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THE BERBERS AND ARAB RULE IN SICILY (9TH – 11TH CENTURIES): RECOVERING THE MISSING VOICES

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Abstract. This article explores the elusive presence of Berbers in Islamic Sicily between the 9th and 11th centuries. A major challenge of the topic is the lack of ethnic differentiation in medieval narratives: both Christian and Muslim sources typically categorize Sicily's population according to religious affiliation, rather than ethnic identity. In contrast to al-Andalus, where Berber communities are more visibly represented in the sources, their presence in Sicily appears fragmentary and often ambiguous.

The aim of the study is to identify, systematize, and interpret the historical evidence relating to Berbers in Sicily. Methodologically, it combines a comparative analysis of data from various medieval Arabic chronicles with a critical review and reassessment of existing historiographical approaches.

A key contribution of the study is the discussion of the possible presence of Berber Christians in Sicily prior to the Islamic conquest of the island in the 9th century. A chronological synthesis of references concerning Muslim Berbers is presented and analyzed. The study situates developments in Sicily within the broader political dynamics of North Africa, with particular emphasis on the role of the Kutāma Berbers in the 10th century and the increasing involvement of the Berber Zirid emirate in the 11th century.

The article also explores literary stereotypes about the Berbers in Arabic historical writing – both in general terms and in relation to their role in Sicily. Particular attention is given to the spread of Ibāḍī Khārijism, which may have been introduced by Berber settlers. As a marginal movement within regions dominated by Sunnī Islam, Khārijite groups are often depicted in a negative light in Arabic chronicles. The article engages with these contested issues in an effort to offer a nuanced perspective on the Berber presence in medieval Sicily.

Keywords: Berbers; Islamic Sicily; Mediterranean; Medieval period; Arabic historiography

Introduction

In the latter half of the 7th and early 8th centuries, the Berber tribes and confederations played a pivotal role in the Arab expansion across North Africa. The rapid spread of Islam among the Berbers, along with their integration into the Caliphate's military structures, significantly influenced the political dynamics of the Mediterranean for centuries. As key participants in the campaigns of conquest, Berber troops played a crucial role in the further expansion into al-Andalus and Sicily. These movements not only facilitated Islamic military successes but also initiated waves of Berber migration across the Mediterranean. Berber families and clans settled in the newly conquered territories – particularly in rural areas.

The Aghlabid dynasty (800 – 909 CE) launched the invasion of Sicily in 827 CE, marking the beginning of Arab rule on the island. By that time, the Berbers had already acquired substantial political and cultural experience through prolonged interaction with Arab elites in North Africa. Having embraced Islam by the late 7th century, they entered into a client-patron system with Arab clans as *mawālī* – new participants in the Islamic community for three generations. By the end of this transitional phase, they were regarded as fully integrated into the Islamic umma, often retaining the names of their Arab patrons.

In addition to adopting Islam and Arabic names, many Berbers emulated Arab genealogical identities, further obscuring ethnic distinctions. This process complicates their identification in the historical record. Another significant obstacle lies in the general absence of ethnic categorization in the medieval sources: both Christian and Muslim chroniclers tend to classify the Sicilian population according to religious affiliation rather than ethnic background.

Arabic sources present a fragmented puzzle, shaped by the perspectives of later medieval authors writing within distinct political and ideological frameworks. These narratives construct a somewhat elusive and often contradictory image of the Berbers in Sicily. Despite the well-documented political significance of Berber tribes and clans throughout the western Islamic world, a comparison between the narratives on Sicily and those on the Maghreb and al-Andalus reveals a striking absence of Berbers in the island's landscape – what Annliese Nef aptly describes as "the lack of Berbers" Nef 2008, p. 63)

This article addresses this lacuna by studying the Berber diaspora in Islamic Sicily. It aims to identify, organise, and interpret the available references to Berbers in medieval Arabic sources – both chronologically and thematically - to provide a more precise and more nuanced understanding of their presence on the island.

