al-islām* carried out by Michelangelo Messina (University of Catania, in collaboration with Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne). The aim is to investigate the reality of the frontier and its dynamics between the 9th and 10th centuries through the study of various archaeological sites illustrating different settlement patterns: urban (Catania, Taormina, Syracuse), rural (Merì, Cava d'Ispica, Muculufa), as well as new fortified *kastra/hiṣn-s* (Paternò, Ragusa, Piano Grilli, near S. Marco-Demenna), to develop a clearer picture of productive landscapes and markets. On the topic see Arcifa – Messina 2018.

Table des illustrations



Titre

Fig. 1 – The Central Mediterranean in the 9th-10th century: Sicily between Islamic Ifriqīya and Byzantium (by H. Renel, A. Nef, CNRS-Orient & Méditerranée).

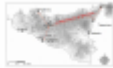


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<http://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/docannexe/image/9925/img-1.jpg>

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|  | Titre | Fig. 2 – Location of the Kassar (late 7 th -early 8 th century) in connection to the main roads within the island. |
| | URL | http://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/docannexe/image/9925/img-2.jpg |
| | Fichier | image/jpeg, 439k |
|  | Titre | Fig 3 – Distribution of <i>topotereta</i> 's seals, actually known, between the 8 th and 9 th centuries, related to the archaeological data on urban fortification and new kashtra during the early 9 th century. |
| | URL | http://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/docannexe/image/9925/img-3.jpg |
| | Fichier | image/jpeg, 424k |
|  | Titre | Fig. 4 – Framework of the main archaeological markers in the 9 th century: Oriental globular amphorae; <i>ollae</i> with groove decoration; dry-stone round buildings (sunken-hut) |
| | URL | http://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/docannexe/image/9925/img-4.jpg |
| | Fichier | image/jpeg, 518k |

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