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ARAB-MUSLIM ACCOUNTS OF MEDIEVAL SICILY AND THE QUR'ĀN: AN INTERTEXTUAL READING

Nesma Elsakaan

The meaning of a text depends [...] on the kinds of connections made in a particular community between it and other texts.

Jay Lemke¹

Sicily was one of the most important destinations that attracted travellers in medieval times. Many Muslim historians, geographers and poets wrote about this Mediterranean island that had been ruled by Arabs for more than two centuries. Arab-Muslim accounts of Sicily have been a rich subject to study from a range of points of view. This chapter compares Muslim accounts of medieval Sicily with texts from the Qur'ān and prophetic narrations.² The major focus is to trace the similar themes and semantics within these texts. The objective of this comparative study is to demonstrate that Muslim travellers'

¹ Jay L. Lemke, 'Intertextuality and Text Semantics', in *Discourse in Society: Systemic Functional Perspectives: Meaning and Choice in Language: Studies for Michael Halliday*, edited by Peter H. Fries and Michael Gregory (Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1995), 85.

² In this chapter, I use the term 'medieval' to refer to Sicily between 800 and 1300. For more about medieval Sicily, see Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Sicily* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), and Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

descriptions of the Sicilian landscape and people were influenced by their religion, which had shaped their culture and identity. Their representation of Sicily, its landscape and people is permeated by references and allusions to the Islamic tradition. In order to address the intersection between religious and historical texts, I will read these sources intertextually. I claim that the Sicilian landscape evoked Qur'ānic imagery and themes in the minds of Muslim travellers. The analysis will demonstrate how this led them to adopt Qur'ānic language and themes in the description of various aspects of the island. The connection that Muslim travellers made between Sicily and the Qur'ān reveals that, for them, the value of this island was almost holy as it reminded them of God and His magnificence.

One may question whether it is valid to compare human texts and the Qur'ān's sacred discourse. In 2016, Angelika Neuwirth wrote that . . .

. . . the connection between literary discourses and their Qur'ānic predecessors is usually bypassed in present scholarly works on profane Arabic literature. There is still a reluctance to involve the Qur'ān in literary debates – too remote is the field of Qur'ānic Studies from Literary Studies. Or more precisely: the Qur'ān is still being considered something apart from literature, be it as a sacred text, or a text whose origins are considered precarious.³

This excerpt was taken from the foreword to a book that Neuwirth was praising for investigating the Qur'ān's influence on the system of *adab*⁴ and its

³ Angelika Neuwirth, 'Foreword', in Sarah R. Bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Pre-modern Arabic Prose* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), vii.

⁴ The term *'adab* corresponds, more or less, to what we mean by literature today. However, literature as a modern conceptualisation of literary texts is not an accurate translation of the word *'adab*. The first reason is that *'adab* refers to premodern literary texts. The second is that, according to Wolfhart Heinrichs, it connotes three dimensions: '(1) "good, correct, polite behaviour", (2) "a genre of anecdotal and anthological literature which serves as a quarry of quotable materials (*muḥāḍarāt*) for the bel-esprit", and (3) "a body of knowledge in the linguistic and literary field which comprises the genre of literature just mentioned, but include further ancillary disciplines like grammar etc."' Bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose*, 9. For more on the definition of *'adab*, see Nuha Alshaar, 'Introduction: The Relation of *Adab* to the Qur'an: Conceptual and Historical Framework', in *The Qur'an and Adab: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam*, edited by Nuha Alshaar (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2017), 6–11.

artistic language. My concern is to be part of the scholarship examining how Muslim writers drew on the Qur'ān to encode meanings that would resonate with their readers and to show how this influenced the development of Arabic literary and historical texts. I agree with Sarah Bin Tyeer when she says that 'Arab-Islamic literary and artistic endeavours where premodern,⁵ and to some degree modern and contemporary literary expressions, show a continuum of influence with [. . .] the Qur'ān, and its influence on the creative process'.⁶ Nevertheless, the concern of this study is not to investigate the religious behaviours of the Muslim travellers that I discuss here. Rather, it is to explore how the religious nuance enriches literary and historical writings.

Methodological Approach

In this chapter, I will undertake an intertextual reading, comparing a selection of Arab accounts of medieval Sicily with the Qur'ānic text. More precisely, I will focus on the thematic and semantic relations between these texts. To do this, I will use the thematic model of Jay L. Lemke, according to which . . .

. . . the texts may not share words, but use thematically equivalent synonymous or even figurative expressions. It is *semantic* patterns that the texts must share: the intertextual tie is stronger as more semantic relations among equivalent thematic items are shared between texts.⁷

Lemke points out that 'intertextual relations transcend the context of situation and depend on context of culture'.⁸ Hence, the analysis of meaning should be considered according to the social, historical and cultural dimensions of the community.⁹ In my analysis, I will shed light on the religious experience and on memory to demonstrate why the travellers examined in

⁵ In Bin Tyeer's book, the term 'premodern' refers to the Arab-Islamic literary tradition until the nineteenth century.

⁶ Bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose*, 2.

⁷ Lemke, 'Intertextuality and Text Semantics', 91.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹ Xiaxia E. Xue, 'An Intertextual Discourse Analysis of Romans 9:30–10:13', in *Modeling Biblical Language*, edited by Stanley E. Porter et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 279.

this chapter were so impacted by specific features of the landscape of Sicily and by the customs of its people. Lemke also talked about the use of ‘thematic formations’, which he defined as ‘a recurrent pattern of semantic relations used in talking about a specific topic from text to text’.¹⁰ Usually, writers employ patterns (repeated words or phrases) which are common to a specific community. According to Lemke, ‘the thematic formation abstracts from its stances in one or more texts the common lexicogrammatical semantic relations [. . .] actually shared by the texts’.¹¹ It is these relations on which I will focus in the travellers’ descriptions of nature and traditional customs in medieval Sicily.

The Corpus

This chapter analyses portions of the following texts:

1. *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma‘ādin al-jawhar* and *Al-Tanbīh wa-l-‘ashrāf* by Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956);
2. *Tuhfat al-‘albāb wa nukhbat al-‘iḥjāb* by Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1170);
3. *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fi ‘ikhtirāq al-‘āfāq* by Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad al-Idrīsī (d. 1166);
4. *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik* by Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad Ibn Ḥawqal (d. 977).

It is important to note that this study does not aim to provide a historical or political reinterpretation of the examined accounts. Also, it is not relevant whether the testimony of these travellers was the result of their own observation or based on second-hand information. Instead, this article unearths the intertextual relations between their accounts and the Qur’ān. As with many authors in premodern and modern times, the Qur’ān inspired Muslim travellers in direct and indirect ways. This is because the language used in the sacred text to describe the scenes of Hell and Paradise is very subjective and has

¹⁰ Lemke, ‘Intertextuality and Text Semantics’, 91.

¹¹ Ibid., 91–92.

strongly affected many Arab writers, linguistically and artistically.¹² Indeed, as Roberto Tottoli noted: 'Eschatology constitutes one of, if not the, major topics of the Quran and early Muslim traditions (hadith)'.¹³ This chapter examines how this is evident in the Arab-Muslim travellers' discourses on features of the natural world in Sicily, such as volcanoes, rivers and vegetation.