The methodology combines a synthesis and critical analysis of data drawn from Arabic chronicles with a comparative reassessment of existing historiographical interpretations. The study engages with historical context, literary structure, and recurring stereotypes, using comparative analysis to highlight broader patterns and internal contradictions.

This study contributes to the discussion for the first time on the possible presence of Berber Christians in Sicily prior to the Arab conquest. Particular attention is given to the key political role of the Kutāma Berbers during the Fatimid period. Furthermore, the political dynamics of Ifrīqiya (present Tunisia, eastern Algeria and western Libya) – especially the rise of the Berber Zirid emirate in the 11th century – are examined for their influence on the Sicilian political landscape. A crucial unsolved question is whether the Berber dynasty of the Zirids had allies within the Berber population on the island. Primarily focused on warfare and political upheaval, the sources provide glimpses of internal divisions among Sicilian Berbers and their efforts to assert power amid a shifting political landscape.

The article also addresses the spread of Khārijism on the island, possibly introduced by Berber settlers. Special attention is paid to the polemic strategies used by Arabic chroniclers in their portrayal of the Berbers, revealing underlying tensions within intra-Muslim relations.

Sources and Historiographical Issues

The primary Arabic sources documenting the Berber presence in Sicily are predominantly late medieval chronicles, composed several centuries after the initial Arab conquest of the island. The earliest extant references appear in *Futūḥ al-Buldān* by al-Balāḏurī (d. ca. 892) and the Arabic anonymous *Chronicle of Cambridge* (10th–11th centuries CE), both of which offer only fragmentary insights into Berber involvement in the early phases of the Islamic expansion in Sicily. More detailed and systematically structured accounts are present in the writings of later historians such as Ibn al-Athīr (1160 – 1233), Ibn ʿIdhārī (late 13th – early 14th century), al-Nuwayrī (1279 – 1333), and Ibn Khaldūn (1332 – 1406), whose broader vision of the Islamic world often reflects Arab-centric perspectives.

While the chronicles provide essential – albeit fragmented – testimonies regarding the Berbers in Sicily, their narrative patterns and ideological assumptions have prompted careful scrutiny by modern scholars. The interpretative challenges posed by these sources have given rise to a range of historiographical approaches.

One of the earliest efforts to collect Arabic written sources on medieval Sicily was undertaken by Michele Amari in the 19th century[1]. Amari was among the first historians to discuss Arab-Berber relations in Sicily (Amari, 1858, vol. II, pp. 35 – 43). His thesis about a robust Berber community in Agrigento in opposition to the Arab elite in the capital, Palermo, has remained influential in subsequent scholarship.

Modern historiography has continued to engage with the issue of the Berber presence and influence in Sicily, with most researchers agreeing that the Berber population played a secondary political role and often demonstrated separatist tendencies. Ahmad Aziz offers a general characterisation, stating that the Berbers "had played a considerable role in the conquest of the island (…) and from time to time rose against the Arabs in civil strife" (Ahmad 1975, p. 22).

The demographic processes and migrations between Africa and Sicily during the two centuries of Arabic domination on the island are difficult to trace (Cresti 2007, pp. 31–32). Information on the agricultural regions is scarce in the written sources, but it is plausible that the so-called „agricultural revolution" in Sicily could be linked to the Berber population (Barbera 2012, pp. 44 – 51). Anri Bersc has interpreted a Fatimid decree for Sicily issued by Caliph al-Muʿizz (r. 953 – 975) as a form of *incastellamento* – a process of socio-political consolidation that marked the end of clan-based solidarity and the integration of Arab and Berber groups (Bresc 1993, pp. 36 – 37). Leonard Chiarelli has investigated the localisation of Berber settlements and the possible transmission of Ibāḍī Khārijism to the island (Chiarelli 2005), drawing primarily on Norman-period sources (1061 – 1194). Annelise Nef has problematised the reliability of Arabic chronicles as sources on Berbers in Sicily, arguing that they may reflect ideological constructs rather than historical realities (Nef 2008; 2018). Her studies highlight the process of acculturation among the Berbers in Sicily, noting that references to ethnicity emerge more distinctly in Arabic texts toward the end of Islamic rule (Nef 2008, p. 70). Alex Metcalfe has similarly drawn attention that "in Arab-Muslim historiography, the term "Berber" was so closely linked to ideas of rebelliousness that it can sometimes be taken to refer to a behavioral category as much as an ethnic affiliation" (Metcalfe 2009, p. 7). William Granara shares a similar perspective, describing Arab-Berber tensions in Sicily as intra-Muslim conflicts (Granara 2019).

