

The Muslim Evidence of Medieval Sicily. The Case of Enna

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ABSTRACT

This paper comes from the analysis of the written documents on the city of Enna (Italy), made on a research experience that, starting from the 70's, has interested many medieval towns of the Island, based on the observation that in the history of the city, beyond the evidences and the written sources, the same urban areas constitute a fundamental foundation of knowledge

Keywords: Muslim; medieval topography; toponymy, cartography, archive records.

INTRODUCTION

Enna is located in the central Sicily (**fig: 1**); is an impressive natural fortress that due to its geographical position in the center of the Island, was known since Antiquity as *umbilicus Siciliae* and *urbs inexpugnabilis* (**fig: 2**). This city always been an important connecting marker in the Sicily; it is maintained its central role in its road linked to several small rural settlements on



Figure1. Sicily in the Mediterranean area



Figure2. Enna “Umbilicus Siciliae”

This paper comes from an examination for the possible Islamic records in the urban area of

the Inner part of the island promoted by Roman agrarian at the expense of the big old cities (Asheri:1983). The major roads passed across the *Hennae castrum* in Roman and Byzantine age, classical example of military stronghold controlling the district. After the Islamic domination over the 9-11th centuries the city conquered by Normans has had a leading role in the central Sicily.

Enna in medieval age, based on written sources and old cartography, according to a research experience that, starting from the 70's, has interested many medieval towns of the Sicily (Guidoni: 1974; Guidoni: 1979) based on the statement that in the history of the city, beyond the testimonies and written sources, the same urban areas constitute an important base of knowledge.

DISCUSSION

From the sources (Cracco Ruggini: 1980) we know that between the 6th and 12th centuries, Enna, classical example of “*castrum*” in the Byzantine era, strong Muslim centre, isolated by the Normans, but reborn between the 13th and 14th centuries, is still an important city in the middle of the island, next to the urban centers of Agrigento in the west and Syracuse to the east.

The Islamic conquest constitutes one of the most important phases that left significant traces in the cultural and political-administrative framework of the island as well as in the typology of settlement of many Mediterranean historical centers, where the incidence of the Islamic phase is still very present and

documentable (Casamento et Al:1984).¹

Also Enna, conquered by Muslims in the year 254 of Hegira (858-859) (Amari 1881) had to continue having a leading role, so as to be fully Islamized, as shows the analysis of urbanized structure, particularly the persistence of the scheme alleyway - courtyard, which survived up until today, can be traced back to the age of the consolidation of settlement system, coinciding for Sicily with the Islamic period (Guidoni: 1974).

The influence of urban culture in the Islamic world on the origin and development of urban settlements of Sicily is recognized mainly in general characters of the urban areas through its transformation in time: the hierarchy between the locations and the routes, the separation between the fortified spaces and the residential spaces, the organization of residential areas into real parts of the city (“*madina*”) and in different villages, as, for example, the *Rabati* of sicilian toponymy.

The study of the Islamized towns on the island in particular has permitted to highlight useful types for the understanding of building neighborhoods and specifying a key offered from persistent urbanization and toponymy, whose validity is observable even in Enna’s case (fig: 3).

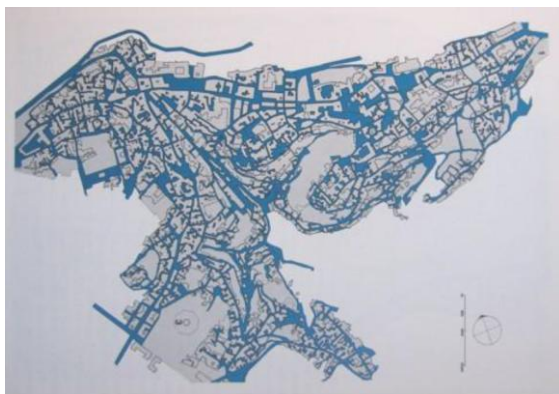


Figure3. Enna. Plan of the city revised on the photogrammetric survey (by Casamento et Al. 1984)

The town of Enna might have had in Islamic age an very reduced extension compared to the current one, as it appears from the analysis of

nineteenth-century cartographic documentation, consisting mostly of cadastral maps.²

The importance of the city is determined by the central position within the new province, as the center of political-military control, but also exploitation of the territory, thanks to the introduction of technical innovations and new cultures.

The description of Edrisi, dated between 1139 and 1154 (Amari 1880-81; Amari Schiapparelli 1985) may be considered a summary of the evolution of the city in the Islamic period. In addition to the religious buildings, also the main buildings of the city are mentioned, new or restructured, including the castle, the markets, the industries and the palaces. The city seems rich and magnificent. New economic incomes come from the market: *Qasr Yani* constitutes that is a must for merchants and travelers who converge into the city by the main roads that connect to the coastal centers. This richness makes us assume that in the Islamic age the town was maybe equipped with facilities of great significance, including a congregational mosque next to a “*hammam*”, who would have been part of the center, a medina, worthy of a city so important, especially in connection with the settlement of Kaid Ibn al Hawwas in 1040.