Arab accounts of medieval Sicily have been widely studied by historians searching for fundamental information on the island and its history during and after Muslim domination. Historians have found a rich resource in the very important work of the Italian scholar Michele Amari (d. 1889), *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, first published in 1880. Amari compiled Arab travellers' writings on Sicily in a collection that displays the texts in both the original language and Italian translation. The main scholarly works on these accounts have engaged with their historical, geographical, social and political aspects.¹⁴ However, analysis of the linguistic features has been largely neglected due to the fact that most of the scholars in this field are historians. This is not to say that this kind of analysis did not arouse any attention at all. There are some survey histories

¹² Cf. Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); idem (ed.), *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Samuela Pagani, 'Un paradiso in terra: Il *Ḥammām* e l'economia della salvezza', in *Hammam: Le terme nell'islam*, edited by Rosita d'Amora and Samuela Pagani (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2015), 133–58.

¹³ Roberto Tottoli, 'The Morsico Hell: The Significance and Relevance of Aljamiado Texts for Muslim Eschatology and Islamic Literature', in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, edited by Christian Lange (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 271.

¹⁴ For an overview of the foundational studies in this field, see Mirella Cassarino, 'Studies on Islamic Sicily: The Last Fifteen Years', in *Islamic Sicily: Philological and Literary Essays*, edited by Mirella Cassarino, special issue of *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 10 (2015): 3–11; William Granara, 'Review of *A History of Muslim Sicily*, by Leonard C. Chiarelli', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135/1 (2015): 166–68; Antonino Pellitteri, 'Reflections on the Study of Muslim Sicily: History, Politics, and Nineteenth-Century Sicilian Historiography', *Scripta Mediterranea* 19–20 (1998–99): 109–18; Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, 'La storiografia arabistica italiana di fronte alla questione della presenza islamica nel mezzogiorno medievale', in *Il Mezzogiorno medievale nella storiografia del secondo dopoguerra: Risultati e prospettive* [= Proceedings of the Fourth National Congress of Associazione dei Medievali Italiani, University of Calabria, 12–16 June 1982], edited by Pietro De Leo (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 1985), 113–21.

that consider the linguistic issues of the text, but they do not do so in a systematic way. For instance, the Italian scholar Antonino Pellitteri has addressed the terminology used by Muslim historians.¹⁵ In his ‘La Sicilia nella visione arabo-musulmana: Immagini nel testo e immagini del testo’,¹⁶ Pellitteri presents a historical reading of historians such as Muḥammad Ibn ‘Aḥmad al-Muqaddisī (d. 990), Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan Ibn Rashīq al-‘Azdī al-Qayrawānī (d. 1064), Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956), Muḥammad Ibn ‘Aḥmad Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217) and the Andalusian poet Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad Ibn Hānī (d. 972). In it, he addresses some Arabic terms which he identifies as encapsulating the geographical importance and emotional significance of Sicily to the medieval Muslim community. He writes:

In the works of al-Mas‘ūdī and the Andalusian Ibn Jubayr the perception was conditioned by the expressive codes of the time as well as the social context and norms of the group of which they were members. In this sense, the texts of the Muslim authors exemplified here [in the article] can be considered truly ‘representative’. In other words, the authors expressed an idea as well as a historical moment, and in doing so, they legitimately represented the community.¹⁷

¹⁵ Pellitteri has written several works on Medieval Sicily. In 2016, he published a study that addresses the central position of Sicily in the Mediterranean during the Fāṭimid period, presenting a new reading of Arabic and Italian historical resources with a focus on the terminology used in the Arabic accounts. See Antonino Pellitteri, *Sicilia e Islam* (Palermo: Franco Angeli, 2016). Recently, he has published a comparative study that points out the sociocultural relationships between Sicily and Egypt in the Fāṭimid period. In this work, he compares Arabic sources, Sicilian historical and literary works, as well as popular culture data, in order to highlight the role that the Fāṭimids played in strengthening the relationships between Sicily and Egypt. For example, he traces the popular representations of the ‘Papireto river’ in Palermo, which was considered the son of the Nile. According to him, this demonstrates the deep connections between Sicily and Egypt during the tenth and eleventh centuries. See Antonino Pellitteri, “‘From the Nile My Water Comes and Papyrus Is My Name’: A Way of Representing a Connection/*Nasab* between Palermo and Egypt”, in *Viaggio e ansia del ritorno nell’Islam e nella letteratura araba*, edited by Antonino Pellitteri and Laurence Denooz (Rome: Aracne, 2019), 77–92.

¹⁶ Antonino Pellitteri, ‘La Sicilia nella visione arabo-musulmana: Immagini nel testo e immagini del testo’, in *Lo spazio letterario del medioevo, Vol. 2: La cultura arabo-islamica* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2003), 727–47.

¹⁷ Ibid., 741. This translation and the following translations of this work by Pellitteri from Italian into English are mine.

Even if in his article Pellitteri does not talk overtly about intertextuality, he addresses some intertextual relations between the Qur'ān and the poems of al-'Azdi and Ibn Hānī. For instance, he notices that both authors quote the Qur'ānic verse 'By the fig and the olive' (Q. 95:1) when referring to Sicily.¹⁸ Pellitteri comments:

It is difficult to say whether by attributing the Qur'ānic sacredness of the olive tree and the safety of the district to Sicily, a typical quality of Meccan territory, al-Azdi did not want to re-propose, albeit unconsciously, the vision of another Andalusian poet [. . .] Abu al-Qasim Ibn Hani [. . .] who held that [. . .] the light of prophecy was shining on the island, albeit thanks to the caliph and imām al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah.¹⁹

As noted earlier, when historians address the linguistic features of a text, they do so with the aim of uncovering the social and political circumstances pertinent for inclusion in the historical record. Intertextuality is not a key analytical tool employed in their studies. Many Muslim authors have used references and allusions to the Qur'ān as a literary technique to give more value to their oral and written works.²⁰ I will underline the use and role of Qur'ānic verses in the travellers' imagery and descriptions of Sicily. This kind of analysis is still not sufficiently dealt with in the available scholarly works. Exploring the influence of the Qur'ān on the travellers' writings can contribute to a better understanding of these sources. Moreover, it reconsiders the historical records in the light of the religious and cultural memory of the writers.

Which Reader?

Reading Arab-Muslims' accounts of medieval Sicily is an interactive process, especially among those who are Muslim and Arabic native speakers. From the first pages, there is, among this group of readers, a sense of cultural complicity

¹⁸ Ibid., 728.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Na'im 'Ammūri, 'Al-Tanāṣṣ al-qur'ānī fī 'ash'ār 'Adīb Kamāl al-Dīn', *Majallat Markaz Dirāsāt al-Kūfa* 1/47 (2017): 205–20; Alexander Knysh, 'Multiple Areas of Influence', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 211–32.

with the author. The semantic features and the thematic formations used in the description of some scenes call to these readers' minds a central book for Muslims: the Qur'ān. Once the readers' complicity with the author as well as with the text is forged, and once the text starts calling other text(s) to mind, then we can talk about intertextuality. I believe that travellers wanted to create a bridge to their future readers, and they did so through a textual nexus that goes beyond time and engages communal memory.

It is important here to refer to Julia Kristeva's considerations on the reader and the text. Kristeva argued that a text has two axes: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal axis 'determines the relationship between the reader and the text'. The vertical one 'contains the complete set of relations of the text to other texts'.²¹ These axes are surrounded by a 'framework of pre-existing codes that governs and shapes every text and every reading act'.²² The writer creates a system of correspondences with readers from a similar culture by activating shared elements in them. The former communicates with the latter using discursive and thematic patterns. In the case of Muslims who are Arabic speakers, the communication is stronger, since the discourse and themes draw not only on culture, but also on religion.

