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Dionisius A. Agius

## Who Spoke Siculo Arabic?

The Islamic rule (827-1091) in Sicily which lasted 254 years and the Norman reign (1091-1282) lasting 191 years are the most significant periods in the history of the island. Never was Sicily more wealthy than during these occupations. It was a period of continuous immigration from North Africa and al-Andalus as well as from a number of states of Italy, the Lombards in particular; consider, the agricultural labourers, tradesmen and others brought as slaves captured during raids. A policy of Islamization during the Arab-Berber rule secured places in Val di Noto and Val Demone while the reverse took place during the Norman reign where a policy of Christianization and Latinization ruled the country. This is a brief outline of the complex social, cultural, political and religious history of an island under foreign domination (445 years) with a mosaic of Arabic (Muslim, Christian and Jewish), Sicilian and Greek-speaking communities and the incoming Romance speakers from mainland Italy during the Norman rule<sup>1</sup>.

In my book *Siculo Arabic*<sup>2</sup> I contended that, hypothetically, there existed in Sicily three linguistic communities which emerged during the Islamic and Norman periods with varying degrees of importance: one was isolated culturally and linguistically from Islam and Arabic; the second had a common cultural affiliation into which Muslims were brought up with a common Arabic language; and the third was acculturated to Islam and spoke a form of Arabic but remained affiliated to Christianity. In this paper, I would like revisit the subject of Sicilian Arabic and offer new interpretations.

"Siculo Arabic" is a term I used after Amari<sup>3</sup>. Although his usage comprises a corpus of historical, archaeological, architectural and philological material, I have applied it to represent collectively different layers of mixed languages or

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: CA = Classical Arabic; It = Italo dialects; It-Sic = Italo-Sicilian dialects; Rm = Romance; SA = Siculo Arabic.

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, Kegan Paul International, London 1996, p. 430.

<sup>3</sup> M. Amari, *Biblioteca arabo-sicula*, I-II, Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, Palermo 1988.

dialects of Arabic and Romance spoken by the communities of the island. I have stated that "Siculo Arabic" would have been a variety which emerged during the Islamic period and continued to exist during the Norman reign at least until 1300. It would have been a variety spoken primarily by Arabic and Berber groups, secondly, indigenous people who became Muslims, and lastly those who were in contact with Arabs and Berbers as a result of work and trade or marriage; in the latter two instances it is highly probable that they never lost their native Romance language and continued to use it wherever the opportunity arose. Historical and textual evidence point to this mixture but so far no document has come to light to support a spoken language variety as we find in Andalusī Arabic. Nor did Ibn Makkī's (d. 507/1107) *Tathqīf al-lisān* (*The Straightening of the Tongue*)<sup>4</sup> supposedly representing the errors of the common people, leave any concrete trace of the dialect spoken at the time, as I have shown in my book. Firstly, the aims of his work are unclear with incoherent examples about what the «common people» (*al-ʿamma*) pronounce differently from the «social élite» (*al-khāṣṣa*). Secondly, though it is possible to reconstruct some phonological data by comparing them with Classical Arabic, some with Andalusī Arabic or Maltese there remain several inconsistencies in pronunciation<sup>5</sup>. Thirdly, the morphological data are limited to plural forms with no obvious examples about the imperfective aspect /bi-/ marker, so fundamental to Maghribī dialects. Fourthly, there remains doubt about whether his data are pointing towards speech errors by Arabs and Berbers of Sicily and Arabicized Sicilians or elsewhere. Fifthly, more seriously, his treatise is void of any syntactic comments<sup>6</sup>. As a result it is problematic to find corroborating evidence of a Sicilian Arabic variety.

We find in the Norman period that the difficulty in establishing a dialectal Sicilian Arabic variety increases as one examines the lexical data in Cusa's *I diplomī greci ed arabi*<sup>7</sup> which are not always correct thus leading to misapplication; moreover, the scribes employed by the royal *dīwān* included terms that were not necessarily flavoured with Sicilian Arabic. Although I have shown how the hybridized form of Classical Arabic and dialectal features constituted a Sicilian Middle Arabic<sup>8</sup>, ten years on I would like to reverse that statement and say that the 17 examples of Middle Arabic I elicited from the registers of lands and men<sup>9</sup> are not representative enough to justify a variety unique to

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Makkī l-Ṣiqillī, *Tathqīf al-lisān wa-talqīḥ al-janān*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Maṭar, Dār al-Taḥrīr, Cairo 1966.

<sup>5</sup> D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit., pp. 159-242.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 151-154.

<sup>7</sup> S. Cusa, *I diplomī greci ed arabi di Sicilia*, Lao, Palermo 1868-1882.