From the sources we know how the city was reorganized and was being rebuilt soon after the Islamic conquest, as evidence of how the new rulers considered it a key outpost, being the city of the utmost importance of central Sicily.³ The Muslim chronicles (Amari 1881) inform us that *Al ‘Abbas*, that has just entered into the city, accommodated a mosque, inside of which, raised the *mimbar*, pronounced the *hutbah*, the official sermon of Fridays. In the years after *Al Abbas*, already settled in Palermo, immediately restored the fortification of the city, that as of now is named *Qasr Yanah*, with evident Islamization of ancient Byzantine toponym. All the urban area undergoes a radical reorganization, it is adapted to the needs of the new rulers. *Qasr Yani* assumes a hierarchical organization, characteristic of the Islamic

² Within the framework of the cartographic documentation the maps of 1876 were examined and updates of the years 1897 and 1921.

³ From Muslim sources we also know that following the conquest of Syracuse, the *Castrum* of Enna, becomes the center of Byzantine strategic military command identified by Muslims as the new capital of the Island.

¹ In Sicily Muslim records would be visible in the urban centres of Menfi (AG), Palermo, Trapani, Agrigento, Siracusa, and in the territory, in Enna, Assoro and Calascibetta.

system, articulating itself into distinct areas. This assumption could explain also the persistence of the road system the different settlement areas of *Qasr Yani* are developed according to the morphology of the territory: the intersections of the mount, in fact, constitutes natural joints that are still inhabited today. It is likely that the center of the city was maintained over the centuries, more or less in the same position, but with a shorter extension with respects to the current one.

The city was supposed to be divided into different areas: a *medina*, an administrative religious center, an *Harat al Isqlabah* (the neighborhood of the “Schiavoni), a *rabbato* -in other words- a suburb and also a Greek district, which would correspond to the current one, outside of the living neighborhood.

The *Medina* would have occupied the area west of the fortress, east end of the plateau, and would have focused on the two sides of the *shar*, to be identified by the way of the “via Roma”. Here was where the congregational mosque was located, where today we find the actual church of St. Michael, as well as the *hammam* and the *souk*, which would have had its popularity in the current plan of the main church.

The centrality of this area may be at risk also by examining the paths of the processions, subject addressed by other Sicilian towns because it provides important news on the extension of the city centre and on the hierarchy of areas in which it is divided (Guidoni: 1980). In Enna, although the processions were instituted later, they provided a path that from the main church reached up to the other major churches of the city, to mark the importance of the road corresponding to the current route “via Roma”.

A major source from which we can find news about the islamic city of *Qasr Yani* can be found in the documentation used in the buying and the selling of a house, dating 1193 (Cusa 1882:496) agreed to by a Christian and a Muslim.

However, the document that constitutes the first source that precisely nominates a city gate, speaks of a “*Harat al-Isqlabah*”: the neighborhood of the “Schiavoni”, identifiable with an area close to the current Giudecca, probably the one to the South, or even part of it, since it is specified in this document that the road that crosses it, starting from the "salt pit" (*al-Bir al-malih*) joined it at an open space

(*fushah*) of *Bab al-barah*, which was translated as "the door of the plain", a word which may indicate both the plain, but more likely an open space which opened in front of the door.

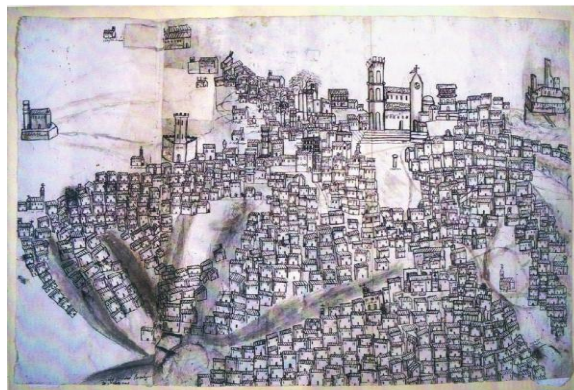


Figure4. The city as seen by Jacopo Assorino 1584 (by Muratore, Munafò 1991)

Other gates are reported only from later sources such as the view of friar Jacopo Assorino of 1584 (Muratore-Munafò:1991)⁴ which refers to the door of “Scirasa” (fig. 4); or 18th century manuscript between Friar Giovanni de Cappuccini (Fra Giovanni dei Cappuccini: 1754) that nominates Porta (door) Palermo, of Port Salvo, Scirasa, Janniscuro, Pisciotto, Papardura, Kamuth, of Acqua Novas). Another scholar, V. Amico (Di Marzo: 1856), mentions Porta S. Agata together with those reported by friar Giovanni de Cappuccini (fig. 5).



