Sicily

The geographical location of Sicily in the central Mediterranean, between the mainland areas now referred to as Italy and Tunisia, largely determined the complex linguistic history of the island in the ancient and Medieval periods. Thus, for most of the Classical and early Medieval periods (ca. 835 B.C.E.–535 C.E.), dialects of Greek and Latin came to predominate over the miscellany of tongues used by a range of indigenous and immigrant peoples. In addition, Neo-Punic was also attested but to a much lesser extent, and only in the west of the island. Nonetheless, the Romano-African author Apuleius could still speak of the *Siculi trilingues* in the mid-2nd century C.E., a reference to multilingualism that was picked up again a millennium later. However, on the eve of the Arab-Muslim invasion from Aghlabid Ifrīqiyā that precipitated the disintegration of Byzantine rule (535–827 C.E.), forms of Sicilian Greek are thought to have been the island's main language, although the extent to which Latinate dialects had continued to coexist remains a matter of debate.

The subsequent Muslim conquest and settlement not only introduced Islam as the main religion but with it Arabic as the island's prestigious new lingua franca. These factors strongly determined the direction of acculturation for both the indigenous and immigrant population as a colony of Ifrīqiyā under Arab-Islamic rule (827–ca. 1072 C.E.). During this period, the Byzantine Greek church in Sicily came close to total collapse, yet there remained strong concentrations of Christian influence in the mixed communities of the island's north-eastern corner, and to some degree this is borne out by the mottled distribution of Arabic and Greek toponymy. Although there is little reason to doubt the Arabic sources' claim that most people converted to Islam, the remaining Christian communities, whose strong religious identity was bound up with the Greek language of their liturgy, intermittently provided stiff resistance throughout the two centuries of Muslim rule. Consequently, by the end of the Islamic period, many of these Sicilian Christians were likely to have succumbed to varying degrees of Arabic-Greek bilingualism, while the majority of the island's population was Arabic speaking and Muslim. The main urban environments, which were probably subject to substantial repopulation, quickly appear to have assumed an Arab-Islamic character, with political and cultural life being heavily concentrated in the island's largest town, Palermo. In contrast, sketchy evidence suggests that inland rural areas underwent much slower processes of social, religious, and linguistic assimilation. A small number of short-lived colonies were established on the south Italian mainland and possibly in Sardinia, too, while the peripheral southerly islands of Pantelleria and Malta were repopulated with Arabic speakers, whose dialects would persist beyond those of the Sicilians. Whether these islands were populated from Sicily or North Africa or both is unknown, while many of the arguments designed to describe the relationship between Sicilian Arabic and Medieval Maltese have proved difficult to establish with certainty.

If Berber dialects managed to survive at all in the crowded and competitive language situation of fiercely anti-Berber Sicily, their impact has left barely the faintest trace in Sicilian Arabic, and no convincing examples can be found in later Romance-based Sicilian dialects. A small amount of Sicilian toponymy reflects Berber tribal names.

The Norman period (ca. 1061–ca. 1194) witnessed the chaotic end to Muslim dynastic rule, the introduction of the Latin church, and a wide range of colonists from the European mainland. A new ruling elite began to emerge which increasingly included 'Latin' Christians who were not native to the island, as well as some Muslims, converts, and multilingual Christian administrators. In addition, overwhelming numbers of settlers were attracted from the Italian mainland, particularly from the northern regions covered by modern Piedmont, Liguria, and Lombardy. Thus, to a large extent, the introduction of Arabic-speaking elites and colonists along with the socioreligious and

linguistic assimilation toward Arab-Islamic norms that had been brought by the Muslim conquests were reversed in the Norman period.

Arabic was said by independent Medieval Arabic sources (Ibn Saʿīd al-Maġribī and Ibn Jubayr) to be known by the Norman kings and was prominent as the principal working language of the royal palaces and fiscal administration. Nonetheless, in the light of a deteriorating politico-religious situation around the island from the 1160s, its association with Islam was viewed negatively by the recent settlers and insurgent landholding classes whose miscellaneous Italo- and Gallo-Romance dialects unambiguously identified them as adherents of the Latin church. As such, the prestige of Arabic as one of the royally adopted languages of inscriptions, coinage, and chancery documents cannot always be reconciled with its decline outside the palaces. Similarly, Frederick II's (d. 1250) harsh repression of the Sicilian Muslims did nothing to reduce his eclectic use of Oriental imports that consciously echoed his Norman predecessors in Palermo.