Another major difficulty in reconstructing the Berber presence in Sicily lies in the ambiguous identification of Berber individuals based solely on anthroponomic evidence. The distinction between Arabs and Berbers is further blurred by the widespread practice among Berbers of self-identifying as Arabs and adopting Arabic names to secure higher social status and political legitimacy (Brett & Fentress 1997, p. 131). From the 10th century onwards, particularly in the Maghreb, the Yemenite genealogical tradition gained prominence, allowing for the reinterpretation of Berber lineages as descendants of the Himyarite kingdom (110 BCE – 525 CE) in Yemen (Shatzmiller 1983). Within this genealogical framework, the Berbers were seen as ethnically Arab, further complicating modern attempts at ethnic classification.

In the case of Sicily, the sources provide virtually no insight into how Berbers perceived or expressed their own identity. Even in the relatively well-documented Norman period, individuals bearing the nisba *al-Ifrīqī* (the African) appear sporadically in the records, and only one of them can be reliably identified as being of Berber descent (Johnes 2002, p. 147). The absence of Berber sources and data on their self-identifying exemplifies the difficulty in recovering Berber presence within a community dominated by Arabic-speaking elites and narrative constructions that marginalized non-Arab individuals.

Taken together, these scholarly contributions underscore the complexity of Arab–Berber relations in medieval Sicily, as well as the interpretative challenges posed by the ideological underpinnings of the sources. Recovering the missing voices of the Berber communities remains a scholarly desideratum.

Were Berbers Present in Sicily Before the Muslim Expansion of 827?

The question of whether Berbers were present in Sicily before the Muslim landing in 827 remains unresolved. Although the evidence is sparse and primarily indirect, its implications are significant. Following the Arab conquest of Carthage in 698 and the fall of the Byzantine Exarchate of Africa, waves of refugees reportedly fled across the Mediterranean. Both Abū Bakr al-Mālikī and Ibn al-Athīr mention this initial movement[2]. Ibn ʿIdhārī likewise records that some inhabitants of Carthage sought refuge in Sicily after the city's fall, while others migrated westward to Spain[3].

A crucial passage appears in a speech delivered by the first Arab commander, ʾAsad ibn al-Furāt, to his troops shortly after their landing in Sicily in June 827. Preserved in "Riyāḍ al-Nufūs" ("The Gardens of the Souls") by al-Mālikī – who cites an eyewitness and participant in the events – ʾAsad exhorted his men: "These are coastal barbarians (*ʿujm*). These are your slaves. Do not be afraid!"[4] The narrator explicitly notes that ʾAsad was referring to those who had earlier fled from North Africa to Sicily.

Ibn ʿIdhārī noted that ʾAsad's army in Sicily included Arabs, Berbers, and Andalusians[5]. It is also well documented that the Arab leader had formed an alliance with local Byzantine rebels, referred to in Arabic sources as *rūm* (Byzantines). The term *ʿujm*/*ʿajam* in Arabic refers to non-Arabic-speaking populations and differs semantically from *rūm*. In this specific context, *ʿujm* likely refers to Berbers who may have sought refuge in Sicily after the fall of Carthage. It is plausible that these Berber migrants were Christians, evacuated by the fleet of the Byzantine Exarchate of Africa to the nearest still-Byzantine province, namely, theme Sicily. ʾAsad ibn al-Furāt's words may reflect an African Muslim perspective and a historical memory of refugee waves caused by the Arab expansion and the Islamisation of North African Berbers.

