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***I nostri Saracini:***  
**Writing the History of the Arabs of Sicily**

**Karla Mallette**

In 1868 – in the aftermath of Garibaldi’s march on Rome and more than halfway through the century during which, through long and diligent labors, Sicilian Orientalists would disinter the island’s buried Muslim history – Salvatore Cusa published a collection of Greek and Arabic records from the years of Norman rule in Sicily. In his introduction to that collection, justly remembered as one of the literary monuments of the Sicilian nineteenth century, he described the fate of the Arabic documents still buried in provincial archives centuries after Arabic literacy was lost in Sicily:

È a convenire, che l’ignoranza istessa, la quale ne’ tempi antichi cagionò la dispersione di queste carte, fu causa più tardi che esse venissero salvate da totale rovina. Scritte in lingua e caratteri, più o meno, sconosciuti, esse ebbero un valore, solo per ciò; e gelosamente custodivansi dagli stessi Archivarî, sottratte sinanco allo sguardo del volgo profano. La parola *greco* suonava qualche cosa di recondito; e quella poi di *saraceno*, tutto quanto di arcano e di favoloso restasse nella mente pregiudicata del popolo, relativamente ad un tempo in cui i nemici di Dio governavan quest’isola.<sup>1</sup>

[It must be acknowledged that the ignorance itself which in ancient times caused these pages to be scattered was the motive that later caused them to be saved from total ruin. Written in a language and in characters more or less unknown, they had value simply for that; they were guarded jealously by archivists, shielded even from the view of the vulgar crowd. The word *Greek* evoked something of deep mysteries; and *Saracenic* remained in the prejudiced mind of the people something altogether arcane and fabulous, relating to the days when the enemies of God governed this island.]

During the nineteenth century, Sicilian Orientalists set themselves the task of tracing a lost history: the two centuries of Muslim domination of the island, and that portion of the years of Norman rule that could be retrieved only from the Arabic-language documents moldering in Sicilian libraries.<sup>2</sup> Sicilian historians before the beginning of the nineteenth century contrived to

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<sup>1</sup> Salvatore Cusa, *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia* 1:x.

<sup>2</sup> A word on my use of the adjectives Arab, Arabic and Muslim in this essay: Twenty first century English-speaking scholars insist on the distinct lexical range of these three words. “Arab” generally refers to those who speak Arabic and their culture in a broad sense; “Arabic” is taken to refer specifically to the language and literary culture of the Arabs; and “Muslim” signifies the followers of Islam regardless of their native tongue. (Believing that discretion is the better part of philological acumen, I do not broach the vast lexical range of the homely but problematic English word *Arabian*.) The Italian language does not distinguish between “Arab” and “Arabic” (*arabo* signifies the language, the people, and the culture; the Italian *arabico* is now obsolete). And nineteenth century European Orientalists regularly used the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” as synonyms. Furthermore Sicilian history problematizes the distinction between “Arab” and “Muslim” (as does medieval Andalusian history); today historians tend to refer

write the island's history without knowledge of the Arabic language. This linguistic blind spot created a lacuna in Sicilians' understanding of their past. And it left Sicily's intellectual community vulnerable to con men like Giuseppe Vella, a Maltese cleric who fabricated documents that he claimed to be Arabic letters sent between the leaders of Sicily – both Arab and Norman – and the Muslim emirs of North Africa.<sup>3</sup> Such manipulations of Sicily's history depended on both ignorance of the languages of Sicily's past and the ethnic and religion chauvinisms of early modernity. It fell to the enlightened Orientalists of the nineteenth century, who could read the Arabic documents that recorded Sicilian history and could see that the Arabs were no enemies of God but bearers of a new science, to blow the cobwebs from the archives and bring that forgotten history to light.

By deciphering these documents, Sicilian Orientalists gave expression to Sicily's difference from an Italian standard, the distinct origin of its cultural traditions. As it turned out, no archives dating to the years of Muslim domination remained on the island; the medieval records that held information about Muslim Sicily were in the collections of continental libraries (or in the Arab world – but nineteenth-century Sicilians did no work in Arab libraries). The documents in Arabic that lay unread in Sicilian libraries were produced during the years of Norman rule on the island. Sicilian historians who learned Arabic – particularly during the second half of the century, as philologists developed more sophisticated methods for extracting information from medieval documentary sources – often focused on the Norman period, not the years of Muslim domination. Thus during the nineteenth century, historians cracked the code that allowed them to tell one of the most remarkable stories in medieval European history: the tale of a Christian kingdom that participated as a full partner in the dominant, vibrant Arabic-language culture of the medieval Mediterranean. And in the “arcane and fabulous” history of the Norman era, Sicilian Orientalists found a medieval past with compelling contemporary relevance.

In this essay, I will trace the emergence of a Sicilian Arabic historiography, the stages by which Sicilian historians discovered the island's Arab history and framed the narrative that gave it shape and meaning. As always in the production of historical narratives, the tale that Sicilian scholars articulated during the nineteenth century responded both to the objective data that form

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to the history of “Muslim Sicily” rather than “Arab Sicily” because the Muslim settlers in Sicily were both Berbers and Arabs. The language of the documents that are our witnesses to that history, however, is Arabic (and in this essay I will talk about how Arabic literacy transformed understandings of Sicilian history). But the Arabic language was used too by the Normans, whose history certainly cannot be termed “Muslim.” In deference to the nineteenth century philological works I am discussing and the complexities of the history they describe, I will occasionally use the adjective “Arab” to describe those periods of the Sicilian past that are documented by Arabic-language records—regardless of the confessional or ethnic pedigree of the Sicilians who wrote the records.

<sup>3</sup> For the fullest account of the Vella affair see *L'arabica impostura*, which reprints Domenico Scinà's nineteenth century account of Vella's fraud (until this 1978 publication, the sole source of information on the events) along with a well-researched essay by Adelaide Baviera Albanese on the forces—both within the Sicilian aristocracy and the Bourbon regime—that conspired to use Vella's “discoveries” to their own purposes. Vella's intervention remains the point of departure for accounts of the Sicilian rediscovery of Arabic; among the nineteenth century Sicilian historians, Michele Amari (*Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia* 1:6-11) and Vincenzo Mortillaro (*La storia, gli scrittori e le monete dell'epoca arabo-sicula* 296) recount the tale as the episode that gave impetus to a truly scientific Arabic philology in Sicily. William Spaggiari discusses a series of letters sympathetic to Vella written by Antonio Panizzi in “La ‘minzogna saracina.’” Paolo Preto discusses the episode, along with a number of other Sicilian historical counterfeits from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, in “Una lunga storia di falsi e falsari” (24-30). Giuseppe Giarrizzo, in a biographical essay on Rosario Gregorio, includes a brief but provocative discussion of the Vella episode (*Cultura e economia nella Sicilia del '700* 220-21). And Leonardo Sciascia's novel based on the event (*Il consiglio d'Egitto*, translated into English as *The Council of Egypt*) has garnered praise for its historical accuracy and was made into a movie, “Il consiglio d'Egitto” (2002, dir. Emidio Greco).

our record of the past – medieval documents, the architectural and toponymic traces left on the Sicilian landscape – and to contemporary exigencies. Nineteenth-century Sicilian historiography cannot be understood without reference to the political history of that tumultuous century. At the beginning of the century, Sicilian intellectuals resisted the rule of the Bourbons; by its end, the island would be integrated into a unified Italy. And smack in the middle of the century, the Sicilians had their 1848. Sicily became modern by acknowledging the failures of European liberalism and (in the works of the Sicilian Orientalists, at any rate) compensating for the collapse of its dreams of autonomy and ultimately its absorption into a unified Italy by asserting its Mediterranean difference. Sicily's centuries of participation in Mediterranean Arabic culture, according to Sicilian Orientalists, granted the island a unique historical primacy: in European exposure to the Arab sciences through the conduit of Sicily, and in particular Norman translation of the Arab sciences, European modernity was born.

This reading of Sicilian intellectual history, of course, complicates our received understanding of the European Orientalist. The familiar Saidian definition of the Orientalist describes a scholar whose object of analysis could not be more distant from himself (and in Said's work the scholar most emphatically is a *him*). The dis-identity of the Orient with the West defines the geography in which the Orientalist works: the distinction between the Orient and the West, and in many cases the constitution of the Orient as an object of colonial interest, characterizes Saidian Orientalism. But more recent scholarship has pushed gently at the Manichean boundaries of this theoretical formulation. Todd Kontje's work on German Orientalism, Billie Melman's on women travelers in the Orient, and Lisa Lowe's on French and German Orientalism – for all their disciplinary breadth – have a common denominator; they argue the rich diversity of northern European Orientalisms between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries and the central importance of Orientalist formations to the intellectual history of the period in general.<sup>4</sup> And recent work by medievalists and modernists working on the history and literature of the Mediterranean has sensitized Western scholars to two truisms – the one historical, the other geographical – that have typically flown under the radar not only of the general public but also of professional observers of the past. Even though Westerners may not in general identify personally with the Orient, still communication and exchange (sometimes, but not always, hostile) between the Islamic East and the Christian West have remained a historical constant for the last millennium and a half. And this engagement has not always and not merely taken the form of an asymmetrical aggression on the one side and passivity on the other. From the Middle Ages through early modernity and into the late modern period, the Mediterranean has served as a lens that has focused attentive glances from one shore to the other.<sup>5</sup> In Sicily during the nineteenth century, *Mediterraneanism* took the form of a search for the Arab origins of European modernity.

My examination of Siculo-Arabic historiography will focus on three men born in the *anni mirabiles* of 1806-07, students of Sicily's Arab history whose paths crossed in Palermo in 1848:

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<sup>4</sup> See Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms*; Billie Melman, *Women's Orients*; and Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains*.

<sup>5</sup> The crucial bibliography in the field includes the seminal studies by Henri Pirenne, Fernand Braudel, and Horden and Purcell (which focus on "Mediterraneity" rather than the question of Muslim-Christian relations) and works by María Rosa Menocal, S.D. Goitein, and Molly Greene (studies that consider inter-confessional relations with a secondary regional focus on the Mediterranean). Recent years have seen a number of essay collections on related topics, indicating the keen contemporary relevance of the topic. See, for instance, *Rethinking the Mediterranean, A Faithful Sea*, and the collection of translated essays by Vincenzo Consolo, *Reading and Writing the Mediterranean*. Finally, see my "Beyond Mimesis: Aristotle's *Poetics* in the Medieval Mediterranean," to appear in the March 2009 issue of *PMLA*.