<sup>8</sup> D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit., pp. 401-3.

<sup>9</sup> See A. De Simone, *Spoglio antroponimico delle giaride arabo-greche dei diplomī editi da Salvatore Cusa*, I, Istituto per l'Oriente, Roma 1979.

Sicilian Arabic. This is because, as Alex Metcalfe<sup>10</sup> has argued correctly, the scribes may not have been native to the island. "Siculo Arabic" remains, therefore, speculative but shying away from discussing the issue would mean denying the possibility of such a variety and further inquiry.

*Defining the concepts of "integration" and "segregation"*

Integration is behaving in such a way that one becomes part of the group or is accepted into it; conversely, segregation is keeping two or more groups of people physically apart from each other. Although historically there is evidence of linguistic and cultural communities living apart from each other during the Islamic and Norman periods, some by choice others under increasing pressure in and after the 1160s to convert to Christianity, it is equally true that integration of groups was taking place at varied degrees in different sectors of Sicilian society. In terms of social and linguistic assimilation of groups what can our sources offer?

Adherence to the dates given by historians to the start and finish of the Islamic and Norman occupations may distort our understanding of what people spoke or wrote during these times. For example, one cannot take 827 as the birth of a new religion, Islam, and a new language, Arabic, with 1091 as the death of both; the religion-language parameters were wider and lasted longer than what historians have implied. Admittedly, our Arabic and Western sources are defective as to information about a spoken Arabic variety or for that matter a Siculo Arabic variety; they do not point to any particular linguistic community; therefore, we base our argument on the assumption that some of the common people may have been bilingual speaking Arabic and a Sicilian dialect or perhaps Arabic and a Greek dialect; but these could not have been in large numbers. However, one suspects that there were a significant number of Christian women married to Muslim men as Ibn Ḥawqal has lead us to believe<sup>11</sup>. One event supporting this assertion, often reported by historians is the observation made by Ibn Jubayr on the Christian women of Palermo he saw at La Martorana church on Christmas Day in 580/1184 who «spoke good Arabic» [*faṣḥāt al-alsun*]<sup>12</sup>. As for the writing of registers and deeds or other legal and administrative documents, our sources are more helpful: they were written in Arabic with Greek and/or Latin transliterations. A number of people were essentially bilingual, speaking Arabic-Greek and a smaller number in the later

<sup>10</sup> A. Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily. Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam*, Routledge-Curson, London 2003, p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-ard*, Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, Beirut 1992, p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr*, Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī-Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣrī, Beirut-Cairo *sine data*, p. 231.

Norman and Swabian periods speaking Arabic-Latin<sup>13</sup>; certainly some had the ability to read and/or write but not necessarily speak another language other than their own fluently; these were the professionals, among them the kings, court officials, scribes, religious clerics, teachers and Sicilian Jews.

Arabic must have been the *lingua franca*, a language of commerce and administration during the Islamic period; the language-religion association within the Arab-Berber community declined numerically during the Norman period as Muslims left the island or converted to Christianity; those who stayed continued to use this *lingua franca* adding some of its features to the Sicilian Arabic variety. Hundreds of examples of bilingualism, Arabic-Greek and Arabic-Romance, have been elicited<sup>14</sup>; I have argued for a Sicilian Arabic variety that developed from examples given of material cultural terms but also toponymical and anthroponymical terms<sup>15</sup>. But how representative are these examples of a Siculo-Arabic variety? It is difficult to answer this question because firstly, who used these terms? Only a small group: scribes, legal officials, merchants, traders, agents etc.; secondly, the year the examples were recorded varies from the twelfth up to the fifteenth century, some even later; and thirdly some of the terms belong to an administrative corpus, others to a commercial repertoire, and though of Arabic origin, they may have entered in the Sicilian registers and deeds via a European or Andalusi route.

One area that I have not explored is the language of the port towns of Sicily. They are the first place foreign workers would have called on and mixed with the local Sicilian community. Arab-Berber seamen, merchants and traders must have established trade links with the Sicilian seafaring communities before the advent of Islam and continued to do so way up to the Ottoman period; likewise their Sicilian counterparts ventured to all coasts of the Mediterranean. Either way contacts brought about socializing and intermarrying, thus strengthening bonds with community groups. Some raids and skirmishes did interrupt this harmonization process, which led to certain community groups living in isolation from the wider community.