The Berbers and the Conquest of Sicily (827 – 902)

On the eve of the Arab invasion of Byzantine Sicily, the Aghlabid emirate (800 – 909) did not seek reinforcements from neighboring Berber tribes but instead relied on their own Berber contingents of Zanāta and Hawwāra confederations. The available sources offer insufficient data to determine the exact number of Arab and Berber troops or the scale of colonisation during the initial expansion. Tensions between Arab and Berber soldiers within the Muslim army are attested in the anonymous "Cambridge Chronicle" and in the

writings of Ibn ʿIdhārī. The protracted nature of the war, which lasted seventy-five years, may have been at least partly due to the limited size and cohesion of the Muslim forces on the island.

The available evidence concerning Berber presence in 9th-century Sicily includes the following key events:

– In 829 Aṣbagh ibn Wakīl Farghalūsh (al-Hawwārī), likely hailing from al-Andalus or possibly an Andalusian from The Emirate of Crete (Metcalfe 2009, p. xiii note 4), contributed to the Aghlabid advance against Mineo. He subsequently became chief commander in Sicily, albeit only for a few months. His Berber origin is only attested by al-Nuwayrī[6]. The nisba *al-Hawwārī* links him to the Hawwāra tribal confederation.

– In 869, the Aghlabid governor of Sicily – Khafāja ibn Sufyān, was assassinated by a Berber soldier from Hawwāra. According to al-Nuwayrī, the assassin found refuge in the Byzantine-held city of Syracuse[7].

– In 886 – 887, the "Cambridge Chronicle" reports the first documented conflict between the *jund* (regular troops) and the Berbers in Sicily[8]. It is an indication of a deep problem within the Muslim community, but the reasons remain uncertain.

– In 895 – 896, a peace treaty with the Byzantines stipulated the release of 1,000 Muslim captives every three months, alternating between Arabs and Berbers[9] – indicating the distinct recognition of ethnic divisions within the Muslim population.

– In 897 – 898, 899 a renewed conflict between Arabs and Berbers is reported by both the "Cambridge Chronicle" and Ibn ʿIdhārī.

– In 900, a confrontation between the Palermitans and the Agrigentans is described by the "Cambridge Chronicle", Ibn ʿIdhārī, Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Khaldūn. The events are interpreted as a continuation of Arab-Berber tensions (Metcalfe 2009, p. 30), although such clarification is lacking in the Arab chronicles.

The territorial structure of Sicily during the 9th century remains unclear. Historiographical theories suggesting a division of the island into distinct Arab and Berber zones lack sufficient evidence and remain largely speculative. While such patterns of ethnic-territorial division were a characteristic feature of the Arab conquest of al-Andalus in the early 8th century, the strategic priorities and political dynamics of the Arab-Berber relations had evolved significantly by the time of the Sicilian conquest a century later.

In the context of the prolonged military conflict with Byzantium, there appears to have been no drive for rapid expansion accompanied by plunder, land appropriation, and redistribution – practices typical of earlier conquests in the western Islamic world. Unlike the campaigns in the Iberian Peninsula, there is no evidence in Sicily of military units composed exclusively of Berbers. This contrast suggests that the Aghlabids may have deliberately limited Berber influence within their expeditionary forces in order to forestall potential separatist ambitions.

The Role of the Kutāma Berbers in Sicily in the 10th Century

Several Berber tribes in North Africa had engaged in long-standing rivalries over territories and resources. Among the most prominent were the Zanāta confederation, which inhabited the fertile Mediterranean littoral extending to Morocco, and their neighbors, the Ṣanhādja confederation, whose lands also encompassed parts of Morocco. The Zanāta – Ṣanhādja rivalry is a well-established theme in the historiography of the medieval Maghreb.

With the rise of the Shiite Fatimid Caliphate in the early 10th century, the Kutāma – one of the major Ṣanhādja tribe – sadopted Fatimid Shiism and emerged as a strategic ally of the new regime (Brett 2001, pp. 85 – 99). The Kutāma's military support was crucial to the downfall of the Sunni Aghlabid emirate in 909. In the aftermath of the Aghlabid collapse, Sicily became a contested territory caught between competing political and ideological forces.