Michele Amari, Pietro Lanza, and Vincenzo Mortillaro. And I will consider more briefly two historians whose work merits greater recognition than it has received outside Sicily: Salvatore Morso, who used Arabic-language sources to write a recollection of Norman-era Palermo, and Salvatore Cusa, the alter ego of the much better known Michele Amari. The historians discussed in this essay shared a sense of the urgency of their work; they were (to use a metaphor and an epithet that appear repeatedly in their writings) shining a light into the shadows of Sicily's Arab past in order to illuminate the forgotten history of "*i nostri Saracini,*" *our Saracens*. As was the case for historians throughout Europe, the formation of philology as a humanistic discipline using scientific methodologies informed these historians' work, and the exigencies of a *philologie engagée* – the imperative to produce a narrative of national history that would define and exalt the national character – gave their work a sense of urgency and moment, as Orientalists shined the brilliant lamp of empirical investigation into the dark corners of Sicily's oddly modern Saracen past.

Before the 1840s, the historians who discussed Sicily's centuries of Muslim domination – and they were few – still relied largely on a received, bare-bones narrative, a short list of facts culled from sources available in the European languages: the island's decadence under Byzantine rule, its fall to the Arab warriors invited to sort out a local dispute, its eventual flowering under Arab command and fall to Norman warriors.<sup>6</sup> In one of the most interesting documents from the Vella scandal to see publication, Vella himself underscored the temptation that this dark chapter in Sicilian history presented to modern historians. After his trial and conviction for forgery, while he was living under house arrest, Vella was apparently approached by a Viennese editor assembling a volume of Arabic literature in translation who asked him to contribute selections from his own collection of Sicilian Arabic letters. The editor, it seems, was not aware that Vella had concocted the purported medieval letters himself. Neither the editor's letter nor the fair copy of Vella's response survive, but in 1905 scholar Pietro Varvaro published a draft of Vella's response found among his papers. In a sublime passage – discussing the authenticity of his Arabic codices; it is impossible to tell whether he is replying to a direct question or voicing his own anxious internal debate – Vella affirms the value of his documents. The personality of each individual writer stands out clearly in the letters of his Sicilian emirs, he says; the sequence of events is depicted with clarity and precision; the engines of history are plainly visible.

Bisogna dunque convenire che se io non avessi fatto altro se non che indovinare, non si poteva indovinare più giusto; e che l'inventore d'una produzione così singolare sarebbe, mi si permetta il dirlo, di ben tutt'altro merito che il traduttore modesto d'una raccolta di lettere arabe riunite nella Cancelleria, nel tempo che li Arabi dominarono la Sicilia.<sup>7</sup>

[One must therefore admit that if I had done nothing other than guess, I could not have guessed more accurately; and that the inventor of such a singular production would be – allow me to say it – of indeed another order of merit than the modest

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<sup>6</sup> For a survey of early nineteenth century Sicilian Orientalist historiography, see my forthcoming volume *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean*.

<sup>7</sup> Pietro Varvaro, "Giuseppe Vella e i suoi falsi codici arabi con un documento inedito" 328. Jeremy Johns uses this magnificent quote as the epigraph for his masterful 2002 study, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily*.

translator of a collection of Arabic letters gathered in the Chancery at the time when the Arabs dominated Sicily.]

Vella's statement – which effectively renders much of Jorge Luis Borges's oeuvre redundant – demonstrates with uncanny and uncomfortable precision Vella's own historical position. Vella sat astride the fence that divided the eighteenth century, with its cunning counterfeits and dilettantes who repackaged myth as historical fact, from the nineteenth century, when the scientific philological techniques of verifying historical sources allowed historians to celebrate prodigious advances in the accuracy of their narratives of pre-modern history.

The generation of Pietro Lanza, Vincenzo Mortillaro, and Michele Amari – all three born within a year of each other, in 1806 and 1807 – would decisively transform Sicilian historiography; as Orientalists trained (however crudely by twentieth-century standards) in Arabic letters and philological methodology, they brought Sicily's Muslim past to light. The drama of excavating the lost centuries of Sicilian history took place against a vivid historical backdrop, a half-century of resistance to Bourbon rule. After an anti-Bourbon uprising in 1812, after a parenthesis of occupation by the Bourbon court and the British anti-Napoleonic forces, following the restoration of Bourbon rule in 1816 and another anti-Bourbon revolution in 1820, Sicily saw the eruption of the first of the European revolutions of 1848, when an armed uprising ended the celebration of the Bourbon king's birthday in Palermo on January 12. At the time, Sicilian aristocrats dreamed of independence from the Bourbons and autonomy, or imagined that Sicily might become an autonomous member of a still vaguely defined Italian federation. The Sicilian revolution, of course, ended in disaster for the liberals. The core revolutionary figures went into exile or were punished – with torture, interminable imprisonment, or death – by the Bourbon regime. The Bourbon repressions would ultimately end in a kind of victory for the people, in Sicily as throughout the Italian peninsula. In 1860, Garibaldi would lead the march of I Mille from Palermo. He eventually reached Naples and overthrew the Bourbon government; Sicily – which a short time earlier aspired to independence and autonomy – would become part of a new pan-Italian state.

Three of the most prominent nineteenth-century historians of Muslim Sicily were in Palermo and played an active role in the events of 1848. Pietro Lanza (1807-1855), a member of one of Sicily's oldest aristocratic families, didn't read Arabic; he was not indeed a professional scholar but a passionately devoted student of Sicilian history and contemporary political thought and (first and foremost) a patriot. He wrote a detailed history of Arab Sicily, relying on sources available in translation, which he read in 1832 at the Accademia di Scienze e Belle-lettere in Palermo and later published with the full complement of scholarly notes. He played a central role in the administration of the revolutionary government in 1848-49 and was forced into exile with the collapse of the revolution. He would die not long after in Paris in 1855.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On Lanza's biography see Mortillaro, *La storia, gli scrittori e le monete dell'epoca arabo-sicula* 304; *Dizionario dei siciliani illustri* 287; and Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* 1:12. Amari's collected letters include a handful of letters exchanged with Lanza during the events of 1848-1849, the last of which (dated 9 April 1849 and written from Palermo) is heartbreaking. Amari had written to him on 28 March counseling resistance, "e la resistenza vorremmo tutti noi," Lanza replied; "ma Palermo sola può resistere? Ed anco resistendo, potrà poi ricuperare quanto fatalmente si è perduto, senza elementi materiali, e privi di quell'appoggio morale, che desta l'entusiasmo quando è suscitato dal successo? ... Comprenderete bene, che se la fortuna ci continuerà ad essere avversa (il che non bisogna augurarci, anzi ardentemente spero che sia il contrario) starò al mio posto sino all'ultimo, e poi se rimarrò in vita esulerò in terra straniera. Ah, caro Michele, come mi sento oppresso di spirito! ["and we all would like to resist," Lanza replied; "but can Palermo resist alone? And even resisting, will it be able to recover what has been so

Michele Amari (1806-1889), an ardent patriot and the most prominent scholar of Muslim Sicily of the nineteenth century, was already in exile in Paris when the Sicilian revolution began in January 1848. In 1842, he had published a book on an event in Sicilian history subsequent to the years of Arab rule – the 1282 Vespers uprising, when a popular resistance movement overthrew a foreign monarch – which functioned as a thinly veiled revolutionary manifesto, a blueprint for the successful overthrow of an unpopular monarchy. The Neapolitan censors allowed the publication of the book, realizing its revolutionary subtext only after it appeared in print. Rather than stand trial in Naples, Amari escaped to Paris. There he would learn Arabic (studying with Joseph Toussaint Reinaud, a student of Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy) in order to write the history of Muslim Sicily. On the continent, he had access to the great libraries that held the Arabic manuscripts required to write a truly modern history of medieval Sicily. Already in 1845 – three short years after he arrived in Paris and started his study of Arabic – he published the first fruits of his investigation of Sicily’s Muslim past: the Arabic text of an account of Sicily by the medieval traveler and geographer Ibn Hawqal, with his own translation into French. When revolution broke out in Palermo in 1848, Amari rushed back and, like Lanza, played a key role in the revolutionary government. He too would flee to Paris after the failure of the revolution. He continued his work on Muslim Sicily, writing a history (published in multiple volumes between 1854 and 1872) that remains to this day the authoritative work on the subject. He returned to Italy in 1859 and, converted to the dream of Italian unification, played an active role in the Risorgimento; he taught Arabic (chiefly in Florence), and never again lived in Sicily.<sup>9</sup>

Vincenzo Mortillaro (1806-1888), a member of the petty aristocracy, was a Sicilian-trained Arabist. He had studied with Salvatore Morso (himself trained by Rosario Gregorio), whose luminous work on medieval Palermo I will discuss later in this essay. Mortillaro inherited the duties that were the legacy of Vella’s intervention in Sicily’s Muslim history. He wrote, for instance, on Siculo-Arabic coinage. Numismatics was a topic of pressing (and, to the twenty-first-century sensibility, unaccountable) interest for nineteenth-century historians. In Sicily, the matter had a peculiar urgency; Vella, who made a cottage industry of manufacturing Siculo-Arab history, had minted counterfeit coins as well as manuscripts, and subsequent Sicilian historians worked diligently to separate authentic medieval Sicilian coinage from Vella’s inventions, as they had to unmask his manuscript forgeries. Mortillaro published a history of Muslim Sicily in 1846, and he too was in Palermo during 1848. But whereas Amari and Lanza participated in the events of 1848 as passionate liberals and as committed members of the revolutionary core, Mortillaro – a conservative – kept his distance from the revolutionists during that anarchic year and was subsequently a vocal critic of the revolution.<sup>10</sup>

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unfortunately lost, without fundamental materials, and deprived of that moral support that awakens enthusiasm when it has been excited by success? ... You will understand me well: if our fortune continues to be adverse (which I ardently hope will not be the case) I will stay at my post until the last, and then if I still live I will go an exile to a foreign land. Ah, dear Michele, how oppressed I feel in spirit!”] (*Carteggio* 1:566-67)

<sup>9</sup> On Amari’s biography see my “Orientalism and the Nineteenth Century Nationalist” and *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100-1250* 17-46, with bibliographic footnotes; and Roberto M. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* 172-238.