### *The port towns*

Textual evidence points to vibrant activity in the ports of Messina, Palermo and Trapani. They would have attracted people from all over the Mediterranean; their geographic locations and cultural traits, as well as the diverse

<sup>13</sup> A. Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> See G.B. Pellegrini, *Gli arabismi nelle lingue neolatine*, I-II, Paidea, Brescia 1972; A. De Simone, *Spoglio antroponimico*, cit.; G. Caracausi, *Arabismi medievali di Sicilia*, Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, Palermo 1983; D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit., pp. 243-358.

maritime traffic brought about ideas of technology, economic exchange and probably innovation in maritime technology. All three ports are described vividly in the diaries of the Andalusian traveller Ibn Jubayr<sup>16</sup> in the year 580/1184. These ports were the emporia of the Mediterranean. There is evidence in the Genizah letters of a thriving port community in Palermo; several ships sailing to and from Palermo<sup>17</sup> and trade contacts with the East Mediterranean and merchant activity<sup>18</sup>.

Ibn Jubayr's notes on Messina show how industrious the port town was and what a rich cultural and linguistic mix was found there: Messina was the market-place for «merchant infidels» and it attracted travellers because of the «lowness of prices»; it was «the focus of ships from the world over»<sup>19</sup>. Christians treated Muslims well; they lived «beside them [ie. Christians] with their property and farms»<sup>20</sup>. We are told that King William had a shipyard in Messina «containing fleets of uncountable numbers of ships»<sup>21</sup>. He is described as a just man; he employed a large number of Muslims in the palace and elsewhere<sup>22</sup>. Ibn Jubayr is perhaps one of the earliest Muslim writers to describe Messina, second in importance after Palermo; it became in the Norman period the gate to the Holy Land and many ships on their return voyage called on Messina from the Levant.

### *The language of the port town communities*

The Sicilian port towns, thriving as they were in the medieval period, must have been multilingual which led to the development of a pidgin variety of language used for trade and commerce. It was a rudimentary language because it served only for contact. How could this have worked? I illustrate a modern case of a Pidgin variety which is the Bazaar Arabic of the Arabian Gulf states today: for their shopping (food, clothes, housing materials, electric appliances etc.) Gulf Arabs communicate with non-Arab shop-keepers or sellers at the souq in a Pidgin variety which is a mixture of Arabic, Swahili, Baluchi, Urdu, English and Indian languages. I asked Omanis how do you learn this mixture?

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. by R.C. Broadhurst, Jonathan Cape, London 1952, pp. 338-56.

<sup>17</sup> Sh. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, I-VI, University of California, Berkeley 1999, I, pp. 215, 314-5, 322, 324-6.

<sup>18</sup> Sh. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, cit., I, pp. 42, 45, 68, 119, 198, 200, 212, 215, 218, 274, 302, 374-375, 377; II, pp. 60, 294, 322; III, pp. 73, 339, 442; IV, pp. 349, 410, 412.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, cit., p. 338.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 343.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, p. 340.

I was told you do not learn it but you speak it by force of listening, imitation and correction. Pidgins are used typically for specific functions rather than to signal social distinction. It is not then a language of group identification. The Pidgin Arabic is also spoken by Indian workers at shipyards on the Arabian Gulf coast and also in mainland Saudi Arabia<sup>23</sup>. Indian foreign workers who acquire a work permit do not speak or understand Arabic when they arrive in the Gulf, though, most of them are of an Islamic background and would have some ability to read and recite the Qur'an in Arabic in order to fulfil their religious duties. The situation may have been different in medieval Sicily; Arabic would have been predominantly the working language among Arab and Berber settlers in the port town environment while the reverse took place during the Norman period when Sicilian and an administrative Latin/Romance language were in place. Either way foreign workers acquired what was most urgently needed. The acquisition of L<sub>1</sub> or L<sub>2</sub> speakers normally «slows down and even stops at a level that is far removed from the language [...] they have to live in»<sup>24</sup>.

### *Jargon and Pidginization*

Among the harbour communities a *lingua franca* would have been used at all times in the Mediterranean. I assume that in the early stage of pidginization a jargon took place and full-Pidgin would have evolved as a result of «a prolonged need for a *lingua franca* and where a stable social situation leads to focusing and stabilization» of the language<sup>25</sup>. Holmes states that «Pidgins develop to serve a very narrow range of functions in a very restricted set of domains; they tend to have a simplified structure and a small vocabulary compared with fully developed language»<sup>26</sup>. How true is this statement in the case of a pidginized Arabic variety in Sicily? In the pidginization process, three stages leading to its formation are noted: admixture, reduction and simplification.

Intermarriage was perhaps the main contributing factor to the admixture of Arab/Berber and Sicilian; although Sicilian women would marry into households dominated by Arabs and Berbers, who spoke Arabic, they would scarce-

<sup>23</sup> For further details on Pidgin Arabic used by Indian labourers in Saudi Arabia see A. Hobrom, *An analysis of the Arabic Pidgin spoken by Indian workers in Saudi Arabia*, MA Thesis, University of Kansas 1992.