Due to their alignment with Fatimid doctrine, the Kutāma Berbers were portrayed in Sunni sources as agents of Shiite influence. A main part of the Fatimid military presence in Sicily consisted of Kutāma troops (Nef 2013, p. 45). Tthe first emir dispatched by the Fatimid regime is Ibn Abī Khinzīr (r. 910 – 912). Biographical information about him is scarce[10], but he may have been a Kutāma Barber. (Dachraoui 1981, p. 136).

Between 913 and 917, a major pro-Abbasid[11] uprising led by the Sicilian Arab, Ibn Qurhub, posed a serious challenge to Fatimid authority on the island. The rebellion was ultimately crushed following a lengthy siege of Palermo, led by Kutāma forces. In 917, Ibn Qurhub, his son, and the Sunnī *qāḍī* of Palermo were executed in Ifrīqiya, signaling a decisive Fatimid victory and the imposition of Shiite dominance in Sicily[12].

Arabic sources make it clear that the Kutāma did not integrate into the local Berber population in Sicily, but instead remained a distinct military elite. The recorded conflicts were primarily linked to issues of taxation and the fragility of political authority during the Fatimid period (909–947). In many accounts, the Kutāma are cast as aggressors and enforcers of Fatimid religious and political agendas[13].

In 948, the Fatimids took a decisive step in the administration of Sicily by appointing the Arab military leader ʿAlī ibn Abī al-Ḥasan al-Kalbī (r. 948 – 954) as governor of the island. This move marked the beginning of the emirate of the Kalbids, who governed Sicily as vassals of the Fatimids from 948 until the mid-11th century.

A rare reference to a patron-client relationship appears around 970, when a *mawlā* affiliated with the Kutāma tribe took part in an uprising against the new Kalbid emir, Abū al-Qāsim ʿAlī (r. 970 – 982)[14]. In addition, the geographer Ibn Ḥawqal, who visited Palermo in 973, recorded that one of the city's gates bore the name Bāb al-Kutāma ("Gate of the Kutāma"), suggesting a visual presence of the tribe within the urban landscape (Metcalfe 2009, p. 52).

The triangular dynamic between the Fatimids, their Kalbid governors, and the Kutāma Berbers – both as allies and occasional foes – became a defining feature of 10th-century Sicilian politics. The tensions between Kutāma and Sicilian Berber tribes, as well as the broader Sunni–Shiite divisions among North-African Muslims also played out in Sicily and should be viewed as central to understanding the island's political and religious landscape during the Fatimid era.

According to Illuminato Peri, the phenomenon of troglodytism in Sicily may be linked to the presence of Kutāma Berbers (Peri 1990, pp. 10 – 11). His hypothesis draws on some Norman chronicles and Muḥammad al-Idrisi's (c. 1100 – 1165) work "*Kitāb nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*" ("The Pleasure Excursion of One Who Is Eager to Traverse the Regions of the World") Peri suggests that Kutāma communities, who traditionally inhabited cave dwellings in North Africa, may have continued this practice in Sicily – particularly in sandstone-carved dwellings found in the rural areas surrounding Agrigento. The question remains open, as archaeological evidence and written sources attest to cave habitation on the island both before and after the period of Muslim domination (9th – 11th c.). As such, the attribution of troglodytism specifically to Berber communities in Sicily remains a subject of scholarly debate.

The Berbers of the Zirid Dynasty and the Fragmentation of Arab Authority in Sicily

The Zirid Emirate (972 – 1148), a Berber state rooted in the Ṣanhādja confederation, initially functioned as a vassal of the Fatimid Caliphate. Gradually, they gained political autonomy. They expanded as far as the Iberian Peninsula, where the establishment of the Zirid Taifa of Granada (1013 – 1090) served as a significant outpost of their influence.

Both the political stability and expansion interests predetermine Zirids' involvement in Sicily, particularly during the period of growing instability that preceded the Norman conquest (1061 – 1091). The Zirids' recurring interventions on the island – whether as military reinforcements, political mediators, or agents of Fatimid policy – significantly contributed to the erosion of Arab hegemony and the growing fragmentation of Muslim authority in Sicily during the 11th century.