<sup>10</sup> On Mortillaro’s biography see Giuseppe M. Mira, *Bibliografia siciliana* 2:106-8; Angelo De Gubernatis, *Matériaux pour servir à l’histoire des études orientales en Italie* 236-37; *Dizionario dei siciliani illustri* 334-35; and, of course, his own *Reminiscenze*.

Amari and Lanza were elected to high level positions in the revolutionary government—Amari as Minister of Finance, Lanza as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Mortillaro was elected to Parliament as a peer (the peerage having been significantly expanded by the revolutionary government in order to broaden the power base). And he served as a high-ranking official in the National Guard, an arm of the coalition government conceived and operated by the

Mortillaro, indeed, would become Amari's mortal enemy during the years following 1848 and would not miss an opportunity to criticize Lanza either – though because he published little and died young, Lanza presented a narrower target. In his history of Arab Sicily, which appeared shortly before the events of 1848, Mortillaro had produced a compendious *catalogue raisonné* of the historians of Sicily's Arab past. There he noted simply that Lanza's work on Arab Sicily was “il primo saggio degli studii patrii in che poscia riuscì valoroso” (“the first of those patriotic studies in which Lanza subsequently had worthy success”), and he lauded Amari for the two translations of Arabic texts relevant to Sicilian history that he had at that point published.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent transformation of his opinion of the two men is remarkable even for a man whose temperament a sympathetic biographer termed “bilious and choleric.”<sup>12</sup> In 1861 – following the publication of the first two volumes of Amari's *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia* (which appeared in 1854 and 1858) – Mortillaro would write toxic assessments of both Amari's *Storia* (“l'autore non avrebbe dovuto intitolarla *storia*, perchè di storia non ha nè la contenenza nè il dettato” [“the author ought not to have called it a *history*, because it has neither the content nor the style of a history”]) and Lanza's work on Muslim Sicily – published, in all fairness, three decades earlier (“ripetè le favole stesse narrate e ripetute da tutti color che non conobbero le opera degli arabi scrittori” [“he repeated the very same tales narrated and repeated by all those who do not know the works of the Arab writers”]).<sup>13</sup> And in the first volume (published in 1865) of his interminable *Reminiscenze*, Mortillaro would write that Amari's book on the Vespers was guilty of “il vezzo di fantasiare su la storia, a fine d'immolarla ad un'idea precogitata, nella quale era stato da altri prevenuto ... servendosi, com'egli stesso attesta, di un dettato disuguale, febbrile, spezzato come la parola di che è tra i tormenti” [“the vice of fantasizing about history for the purpose of sacrificing it to a preconceived notion (which others had arrived at before him) ... using, as he himself admits, an uneven style, feverish, stammering like the words of one being tortured”].<sup>14</sup>

Amari, however, gave as good as he got. In the opening pages of the *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia*, Amari provides an abundant and lively history of previous scholarship on Sicily's Muslim past. In this context, he mentions Mortillaro's contributions to Sicilian historiography. But he writes at much greater length about the role that Mortillaro played in Palermo in 1848-49:

Mi occorerà forse di correggere qua e là qualche errore del signor Mortillaro, di quei che recherebbero torto alla verità storica; non dovendosi appuntare tutti gli altri nelle opere di chi non ha avuto comodo di bene studiar quella lingua. E il

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conservatives as a means of suppressing the *squadre* in the countryside. The liberals had recruited the *squadre* to resist the Bourbon army; they spent the majority of their working hours, however, promoting lawlessness to their own purposes. Speaking of the ambitions and the failures of the *squadre* in particular and the revolutionists in general, Raffaele de Cesare—a historian sympathetic to the revolutionary cause—wrote: “Se quel periodo non ebbe consistenza politica, fu moralmente glorioso” (“If that period did not have political consistency, it was morally glorious” (*Fine di un regno* 1:4). The split between the *squadre* and the National Guard was one of the more visible manifestations of the deep divisions between Sicilian liberals, the core of the revolutionary movement, and the conservatives, who were loyal to the Bourbons or in favor of institutional changes rather than outright revolution.

<sup>11</sup> Vincenzo Mortillaro, *La storia, gli scrittori e le monete dell'epoca arabo-sicula* 304 and 310.

<sup>12</sup> Giuseppe Mira, *Bibliografia siciliana* 2:106.

<sup>13</sup> The comments are from private letters collected in the interminable volumes of *Works* that Mortillaro himself edited and published; *Opere* 8:184 and 165.

<sup>14</sup> Mortillaro, *Reminiscenze* 63-64. Mortillaro blamed Amari for the extinction of his own literary journal, *Giornale di scienze lettere e arti per la Sicilia*, which fell victim to the Bourbons' suppression of the press following the publication of Amari's work on the Vespers. Mortillaro would resume publication of the journal in February 1848, after the Sicilian revolution annulled censorship of the press (*Reminiscenze* 76).



farò a malincuore, perchè mi annoiano mortalmente i pettegolezzi letterarii, e perchè temo che la critica non si apponga a nimistà. Ma, qualunque sia l'animo mio verso l'autore, io tengo che la condotta politica d'un uomo non abbia nulla a fare col merito dei suoi studii; e sarei il primo ad applaudir come scrittore tale o tal altro che punirei come cittadino con tutta la severità delle leggi, se mai le vicende mi chiamassero nuovamente alla esecuzione delle leggi.

[I will perhaps have occasion to correct here and there a few of signor Mortillaro's errors, among those that do violence to historical truth; it is not necessary to detail all the errors in the work of a man who has not had the opportunity to study the language well. And I will do it with regret, because literary gossip disturbs me profoundly and because I fear that my criticism will be imputed to hostility. But, whatever my attitude may be toward the author, I hold that the political conduct of a man has nothing to do with the merits of his scholarship; and I would be the first to applaud as a writer such or such a one whom I would punish as a citizen with all the severity of the law, if ever events called me again to the execution of the law.]

And in a footnote, Amari reviews some of the information that his conscience will not allow him to include in the pages of his scholarship:

A chi mi domandasse perchè mi venne in capo di ricordare in questo luogo le vicende del Quarantotto, risponderò che io scrissi e pubblicai quelle parole durante il mio secondo esilio mentre il marchese Mortillaro reggeva un importante ramo della amministrazione pubblica in Sicilia. E in vero io allusi alla condotta ch'egli avea tenuta nella primavera del 1849 quand'ei fu caldo promotore della reazione borbonica e clericale in Palermo.<sup>15</sup>

[To whomever might ask me why I saw fit to remember in this place the affairs of 1848, I will respond that I wrote and published these words during my second exile, while the marquis Mortillaro governed an important branch of the public administration in Sicily. And in point of fact, I alluded to his conduct during the spring of 1849, when he was a warm promoter of the Bourbon and clerical reaction in Palermo.]

At moments like this, it's easy to forget (as Amari himself seems to have done) the cast of characters who populate the pages of medieval history that follow: the sons of Qayrawan who crossed the sea to Mazara del Vallo, led by the *qadi* Asad ibn al-Furat and at the invitation of the Byzantine insurrectionist Euphemius, in 827; the Muslim troops who entered Palermo in 831 under the command of Berber general Asbagh ibn Wakil; the penetration of Muslim armies through the Italian peninsula as far as the Garigliano river, the border between Latium and Campania, in 882. We are in Palermo in the spring of 1849; Mortillaro, from the safety of his bureaucrat's desk, forwards the Bourbon cause, while Amari is running for the docks.

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<sup>15</sup> Amari, *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia* 1:13 and fn 3, 13-14.

It is illuminating, having reviewed the bitter disputes between these men, to turn to the pages of their histories of Sicily. Their inequalities are substantial. Amari's passion and probity, and his considerable skills as a stylist, are such that they elevate him not only above Mortillaro and Lanza, but indeed above most historians of the nineteenth century. Yet for all their political, scholarly, and literary differences, the three men tell a strikingly similar tale. They – like previous historians approaching the same material – see these centuries as a secret history to be discovered; they are shining the light of historical inquiry into the dark corners of the past. Mortillaro sings the praises of his predecessor Rosario Gregorio, born to “diradar la caligine in che era involta l'epoca saracena” [“dissipate the darkness in which the Saracen epoch was cloaked”]. Lanza promises to “diradare le tenebre che coprono quest'età” [“dissipate the shadows that cover that age”]. Finally, Amari undertakes his history of Muslim Sicily “mosso da brama irresistibile di guardar nelle tenebre che avvolgeano la Storia di Sicilia avanti i Normanni” [“moved by an irresistible desire to look into the shadows that shroud the history of Sicily before the Normans”].<sup>16</sup>

When they cleared the cobwebs from the past, the three historians found a strange new history that belonged unmistakably to the distant past, yet spoke to the present. They would see Sicily's history of serial conquest – in the hands of other historians, evidence of Sicily's abjection throughout history – as the source of its glory. Lanza makes a particularly lovely story of this heritage. The Greeks and Romans left traces of their culture on the island; even the depredations of the Byzantines and the occasional barbarian incursion couldn't erase that glorious past entirely. Thus when the Arabs arrived in Sicily, they did not find a cultural void, as other armies of the Arab expansion did in Africa, Asia, and Spain. Rather, they nourished the sparks of cultural life surviving here and there until a flourishing culture emerged.

Essi raccolsero quanto eravi qui di più bello, e delle loro lettere, e delle loro scienze ci diedero i semi, che fra noi crebbero rigogliosi. Nè potea diversamente avvenire: poichè avendo ciò fatto presso altri popoli non poteano certo non diffonderli in una terra riverita da tutti, e i cui abitatori dotati di svelto ingegno, facili, e presti alle innovazioni, e alla civiltà avrebbono ogni ramo di dottrina ricevuto, alimentato, e promosso.