I argue that, in their description of the lands and the people of Sicily, Muslim travellers used Qur'ānic language in order to emotionally involve the reader as well as effectively convey the described scenes. Through the 'act of reading', which in fiction puts the author's and the reader's created selves into agreement,²³ the reader is required to perceive cross-references to other traditional texts. This is possible only if authors and readers share commonalities. In the context of this chapter, I am referring to the emotions and faith which, as 'Abdullāh Ibrāhīm noted, influenced Muslims' perceptions of the past and history, as well as their imagination and aspirations.²⁴ Additionally, in their adoption of religious language and themes, Muslims were motivated by the

²¹ Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Routledge, 2006), 121.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 30.

²⁴ 'Abdulla Ibrahim, *ʿālam al-qurʾān al-wuṣṭā fī ʿaʿyūn al-muslimīn* (Abū Dhabī: Al-Mujammaʿ al-Thaqāfī, 2001), 14.

ideology of the *dār al-Islām* (territory of Islam),²⁵ which shaped their representations and perceptions of the ‘self’ and the ‘Other’.²⁶

Intertextuality

Intertextuality (in Arabic *‘ilm al-tanāṣṣ*) is concerned with the subtext that readers interweave with the text that they are reading. The term ‘intertextuality’ was coined in the 1960s by Kristeva who combined the theories of language and literature expounded by Ferdinand Saussure (d. 1913) and Mikhail Bakhtin (d. 1975).²⁷ According to Janine Ungvarsky, intertextuality ‘refers to the use of a text or elements of a text within the body of another work. The word itself is derived from the Latin word *intertextus*, which means “intermingling elements of a weaving”’.²⁸ Intertextuality conveys ‘an additional layer of meaning to a text by referring to a known character or concept from another work’.²⁹ This kind of allusion exists beneath the surface of the text, and it takes a dedicated reader who is widely read and well-versed in the culture to discover the author’s subtle intentions. Intertextuality is more usually applied to literary works in which the author uses direct reference to another work (with respect to a specific title, character, scene, or plot, for example).³⁰

According to Lemke, constructing intertextual relationships is a kind of ‘contextualizing practice’ or ‘a making sense of the texts, or portions of them, by placing them in the context of only some and not other texts or recurring discourse pattern’.³¹ Thus, the choice of the texts to which intertextuality could be applied is important. One should be aware of the relevant texts in a specific community. To quote Lemke, ‘the study of intertextuality is concerned with the recurrent discourse and activity patterns of the community

²⁵ *Dār al-Islām* is a juridical concept that has been used to indicate territories where Islamic law prevailed. For more about this concept, see Giovanna Calasso and Giuliano Lancioni (eds), *Dār al-Islām/Dār al-ḥarb: Territories, People, Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

²⁶ Ibrahim, *Ālam al-qurūn al-wuṣṭā*, 13.

²⁷ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

²⁸ Janine Ungvarsky, ‘Intertextuality’, in *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, <https://bit.ly/34bOSIV> (accessed 17 October 2020).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Lemke, ‘Intertextuality and Text Semantics’, 86.

and how they are constituted by, instanced in, and interconnected or disjointed through particular texts'.³²

Intertextuality holds a significant place within the Arabic literary tradition, with the incorporation of images and ideas from other texts being a common practice since the inception of Arabic literature. Cassarino points out that Arab authors establish intertextual connections with preceding traditions and construct links between texts deemed essential to their own discourse. This phenomenon elucidates the presence of similarities in their texts, without diminishing the originality inherent in their works. Arab authors, according to Cassarino, establish 'a subsystem of sources within the literary system to which each of them chooses to refer'.³³

Literary Texts and the Qur'ān

For Muslims, the Qur'ān is a divine text and the most important literary text that has ever existed in the Arabic language. Many scholars have studied the intertextuality that exists between literary texts (poems and prose) and the Qur'ān.³⁴ One of the recent scholarly works investigating the relationship between the sacred text and classical Arabic literary works is *The Qur'an and Adab: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam* by Nuha Alshaar.³⁵ According to Alshaar, '[t]he Qur'ān as a text has an effect on its readers (the *'udabā'*³⁶ in this context), with its content and literary devices causing readers to respond and in turn create meaning'.³⁷ The classical *'udabā'*³⁸ 'extract meaning from the Qur'ān'; however, their texts are not determined by the Qur'ānic narrative.³⁹ The sacred text – as Alshaar explains – 'was one of many sources that they might employ in developing a narrative on a specific

³² Ibid.

³³ Mirella Cassarino, 'Système, genres et mode dans la littérature arabe classique', *Synergies Monde arabe* 6 (2009): 57. The translation from French is mine.

³⁴ 'Ammurī, 'Al-Tanāṣṣ al-qur'ānī', 206.

³⁵ For a review, see Helen Blatherwick, 'The Qur'an and Adab: The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam by Nuha Alshaar, ed.', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 22/2 (2020): 129–33.

³⁶ The term *'udabā'* here refers to the classical *literati*. Alshaar, 'Introduction', 2.

³⁷ Ibid., 3.

³⁸ In Alshaar's work, the term 'classical' refers to the period between pre-Islamic times and the ninth/fifteenth century. Ibid., 45.

³⁹ Ibid., 4.

topic in their own texts'.⁴⁰ This process of intermingling and weaving characterised classical literary works.

In the Islamic interpretative tradition, intertextuality is a very practical exegetical approach which, as articulated by Hussein Abdul-Raouf, 'is concerned with establishing textual links within the Qur'ān in terms of an expression, an individual phrase, or an *āyah* [Qur'ānic verse]'.⁴¹ By intertextuality, Abdul-Raouf means an interpretative traditional approach known as *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān*.⁴² According to this approach, the Qur'ān interprets itself.⁴³ Abdul-Raouf demonstrated that intertextuality could be applied to the Qur'ān's leit-motifs, for they refer to each other and establish thematic connectivity.

Due to its literary techniques, stylistic features, and linguistic mechanisms, the Qur'ānic text has wielded significant influence within Arabic literature.⁴⁴ From the time of the very first Muslims, writers and poets have referred to the sacred text's themes and semantics. The figurative speech found in many Arabic texts is resonant of that of the Qur'ān, where it exists as a distinct textual strategy.⁴⁵ The linguistic features of the Qur'ān are deeply expressive and evoke strong emotions, leading Muslims to regard its language as almost magical. Because of the power of the language of the Qur'ān, Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was accused of being a sorcerer (*sāḥir*). His figurative reading of the world made people accuse him of 'magically manipulating their word[s]' through the magic of speech (*siḥr al-bayān*).⁴⁶ During the seventh century, the Qur'ānic language challenged Arabs' linguistic and poetic skills. It created a 'paradigm shift on the intellectual, artistic, and religious levels[;] it also created a paradigm shift on both the literary and cultural levels'.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Qur'ān was the main source from which grammarians established the rules of Arabic grammar. The Qur'ān is also a narrative through which God tells the stories of different people and prophets. For all these reasons, many scholars – for instance, Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966), 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 1998) and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Hussein Abdul-Raouf, *Theological Approaches to Qur'anic Exegesis: A Practical Comparative-Constructive Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2012), 10.

⁴² Ibid., 30.

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ See Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 16 of Alshaar, *The Qur'an and Adab*.

⁴⁵ Neuwirth, 'Foreword', vii.

⁴⁶ Ibid., viii.

⁴⁷ Bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose*, 5.

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010) – consider the Qurʾān the most valuable literary model to have ever existed in Arabic. The religious, linguistic and artistic dimensions of the Qurʾān have made it a central text in Arabs' everyday lives, thoughts and expressions. For these reasons, it is possible to trace Qurʾānic nuances in works of different genres.