Figure5. The old city gates on the basis of the sources (by D. Patti and A. Plumari)

Another important record is referring to a document dated 1575, shortly before the view of Assorino, prohibiting people and goods from entering to avoid the contagious illness of the plague. Surely, even in the Islamic age the most important issue the city of Enna is linked to the need to strengthen the defenses of the site. As in

⁴ The city as seen by Jacopo Assorino (1584). The document shall be kept at the Angelican Library of Rome. BSNS 56/5.

the Byzantine era, the town has a Citadel, which is separate but adjacent to the town, located in the area of what today is known as the castle of Lombardia. As for the rest of the city, it does not seem surrounded by walls, we can see strategic advantages offered by its natural configuration, but with sections of wall only in the most accessible and least defensible areas. The water wealth is the second important characteristic of the city.

It is likely that the new occupants, the heirs of a technical-scientific notion, evolved on the exploitation of water resources, have placed it between the main concerns. Although the dating on the structures investigated is uncertain, there are many wells which were found under the dwellings and were called "Arabs". It would be interesting also going deeper in the studies of the underground tunnels that cross the city and that could have constituted the canalization system. The salt water well (*al-Bir al-malih*) as mentioned in the Buying and Selling Act of 1193 may refer to one of these underground facilities or otherwise refer to similar ones located near the castle and speak of later sources (Littara's manuscript 1582),⁵ all in agreement in stressing the richness of running water in all of the plateau, already reported by Arab chronicles (Amari 1881).

An important issue relating to the subdivision of the city in Islamic age is offered by the *Rabato* toponym, used by the popular oral tradition to identify the area of St. Augustine, but still of uncertain identification since the term appears in two notary acts respectively from 1642 and 1820,⁶ in which topographical references are not shown. Rabbato, known as suburb, outside the city walls, was supposedly built in the Islamic era in continuity with the existing urban area that would have concentrated along the main roads. Other districts would have been built near the town but outside the walls. It is likely that one of them was the area of the Greeks, which still has this designation, overlooking the Valley of Pisciotto in the west. The toponym recalls Greece of some Calabrian towns including

⁵ In the scene of friar Jacopo Assorino is shown a well overlooking the Cathedral. The scholar Littara in 1577 refers to a well located on the cliff, but unutilized due to dangerous position and for its deepness. The well is also mentioned in Amico and subsequently in Lo Menzo. Especially Amico refers to an existing well in the first courtyard of the castle.

⁶ This map is preserved at the State Archive of Enna. *Historical Archive of CastroGiovanni*, Notarial Fund 233.

Catanzaro and S. Severina. It is likely that in this case they are referring to a rocky neighborhood, as we can see from a high concentration of caves in this area. It is likely that there were rock settlements also in other areas of the mountain, especially on the walls that surround the Valley of Pisciotto.⁷

On the site of an old leaved cave church, the "Papardura sanctuary" was built in the late seventeenth century; differently not verified is the tradition in the cave of "Spezieria" - important in Greek Age- that is identified in the Cave of St. Pancrazio, Syrian monk, then bishop of Taormina, who is believed to have converted the *fullones* dedicated to working linen and hemp. A marker of this tradition could be a toponym by which an area of this district (Valley Pisciotto) is indicated. The cult of St. Pancrazio, with a church to him dedicated, is documented in Enna in the *Rationes Decimarum* for the years 1308-1310. Nowadays the Cave of the Saints is very important due to the presence of the precious frescoes of the XII century, as well as the location of the chapel compared to the viability system towards the town of Enna. Particularly important is the fresco of St. Nicholas, the previous protector of the city, whose cult was replaced in 1412 by the Virgin of Visitazione.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the urban area of the city would bring, therefore, to a confirmation of Islamic influence. The presence of alley-courtyard is present in different areas of the city.

They are, in fact, present in the central area, in the South East spur, in the area rearward of S. Cataldo Church and in the area of Fundrìsi.

The only area that remains completely excluded is the western most area, the most modern one.

⁷ Archaeological research has allowed us to highlight some issues, so far considered secondary, linked to the particularly diffused presence of rock units, relevant to a real underground city. They are particularly diffused along the southeast border of the city between the Church of the Santo Spirito (Janniscuro area) and the Church of the Passione, up until the viaduct of Via Pergusa; but also includes the borders with the churches of San Leone and Valverde to the castle of Lombardy.

This type of housing is more than a chronological indication, a model that, introduced during the Islamic occupation, remains in Sicilian culture, in later centuries, even today.

The presence of toponyms, urban tracks, constitute valuable indicators of the influence exercised over the city during the Muslim occupation.

The urban component cannot be merely the result of a stable and lasting settlement, which surely manifested itself in other areas still poorly known. Awaiting the publication of the latest surveys conducted in the area of the Castle, the highlighting of the issues examined might provide us with new elements for understanding the settlement phase of Islamic age in Enna, which goes, without a doubt, undoubtedly recognized the important role played within the province of *Dar al Islam*.

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