Ed a me sembra certo che come i Saracini all'ombra della pace fecero prosperare appo noi l'agricoltura, ed il commercio; così col loro esempio destarono gli assonnati spiriti, togliendoli dall'inerzia, invitandola alla letteraria emulazione, e propagando la civiltà.<sup>17</sup>

[They gathered what was most beautiful here, and they gave us the seeds of their own letters and their own sciences, which bloomed among us. Nor could it have happened differently: for having done the same among other peoples, they certainly could not do other than diffuse these seeds in a land revered by all, whose inhabitants were endowed with a swift intelligence and given to innovations and who had to the benefit of civilization received, nourished, and promoted every branch of learning.

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<sup>16</sup> Mortillaro, *La storia ... dell'epoca arabo-sicula* 297; Lanza, *Degli Arabi e del loro soggiorno in Sicilia* 19; Amari, *Storia dei musulmani* 3:921-22.

<sup>17</sup> Lanza, *Degli Arabi e del loro soggiorno in Sicilia* 50-51.

And to me it seems certain that as the Saracens, in the shadow of peace, made agriculture and commerce flourish among us, so with their example they awakened slumbering spirits – chasing away their inertia, inviting them to literary emulation, and propagating civilization.]

Amari tells a similar story of serial conquest as a source of strength for Sicily, contrasting Sicily's past with the distinct history of that other Arab state in Mediterranean Europe, al-Andalus. And in this passage from his first publication on Muslim Sicily, his edition and translation of Ibn Hawqal's account of his visit to the island, he combines a summary of Sicily's conquests with the familiar motif of the hidden history that must be brought to light.

L'Espagne, occupée par les Visigoths, présentait déjà les caractères de la société romano-germanique à l'époque de la conquête musulmane. La Sicile, au contraire, pillée plutôt que conquise par les barbares du Nord, était toujours grecque et romaine lors de l'invasion des Sarrasins. L'élément germanique n'y pénétra qu'après l'élément musulman, quand une poignée de la noblesse normande, que l'on pouvait regarder comme déjà française, vint y fonder un royaume moitié chrétien et moitié musulman.

La civilisation arabe, qui dominait en Sicile, fit tous les frais de ce glorieux gouvernement normand, qui bientôt s'étendit sur l'Italie méridionale.... Quel était donc ce peuple musulman de Sicile dans ses plus beaux jours ? Qu'est-ce qu'il emprunta à la Sicile gréco-romaine ? Quelles furent ses ressources, ses vicissitudes, ses œuvres ? Voilà des questions auxquelles répondent fort mal les chroniques musulmanes et chrétiennes qui nous restent ; chroniques incomplètes, et écrites pour la plupart aux XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles.

L'histoire de la Sicile musulmane est donc encore à faire ; bien plus, il faut en trouver les matériaux.<sup>18</sup>

[Spain, occupied by the Visigoths, already had the characteristics of a Romano-Germanic society at the epoch of the Muslim conquest. Sicily, on the other hand – pillaged rather than conquered by the barbarians of the North – was still Greek and Roman when the Saracens invaded. The Germanic element penetrated only after the Muslim element, when a handful of the Norman nobility, whom one could regard as already French, came to found there a realm half Christian and half Muslim.

That glorious Norman government which soon enough extended throughout southern Italy took its substance from the Arab civilization that dominated in Sicily . . . . What indeed was this Muslim population of Sicily during its most beautiful days? What did it borrow from Greco-Roman Sicily? What were its resources, its vicissitudes, its deeds? These are the questions to which the Muslim and Christian chronicles that we possess fail to respond; incomplete chronicles, written for the most part during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The history of Muslim Sicily is indeed still to be written; more than that, we must yet find the materials (to write it)].

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<sup>18</sup> Amari, *Description de Palerme au milieu du X<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'ère vulgaire, par Ebn-Hauqal* 4.

Amari, of course, would hunt down and publish the necessary materials and write that history himself. This 1845 publication was his first contribution to Siculo-Arabic historiography. In addition to his multi-volume history of Muslim Sicily, he would ultimately publish two volumes of a *Biblioteca arabo-sicula*, an anthology of medieval texts relevant to Sicily history, first in the Arabic original and then in Italian translation.<sup>19</sup>

In this passage, Amari alludes to a third theme that would inspire some of the most pyrotechnical passages in his history and in the works of Mortillaro and Lanza as well. The culture of the Arabs of Sicily would expand beyond the island. Transferred to the Italian peninsula, it would awaken the Italians from their medieval slumbers. Here Lanza extols the civilizing effect that Sicilian Arabs had on Sicily, on Italy, and indeed on the West in general:

Grazie intanto ai lumi del nostro secolo, ed alla sana critica, che dirige ormai ogni sorta di studio: lodansi i Normanni, perchè di laudi son degni, noverandosi fra i primi popoli, che con la cavalleria incivilirono l'età di mezzo, e perchè fra noi fondarono, secondo l'uso de' tempi, uno dei più bei regni di quella epoca; ma non si biasimano, anzi si venerano i Saraceni, perchè lungi di essere barbari ed ignoranti, furon quelli a cui deve il mondo la moderna civiltà.<sup>20</sup>

[Thanks to the illumination of our age, and thanks to the wholesome critical attitude that now guides every sort of study, not only are the Normans praised – because they are worthy of praise, since they are numbered among the first peoples who with their chivalry brought civility to the Middle Ages and because among us they created, in the manner of their age, one of the most beautiful kingdoms of that epoch, but the Saracens are not slandered, but rather venerated, because far from being barbarous and ignorant, it was they who gave the world modern civilization.]

Lanza's praise for Arab civilization (and for the enlightenment of his own age) may seem excessive. Yet it was not immoderate by contemporary standards. Here Mortillaro extends himself on the Saracens of Sicily – painted as fathers of the Sicilians and as bringers of enlightenment to the Italians:

Or sappian coloro che Saracini ci nomano e dileggiarci s'avvisano, che non briganti, viventi sol di rapine, e uniti dall'amor delle prede, ma Saracini illustri, armigeri ed avventurosi, pieni di vita, di moto, d'intelligenza furono i padri nostri: e che da questo scoglio sul quale per variar di fortune non s'è mai spenta la scintilla del genio, dettar leggi ai vicini, le dettarono ai lontani; e per terra e per mare dominando colle arme e col senno nei petti degl'Italiani svegliarono il sopito valore, e ne dischiusero le aggravate pupille.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mortillaro tells a slightly different version of Sicily's pre-Muslim history. He doesn't mention the classical (Greek or Latin) heritage. He depicts Byzantine Sicily at the time of the arrival of the Arabs as hopelessly decadent—already a familiar trope in nineteenth century Sicilian historiography—and describes the residence of the Arabs in Sicily as one of gradual cultural and technological innovation *ex vuoto*.

<sup>20</sup> Lanza, *Degli Arabi e del loro soggiorno in Sicilia* 19-20.

<sup>21</sup> Mortillaro, *La storia ... dell'epoca arabo-sicula* 273.

[Now let those men who call us Saracens and think they mock us know that our fathers were not brigands, living only by pillage and united by love of booty, but illustrious Saracens, warriors and adventurers, full of life, emotion, intelligence; and that from that promontory upon which, through all the changes of fortune, the spark of genius was never extinguished, they granted laws to those close to them and granted laws to those distant; and dominating with their arms by land and by sea, and with the intelligence in their breasts, they awakened the valor that slumbered in the chests of the Italians and opened the heavy lids of their eyes.]

Even Amari would be tempted to rhetorical excess by the achievements of the Arabs and the effect their civilization had on Italians – although in his work, tellingly, it is the Norman continuation of Arab culture rather than the inventions of the Arabs themselves that worked the cultural miracle on the mainland. Under the Normans, he wrote,

si era mandata ad effetto, sotto gli auspicii del nuovo popolo, l'opera cominciata dagli Arabi quattrocento anni avanti: la Sicilia tornata a potenza e splendore primeggiò per tutto il duodecimo secolo tra le provincie italiane; s'insignorì delle parti meridionali della Penisola; occupò temporaneamente qualche città dell'Affrica propria e sparse in terraferma molti semi di quel mirabile incivilimento della comune patria nostra il quale entro pochi secoli dileguava in Europa le tenebre del medio evo.<sup>22</sup>

[that labor had been accomplished, under the aegis of a new people, which had been begun by the Arabs 400 years earlier: Sicily, returned to power and splendor, predominated for the rest of the twelfth century among the Italian provinces; it mastered the southern regions of the Peninsula; it occupied temporarily some African cities, and scattered on the continent many of the seeds of that wondrous civilization of our common fatherland, which within a few centuries dispersed in Europe the shadows of the Middle Ages.]

Indeed as the Sicilian Orientalists scattered the shadows that shrouded the history of Sicily, they chipped away at the line dividing the Sicily of the Normans from the Sicily of the Arabs. Few historians of Muslim Sicily could resist the temptation to advance into the years of Norman control, particularly when treasures like al-Idrisi's geography (produced under the patronage of Norman king Roger II) and the Arabic poetry written in honor of the Norman monarchs awaited them on the other side. Lanza ends his account by summarizing the Arabic-language achievements of the years of Norman rule; Mortillaro and Amari close their histories with the death of Frederick II, the great Norman-Hohenstaufen king of Sicily, in 1250. In fact, about 46 percent of Amari's 2,000-page history of *Muslim Sicily* deals with the years of Norman, not

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<sup>22</sup> Amari, *Storia dei musulmani* 1:107. Note Amari's use of the first person plural pronoun in this passage. Sicilian historians of the nineteenth century consistently referred to the history of Arab Sicily as "our" history and to the Muslims of Sicily as "our Saracens." Amari, however, never uses first person plural pronouns when referring to the Muslims. He uses the word "our" repeatedly and insistently. However he regularly uses it in reference to Christian or to modern history, and in particular when writing about modern, Christian, Sicilian history. In this passage, however, "our common fatherland" means *Italy*: a concept that did not exist when Lanza and Mortillaro published their works in 1832 and 1846 respectively—and that remained vague and somewhat suspect in Sicily in 1854, when this volume of Amari's history appeared.

Arab, rule.<sup>23</sup> So too did Salvatore Cusa and Salvatore Morso, whose work I will discuss later in this essay, concentrate their own research on the Normans.