In the next section, I will focus on portions of the above-mentioned accounts of Sicily and compare them to Qurʾānic verses. The analysis will take into consideration the 'co-thematic intertextuality' which is concerned with texts that construct 'the same pattern of semantic relations among their themes'.⁴⁸ There are three types of meanings: (1) a lexical meaning, which corresponds to the meaning-potential of a word; (2) a use meaning, which seizes the contextualised meaning of a word as part of a particular text; and (3) a thematic meaning, which connects the first two as well as corresponds to the meaning that 'the word realizes in a recurrent discourse pattern that is familiar in many texts and which forms the basis of co-thematic intertextual relations'.⁴⁹ The meaning of a word – as Lemke explains – derives from the thematic meaning and 'only very indirectly from its lexical meaning'.⁵⁰

How could two texts match through the meaning of a word? According to Lemke's theory, discursive formations play an important role in this process. They 'combine a particular set of semantic relations among topical themes with a particular rhetorical or genre structure. They are clichés [. . . and] they in effect paraphrase one another, being small variations within a recognizable constant pattern'.⁵¹ Each community uses certain words to communicate familiar things. In Muslim-majority communities, the religious language has systematically influenced persons' thoughts and expressions. For example, the phrase '*jahannam wa bi's al-maṣīr*', which means '(for you is) the Penalty of Hell: and evil is (such) Destination' is a reference to the Qurʾānic verse that says: 'For those who reject their Lord (and Cherisher) is the Penalty of Hell: and evil is (such) Destination' (Q. 67:6).⁵² This is a cliché commonly used in situations where someone is doing something forbidden, and someone else

⁴⁸ Lemke, 'Intertextuality and Text Semantics', 87.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² For the English translations of the Qurʾānic verses reported in this chapter, see Yusuf Ali on the Qurʾānic Arabic Corpus website, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp> (accessed 28 January 2020).

discovers that person doing it. Imagine a child who eats the chocolate that his/her mother has hidden, and a sibling catches the child doing so. In this case, the sibling could use this selected part of the verse as a saying to tell the child that he/she is in trouble. Of course, the child will not suffer the ‘penalty of Hell’ just for having eaten a piece of chocolate. Consequently, it is misleading to interpret *jahannam* in the light of its lexical meaning: Hell. Rather, it is the thematic meaning and the context that make us understand the nuance.

In the following section, I will use thematic and semantic relations as well as Lemke’s notions of meaning as analytical frameworks to examine the themes and the terminology of Arab accounts of medieval Sicily. I will focus on two aspects that have to do with the Sicilian landscape, along with one aspect pertaining to its inhabitants: (1) Mount Etna; (2) the Sicilian springs, rivers and vegetation; and (3) the habits of the people of Palermo. This analysis will show how the language adopted by the authors derives from the Islamic tradition and its sources.

Mount Etna

Jabal al-nār (Mount of the Fire) and *al-burkān* (the volcano) are terms that Muslim travellers used in reference to Mount Etna. This mountain is widely described in their sources.⁵³ It is almost the first landscape feature that they mentioned, for its impressive view. Although no proper attention has been given to intertextuality in this regard,⁵⁴ Sir Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (d. 1933), a prominent Indian Zoroastrian priest and scholar, also known as *Shams al-‘Ulamā’* (Sun of the Scholars),⁵⁵ addressed some linguistic and thematic features in al-Mas‘ūdī’s work *Murūj al-dhahab*. Modi was interested in the natural sciences⁵⁶ and had written a work entitled *Maṣūdi on Volcanoes*, published in 1908. In it, he notes that, at the time of writing, scientific European writers had not mentioned al-Mas‘ūdī in

⁵³ See Adalgisa De Simone, ‘L’Etna dei geografi e viaggiatori arabi del Medioevo’, *Quaderni del corso ‘Al-Imam al-Māzari’* 5 (1982): 13–33. Alessandro Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 168–73.

⁵⁴ I have authored a paper addressing this topic, see Nesma Elsakaan, ‘L’Etna nei resoconti di al-Mas‘ūdī e al-Ġarnāṭī tra memoria, intertestualità e Corano’, *In Verbis Lingue Letterature Culture* 2 (2023): 97–110.

⁵⁵ Michael Stausberg and Ramiyar P. Karanjia, ‘Modi, Jivanji Jamshedji’, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 2015, Online Edition, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/modi-jivanji-jamshedji> (accessed 28 January 2020).

⁵⁶ For a biography on Modi, see *ibid.*

their discourses on volcanoes. Consequently, he decided to introduce to the volcanologists al-Mas'ūdī's contribution on this 'grand phenomenon of nature'.⁵⁷

Here is how al-Mas'ūdī describes Mount Etna in *Murūj al-dhahab*:

أتينا على [. . .] خبر الجزيرة المعروفة بالبركان وهي الأظمة التي تخرج منها أجسام من النار
كأجسام بلا رؤوس فتعلوا في الهواء بالليل ثم تسقط في البحر فتطفو على الماء .

We have already spoken about [. . .] the island which is known by *al-burkān*. It is *al-'aṭma* that evicts inflamed objects (*'ajsām min al-nār*) which look like headless bodies (*ka-'ajsām bilā ru'ūs*) that rise high in the air during the night then fall back into the sea and float on the water.⁵⁸

Modi was interested in various linguistic and religious features as well as superstitious characteristics of al-Mas'ūdī's description. He used these to unearth the scientific significance of al-Mas'ūdī's observations. Modi pointed to al-Mas'ūdī's use of religious terminology when describing natural facts.⁵⁹ He noted that religious persons perceived volcanoes as Hell. This perception was quite normal for him since he was religious and he personally experienced that.⁶⁰ Modi explained that religious writers had received their conception of Hell from the volcanoes.⁶¹ In addition, in the Italian tradition – as Modi

⁵⁷ Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, 'Maçoudi on Volcanoes', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22 (1908): 135.

⁵⁸ Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawhar*, in *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, vol. 1, compiled by Michele Amari (Palermo: Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 1988), 4. All quotations are translated from Arabic into English by me.

⁵⁹ For example, Modi addressed al-Mas'ūdī's use of the term 'Antichrist' (*dajjāl*) that appears in his description of the volcanoes situated in the Sea of China, precisely in this passage: 'The mariners who have voyaged on these sea-coasts [of the sea of China] say that it is there that the Dajal [. . .] the Antichrist, has fixed his abode'. According to Modi, al-Mas'ūdī re-proposed the idea of Christian mariners who had considered these volcanoes 'the seat of Hell itself' and of those who do not believe in Christ. Modi, 'Maçoudi on Volcanoes', 138.

⁶⁰ Modi says: '[T]he allusion to these volcanoes as the seat of Hell, or as the seat of the punishment of the sinful, is natural. The first impression upon my mind, when I stood at the edge of the crater of the Vesuvius on 28th July 1889, and when I heard the terrible and frightful sounds from within, with the occasional showers of stone that rose from it, was that of Hell. I noted the first impression in my notebook there and then, thus 'Oh! the sounds! They are of Hell'. Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 138, 139.

explains – Mount Vesuvius in Naples and Mount Etna in Sicily were considered Hell: ‘That part of Sicily in which Mount Etna is situated is called *Valle Demone*, because popular tradition believed that the inside of the volcano was a region of demons’.⁶²

According to Modi, ‘perhaps it is from the appearance of [. . .] phantoms or fantastical shapes of vapours, added to the terrible sound from within, that the ancients thought that the volcanoes were the localities of Hells where the bodies of the sinful were burnt in suffocating flames and smoke’.⁶³ Modi tried to unearth the relationships between the fantasies of al-Mas‘ūdī and the scientific explanation of this natural phenomena. He assumed that the representation of the volcanoes as Hell was due to the religious thought of al-Mas‘ūdī. Nevertheless, he located this idea in the role that Zoroastrian and Christian religions as well as the Italian popular tradition at the time had played in the thoughts of travellers and historians in medieval times (al-Mas‘ūdī in this context). Curiously, Modi did not propose the potential impact of the Islamic tradition on al-Mas‘ūdī, despite the latter’s Muslim background. In the next section, I will do what Modi had missed. In other words, I will demonstrate that in their discourse on Mount Etna, al-Mas‘ūdī as well as al-Gharnāṭī were influenced first and foremost by the sacred text of Islam.