A diachronic reading of medieval Arabic sources reveals a discernible evolution in Zirid policy towards Sicily. According to Ibn al-Athīr, a power struggle erupted in Sicily in 1015, when a contender named ʿAlī, backed by Berber troops, led a rebellion against the ruling emir and his brother Jaʿfar (r. 998 – 1019). The conflict escalated into a violent confrontation, resulting in the deaths of numerous Berbers and slaves[15]. After the rebellion was crushed, ʿAlī was executed, and Jaʿfar reportedly ordered the expulsion of all Berbers from Sicily to Ifrīqiya. The scope of the expulsion decree remains unclear: it is not evident whether it targeted only military units or also affected peaceful Berber settlers in urban and rural contexts.

The influx of deported Sicilian Berbers into the Zirid realm likely attracted the attention of the central authorities, raising questions about their intervention in Sicily. In 1023, the Zirids dispatched military forces to the island; however, this display of strength appears to have had no lasting outcome (Idris 1962, p. 127).

A key factor contributing to growing separatist tendencies from the 1030s onward was the intensifying hostility between "the Sicilians" and "the ʾIfrīqiyyans" (Nef 2008, pp. 66 – 70). Ibn al-Athīr notes that this antagonism had a profound impact on the political fragmentation of the island and ultimately contributed to the collapse of Arab rule. The term "ʾIfrīqiyyans" likely designates individuals originating from the province of Ifrīqiya, which, during this period, was under Zirid control. If this interpretation is correct, it would be reasonable to infer Zirid involvement or at least perceived influence. A related historiographical question arises: why do Arabic sources refrain from explicitly naming the Zirid dynasty in this context?

Arabic authors provide detailed accounts of a Zirid intervention in Sicily in 1036. Together with their local Berber allies, Zirid troops captured the capital – Palermo. According to Ibn Khaldūn they executed the Sicilian emir, sending his severed head to the Zirid emir al-Muʿizz ibn Bādīs (r. 1016 – 1062) in Ifrīqiya. The motives and long-term objectives of this pro-Zirid faction on the island remain unclear. Following a military setback near Troina, reportedly resulting in the loss of over three hundred soldiers (Idris 1962, p. 170), the Zirid forces withdrew, leaving Sicily in a state of deepening political fragmentation.

The meager references to subsequent Zirid activities in the Arabic chronicles suggest a broader pattern of marginalizing Berber-led campaigns. By mid-11th century, Zirid influence in Sicily was maintained through an agent – Fatūḥ (or Futūḥ) ibn al-Ghazāl al-Bāgaʾī, an Arab by origin (Idris 1962, p. 176), tasked with reporting on local political processes. His assassination points to the intensity of anti-Zirid sentiment on the island during this period.

Between the early 11th century and the Norman conquest of Sicily after 1061, migration and political interaction between North Africa and the island intensified considerably. During the civil strife of the 1040s, Sicilian Berbers are depicted as key military and political allies to the Arabs. Notably, Ibn Ḥawwās, the Arab ruler of Castrogiovanni (modern Enna), is reported to have relied on Berber support (Ahmad 1975, p.36).

Between 1063 and 1069, Tamīm ibn al-Muʿizz (r. 1062 – 1108), son of the Zirid emir, launched a series of unsuccessful attempts to halt the Norman advance in Sicily. These interventions are mentioned only briefly by Ibn al-Athīr and al-Nuwayrī[16], reflecting once again the peripheral treatment of Berber-centered military efforts in mainstream Arabic historiography.

In 1075, the Zirids launched another unsuccessful campaign against the Normans in Sicily (Johns, pp. 63 – 64). Given that the Zirids belonged to the Ṣanhādja

confederation, their failure to reverse the Norman conquest may point to the absence of Ṣanhādja allies on the island (Cassarino, p. 91).