Two motives account for the appeal of the years of Norman domination. First, for Sicilian Orientalists who remained in Sicily, a pragmatic consideration agitated in favor of emphasis on the Normans. No records of Muslim Sicily remained on the island. The Arabic-language works preserved in Sicilian archives belonged to the Norman period. The history of the Muslim era must be sought in the compendious Arab histories available only to those who, like Michele Amari, left Sicily and had access to continental libraries. At the same time, however, Amari would discover that the history of Norman Sicily was difficult to write *without* access to the Arabic-language records that remained in Sicily. The records in Greek, Latin, and Arabic that could be studied in continental libraries gave a limited account of the Norman administration; crucial documentation – tax records, legal records, and epigraphy – were preserved in Sicily.

Secondly, the years of Norman rule had been previously and became to an even greater extent during the nineteenth century a source of enormous pride for Sicilians. Under the Normans, Sicily dominated the central Mediterranean and, indeed, in the hands of the Sicilian historians, became the major maritime power throughout the Mediterranean. If the scientific culture or the legal institutions of European modernity came from the Arabs, it was the Normans who first recognized the potential of that Arab seed, nourished it, and transplanted it to the European mainland. To recognize the triumphs of Norman civilization, to detail in particular Norman reception and manipulation of Arab civilization, was to demonstrate Sicily's centrality to European history and to European modernity in particular. This task became more acute as Sicily's dreams of autonomy faded and Sicily found its place, once again, not as an independent island state, but as an insular coda to unified Italy.

So it comes as no surprise that when Vincenzo Mortillaro wanted to attack Amari, he would impute to Amari a desire to deny Sicily's difference, the Mediterranean peculiarity of Sicily's compound Arab-European culture under the Normans. In 1868, Mortillaro wrote an open letter to Amari that he published as a pamphlet; in it he savaged Amari in a tone surprising even to those familiar with the often toxic language of academic quarrels. Mortillaro fills the bulk of the letter with a detailed and eminently forgettable criticism of Amari's discussion of medieval coinage. As tiresome as Mortillaro's enthusiasm about the topic may seem to us, we do well to remember that by stressing his superior familiarity with medieval Sicilian numismatics Mortillaro emphasizes his advantage over Amari: he, unlike Amari, is not an exile. Unlike Amari, he was and remains a *Sicilian*. For this reason, he has access to the insular numismatic collections that Amari in Italy is not able to study. Most interesting from our perspective, however, is a passage in which Mortillaro responds to a chapter of the final volume of Amari's *Storia dei musulmani*, which is still in press but which Mortillaro has seen in galleys:

Di ciò ragioneremo a suo tempo largamente, indi a che avrete compiuta la stampa dell'opera vostra, nella quale voi siciliano ammaestrar volete noi siciliani a ritenere (ciò che ritenete voi solo) che nientemeno la civiltà ce l'importarono ai

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<sup>23</sup> The first two volumes of the *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia* (in the twentieth-century edition, 1,097 pages) deal with the years of Muslim rule; the three-part third volume (922 pages) addresses the Normans. If one were to subtract from the Arabs' tally the portion of the first volume that recounts Sicilian history *prior to* the arrival of the Arabs, the relative number of pages devoted to the Normans would be even more striking.

tempi dei Normanni gl'italiani dell'*Italia di sopra*, piemontesi, genovesi, lombardi.<sup>24</sup>

[We will speak at greater length at another time, once you have finished the publication of your work, in which you, Sicilian, wish to teach us, Sicilians, to believe (something that you alone believe) that nothing less than our civilization was imported by Italians from *upper Italy* [emphasis in the original], Piedmontese, Genoese, Lombards, at the times of the Normans.]

In this pregnant paralipsis, Mortillaro aims to scandalize his Sicilian readers (*noi siciliani*) by telling them that in his new book – the first of the three volumes that Amari will publish on the Norman period of the history of Muslim Sicily – he will claim that the culture of the Norman era was an Italian import.

Unsurprisingly, this is not at all what Amari wrote. In the chapter to which Mortillaro refers, Amari argues from literary and linguistic evidence that the indigenous non-Arab population in Sicily was either not particularly numerous or not particularly important during the years of the Norman domination. Furthermore, he points out that an influx of population came to Sicily from “*Italia di sopra*,” correcting earlier historians who emphasized the influence of indigenous Sicilians or immigrants from the southern part of the peninsula on the administration of the Norman regime and the culture of the Norman age. He twice uses the term “*Italia di sopra*” to refer to the links that bind Sicily to Lombardy and Piedmont. Perhaps most galling to a Sicilian audience – and in particular to a historian whose understanding of the sources he has critiqued – Amari tells the story of a Sicily intimately bound to the peninsula, affirming that those bonds will become ever clearer as historians use the philological method developed by continental historians to read the historical record more accurately: “Ma in oggi i felici avvenimenti politici che stringono i legami e moltiplicano i commerci di tutti i popoli italiani, e i progrediti studii linguistici in Europa, ci danno abilità a cavare conseguenze assai più precise” [“Today, the felicitous political events that tighten the links that bind and multiply commerce between all the Italian peoples and the progress of linguistic studies in Europe give us the ability to derive much more precise conclusions”].<sup>25</sup>

But as his history of Norman Sicily progressed, when the second and third volumes on the Normans appeared, Amari’s perception of the Sicilian contribution to Norman culture and the Norman contribution to European culture would become clear. European encounters with Arab letters in Sicily generated the cultural miracle of Norman Sicily. But the Normans did not passively accept an Arab culture they found *in situ*. More important were the cultural institutions they sought out and imported from the Arab ports of the Mediterranean and the Arabic-language works produced under their patronage. Sicily, in a sense, is not a noun but a verb in Amari’s *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*. It denotes the capacity to mediate between European and Arab cultures and, in particular, the Normans’ capable manipulation of the Arab culture of the contemporary Mediterranean.

This dispute between Mortillaro and Amari illuminates the differences in their perceptions of Sicily’s relations with the continent and of Sicily’s Mediterranean particularism. Amari’s

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<sup>24</sup> Mortillaro, *Lettera del Marchese Vincenzo Mortillaro* 4-5. Mortillaro refers in particular to chapter 8 of volume 3, part 1 (which appeared in 1868).

<sup>25</sup> Amari, *Storia dei musulmani*, 3:227 (where the phrase “*Italia di sopra*” appears twice) and 3:233.

emphasis on Sicily's links with peninsular Italy is not all that surprising in the work of a Sicilian historian who had been converted to the dream of Italian unification. Amari locates Sicily's Arab history in the past. He insists that Sicilians need the new methodologies developed by continental historians to bring that distant history to light, and he suggests that the gradual progress of understanding Sicily's past achieved by means of those new research methods will in turn strengthen the ties between Sicily and the continent.

Mortillaro, however, viewed Sicily's Arab history as something transhistorical and indigenous – indeed, immanent – and accessible only to those who had direct access to the soil of Sicily. Continental methods of research might help to clarify specifics. The essential thing, however, was contact with Sicily itself; for Sicily's Arab history was inscribed in its very landscape. In a letter to philologist and Orientalist Angelo Mai written around the same time as his history of Muslim Sicily, Mortillaro bemoans the ignorance of Sicily's Arab history among continental Orientalists. And he evokes a Sicily that holds the image of its Muslim past in its very mountains, fields, and rivers: “Quivi e fabbriche, e lapidi, e monete, e monumenti arabi d'ogni genere ritrovansi, e i nomi delle città non solo, ma delle montagne ancora, delle terre, dei fiumi, il lungo soggiorno attestano che in questa regione fecero i Musulmani” [Here Arab productions, and stones, and money, and monuments of every sort are found, and not only the names of the cities, but also the mountains, the fields, the rivers, witness the long sojourn of the Muslims in this region].<sup>26</sup> This letter – which predates 1848, and hence predates Mortillaro's bitter dispute with Amari – anticipates the core of Mortillaro's argument with Amari. The splendid new philological methods pioneered by European Orientalists will not suffice to bring Sicily's Muslim history to light. Sicily's Arab civilization, the kernel of Sicilian history and the key to Sicily's contributions to modern European history, can be understood and written only through direct access to the physical reality of Sicily. Exiles cannot write it, but only those Sicilians who have remained *Sicilians*.<sup>27</sup>

On balance, one is relieved that history remembers Amari's name and his contribution to Sicilian history, while Mortillaro's has been largely forgotten. Mortillaro's essentialist understanding of national history would not prevail; Amari's careful philological analysis of the historical records of Muslim Sicily has, if anything, appreciated in value over the years. Yet the core of Mortillaro's argument – that Sicily's fields and rivers, and the tangled streets of the older quarters of its cities, record an essential element of the history of Muslim Sicily – holds a certain amount of truth. Amari, for all the sophistication of his continental training, at times found himself at a disadvantage because of his distance from the archives and monuments of Sicily. And Sicilian historians – that is, those who remained in Sicily – might press their own advantaged access to Sicily as resource. I am thinking in particular of two Sicilian historians whose names have not been remembered outside Sicily (although they remain familiar to Sicilians who know their nineteenth-century history) and who deserve to be much better known for the scientific, historical, and literary value of their work. Salvatore Morso wrote a magnificent account of the Palermo of the Norman era – something of a historical travel guide – drawing on Arab sources that no historian of Norman Palermo before him had used. The second historian, Salvatore Cusa (1822-1893), is best known for his anthology of documentary sources

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<sup>26</sup> Mortillaro, *Opere* 3:189

<sup>27</sup> On the growing tension between the exiles of 1848 and those who remained, particularly in the years leading up to the Risorgimento, see Marta Petrusiewicz's discussion in *Come il Meridione divenne una questione*, especially 152-56.



from the Norman era in Greek and Arabic, with an introduction that is justly remembered by Sicilian historians as one of the most beautiful historical essays of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