Travellers’ Representations of the Volcano and the Qur’ān

The importance that Muslim travellers assigned to Mount Etna, as the first element described in their sources, is understandable if we read it in relation to the Qur’ānic verses about Hell (*jahannam*). In *Murūj al-dhahab*, al-Mas‘ūdī represented the fire and the flames of Etna, which are inanimate, in human terms,⁶⁴ such as ‘inflamed objects’ (*‘ajsām min al-nār*) and ‘headless bodies’ (*ka’ajsām bilā ru’ūs*).⁶⁵ In another text, *al-Tanbīh wa-l-‘ashraf*, he used the expression ‘corpses similar to human bodies’ (*juthath ka-‘abdān al-nās*) to

⁶² Ibid., 138. For the representations of Mount Etna as Hell in Greek and Latin mythology and in medieval popular tradition, see Teresa Leslie, ‘Etna Mount’, in *Trade, Travel, and Exploration in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, edited by John Block Friedman and Kristen Mossler Figg (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 179–80.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

refer to the volcano's flames.⁶⁶ These expressions realise a thematic intertextuality between al-Mas'ūdī and the Qur'ānic verses about Hell. Al-Mas'ūdī alludes to the Qur'ān, using the motif of individuals enduring fiery torment in Hell. This can be traced in the following verse which speaks about people burning in the fire of Hell:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا قُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ [. . .].

O ye who believe! save yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones (Q. 66:6).

Another verse that underlines the torment of burning in Hell is the following:

وَمِنْ النَّاسِ مَنْ يُجَادِلُ فِي اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَلَا هُدًى وَلَا كِتَابٍ مُنِيرٍ (8)
ثَانِي عَطْفِهِ لِيُضِلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ تَلَّه فِي الدُّنْيَا خِزْيٌ وَنَذِيقُهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عَذَابُ الْحَرِيقِ. (9)

(8) Yet there is among men such a one as disputes about Allah, without Knowledge, without Guidance, and without a Book of Enlightenment (9) (Disdainfully) bending his side, in order to lead (men) astray from the Path of Allah: for him there is disgrace in this life, and on the Day of Judgment We shall make him taste the Penalty of burning (Fire) (Q. 22:8–9).

Now let us see how al-Gharnāṭī comments on the volcano in his accounts. While he was travelling towards Alexandria, al-Gharnāṭī briefly stayed in Sicily. Based on this visit, he gave a detailed description of Mount Etna. The following quotation refers to information that he gathered from a Sicilian religious scholar, Sheikh Abū al-Qāsim Ibn al-Hakīm al-Ṣiqillī:

وأخبرني الشيخ أبو القاسم بن الحاكم الصقلي حين سألته عن تلك النار قال: ان تضياء [. . .] تلك النار على عشرة فراسخ لا يحتاج معها أحد الى ضوء ولا الى سراج [. . .] لكثرة الضوء. ويخرج من تلك النار جمر كبير [. . .] وان وقع جمر من [. . .] تلك احترق الحجر ولا يحرق الحشيش ولا النباتات ولا الثياب ولا يحترق الا الحجارة والحيوان فهذه تشبه نار جهنم التي قال الله تعالى "وقودها الناس والحجارة" أعاذنا الله منها ومن عذابها امين يارب العالمين.

⁶⁶ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Al-Tanbih wa-l-'ashraf*, in *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, vol. 1, compiled by Michele Amari (Palermo: Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 1988), 7.

When I asked Sheikh Abū al-Qāsim Ibn al-Ḥakīm al-Ṣiqillī about the fire, he said: ‘This fire could light up [the way] for a distance of ten leagues without the need for light or lamps [. . .], thanks to its abundant light. Big embers come out from the fire [. . .] and if one of these embers falls, it will burn the stones, but it does not burn the grass or the plant, nor the clothes; only stones and animals will burn. This [fire] is similar to the fire of Hell where, according to the words of God Almighty, “its fuel is Men and Stones”’. May God protect us from the fire of Hell and its torment. Amen, O Lord of the worlds.⁶⁷

Al-Gharnāṭī makes a more explicit reference to Q. 66:6 when he writes: ‘This [fire] is similar to the fire of Hell, where according to the words of God Almighty, “its fuel is Men and Stones”’.⁶⁸ He uses a direct reference to the Qurʾān in order to emphasise that the fire of Etna would be similar to that of *jahannam*. Moreover, al-Gharnāṭī’s report about the objects that the fire of the volcano would burn seems to be derived from the Qurʾān; the fire would burn only stones and animals: ‘it does not burn the grass or the plant, nor the clothes; only stones and animals will burn’.⁶⁹ Be it the words of al-Gharnāṭī or Sheikh al-Ṣiqillī, this thesis could not be the result of the act of watching. It is not possible that the fire does not burn the grass. Rather, it is the Qurʾānic notion of Hell that unconsciously affected the narrator/observer and made him think that the fire of Etna would burn only ‘stones’ and ‘animals’, just as the fire of Hell is fuelled by ‘people’ (which are animate objects, like animals) and ‘stones’.

Another example of intertextuality can be traced in the application of one of the most famous Arab names to Mount Etna: *ʾaṭma*. The term *ʾaṭma* is often used in the accounts in reference to volcanoes. In al-Masʿūdī, Mount Etna is called *ʾAṭmat Ṣiqiliyya* (the *ʾaṭma* of Sicily). In *Nukhbat al-ḍahr*, Shams al-Dīn Abū ʿAbdullāh Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Anṣārī (d. 1327) used the term *ʾaṭma* to refer to a volcano located in the sea of China as *ʾAṭma bi-jazīrat*

⁶⁷ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Gharnāṭī, *Tuhfat al-ʾalbāb wa nukhbat al-ʾiṣṣāb*, in *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, vol. 1, compiled by Michele Amari (Palermo: Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 1988), 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

al-mibrāj fī baḥr al-Šīn ('*aṭma* in the island of the Maharaja in the sea of China).⁷⁰ It is apparent that '*aṭma*' is synonymous with 'volcano'. This is actually the meaning that has been attributed to the term in the modern period. Indeed, it appeared as a synonym of volcano in the journal *Majallat al-majma' al-ilmī* in Damascus.⁷¹ However, '*aṭma*' also has another connotation in al-Mas'ūdī:

وجزيرة صقلية وما يليها من جبل البركان ومنه تخرج عين النار التي تعرف بأطمة صقلية
[. . .] يرى في شراره إذا علا لهبه في الجو جثث كأبدان الناس.