An indirect indicator of their continued interest in the island is found in their reception of refugees fleeing the Norman conquest. Among these was the celebrated Arab poet Ibn Ḥamdis of Syracuse, who left Sicily in 1078. After a short stay in al-Andalus, he found refuge and patronage at the Zirid court in North Africa (Ahmad 1975, p. 80).

The Zirids actively promoted the myth of Himyarite Arab descent (Brett & Fentress 1997, p. 131), both as a political narrative and as a cultural strategy to legitimize their rule among Arab population. This constructed lineage appealed to Berbers as it placed them within the prestigious Arab historical framework. Arab authors responded with sharp criticism, dismissing Berber dynasties as illegitimate. This entrenched bias likely contributed to the relative marginalisation of Zirid activity in Sicily within Arabic historical writing.

The Silenced Berber Voice

In the Arabic chronicles, mutinies and assassinations of military commanders during the protracted seventy-five-year conflict for Sicily are frequently attributed to the Berbers. A telling example is the use of the Qur'ānic term *fitna* by Ibn ʿIdhārī[17] to describe the Berber uprising of 899. This pattern is not unique to Sicily; similar terminology is employed to frame Berber revolts in both the Maghreb and al-Andalus[18]. In the Qur'ānic tradition, *fitna* denotes sedition, turmoil, and religious deviation. The term is used as a rhetorical device to delegitimize political resistance by casting it as a form of religious transgression. This conceptual framework contributes to the consistent negative portrayal of Berbers. The Sicilian example illustrates how the *fitna* could serve as a disparaging label.

Ibāḍī Berber presence in Sicily is a matter of scholarly debate. Ibāḍīsm emerged as a distinct branch of early Khārijism in the late 7th century and spread across North Africa (Peev 2022, 403). Its most significant political expression was the Rustamid Imamate (778 – 909), which served as both a political entity and an intellectual centre for the Ibāḍī community.

A significant event in this context is the Khārijite revolt led by Abū Yazīd – known as *"the man on the donkey"* – against the Fatimid Caliphate in Ifrīqiyya (Van Ess 2017, p. 35) in the period from 943 to 947. Remarkably, a contemporaneous Berber uprising occurred in southern Sicily, where several towns reportedly refused to pay tribute to the Fatimid administration. While the chronological proximity invites speculation regarding ideological affinities, the sources remain silent on explicit doctrinal connections. Ibn al-Athīr briefly notes that the first Kalbid emir of Sicily, ʿAlī ibn Abī al-Ḥasan al-Kalbī – who had previously taken part in the Fatimid campaign against Abū Yazīd – was dispatched to the island at a time when the Muslims had been weakened by the unbelievers (*kuffār*)[19]. Whether the Sicilian

unrest was driven by Khārijite doctrines, or it merely exploited the moment of Fatimid vulnerability remains unclear.

Later references to Ibāḍī activity in Sicily, while suggestive, are sparse and indirect. These accounts often rely on retrospective attributions or generalizing patterns of rebellion rather than concrete evidence. Consequently, any assertion of sustained Ibāḍī influence in Sicily during this period remains hypothetical and should be treated with caution. The historiographical challenge lies not in what the sources reveal, but in what they omit – raising critical questions about historical visibility, narrative control, and the filtering of religious identities through politicized frameworks.

An additional interpretative thread in the study of the religious processes in medieval Sicily involves the Palermo Qurʾān, dated to 982 – 983 CE (Déroche 2001, 601 – 603). Of particular scholarly interest is the inclusion of a theological statement within the *shahāda*: "The Qurʾān is the word of God and is not created". This formula invokes the key Islamic theological debate on the nature of the Qurʾān from the 9th century. Sunni tradition maintains that the Qurʾān is the uncreated Word of God. In opposition, the Muʿtazilī doctrine proclaimed the createdness of the Qurʾān (Pavlovitch 2023, pp. 35 – 37). Like the Muʿtazilīts, the Ibāḍīs also supported the doctrine of the createdness of the Qurʾān (Lewicki 1971b, p. 658). In a Sicilian context, the Sicilian *shahāda* may be understood as a polemical refutation of Ibāḍī (or Muʿtazilī) views.