<sup>24</sup> C. Perdue et al., *Second Language Acquisition by Adult Immigrants. A Field Manual*, Newbury House, Rowley 1984, pp. 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> P. Trudgill, *Introducing Language and Society*, Penguin, London 1992, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> J. Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Longman, London 1992, p. 91.



ly have abandoned their Romance language<sup>27</sup>. The question is what Arabic did they speak and how much Romance was there in their language?

The language between the indigenous and the settlers would have been limited; parts of the Romance dialects were lost or not acquired by the new settlers; thus, the source Romance dialect would have become impoverished and a pidginized form took place. In the process of learning and imitating speech, speakers would tend to change sounds and/or transfer grammatical patterns of the words or technical terms they borrow. Grammatical markers are reduced to a minimum but features become regularized, such as the loss of grammatical gender, using one form of verb, and an increase in lexical transparency. The switching of genders in Arabic nouns is a good example; from Ibn Makkī's data, assuming that he is referring to Sicilian Arabic, we find a list of nouns showing the opposite gender to that of Classical Arabic<sup>28</sup>: SA *s.yf* (f) = CA *sayf* (m) «sword» (cf Rm [It] *spada* [f]); SA *q.m.r* (f) = CA *qamar* (m) «moon» (cf Rm [It] *luna* [f]); and SA *m.t.r* (f) = CA *maṭar* (m) «rain» (cf Rm [It] *pioggia* [f])<sup>29</sup>. It is possible that the dialectal switch of Sicilian Arabic could be a Romance influence; other nouns exemplify: SA *q.d.m* (m) = CA *qadam* (f) «foot» (cf Rm [It] *piede* [m]); SA *.ṣb.<sup>c</sup>* (m) = CA *iṣba<sup>c</sup>* (f) «finger» (cf Rm [It] *dito* [m]); SA *s.nn* (m) = CA *sinn* (f) «tooth» (cf Rm [It] *dente* [m])<sup>30</sup>. The listener whose language is not Romance would accept the speaker's gender assignment and adopts the new gender as a standard form. Other nouns from the post-Islamic deeds of Sicily show masculine switching to feminine in Sicilian Arabic: SA *chiumìa* (f) «band, strip» < CA *kbām* (m) «raw material»; SA *dàgala* (f) «sloping ground» < CA *daghāl* (m) «thicket»; SA *bbunaca* (f) «pool of water» < CA *manqā<sup>c</sup>* (m) «pool»<sup>31</sup> and, though not common, Arabic feminine nouns become masculine in Sicilian: SA *giummu* (m) «tassel; flock» < CA *jumma* (f) «a flock of wool» and SA *succari* (m) «bolt, bar» < CA *sukkāra* (f) «wooden lock»<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Ibn Ḥawqal reports that in a mixed marriage situation one finds that the males were brought up as Muslims while the females as Christians. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-ard*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Makkī l-Ṣiqillī, *Tatbqīf al-lisān*, cit., pp. 206-207.

<sup>29</sup> P.D. Molan, *Medieval western Arabic. Reconstructing elements of the dialects of Al-Andalus, Sicily and North Africa from the Lahn al-ʿamma literature*, PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley 1978, p. 277; D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit., pp. 145-7.

<sup>30</sup> P.D. Molan, *Medieval western Arabic*, cit., p. 278; D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit., pp. 147-8.

<sup>31</sup> G.B. Pellegrini, *Gli arabismi*, cit., I, p. 149, 252; G. Caracausi, *Arabismi medievali di Sicilia*, cit., pp. 191, 199-200; D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit., p. 150.

<sup>32</sup> G. Caracausi, *Arabismi medievali di Sicilia*, cit., pp. 257-8, 352; D.A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic*, cit., pp. 150.