In the island of Sicily, we find *Jabal al-burkān* which contains a fire hole ('*ayna al-nār*') known as the '*aṭma*' of Sicily [. . .] When its flames [that is, of *Jabal al-burkān*] rise high in the air, one can see corpses (*juthath*) similar to human bodies (*ka-'abdān al-nās*).⁷²

Al-Mas'ūdī differentiated between *Jabal al-burkān* (the volcano mount) and '*ayna al-nār*' (the fire hole). He referred to '*ayna al-nār*' as '*aṭma*'; that is, '*aṭma*' here does not refer to the volcano, but the fire hole. The relative pronoun '*allatī*' refers to a singular female noun, which is '*ayna al-nār*', since *Jabal al-burkān* is a singular masculine noun. Consequently, I would say that in this context, '*aṭma*' means 'crater', not volcano, also because al-Mas'ūdī defined it as 'a fire hole rising from the earth'.⁷³

Furthermore, I suggest that '*aṭma*' may be invoking one of the Qur'ānic names for *jahannam* (Hell). I will perform a linguistic comparison between the two nouns '*aṭma*' and *Ḥuṭama* which, first, will shed light on the reason why the Arabs may have called Mount Etna by this name and, second, underline how '*aṭma*' invokes the semantic and thematic elements associated with Hell in the Qur'ān. '*Aṭma*' derives from the verbal root <'a-ṭa-ma> or <'a-ti-ma>.⁷⁴ The dictionary of

⁷⁰ 'Aḥmad Taymūr Pasha, *Al-Tadhbīr al-taymūriyya: Muḥjam al-fawā'id wa nawādir al-masā'il*, edited by Muḥammad Shawqī 'Amin (Cairo: Lajnat Nashr al-Mu'allafāt al-Taymūriyya, 1953), 76.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Al-Mas'ūdī, *Al-Tanbīh wa-l-'ashraf*, 7.

⁷³ Ibid., 5. Alessandro Vanoli claims that the word '*aṭma*' probably comes from the Greek noun *Aitna*. Vanoli, *La Sicilia Musulmana*, 169.

⁷⁴ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1410/1989), s. *V. 'a-ṭa-ma*.

Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311/12), *Lisān al-ʿarab*, gives another two nouns derived from the same root. The first one is *ʾaṭama*, whose meaning is castle (*ḥiṣn*). The second one is *ʾaṭīma*, whose meaning is fire stove (*mawqūd al-nār*).⁷⁵ Hence, the semantics of the verbal root <ʾa-ṭa-ma> delineates ‘height’ and ‘fire’. We could say that *ʾaṭma* (in both its verbal and nominal derivations) was a suitable term for Mount Etna, since it is ‘high’ and sends forth ‘fire’.

Now let us examine the semantics of *Ḥuṭama*. *Al-Ḥuṭama* or ‘the Fire which Breaks to Pieces’, is mentioned in the Surah of *al-Humaza*:

كَأَلَّا لِيُنْبَذَنَّ فِي الْحُطَمَةِ (4) وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْحُطَمَةُ (5) نَارُ اللَّهِ الْمَوْقِدَةُ (6)

(4) By no means! He will be sure to be thrown into That which Breaks to Pieces (*al-Ḥuṭama*), (5) And what will explain to thee That which Breaks to Pieces (*al-Ḥuṭama*)? (6) (It is) the Fire of (the Wrath of) Allah kindled (to a blaze) (Q. 104:4–6).

Ḥuṭama is a noun derived from the second verbal form <ḥa-ṭṭa-ma>, which means ‘to break’ or ‘to destroy’. Hell is called *Ḥuṭama*, because its fire breaks into pieces everything that ends up inside.⁷⁶ Fire is the first element of meaning that *Ḥuṭama* shares with *ʾaṭma*. It is also interesting to note the morphological and phonological similarities between *ʾaṭma* and *Ḥuṭama*. Let us compare their verbal roots:

- <ʾa-ṭa-ma> the verbal root of *ʾaṭma*
- <ḥa-ṭṭa-ma> the verbal root of *Ḥuṭama*⁷⁷

Morphologically, the two roots construct a sort of minimal pair, since they differ only in the first phonological elements, which are the consonant letters

⁷⁵ Ibid. Michele Amari pointed out that originally *ʾaṭma* meant castles and that it derives from the plural *ʾuṭūm* or *ʾuṭm*. For him, the term *ʾaṭīma* used by al-Masʿūdī in *Murūğ al-dahab* refers to a new meaning which Arab scientists adopted to refer to volcanoes. Michele Amari (comp.), *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula: Versione italiana* (Palermo: Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 1997), vol. 1: 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., s. v. *ḥa-ṭṭa-ma*.

⁷⁷ This is the verbal root from which the second verbal form <ḥa-ṭṭa-ma> is derived.

<ʾa> and <ḥa>. Hence, *ʾaṭma* and *Ḥuṭama* share similarities, not only semantically as we saw before, but also morphologically and phonologically. Consequently, I argue that the name *ʾaṭma*, which refers to Mount Etna, invokes the Qurʾānic name of Hell: *Ḥuṭama*.

But why were these travellers so strongly affected by the Qurʾān in their discourse on the volcano? *Jahannam* is mentioned in the Qurʾān on about 145 occasions. Fear of it is pervasive in Islamic thought; consequently, it is embedded in the subconscious of many believers. As Modi explained, the fire of volcanoes would remind devout believers of Hell. Undoubtedly, for al-Masʿūdī and al-Gharnāṭī, the importance of Mount Etna was not simply geographic or topographic. Contemplating nature reminds Muslims of God; the Qurʾān itself invites people to reflect on nature, so as to perceive the Divinity (Q. 88:17–21). Al-Masʿūdī would thus have applied the themes and the semantics of the Qurʾān in artistic and stylistic ways for two reasons: first, to express the subconscious emotion-based relation that he (as a believer) had with the sacred text; and second, to effectively convey the impressive landscape of the volcano to the reader through the evocative imagery of Hell. Al-Masʿūdī applied human characteristics to the volcano's fire and embers in order to introduce scenes that would stimulate the reader's imagination as well as evoke an emotional response.

In al-Gharnāṭī's description, it is hard to say whether the quotation of the Qurʾānic verse had come from him or from Sheikh Abū al-Qāsim al-Ṣiqillī. We know that in *Tuhfat al-ʿalbāb*, al-Gharnāṭī did not provide first-hand information about Sicily; rather, he reported the news about the island from Sheikh al-Ṣiqillī as well as from al-Masʿūdī⁷⁸ (hence, the probability that his text also contains intertextual references to al-Masʿūdī is high). Whoever the narrator was (whether al-Gharnāṭī or Sheikh al-Ṣiqillī), it is clear from the description of the objects that the narrator perceived the fire of Etna through a religious lens.

In concluding this section, it is evident that al-Masʿūdī and al-Gharnāṭī, whether consciously or unconsciously, utilized the artistic and narrative techniques found in the Qurʾān. These techniques served to engage the readers of their time while also resonating with contemporary Arab-Muslim readers. They achieved this through intertextual themes rooted in communal religious,

⁷⁸ Michele Amari (comp.), *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula: Versione italiana*, xxvii.

linguistic, and cultural experiences, which are embedded within circles of memory. These circles establish a connection between the travellers and contemporary readers, conveying meanings and emotions that resonate across time. Consequently, these historical accounts exhibit semantic and thematic links to the Qurʾān, resulting in a subtle subtext initiated by the authors and interwoven by the readers.

Bodies of Water and Vegetation

Apart from Mount Etna, Arab travellers contemplated other, more pleasant types of landscape on the island. This section will address the poetic language used in their accounts of the rivers, springs and fields of Sicily and show how this language approaches the Qurʾānic one.⁷⁹ The sacred text has an internal poem-based linguistic style, especially in the verses about Paradise. Below, I will discuss three quotations from al-Idrīsī, which focus on his fascination with the rivers and vegetation of the island. In *Nuzhat al-mushtāq*, al-Idrīsī describes the gardens (*jannāt*) and rivers (*ʿanhār*) of *al-Qārūniyya* in this way:

القارونية أول اقليم دمنش [. . .] لها جنات وأنهار وكروم وأشجار [. . .].