Hypothetical Ibāḍī presence in Sicily gains some support in later texts. Leonard Chiarelli has examined this topic through the combination of written sources and toponymic evidence, tracing possible Ibāḍī communities in the 11th–12th centures. Ibāḍī sources describe Castrogiovanni (modern-day Enna) as marking the northern frontier of Ibāḍī expansion in the Central Mediterranean. Further, in the 12th century, the Ibāḍī historian ʿAbd Allāh al-Wisyān explicitly identified members of the Hawwāra, a prominent Berber tribe in Sicily, as adherents of Ibāḍīsm (Lewicki 1971a, p. 299).

Arab remarks on religious heterodoxy in Sicily should be understood within a broader framework of suspicion toward non-Arab communities in the Islamic West. Although Berbers constituted the demographic majority in many regions of the Maghreb, Sunni Arabic sources often portray them as inherently prone to sectarian deviance – be it Kharijism, Shiʿism, or various syncretic beliefs. In response, Berber authors and communities frequently constructed counter-narratives that embedded their political aspirations within Islamic rhetorical tropes. The phenomenon of Berber „prophets" and „messianic" figures has been extensively analyzed by Mercedes García-Arenal, though none of the cases she analyses are specifically tied to Sicily. This absence suggests that references to Khārijites (Ibāḍītes) on the island may stem less from any concrete historical memory and more from the projection of broader patterns from North Africa.

Beyond the polemical boundaries of historiography, toponymic evidence provides a more neutral window into the Berber presence in Sicily. Names of settlements and localities appear to preserve tribal affiliations, including those of Karkūda, Malāla, Miknāsa Zammār, and Maghāgha, as well as references to the major confederations of Zanāta and Ṣanhādja. These toponyms preserved traces of communities otherwise silenced by the Arabic chronicles.

Furthermore, Norman administrative documents from the 12th century continue to mention Berber tribal names, indicating the persistence of these identities even after the fall of Muslim rule (Metcalfe 2009, p. 38).

Conclusions

Focusing predominantly on battle scenes and the Christian threat during the period of Islamic expansion (827 – 902), Arabic historiography typically portrayed the Berbers as an integral part of the Muslim army, which nevertheless had occasional conflicts with Arab leadership.

Arabic sources divide the Berbers into two categories: loyal subjects who paid taxes and fulfilled their obligations to Arab authorities, and wayward Berbers – portrayed as rioters, assassins, impostors, and separatists. The first group appears in Medieval Sicily only as a demographic unit, silent during periods of peace.

Berber's resistance to tax increases and to Arab policy suggests that tensions between Muslim communities on the island were shaped not only by ethnic and political cleavages, but also by profound socioeconomic inequalities. The fact that Arabic historiography of Sicily is overwhelmingly written from a Sunni perspective introduces a sectarian bias in the portrayal of Berber communities. The negative image of the Berbers constitutes a sustainable pattern through the centuries.

Systematic stereotyping and didactic use of selected narratives, reflect the deeper conflict within Islamic politico-religious structures in the medieval Mediterranean. The Arab-Berber struggle was perceived not only as a political threat, leading to the portrayal of Berbers as an inherently dangerous part of the Muslim community.

Within the war-peace dichotomy, characteristic of historical narratives, Berber actions are consistently placed in the sphere of warfare. However, the problems encountered by the Arab elites in Sicily should not be reduced to "civil disturbances" (Granara 2019, p. 12). These issues had ethnic, religious, political, social, economic, cultural, and territorial dimensions.

The negative image of the Berbers across Arabic medieval writings was a tacit norm that persisted for centuries. Chronicles heavily criticize the Sicilian Berbers, echoing the same polemic.

Recovering the silenced voices of the Sicilian Berbers demands moving beyond reliance on textual traditions alone. An interdisciplinary methodology – incorporating archaeology, toponymy, anthroponymy, and linguistic evidence – is essential for future research. Only through such an approach can we begin to address

historiographical gaps and re-integrate the Berbers into the broader Mediterranean social, political, and cultural framework.

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