The survival of a few Arabic terms in later Sicilian dialects (e.g. *cajitu* 'local leader' < *qāʾid; taibbu* 'a fine wine' < *ṭayyib* 'good'; *defetari* 'record books' < *dafātir; saia* 'water-irrigation channel' < *sāqiya*) suggests a degree of transitory Romance-Arabic bilingualism in some quarters. However, given the relatively brief (ca. 1100–ca. 1250), antagonistic, and privileged presence of Romance-speaking Christian settlers in areas where the low-prestige language of the Muslims was also used, forms of Latin-Arabic bilingualism were presumably short-lived by comparison with the much longer history of Greek-Arabic social intermingling, religious conversion, acculturation, and bilingualism on the island (ca. 850–ca. 1250). If Muslims were assimilated into Christian communities during the 12th and 13th centuries, the evidence points to absorption principally by their old bilingual Greek neighbors, rather than by the immigrant, nonindigenous 'Latin' communities. For their part, under renewed Christian rule of the Norman period, the bilingual Arabic-Greek Christians are thought to have increasingly resorted back to Greek dialects, which were becoming ever more Italo-Greek in nature. However, many of the finer details of this period's complex socioreligious history that underpin considerations about the wider language situation cannot be established with certainty, and were evidently subject to many local variations.

It is clear that even prior to the year 1100 many Muslims who could afford to had quickly abandoned the island for the safety of North Africa, al-Andalus, or Egypt. In doing so, the island's intellectual output in Arabic virtually collapsed, with al-ʾIdrīsī and Ibn Qalāqis the most notable (but nonnative) authors of the Norman period. The island's remaining Muslims became ever more concentrated in the regions toward the southwest of the island. A long series of Muslim revolts began in 1189 and ended with large-scale deportations to the colony of Lucera on the Italian mainland during the 1220s and 1240s under Frederick II. The rapid decline of Arabic on the island from the end of the 12th century was thus accelerated even further during the 13th. Arabic continued to be used in the large Lucera colony until its dissolution in 1300, while forms of Judeo-Arabic persisted on the island until the expulsion of the Jews at the end of the 15th century (Rocco 1995). Apart from the Jews, it is doubtful whether the remaining population of Arabic speakers, which now consisted of increasingly exiguous numbers of bilingual Christians and converts from Islam, could have reproduced themselves for very long as Arabic-speaking communities on Sicily much beyond ca. 1250.

Along with al-Andalus, the multilingual environment of Sicily provided a medium of transmission for a relatively small amount of Arabic vocabulary into various modern European languages. In almost all cases, these consist of nouns, and most are derived from the fields of commerce, technology, and material culture. Although later Medieval and modern Sicilian dialects are distinguished from other Italian dialects by the presence of Arabic interferences and loanwords, those elements are both slight and superficial, the language having been effectively obliterated by events of the 13th century. Most Arabic loanwords in Italo-Romance dialects of the later Medieval period are nouns that relate to the fields of daily life activities, commerce, flora, fauna, farming, fishing, and physical geography (Pellegrini 1972; Caracausi 1983). There are relatively very few adjectives or adverbial expressions, and it might be noted that lexical items in

Italian dialects that derive from Arabic are significantly increased by inclusion of the exceptional dialect of the remote island of Pantelleria. The likelihood that some Arabic interferences and/or loan words might have been introduced by migrants from the Spanish peninsula while Sicily was under Spanish rule for 400 years until 1713 compounds the problem of describing the relationship between Andalusi and Sicilian Arabic. Indeed, the same problem of interference from the Iberian Peninsula cannot be excluded from the study of Sicilian surnames derived from Arabic. Nor can one exclude the largely undocumented transmission of Arabic terms into Italianate dialects from the seventy thousand Italian, mainly Sicilian, workers who were living and working in Tunisia by the 1880s (where there was also a strong Maltese presence), or from soldiers serving in North Africa during the Second World War. Toward the end of the 20th century, a few thousand migrant workers from Tunisia have come to live and work mainly around the southern Sicilian ports, but they have had a negligible impact on the island's main dialects to date.