*The maritime loan-word inventory*

In a Pidgin situation the vocabulary of a trade language is very small compared to a fully-fledged language; maybe a few hundred words is sufficient. Arabic left its trace in the lexical borrowing of Italian-Sicilian; it is difficult to know when this happened as documentation is lacking. From the sparse information we have on maritime Arabic lexical borrowing it can be said that the impact on agricultural and agrarian terminology is by far the greatest and most lasting in the current Sicilian repertoire. The question is how representative is the maritime terminology of the Islamic and Norman periods? Let us take a few examples: CA *qāla* and It-Sic *cala* «inlet»; CA *dār šinā<sup>c</sup>a* with It-Sic equivalent *darsena* «dockyard»; CA *qalfāt* and It-Sic *calafato* «caulker»; CA *rušās* and It-Sic *rusasi* «stone or other heavy material attached to the nets»; CA *ghanj* «shepherd's crook» and It-Sic *ganciu* «hook»; CA *dumān* and It-Sic *timuni* «rudder, steering-wheel»<sup>33</sup>. The exercise is meaningless if we cannot locate the time and provenance of these examples. Notarial records are ideal for the search of technical terms of the material culture but nautical terms are rare. Furthermore, the picture becomes complicated if it is shown that a Greek lexical interference in both Arabic and Sicilian/Italian dialects possibly took place at an early stage. Would Arabic *ghanj*, *qāla* and *qalfāt* have been introduced to Sicilian directly? Or would Sicilian and Arabic have borrowed them through Greek *gampsós* «hook», *kólos* «docked, curtailed» and *calfatéo* «to repair, refit»<sup>34</sup>? An additional problem lies in the fact that Arabic nautical terms sometimes share common semantic and morphological features with a later lexical layer of Ottoman Turkish equivalents and in turn they may have been borrowed from Italian or Sicilian. Let us consider these terms: Italian *carena* (< Latin *carina*) giving North African Arabic *qārīna* and Egyptian Syro-Palestinian *qrīna* and Ottoman Turkish *qarīna* «ship's bottom»; Sicilian *cuerta* becoming Moroccan *kūbirta*, Egyptian and Levantine *kūbarṭa* and Ottoman Turkish *gūgerite* «(upper)deck»<sup>35</sup>.

It is tempting to assume that the list of loan-words in agriculture, urban industry, institutions and the maritime provided by Pellegrini and the terminology recorded in the deeds of Caracausi's work are the dialectal remnants of a Sicilian Arabic. I would also add that several of the nautical lexical borrowings do not necessarily derive from Arabic, for when the linguistic tide changed

<sup>33</sup> G. Barbera, *Elementi italo - siculo - veneziano - genovese*, Imprimerie Catholique, Beirut 1940, p. 113; H. Kahane, L. Renée-Bremner, *Glossario degli antichi portolani italiani*, trad. e note di M. Cortelazzo, L.S. Olschki, Firenze 1967, p. 33; G.B. Pellegrini, *Gli arabismi*, cit., I, pp. 91-92, 254; D.A. Agius, *Italo-Siculo elements of nautical terms found in Medieval and Post-Medieval Arabic*, in «Scripta Mediterranea» 7, 1986, pp. 37-51 (45-46).

<sup>34</sup> D.A. Agius, *Italo-Siculo elements*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 42-49.

course, it is highly possible that Arabic absorbed a number of terms directly from Italo-Sicilian.

*A short-lived Pidgin*

A language does not grow through the assertion of power. Arabic was the language of administration and it was undoubtedly a dominant language which lasted throughout the Norman period at least up to 1300. The situations in which the language was adopted were highly varied. Within its own language community Arabic developed and prospered side by side with a mixture of Arabic and Sicilian; the mixture crystallized into a Siculo Arabic but gradually declined as Arabs and Berbers as well as Siculo Muslims left the island or converted to Christianity.

A trading Pidgin may have survived for some time though it is possible that it had a restricted administrative function with a vocabulary which was then replaced by a formal variety. Pidgins often have a short life. If they survive for a long time they would develop into fully-fledged Creoles. This obviously was not the case with the port communities and inland Sicily. I postulate that such a variety, however active it may have been during the Islamic and possibly Norman periods may then have disappeared slowly because of the rise and importance of other European port towns. The survival of this trading language is found in the loan-words pertaining mainly to agriculture, urban industry, and institutions, our testimony to a rich past. It is disappointing, however, not to find material cultural terms dealing with life in a port town, and very little in a maritime context.

In general, we cannot know from Ibn Makkī's treatise or from the registers and deeds, how Sicilian words of Arabic origin came into existence; nor do we know how these words were used in practice. Historically, we can speak of a language mixture but linguistically we need far deeper evidence than an inventory of technical or material cultural terms. However, the search for textual evidence does not stop here; it should continue. It is time that we revisit the original documents consulted by Cusa and Amari and re-examine the data as many of the words that have come down to us in print may have been misread, distorted, mis-applied or copied incorrectly. This work can only be achieved by a team of researchers (linguists, historians, epigraphers, architects and archaeologists) studying the Islamic and Norman periods. In addition, the team should include al-Andalus, North Africa and the Maltese Islands to show, where appropriate, similar or dissimilar examples. Until then the question will still remain: who spoke Siculo Arabic?