Al-Qārūniyya is the first [village] of the region of *Dimansh* [. . .] It has gardens, rivers, grapes and trees [. . .]⁸⁰

He also praises Palermo and its flowing springs (*ʿuyūnuhā jāriyya*) and abundant fruit (*fawākīhuhā kathīra*):

والمياه بجميع جهات مدينة صقلية مخترقة وعيونها جارية متدفقة وفواكهها كثيرة [. . .].

The water permeates all parts of the city of Sicily [Palermo]; there are flowing springs and abundant fruit [. . .]⁸¹

⁷⁹ Alex Metcalfe addressed how ‘the Quranic idea of “gardens beneath which rivers flow”’ was reproduced in the description of ‘water gardens’ during Norman Sicily. For example, he pointed out that ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Buthīrī – a poet of Roger’s al-Mannānī palace – described the gardens of the palace of Palermo in Qurʾānic terms. Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Sicily*, 245.

⁸⁰ Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ʾikhtirāq al-ʾāfāq*, in *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, vol. 1, compiled by Michele Amari (Palermo: Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 1988), 43.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Later on, al-Idrīsī mentions another area, *Shalyāṭa*, with its running rivers (*ʿanhāruhā jāriya*), its agriculture (*zirāʿatuhā*) and its low-hanging fruits (*khayrātuhā mutadanniya*). He says:

وشلياطة منزل في مستو من الأرض أنهارها جارية وزراعتها نامية وخيراتها متدانية وغلانها كثيرة ويتصل جرى نهر العسل بغربي أرضها.

Shalyāṭa is an area at sea level with flowing rivers, flourishing agriculture and [emerging] fruits hanging low. [It] produces abundant grain [. . .] *Al-ʿAsal* (the Honey) river flows on the western side of its territory.⁸²

In the above-mentioned quotations, al-Idrīsī uses dynamic language in the description of the bodies of water and agriculture, such as ‘permeates’ (*mukhtariqa*), ‘flowing’ (*jāriya*) and ‘flows/runs’ (*jarā*). Many other Muslim travellers adopted very similar terminology to talk about the abundance of water and the agriculture of the island.

The intertextual ties between al-Idrīsī and the Qurʾān are striking. The following verse of surah *al-Nisāʾ* describes Gardens (*jannāt*) with flowing rivers beneath (*tajrī min taḥtihā al-ʿanhār*) Paradise:

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ سَنُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ [. . .] (57).

But those who believe and do deeds of righteousness, We shall soon admit to Gardens, with rivers flowing beneath [. . .] (Q. 4:57).

In the Surah of *al-Ghāshiyā*, there is another verse that describes the Garden (*jannatin*) and its flowing spring (*uyūnun jāriya*):

فِي جَنَّةٍ عَالِيَةٍ (10) لَا تَسْمَعُ فِيهَا لَاغِيَةً (11) فِيهَا عَيْنٌ جَارِيَةٌ (12).

(10) In a Garden on high (11) Where they shall hear no (word) of vanity (12) Within it is a flowing spring (Q. 88:10–12).

It is possible to trace the thematic and semantic intertextuality between the above-mentioned Qurʾānic verses and the passages of al-Idrīsī. On the

⁸² Ibid., 60.

thematic level, all of them represent similar landscapes in Paradise and on earth. On the semantic level, there are three repeated keywords: ‘garden/s’ (*janna/jannāt*), ‘river/s’ (*nahr/‘anbār*) and ‘spring/s’ (*‘ayn/‘uyūn*). Consistent also is the use of the verb *jarā* and its derived forms *tajrī*, *jāriya* (flowing and run/ning). Another significant example of intertextuality can be traced in the following verse which explains how God produces vegetation from water:

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَخْرَجْنَا بِهِ نَبَاتَ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ فَأَخْرَجْنَا مِنْهُ خَضِرًا نُخْرِجُ مِنْهُ حَبًّا
مُتَرَاكِبًا وَمِنَ النَّخْلِ مِنْ طَلْعِهَا قِنْوَانٌ دَانِيَةٌ وَجَنَّاتٍ مِنْ أَعْنَابٍ وَالزَّيْتُونَ وَالرُّمَّانَ مُشْتَبِهًا وَغَيْرَ
مُتَشَابِهٍ ۚ انظُرُوا إِلَى ثَمَرِهِ إِذَا أَثْمَرَ وَيَنْعِهِ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ (99).

It is He Who sendeth down rain from the skies: with it We produce vegetation of all kinds: from some We produce green (crops), out of which We produce grain, heaped up (at harvest); out of the date-palm and its sheaths (or spathes) (come) clusters of dates hanging low and near: and (then there are) gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar (in kind) yet different (in variety): when they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! in these things there are signs for people who believe (Q. 6:99).

Also, here, we could construct thematic and semantic relations. A contextual reading of the last verse and al-Idrīsī’s quotations reveals:

1. a similar structural sequence of three elements: water/bodies of water (rivers, springs and rain), agriculture, particularly crops of grain (*ghallātuhā*), and fruits – grapes (*a‘nāb*);
2. a similar semantic use of the adjective *dāniya* (hanging low), which is used in the Qur’ān in reference to fruits: ‘its sheaths (or spathes) come clusters of dates hanging low – *ṭal‘ihā qunwānun dāniya*’. Al-Idrīsī used the adjective *mutadanniya* ‘emerging fruits hanging down – *khayrātuhā mutadanniya*’, which has the same meaning and derives from the same verbal root of the Qur’ānic adjective *dāniya*.

In concluding this section, I argue that the text of al-Idrīsī shares many features with the Qur’ān. These thematic and linguistic similarities can also be traced in other accounts. The island had a two-fold effect on Muslims: on the one hand,

the volcano reminded them of Hell, but, on the other, the water resources and vegetation evoked Paradise. It is not by chance that one of the most famous Arabic toponyms in Sicily is Genoard, which derives from the Arabic *Jannatu al-'ard* (Paradise of earth). According to Theresa Jäckh, this expression refers to the fertility of the island, in particular Palermo.⁸³ Paradise represents a recurrent theme in the religious consciousness of Muslims throughout time. This notion influenced the imagination of the Sicilian poet Ibn Ḥamdīs (d. 1133),⁸⁴ who in his exile considered Sicily a lost Paradise:

وراءك يا بحر لي جنة لبست النعيم بها لا الشقاء

Beyond you, oh Sea, there is a paradise (*janna*)
where I lived in happiness, not sadness.⁸⁵

The Social and Ethnographic Dimension in Ibn Ḥawqal and the Qur'ān

The thematic relations between the accounts of medieval Sicily by Arab Muslims and the sacred text may be examined also from an ethnographical point of view. This section will shed light on how Ibn Ḥawqal's descriptions of Palermo and its people were influenced by Islamic notions and expressions. *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* gives much information about the city and its urban aspects, as well as the traditions and customs of the people within.⁸⁶ Ibn Ḥawqal's documentation of the customs of the Arabs of Palermo was less than complimentary. This Iraqi traveller's harsh judgment of Sicily reflects the historical moment and the socio-political context in which he visited Sicily and wrote his text. Francesco Gabrieli (d. 1996)

⁸³ Theresa Jäckh, 'Water and Wealth in Medieval Sicily: The Case of the Admiral's Bridge and Arab-Norman Palermo (10th–13th Centuries)', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 6/5 (2019): e1363: 2, 1–12.

⁸⁴ For an overview of Ibn Ḥamdīs, see Francesca Corrao, 'Ibn Ḥamdīs, 'Abd al-Giabbār Ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Muhammad', *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* 1 (1998): 330.