In spite of its obvious interest, the study of Medieval Sicilian Arabic is still in its infancy. Scholarly pioneering efforts have now recorded and classified nonspeculative examples of Arabic elements in later Sicilian dialects, and these have been accompanied by works seeking to outline the phonetic features of Sicilian Arabic and highlight resemblances to Maltese and Andalusi Arabic. Attention is now refocusing on the complex underlying problems of methodology and the need to establish reliable readings from the source material, as well as a reexamination of the wider language situation and the particular contexts in which the linguistic evidence occurs. As such, the perception of the limits and possibilities surrounding these issues is likely to undergo continuing revision.

Of written material containing some element of Arabic, excluding those merely appended with Arabic signatures or witness lists, there are 33 extant royal *dīwānī* and 22 private documents (Cusa; Johns 2002:301–325). These date from between 1095 and 1242, with the majority issued between 1133 and 1183. A few exist in fragmentary form, but almost all are in legible condition, being written mainly on durable and high-quality parchment. They consist of endowment charters, privileges, donations, decrees, writs, a draft loan agreement, deeds of sale and purchase, various letters patent (one of which is in Judaeo-Arabic), inquest proceedings, and sometimes long descriptions of boundaries (*jarā'id al-ḥudūd*) and lists of men (*jarā'id ar-rijāl)* who lived on crown lands. Most of the *jarā'id* were bilingual (Arabic-Greek), although one significant and extensive boundary definition was composed in Arabic and Latin. In many cases of bilingual documents, the Greek or Latin had been translated or transcribed from the Arabic. The vast majority are available for consultation in state, regional, and church archives in Sicily, although a handful of important Arabic documents are located in the Archivo de Casa Ducal de Medinaceli in Toledo, where their availability is restricted. Almost all the Arabic charter material currently located in Sicily was published between 1868 and 1882 (Cusa, *Diplomi*). This edition, which was reprinted in 1982 without additions or corrections, contains neither proper indices nor translations. Moreover, it is well known to be riddled with errors that continue to undermine the reliability of attempts at investigating Sicilian Arabic from a detailed linguistic perspective. International projects are now underway to produce modern critical editions of all the material.

The *Biblioteca arabo-sicula* (*BAS*) contains extracts of most Medieval authors who have written about Sicily in Arabic. Very few of these authors were native to the island, and their contribution is to our understanding of Sicily's history, geography, and poetry rather than its language. There is no extant Sicilian Arabic poetry in colloquial form equivalent to the Andalusi *zajal*. A collection of the Arabic inscriptions of Sicily was originally recorded by Michele Amari (*Le epigrafi arabiche*).

A single source of *laḥn al-'āmma* 'mistakes of the common people' literature survives for Sicily, written by Ibn Makkī, who emigrated from the island in the second half of the 11th century. While his comments on the speech errors of the *ʿāmma* and *xāṣṣa* are ultimately inconclusive, he makes some intriguing observations relating to morphology, hypercorrections, and gender switching (Agiùs 1996:123–157). However, the force of these observations remains open to interpretation.

Many deviations from Classical Arabic norms that are found in Sicilian Arabic are quite

usual for the loose scribal conventions found in Medieval Arabic administrative texts. Not uncommon examples of Sicilian Middle Arabic include inconsistent use of the relative adjective, the dual form, avoidance of double *ʾiḍāfa*, and a tendency toward analytic possessive constructions (Agiùs 1996:401–403). A very commonly attested characteristic of Sicilian Arabic was the use of noun duplication to indicate extent, e.g. *aṭ-ṭarīq aṭ-ṭarīq* 'right along the road'. The origin of this construction may be Greek, and finds parallels in contemporary Sicilian Latin as well as modern Sicilian dialects.