Following the monographs on the history of Muslim Sicily published by Lanza, Mortillaro, and Amari in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, the next important work to be published on Sicilian Muslim history would be Cusa's edition of Greek and Arabic documents relating to Norman history: *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia*. Due to the meticulous care with which he edited the documents, Cusa's work had a long gestation period – unconscionably long, in the opinion of the rather more impetuous Amari.<sup>29</sup> Amari urged Cusa to publish *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia*, doing so both out of his desire to use the materials for own pages on Norman Sicily and a sense of decency: if Cusa edited the documents, Amari would not have to scoop Cusa (or go to the trouble of editing them himself). Amari himself had edited the sources on the history of Muslim Sicily that he found in European libraries; the first volume of his *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula* appeared in 1857. However, he did not have access to the documentary sources held in Sicilian libraries and archives – sources dating to the Norman period and, therefore, necessary for the three-part third volume of his history on Muslim Sicily, which dealt with the Normans. Amari fumed over Cusa's hesitations and the interminable delays in publication of his work. In 1867, he wrote in exasperation to a mutual friend that the publication of the documents was crucial “1. per la scienza 2. per l'Italia 3. per Campanile e 4. per il Cusa stesso che conosce bene l'arabico” [“1. for science 2. for Italy 3. for the homeland and 4. for Cusa himself who knows Arabic well”].<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Amari would collaborate with Cusa from a distance by looking over documents that Cusa sent him for his opinion, and he would, of course, benefit from the opportunity to review the documents before publication. *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia* would finally appear in 1875, though the first volume was backdated – “with transparent cunning” [“con malizietta molto trasparente”], wrote Amari – to 1868.<sup>31</sup>

Amari's and Cusa's work on Sicily's history had a strangely symbiotic relationship. Amari published sources found only in the great libraries of Europe; Cusa provided the texts accessible only in Sicily. Cusa edited documents largely without interpreting them; he did not produce a great work of historical synthesis, as Amari did. But his introduction to his edition – the *Dizionario dei Siciliani illustri* calls this essay “un monumento egregio di profonda, vasta e sicura erudizione” [“a prominent monument of profound, vast, and sure erudition”]<sup>32</sup> – is written with an eloquence and a passion which even Amari, one of the greatest historical stylists of the nineteenth century, can scarce match. Taken in broad strokes, Cusa's argument is by now familiar. The Normans represented the apex of Sicilian history; they would export the magnificent achievements of their civilization to the Italian mainland; the historian cannot understand the years of their domination without access to their Arabic archives. But Cusa adds a new element to this narrative. In the past, the historians of Europe had their go at Sicilian history, and in general, they took charge of those periods that they could claim as their own: continental

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<sup>28</sup> On Cusa's biography see Giuseppe M. Mira, *Bibliografia siciliana* 1:287-88; Angelo De Gubernatis, *Matériaux pour servir à l'histoire des études orientales en Italie* 235-36; and *Dizionario dei siciliani illustri* 148-49.

<sup>29</sup> My account of Amari's exasperation with Cusa, expressed in a series of unedited letters written to historian Isidoro La Lumia, follows Adalgisa De Simone's lively summary of Amari and La Lumia's correspondence; see “Salvatore Cusa arabista siciliano del XIX secolo.”

<sup>30</sup> De Simone, “Salvatore Cusa arabista siciliano del XIX secolo” 608.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in De Simone, “Salvatore Cusa arabista siciliano del XIX secolo” 610.

<sup>32</sup> *Dizionario dei Siciliani illustri* 149.

classicists have written the ancient Greek history, the Italians have written the Roman history, the Spaniards have written the Aragonese history, and so on.

Ma un periodo è stato sempre, ed a preferenza studiato dagli storici nostri. Esso è quello di cui si è detto, il normanno-svevo, quello a cui ha fissato in ogni tempo lo sguardo il Siciliano, come ad un punto bianco nel nero orizzonte. Lo straniero, mosso da rispetto, lo ha lasciato a noi non tocco, perchè proprietà nostra; e le fonti donde la sua storia vien tratta sono in buona parte nostre, e soltanto da noi studiate.<sup>33</sup>

[But one period has always been the preferred study of our own historians. It is that which is called the Norman-Swabian period, upon which the Sicilian of every age has fixed his gaze, as on a white point against a black horizon. The foreigner, moved by respect, has left it to us untouched, because it is our property; and the sources from which its history is drawn are in good part ours and are studied only by us.]

Now, however, matters are changing. Now, the Norman history of Sicily is not a matter for Sicilians alone. Sicily, no longer the subject of a colonizing power nor sovereign herself, pulls closer to the continent. And this era of Sicily's past – when the nations of Europe, for all their differences of culture and language, were united through Latinity, feudal law, and the Roman rite – has a new resonance in contemporary Europe.

Ond'è, che le memorie, le quali la storia dell'una di esse [cioè nazioni] concernono, sono a reputarsi efficaci a rischiarar quella dell'altra; e mentre noi, a comprender meglio le proprie, ci approfittiamo di quelle pubblicate negli altri paesi, stimiamo non esser per loro indifferenti le nostre; sicchè dal contributo commune la storia della civiltà di tutti s'avvantaggi, e al tempo stesso quella dei singoli popoli.

A questo fine oggi tutto si tenta e si adopra, si turba sinanco la pace de' morti, dalle cui ceneri sperasi ritrarre elemento a nuova e diversa vita; si mettono all'aperto i ruderi, si scuoprono anticaglie, marmi, medaglie e monete, si rifrustano gli archivi, si rimuginano le carte d'ogni natura.<sup>34</sup>

[It is for this reason that the memories which concern the history of one [nation] are held to be useful for clarifying that of another; and while we, to better understand our own affairs, profit from those published in other countries, we consider our own to be not a matter of indifference for them; so that from the common fund the history of civilization of all peoples advances, and at the same time that of each individual people.

To this end, today, no effort is spared; even the peace of the dead is disturbed, from whose ashes it is hoped that the materials of a new and different life might be extracted; ruins are laid bare, antiquities, marbles, medals, and coins discovered, archives are rifled, and papers of every sort are rummaged through.]

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<sup>33</sup> Salvatore Cusa, *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia* 1:vii.

<sup>34</sup> Cusa, *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia* 1:viii-ix.

Cusa sees the new European order emerging around him as a shadow cast by the European order of the Norman age. That past speaks to the present and to all Europeans – not just to Sicilians.

Yet Cusa's vision of Sicilian history does not flatten its difference, the Mediterranean particularity that Sicilian historians had learned to celebrate during the course of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, he insists on the relevance and the centrality of the Arabic-language (and Greek) witnesses to medieval Sicilian history. This, of course, is the motive for his anthology of Greek and Arabic documents. But the sophistication of his treatment of historical sources is most evident in the lovely essay Cusa wrote on the Sicilian palm tree, first published in 1873. Throughout history, the palm tree has been used as a symbol of existential and mystical truths: Cusa begins the article by meditating on the palm as symbol of God, of man, and of love, citing passages from scripture, the Qur'an, Arabic literature, and Dante. At the same time, it is the most useful of plants. Cusa discusses scientific writings on the palm and its management in Arabic, Latin, and Greek. Cusa would know the palm first, however, as a familiar part of the Sicilian landscape. In the final section of the article, he quotes poetic and documentary references to the palm from Sicilian sources: the Arabic poetry and the Greek and Latin documents of the Norman period, as well as modern vernacular poetry. He closes his article with a striking nominalist statement and a final mystical gesture:

I Saraceni ci insegnarono il modo come servircene [cioè della palma]; o meglio, l'uso grande ch'essi ne fecero fu tramandato a noi colla cosa, e coi nomi ch'essi vi aveano attaccato. L'utilità di questa pianta non cessa nè anche colla morte, e come dalla procera palma-dattero, l'uomo cava legno per costruzione e legna da ardere, così dall'umile palmisto trae l'ingrasso tanto utile all'agricoltora, che è uso colle sue ceneri a *debbiare* la terra.<sup>35</sup>

[The Saracens taught us how to make use of (the palm); or better, the abundant use that they themselves made of it was passed on to us with the thing itself, and with the names that they had attached to it. The utility of this plant does not end even with death, and as from the noble date-palm man harvests wood for construction and materials to burn, so from the most humble varieties he draws the oil that is so useful for agriculture, and he uses its ash to fertilize the land.]

Cusa's "us," of course, signifies *Sicilians*; he refers to the lexical and scientific legacy that the Arabs left behind in Sicily.

Throughout the article, Cusa cites Arabic, Greek, Latin, and Romance sources alongside each other, giving equal weight to each. In a footnote to the closing sentence, he discusses the peculiar word *debbiare*, a word of uncertain etymology that here means "to burn the stubble in a field then turn the ashes under, in order to increase the fertility of the soil." He traces the word to both Latin and Arabic sources, but he does not suggest that it appeared first in the one language or the other, or that one language acquired the word from the other. Rather, he leaves the two etymologies dangling as if the word had sprung fully armed from the foreheads of both languages, a bizarre case of parentage as co-monogenesis. Indeed, throughout his article on the Sicilian palm, he cites parallel linguistic traditions without heed to questions of precedence and

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<sup>35</sup> Cusa, *La Palma nella poesia, nella scienza e nella storia siciliana* 79.

influence; he poises the languages beside each other and admires the composition they form. In so doing, he celebrates the Sicilian past as a history of coexistence on the Andalusian model, a history that can't be known without reference to the multiplicity of populations that inhabited Sicily and to Sicily's plural literary-linguistic tradition. The presence of the three languages – Arabic, Latin, and Greek – on Sicilian soil is an irreducible fact of Sicilian history. And in his treatment of Sicilian linguistic complexity – the intellectual and historical balancing act whereby Cusa parallels them without resolving his discussion into a “post hoc, ergo propter hoc” discussion of cause and effect, of *influence* – Cusa Mediterraneanizes Sicilian history.