⁸⁵ Al-Munjī Qilfat, *Al-'Insān wa-l-makān fī-l-shi'r al-'arabī al-qadīm* (Tunis: Al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya li-l-Kitāb, 2016), 88. Translation from Arabic into English is mine.

⁸⁶ For more about Ibn Hawqal's description, see William Granara, 'Ibn Hawqal in Sicily', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 3 (1983): 94–99.

explains that, when Ibn Ḥawqal arrived in Sicily, he judged the island, which had been Islamised for little more than a century, in relation to ‘the great metropolises of the Islamic world and [. . .] centers of ancient Islamic civilization’.⁸⁷ Consequently, for Ibn Ḥawqal, the island and its Arab denizens fell short culturally and socially.⁸⁸ Ibn Ḥawqal’s narratives have garnered attention for his negative portrayals of Palermo and its people. It is intriguing to investigate how, in doing so, the Qur’ān has impacted his descriptions of the Arab residents of Palermo and some zones of the city.

In his accounts, Ibn Ḥawqal mentioned *al-ribāṭāt*, a sort of settlements located by the coast of Palermo. He describes them as follows:

وبها رباطات كثيرة على ساحل البحر مشحنة بالبطالين والفساق [. . .] منتصبين لأخذ الصدقات وقذف المحصنات [. . .].

By the sea-coast, there are many *ribāṭāt* full of workless and bawdy men [. . .] who are there just for begging and slandering chaste women [. . .]⁸⁹

It is interesting to highlight the language adopted by Ibn Ḥawqal in his description of *al-ribāṭāt*, where loafers gathered, according to the quotation. He ascribes negative adjectives to the persons of *al-ribāṭāt*, such as ‘workless’ (*baṭṭālīn*) and ‘bawdy’ (*fussāq*). He also underlined their ‘self-degradation’ (*mahānat al-naḥs*).⁹⁰ Ibn Ḥawqal was unimpressed by their indecent deeds, particularly towards women, which is noticeable from his use of the expression ‘slandering chaste women’ (*qadhḥ al-muḥaṣṣanāt*). This expression is a direct reference from the Qur’ān; precisely, it comes from surah *al-Nūr* in which God curses those who ‘slander chaste women’ (*yarmūn al-muḥaṣṣanāt*):

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَرْمُونَ الْمُحْصَنَاتِ الْغَافِلَاتِ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ لَعُنُوا فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ (23).

⁸⁷ Francesco Gabrieli, ‘Ibn Hawqal e gli Arabi di Sicilia’, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 36 (1961), 251. Translation from Italian into English is mine.

⁸⁸ For more about Ibn Ḥawqal’s motivations and judgment, see *ibid.*, 251–53.

⁸⁹ Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad Ibn Ḥawqal, *Al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, in *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, vol. 1, compiled by Michele Amari (Palermo: Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 1988), 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Those who slander chaste women, indiscreet but believing, are cursed in this life and in the Hereafter: for them is a grievous Penalty (Q. 24:23).

Ibn Ḥawqal also negatively characterised the people of Palermo when he wrote of ‘their foolishness’ (*naqṣ ‘uqūlibim*) and ‘their turbulence’ (*khiffat al-’admigha*),⁹¹ as well as of ‘their bad breath’ (*fasād ḥawāshīhim*).⁹² According to him, all this was due to their overconsumption of raw onion.⁹³ This habit disturbed Ibn Ḥawqal; consequently, he talked about how the raw onion ‘disturbed their perception’ (*’afsada takhayyulabum*), ‘decreased their comprehension’ (*naqasha ’afhāmabum*) and ‘altered the look of their face’ (*’afsada siḥnat wujūhibim*).⁹⁴ It is interesting to note that there is something similar in the *ḥadīth* tradition. According to one tradition, Prophet Muḥammad dissuaded people from eating raw onion and garlic because their resulting bad breath would bother people, especially during the prayers in the mosque. Some narrations reported that the Prophet advised them to cook them and not to eat them raw:

عَنْ مَعْدَانَ بْنِ أَبِي طَلْحَةَ، أَنَّ عُمَرَ بْنَ الْخَطَّابِ، قَالَ إِنَّكُمْ أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ تَأْكُلُونَ مِنْ شَجَرَتَيْنِ [. . .] مَا أَرَاهُمَا إِلَّا خَبِيثَتَيْنِ هَذَا الْبَصَلُ وَالثُّومُ وَلَقَدْ رَأَيْتُ نَبِيَّ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِذَا وَجَدَ رِيحَهُمَا مِنَ الرَّجُلِ أَمَرَ بِهِ فَأُخْرِجَ إِلَى الْبَيْعِ فَمَنْ أَكَلَهُمَا فَلْيَمِئْتُهُمَا طَبَخًا.

It was narrated from Ma’dn Ibn ‘Abi Ṭalḥa that ‘Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said: ‘O people, you eat of two plants which I do not think are anything but bad, this onion and garlic. I have seen the Prophet of Allah (pbsl), if he noticed their smell coming from a man, ordering that he be taken out to *al-Baqī’*. Whoever eats them, let him cook them to death’.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Ibid., 18.

⁹² The source reports this word as *ḥawāssīhim* (their senses). However, the footnote specifies that the Arabic word could, rather, be *ḥawāshīhim* (their interiors) (ibid.). For me, *ḥawāshīhim* is more plausible, since Ibn Ḥawqal was talking about the consequences of eating raw onions (*li-kathrat tagħadibihim min al-nayyi’ minbu*). I think it is more likely that he meant their bad breath resulting from this, not their senses.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ḥāfiẓ al-Nisā’ī, *The Book of the Masjids* (English translation), vol. 1, book 8, hadith no. 709, <https://sunnah.com/nasai/8> (accessed 25 February 2020).

Ibn Ḥawqal did not criticise the consumption of onions. He just pointed out the consumption of large amounts of raw onion. This is the theme that connects his text to the Islamic narrations. To conclude, Ibn Ḥawqal could have had other reasons (for instance, political) for his harsh criticisms. What I contend is that – similarly to al-Masʿūdī, al-Gharnāṭī and al-Idrīsī – Ibn Ḥawqal's comments are permeated by Islamic notions and religious terminology, which could convey messages that a Muslim reader would easily recognize.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an intertextual analysis of the accounts of some Muslim travellers concerning Sicily. The analysis highlighted the influence of the Qurʾān and prophetic narratives on the travellers under examination. It elucidated that beyond serving as mere historical records, these narratives serve as reflections of the religious convictions of the authors. While Muslim travellers engaged in physical exploration, their perspectives were also shaped by their religious beliefs, with the imagery and teachings of the Qurʾān guiding their perceptions. Their travels yielded not only historical chronicles but also enriched the religious outlook of both themselves and their readers, as they discerned divine signs in their observations. The way they perceived places and people was invariably influenced by their religious worldview, resulting in accounts with dual layers of significance: one conveying factual information and another, more subtle layer, reflecting upon religious themes, sometimes explicitly and at other times implicitly. Their interest in phenomena such as fire, bodies of water, vegetation, and specific habits can be traced back to their religious traditions and cultural beliefs.

The intertextual analysis served as a method for reconstructing transmitted traditions and uncovering the nuanced messages conveyed by the writers to their readers. It transcends literal interpretations, enabling the comprehension of underlying aspects crucial for a deeper understanding. By juxtaposing Arab narratives on Sicily with Islamic sources, particularly the Qurʾān, a framework for comprehending these historical and literary accounts is established. Consequently, intertextual examinations of historical texts hold potential for unveiling new perspectives. Nonetheless, further scholarly endeavours are imperative to advance this area of study.

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