Given the large-scale immigration into Sicily during the Arab-Islamic period, one might reasonably expect that Sicilian Arabic would be related to whatever Arabic dialects were spoken in Aghlabid and Fatimid Ifrīqiyā, particularly in the coastal towns from where most settlers seem to have originated. However, linguistic evidence to corroborate this is minimal, conspicuous examples being *k.nīsya* for *kanīsa, zawj* 'two', and *m.tāʾ* 'belonging to' (Sgroi 1986). Several variants of the Maghribi form *bi-z-zāf* 'in excess, much' are attested in Sicilian dialect but significantly not before the 16th century. It should also be pointed out that neither Medieval documents nor later dialects offer any evidence of Maghribi aspectual markers or 1st person verb forms in Sicilian Arabic. Occasionally, there is found some → *maġribī* pointing in both royal and private documents, although this may merely indicate the provenance of a particular scribe. Indeed, since the fiscal administration (Arabic *dīwān*) of the Normans came to be based on the offices of Fatimid Cairo, it is not inconceivable that some of the scribes who worked in Sicily were from Egypt. One might note, for example, in a boundary description of crown lands, the use of *baḥrī* and *qiblī* to indicate 'north' and 'south'. Not only is this usage particularly associated with Egypt, but one also wonders whether *baḥrī* could ever have been used in this way on an island where every direction is necessarily 'seaward' (De Simone 1986:483–484). The possibility that non-Sicilian scribes were employed in the Norman Sicilian *dīwān* thus poses a threat to wider linguistic and diplomatic comparisons.

The exceptional importance of the Arabic material in Sicily lies in the fact that many documents are bilingual, and Arabic-Greek documents in particular offer the most reliable opportunity to reconstruct aspects of Sicilian Arabic phonology (De Simone 1979). For example, the letters *ʾalif* and *fatḥa* were consistently rendered in Greek with *epsilon* (rather than *alpha*), suggesting the strong presence of *ʾimāla* (fronting of *a*) in Sicilian Arabic. In addition, the Greek transcriptions of Arabic vowels suggest the inhibition of *ʾimāla* in the environment of the emphatic consonants. Evidence for *tafxīm* (velarization) is also common, and there is some suggestion that nasalization may have been a common feature of the island's main 12th-century dialects. For example, we find Sicilian Arabic *inǧāṣa* 'a pear orchard' for Classical Arabic *ʾijjāṣa*, and *ḥajjām* > χαγγέμης 'a barber', from which the modern Sicilian surname 'Cangemi' is derived. Similarly, although the Arabic letter *ḍāʾ* is sometimes found represented by a Greek *delta*, rather than a *zeta*, this type of observation begs questions about the phonology of Sicilian Greek, orthographic consistency, and the route of transmission of Sicilian Arabic elements. Evidence that might have provided a means to reconstruct Sicilian Arabic stress patterns by noting where the corresponding accent was marked in Greek transliterations has proved inconsistent to date.

Sicilian Arabic is distinguished by a small number of loanwords and interferences from South Italian Greek dialects (Caracausi 1990) and Gallo-Romance (Várvaro 1981:196–204). According to some researchers, hybrid forms with Arabic and Romance elements attested in later Romance-based Sicilian dialect are evidence that Sicilian Arabic underwent varying degrees of pidginization and creolization of a type which parallel linguistic developments in Maltese (Agiùs 1996). It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of examples of this hybrid type are attested in later Romance-based Sicilian dialects or Sicilian Greek, and there are doubts about the reliability and validity of arguments that seek to infer the nature of Sicilian Arabic anachronistically from non-Arabic dialects of later periods. Recent works have raised concerns over the linguistic status of many of these hybrid forms since they are often attested in translations and transumpts written by scribes with a strong tendency toward code-switching and whose loose concepts of how to write the words of one language in another

often included a capricious blend of translation and transliteration (Metcalfe 2001). This has undoubtedly cast a veil over the evidence and, as such, the wider implications of Romance and/or Greek elements attested in Sicilian Arabic itself, e.g. *al-kh.nzārī* 'pig farmer' (< *xinzīr* + Romance *-ari(us)*), remain as intriguing as they are uncertain.

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