Amari and Cusa together represent the culmination of nineteenth-century Sicilian historiography. Both men made a separate peace with Sicily's integration into a unified Italy by finding a way to express Sicilian particularity not as mere historical quirk but rather as crucible: as the origin of an Italian modernity. And Amari and Cusa were sophisticated philologists who used the modern, scientific research methods pioneered on the continent to tease meaning out of the documentary records of the past. It is illuminating to turn back from their works to an earlier chapter in Sicilian historiography, to observe a perceptive historian working with the cruder philological instruments of an earlier age. Salvatore Morso (1766-1828) took over the chair in Arabic created for Vella at the University of Palermo after Vella's fraud was exposed, in 1797.<sup>36</sup> Domenico Scinà, the historian who chronicled most closely the Vella affair, wrote that it was Morso who “al cader del Vella fece il primo sonare, scacciato il corrotto dialetto maltese, la pura lingua arabica nella nostra università” [“after, with the fall of Vella, the corrupt Maltese dialect had been chased out, was the first to make the halls of our university ring with the sound of the pure Arabic language”].<sup>37</sup> Morso wrote a grammar and dictionary of Arabic for use in the university. He is best remembered, however, for his *Descrizione di Palermo antico ricavata sugli autori sincroni e i monumenti de' tempi* (1827). Mortillaro, Morso's student, wrote a memorial essay in which he sang his teacher's praises with due rhetorical flourishes: Morso, he says, was

convinto non solo dell'utilità che ritraesi dal conoscere la lingua di una nazione ... che vivo conservò nei secoli d'ignoranza qualche splendore di scienze, e che le prime scintille eccitò nell'Europa per lo felice risorgimento della moderna letteratura, di una nazione che tanti e sì interessanti monumenti ci ha lasciati di sua cultura nei rami tutti del sapere; ma persuaso ancora della necessità di coltivarsi siffatto studio nell'Isola nostra, regione dai Saraceni per ben due secoli signoreggiata, e di arabiche carte, iscrizioni, fabbriche e medaglie pregevolmente arricchita; e dove i nomi delle città, delle terre, dei monti, delle acque, dei fiumi, delle spiagge rammentano gli Arabi da per tutto e la loro dominazione.<sup>38</sup>

[not only convinced of the utility that he drew from his knowledge of the language of a nation that preserved some of the splendor of the sciences through the centuries of ignorance and that quickened the first sparks of the felicitous renaissance of modern literature in Europe, of a nation that left us such great and such compelling monuments of its culture in all branches of knowledge, but persuaded also of the necessity of cultivating such studies on our island, a region

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<sup>36</sup> On Morso's biography see Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia* 1:11-12; Giuseppe M. Mira, *Bibliografia siciliana* 2:103-4; and *Dizionario dei siciliani illustri* 334.

<sup>37</sup> Scinà, *La arabica impostura* 75.

<sup>38</sup> Mortillaro, *Opere* 2:110-11.

ruled by the Saracens for a good two centuries and enriched with valuable Arabic documents, inscriptions, products, and medals and where the names of the cities, the fields, the mountains, the lakes, the rivers, the beaches everywhere recall the Arabs and their domination.]

Amari, however, sniffed a bit in his account of Morso's contribution to Sicilian historiography: "seppe quest'idioma [cioè l'arabo] un po' meglio che il Gregorio; ... ma parmi abbia sbagliata la pianta topografica [nella *Descrizione di Palermo*]" ("he knew that language [i.e., Arabic] a bit better than Gregorio; . . . but it seems to me that he erred in his topographic plan [in the *Description of Palermo*])."<sup>39</sup>

If Mortillaro exaggerated Morso's significance, perhaps Amari – in his pride at the European pedigree of his Orientalist learning – is not entirely fair to him. For Morso's *Description of Ancient Palermo* is most certainly not without merit: it is a curious and compelling attempt to recreate Norman Palermo on the page, to reanimate it from the descriptions of the medieval witnesses who walked its streets in its most glorious years. Because he read Arabic, Morso had access to a source that previous Sicilian historians had not used in their discussions of medieval Palermo: he referred regularly to the compendious geography produced under the patronage of Norman king Roger II, al-Idrisi's *Kitab al-Rujjar*, or *Book of Roger*, the greatest geographical treatise of the late Middle Ages. Morso drew on al-Idrisi's description of Norman Palermo to describe in lavish detail a short list of Palermitan monuments, mostly lying within the medieval city walls. However, he included reference to two extramural monuments, pleasure palaces, which, at the time that Morso wrote, were in a state of ramshackle disrepair: the Cuba and La Zisa. Sicilians of the age generally assumed both palaces to be remnants of the years of Muslim domination because of their architectural style and their Arabic inscriptions, which no scholar had yet accurately transcribed or translated.

Morso had a run at copying out and translating the inscription on La Zisa, but the peculiarities and difficulties of the text confounded him. In his modesty, he sent a transcription to two of the greatest Orientalists of the age: Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy and Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall. In a postscript to his chapter on La Zisa in the *Description of Palermo*, he reprinted his letter of inquiry and the replies he received from both men. "I have undertaken a difficult task," he wrote in his initial letter, "since neither verses from the Qur'an, nor the names of Mohammedan people, nor the year of the Hegira, which can be of help in interpreting Kufic inscriptions in general, are to be found" in the inscription. He speculated that this explained why Rosario Gregorio neglected to include the inscription in his own collection of Siculo-Arabic texts. Morso proposed a translation for the text but admitted his lack of confidence in his resolution of its linguistic difficulties and invited the more experienced Orientalists' advice. However, he was quite sure of one thing: the contemporary popular name for the quarter in which the palace is found, La Zisa, must derive from the Arabic word al-'Aziz, which means *mighty, powerful, or noble* and which appeared as the final word in the inscription, where it referred to the building itself.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Amari, *Storia dei musulmani* 1:11-12.

<sup>40</sup> "Difficillimum, quidem, opus aggressus sum, illud enim est hujusmodi, ut neque Corani versus, neque Muhammedicae gentis nomina, neque annus Hegirae, quae omnia subsidio sunt cuficis inscriptionibus interpretandis elici posse videantur." Salvatore Morso, *Descrizione di Palermo antico* 190 and 194. Morso's letters to Silvestre de Sacy and Hammer were written in the lingua franca of scholarship during the nineteenth century, Latin.

Morso also speculated tentatively that he had found the name of a Norman king, Roger, in the inscription – thus suggesting that the palace had been built not by the Arabs but during the Norman era, for a Norman patron. Both Silvestre de Sacy and Hammer disagreed with this suggestion. Silvestre in particular pointed out extremely sensible linguistic reasons why it was impossible that Roger’s name should appear where Morso saw it. Moreover, he added a postscript to his letter, having mulled the inscription and noticed the verbs that directed the viewer’s gaze from the vantage point of the palace to the surrounding countryside: “I suspect that this inscription was inscribed near that part of the royal chambers where the king revealed himself to his court and where he was accustomed to sit when he wished to display himself to his subjects. With this in mind we understand immediately why no mention of any particular ruler is made in the inscription: it referred to all those who might be king of Sicily in future.”<sup>41</sup>

Having considered the evidence – his initial transcription and translation of the text and the responses of the continental Orientalists regarding its ambiguities – Morso presented a revised version of the inscription and his conclusions concerning La Zisa. He made no pronouncement on the intriguing question he had raised concerning the patronage of the palace. He pointed out that although the Arabic inscriptions and architectural style suggested that the building was a remnant of the Muslim rulers of Sicily, some speculated that La Zisa dated to the years of Norman rule. And, he himself adduced evidence in favor of Norman authorship: the images of palms and peacocks, both Christian symbols; human representations, proscribed in the Qur’an; the recessed fountain in the form of a Greek cross. He reviewed again the difficulty he had in deciphering the inscription: “Non mi aiutavano le formole coraniche, di cui sogliono abbondare tutte le cufiche iscrizioni; perchè nissuna quivi ritrovasene: Non v’era segno che le lettere potessero comporre una qualche data di tempo: tutto era oscuro ed equivoco” [“The Qur’anic formulas, which abound in all Cufic inscriptions, could give me no help, because none was to be found here; there was no indication of a date; all was obscure and equivocal”]. But he was obliged to abandon his most convincing evidence of Norman construction. Though he initially believed that he had found the name of King Roger in the inscription, he was now convinced by Silvestre de Sacy and Hammer’s arguments that he had been mistaken.<sup>42</sup>

Silvestre de Sacy and Hammer were absolutely correct in their interpretation of the inscription: Roger’s name did not appear where Morso saw it. But it is one of the most delicious ironies of nineteenth-century Siculo-Arabic historiography that Morso, in a way, was also right. Michele Amari, in his work on the Arabic epigraphy of Sicily, would demonstrate that a Norman king did build La Zisa and that the inscription did name him. The king, however, was Roger’s grandson, William II, and the inscription gave his Arabic *‘alama* (or honorific royal title) rather than his Christian name. Amari translated the inscription from a rubbing made for him by a Parisian friend who was able to visit Sicily (as Amari himself, *persona non grata*, could not). The inscription reads (in my translation of Amari’s Arabic transcription):

Whenever you wish, you may regard the best kingdom  
the most exalted realm in the world . . .  
You may see the king of the age in an excellent habitation

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<sup>41</sup> “Atque suspicor hanc inscriptionem circa partem illam regiarum aedium insculptam fuisse, unde patebat prospectus in forum, et ubi Rex sedere solitus erat, quoties subditis se conspiciendum praebere volebat. Quibus positus, statim intelligimus qua de causa nullius certi principis mentio fit in inscriptione, quae ad omnes quotquot futuri erunt Siciliae Reges, pertinebat.” Morso, *Descrizione di Palermo antico* 203-4.

<sup>42</sup> Morso, *Descrizione di Palermo antico* 178-82 and 186.

which merits haughtiness and delight.  
This is the earthly paradise which comes into sight  
That is the *Musta'izz*, and this is the *'Aziz*<sup>43</sup>

William II used *al-Musta'izz*, “the exalted one,” as his honorific title. The word is derived from the same etymological root as the name of the palace – *al-'Aziz*, “the mighty.” The inscription identifies the king of Sicily with his palace and exalts the power and strength of both. In his analysis of the inscription in *Le epigrafi arabiche*, Amari had great fun with the bumbling efforts of previous Orientalists to decipher it. While discussing their Keystone Kops-like stabs at interpretation, he referred the reader to Morso for a full description of “la storia della interpretazione di questa epigrafe, che sarebbe racconto lungo e noioso” [“the history of the interpretation of this epigraph, which would be a long and tedious account”] and spoke graciously of the “ammirevole schiettezza” [“admirable clarity”] of Morso’s transcription.<sup>44</sup> But he did not acknowledge that Morso had himself attempted to link the palace to a Norman monarch half a century earlier.

Amari is remembered today as the greatest of the nineteenth-century Sicilian Orientalists who labored to unearth Sicily’s Muslim history. And so he should be; he not only reconstructed the history of those forgotten centuries through painstaking analysis of obscure and difficult records but also demonstrated the relevance of Sicily’s past to the present day. Atto Vannucci, a Florentine patriot who traveled to Paris for medical reasons and met Amari there, published a review in 1856 of the first volume of the *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia*, which had appeared two years earlier. In it he demonstrated clearly the contemporary relevance of Amari’s historical work. In his history, Vannucci wrote,

[Amari] narrò in rapide e splendide pagine gli antichi rivolgimenti degli Arabi, loro natura e costumi, leggi, ordini militari, arti e commerci, e cause e sviluppi e conseguenze di loro civiltà; e con nuovi documenti mostrò Maometto come riformatore religioso e legislatore più grande del suo secolo, e *fondatore di una democrazia sociale, basata sulla egualità e sulla fratellanza che l’islamismo voleva tra i credenti*: ordinamento che infondendo negli Arabi novella vita, li fece capaci di opere portentose; sistema religioso e politico, semplice, vasto, e ottimo alla prova: poichè, dice l’autore, rigenerò una nazione più prontamente che non l’abbia mai fatto altra legge, e contribuì non poco all’incivilimento di gran parte del genere umano, e si regge tuttavia, nè par disposto a morire. [Emphasis added.]<sup>45</sup>

[narrated in swift and splendid pages the ancient upheavals of the Arabs, their nature and customs, laws, military orders, arts, and commerce and the cause and development and consequences of their civilization; and with new documents, he demonstrated that Muhammad was the greatest religious and legislative reformer of his age *and was the founder of a social democracy based on the equality and brotherhood that the practice of Islam called for among believers*: an order that

<sup>43</sup> Amari, *Le epigrafi arabiche* 81.

<sup>44</sup> Amari, *Le epigrafi arabiche* 78.

<sup>45</sup> Atto Vannucci, “Dei recenti studj sulla antica civiltà arabica e della storia dei musulmani in Sicilia di Michele Amari” 145.

infused a new life in the Arabs and made them capable of portentous works; a simple and vast religious and political system that met the test; for, says the author, it regenerated a people more swiftly than any other law would have done, it contributed not a little to civilizing a great part of the human race, and it endures still, nor does it seem inclined to die.]

Neither the Americans nor the French can take credit for the invention of modern democracy, Vannucci suggests. Rather Amari's history of medieval Sicily identifies the origin of European democracy in the very substance of Islamic revelation – the “social democracy” that Islam demanded of believers – and finds democracy in practice in the Islamic states established in Mediterranean Europe (although Vannucci, like Amari, is interested only in the Sicilian example).

It seems, however, more than mere sentiment to call attention to the other remarkable historians of the Sicilian nineteenth century: Salvatore Cusa and Salvatore Morso. Cusa should be remembered for his introductory essay to his edition of Norman-era documents and for his essay on the palm. While subsequent scholarship has superseded some of his work, his analysis remains erudite and cogent. By moving between the Arabic, Latin, Greek, and Romance traditions without imposing a causal hierarchy on his material – without reference to a narrative of origins and of influence – Cusa models a comparatist reading of Mediterranean literary traditions. And Morso's work is memorable if only because scholars no longer attempt such things – a vivid recreation of a current capital in an earlier stage of its development. Because Morso describes a lost Palermo with reference to another Palermo equally lost to us – he recalls twelfth-century Palermo with nineteenth-century eyes – his work possesses a particularly rich historical veneer. It is twice removed from reality and twice lost to nostalgia.

But modern philologists might come to appreciate and value Cusa's and Morso's work not only for their insights, but also for their shortsightedness, for their subjectivities as well as the objective accuracy of their observations and analysis. Cusa's reading of the contemporary relevance of the Norman era – *it shows Europeans what we are now becoming* – tells us a great deal about how Europeans understood their past and how philologists viewed their project at a given moment during the consolidation of the European nationalisms. In addition, I must confess a particular affection for Morso's anecdote about his misinterpretation of La Zisa. Amari does not give us stories like this. He recounts a tale about the Cuba, the other extramural pleasure palace built by the Normans. At a party in Paris, at the house of the same Sicilian aristocrat who would later send him the rubbings of the epigraphs from La Zisa, Amari heard his host argue with a French historian of architecture about the provenance of the Cuba. The Sicilian aristocrat argued that the Arabs built it; the French historian gave the Normans credit for it. Two years after this overheard conversation, Amari himself would take rubbings of the inscriptions on the Cuba – making them in a rush, on the day before he fled Sicily in 1849. His interpretation of the inscription would prove the French historian right: the Normans had built the Cuba too.<sup>46</sup> This story embodies the qualities for which we love Amari – he was at once an adventurer, a revolutionist, and a careful scholar. His account of Muslim Sicily remains current today for its historical accuracy (C.A. Nallino corrected some of the inevitable omissions in the work for the

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<sup>46</sup> On the inscriptions at the Cuba see Amari, *Epigrafi* 83 and *Diari* 178.



twentieth-century edition) as well as its moral grandeur.<sup>47</sup> Yet Morso's modest story about an intuition that the specialists proved wrong is equally memorable; it possesses a tender beauty, a startling denouement, and an element of truth. Morso got the details wrong but the story right. He argued a hunch and withdrew it when the documentary record contradicted him. Yet in time, the philologists would find evidence to support Morso's intuition: La Zisa, like the Cuba, was a product of Norman ventriloquism of Arab architectural conventions.

I close this swift survey of nineteenth-century Sicilian Orientalism by drawing from it two lessons, the one historiographical and the other methodological. Nineteenth-century Sicilian historiography serves as further corroboration of a thesis which medievalists – those, at least, who work on the cultures of the Mediterranean – have by now come to accept: the “Clash of Civilizations” is a modern invention.<sup>48</sup> Muslim and Christian armies battled each other in the medieval Mediterranean; Muslim and Christian polemicists and theologians anathematized each other in words. But a shared culture undergirds these competitions, from monotheistic readings of an Aristotelian philosophical tradition to the profane love songs sung in Arabic and the Romance vernaculars to common technologies and bureaucratic practices. Recent scholarship proceeds from the assumption that the Muslim and Christian cultures of the medieval Mediterranean functioned – within limits that scholars are still working to define – as “sibling societies” (in historian Richard Bulliet's words<sup>49</sup>), with all the commonalities and the rivalries that the sibling relationship implies. Philologists of the late twentieth and twenty-first century have recognized those historians who worked before us in the linguistic borderlands of the medieval Mediterranean, like the Sicilian Orientalists whose work I have discussed in this essay.

In a methodological context, the work of these scholars illustrates the relevance of the Arabic language to understandings of “European” history and thus constitutes a persuasive argument for encouraging the study of Arabic among our history students (and teaching texts in translation in general education courses). It demonstrates, once again, that philological research regularly responds to contemporary exigencies: we write our histories with an eye on the present. And – taking a cue from the work of Morso and Cusa in particular – this scholarship illuminates a more delicate point: our research, even when we believe we are producing objective scholarship on a scientific model, may be fueled by an inductive leap. Morso's discussion of the inscriptions at La Zisa and Cusa's study of the palm tree deployed astute readings of medieval textual traditions. But when Morso attributed La Zisa to the Normans, when Cusa created a still life of Latin and Arabic etymons rather than use the hermeneutic tool that literary scholars normally use to interpret such phenomena – the “post hoc, ergo propter hoc” narrative of influence – their arguments relied on intuition. More frequently than we care to admit, our work

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<sup>47</sup> C.A. Nallino taught the Arabic language and literature at al-Azhar University in Cairo, was one of the first professors of Arabic at Cairo University, and served in the Italian colonial administration in Libya. He also taught in Palermo from 1905-1913.

<sup>48</sup> For scholarship on contacts between Arabic and Romance letters and between individual Muslims and Christians in the Mediterranean, see for instance Maria Rosa Menocal's *Shards of Love*, Sharon Kinoshita and Jason Jacob's “Ports of Call: Boccaccio's Alatiel in the Medieval Mediterranean,” and the forthcoming collection of essays, *A Sea of Languages* (ed. Akbari and Mallette). But this all too brief bibliography merely plucks three works—one seminal, one more recent, and one yet to appear—from a field that grows richer each year, currently one of the most vibrant areas in medieval studies.

<sup>49</sup> For Bulliet's discussion of the “sibling” relation between Islamic and Christian societies, see *The Case for Muslim-Christian Civilization*, esp. 16-45.

as philologists proceeds by guesswork and hunches – what philologist Leo Spitzer called an “inner click.”<sup>50</sup>

By the same token, all the historians discussed in this essay argued a position that appeared, to some Europeans, unmotivated and that has yet to win over a non-scholarly public (or even an academic public among those who do not specialize in the Middle Ages). By insisting on the European debt to the Arab civilization of the medieval Mediterranean, they distinguished the story they told from standard, normative perceptions of European history. Amari, far and away the most familiar of the names I have mentioned in this essay, is remembered today because his history of Muslim Sicily remains invaluable (but again, that history has not been superseded in part because European historians perceive it as marginal to European history). Although he founded a school of Arabic in Florence, he is not typically named among the fathers of Italian Orientalism. He trained a student, Celestino Schiaparelli, who carried on his work in Siculo-Arabic studies but did not have any successors himself. The great Italian Orientalists of the twentieth century would come from the universities that trained missionaries and colonial functionaries in Naples and Rome. It seems likely that stripped of his romantic biography – the early manifesto on the Sicilian Vespers, the Parisian exile, the triumphant return to Palermo in 1848 and noble defeat in 1849 – Amari’s work on Muslim Sicily would be more obscure today. And if he had not supported the right causes – Sicilian autonomy in 1848 and Italian unification in 1860 – his reputation would be more tenuous still. Given all that distances them from us, it requires a prodigious intellectual effort indeed to reconstruct the more radical elements of Amari’s, Morso’s, and Cusa’s historiography: their capacity to think a Mediterranean philology that encompasses and mediates between Latin, Greek, and Arabic and their commitment to the futurity of their philology, their belief that the Mediterranean past has something to teach Europeans about their future.

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<sup>50</sup> Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History* 6-7. For a more extensive discussion of philology that relies on inductive arguments, see my *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean* (University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

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