

Chapter Title: TWO EXAMPLES OF ARABIC TEXTS IN SICILY, BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND PHILOSOPHY

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Book Title: Muslim Sicily

Book Subtitle: Encounters and Legacy

Book Editor(s): Nuha Alshaar

Published by: Edinburgh University Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/jj.15478407.11>

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TWO EXAMPLES OF ARABIC TEXTS IN SICILY, BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND PHILOSOPHY

Patrizia Spallino

In recent years, particularly over the last fifteen years, studies on Islamic Sicily – considered in their multiple facets – have grown considerably. Evidence of this is provided by the works, individual or the product of collegiate approaches coordinated by individual scholars, which have demonstrated a widening of horizons in historiographic reflection from the methodological to the hermeneutical point of view.¹

Starting from these excerpted considerations noted in the interesting article by Mirella Cassarino, this contribution aims to illustrate two texts which are exemplars of the cultural relations between Sicily and Islamic civilisations. The first is titled *Tathqīf al-lisān wa talqīḥ al-janān* (Guide on the Language and Fertilisation of the spirit), which was written by Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī,² a grammarian and linguist. The *Tathqīf al-lisān* is the

¹ 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.

² Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī, *Tathqīf al-lisān wa-talqīḥ al-Janān*, introduction by Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Atā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990). For information on Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī, see Umberto Rizzitano, 'Ibn Makkī', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005).

only work of *lahn al-‘ammā* (common language mistakes) from the Islamic West, specifically Sicily. The work is an example of the Arabic language spoken in Sicily in the eleventh century, when the island was an emirate under Islamic rule. The second text to be examined here was written three centuries later. It is a collection of letters exchanged between the Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen and the Andalusian Sufi philosopher Quṭb al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Ibn Sab‘īn.³

These are two texts which shed light on the Arabic Islamic tradition in Sicily,⁴ but which had remained untranslated into any European language for centuries. Their eventual translation (from Arabic) has disclosed documents that had not been very well known in the Western world and has given voice to authors who may have been considered ‘minor’ and who may otherwise have been forgotten. Drawing on these sources and bringing them to the attention of the Western academic community allows Arabic philologists, linguists and scholars of Islamic philosophy, theology and spirituality to more deeply understand their fields, which may be rich in historical facts yet poor in textual evidence.

Let us proceed, in chronological order, by first analysing the *Tathqīf al-lisān* and discussing the sociolinguistic aspects of life in Sicily during the Kalbid era (948–1040). Comprised of fifty chapters, this treaty lists the grammatical errors made by Sicilian speakers of Arabic, whether common people (*al-‘amma*) or learned people (*al-mukhaṣṣiṣūn*).⁵ Each listed error is followed by its correct

³ For more on Ibn Sab‘īn, see Patrizia Spallino, ‘Ibn Sab‘īn’, in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy Between 500 and 1500*, edited by Henrik Lagerlund (London: Springer, 2010).

⁴ A detailed discussion of the philosophical ideas of Ibn Sab‘īn in his collection of letters with the Emperor Frederick II is provided in Chapter Six of this volume.

⁵ It is not the purpose of this paper to engage in detailed linguistic discussions or arguments of Ibn Makkī. For further discussion on Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī and his work on Siculo-Arabic and *Tathqīf al-lisān*, see Dionisius A. Agius, *Siculo-Arabic* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996); idem, ‘Who spoke Siculo Arabic?’ in *XII Incontro italiano di linguistica camito-semitica (afroasiatica)*, edited by Marco Moriggi (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2007), 25–33. The term *mukhaṣṣiṣūn* (plural of the participle *mukhaṣṣiṣ*), also known as *abl al-khaṣṣa* (aristocrats, nobles, the high or cultured class, the elite), deserves special attention. Giuseppe Mandalà writes: ‘The constellation of people and positions that revolved around the ruler is defined by the Arabic term “ḥaṣṣa”, which included vizier, advisors

form. During the Kalbid era, the island gave birth to several important philologists, grammarians, writers and poets. Among those who distinguished themselves in the field of jurisprudence, literature and science in that period were Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī Ibn al-Birr al-Ṣiqillī (d. 1068),⁶ his disciple ‘Alī Ibn Ja‘far ibn ‘Alī Ibn Muḥammad, otherwise known as Ibn al-Qaṭṭā‘ (d. 1121)⁷ and Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī (d. 1107).⁸

Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī (whose date of birth is not known) was an excellent orator, poet, grammarian, linguist, jurist and scholar of Arabic. He lived most of his life in Sicily, presumably in Palermo, until the Norman conquest in 1060. Umberto Rizzitano writes:

Before going to Tunis he lived in Sicily where he remained probably until the beginning of the Norman occupation in 452/1060. This can be deduced first from his *nisba*, then from the fact that he had as his *shaykh* Ibn al-Birr, who lived in Sicily at this time, and finally from an even more convincing

(“*aṣḥāb ar-ra’y*”), judges, secretaries, intelligence services, ambassadors and interpreters, as well as army commanders, leaders of the troops, border governors, the “jund” and tax collectors. All belonged to the “*khaṣṣa*”, a multiconfessional community in the service of the ruler. They represented an elite, or rather a group of chosen people with official roles for specific offices who depended directly on the sovereign who gave them orders and paid them wages’. Giuseppe Mandalà, ‘The Martyrdom of Yuḥānnā, Physician of Ibn Abī’l Ḥusayn, Ruler of the Island of Sicily: Editio Princeps and Historical Commentary’, *Journal of Transcultural Medieval Studies* 3/1–2 (2016), 47–48.

⁶ Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī Ibn al-Birr al-Ṣiqillī was a lexicographer and philosopher who was born in Sicily in the late tenth century. He studied in Alexandria and in Mahdia in Tunisia, then returned to the island at the end of the Kalbid period.

⁷ Ibn al-Qaṭṭā‘, a Sicilian Arab philologist, was the author of a history of Sicily and an important anthology of Arab-Sicilian poets, *Al-Durra al-khaṭīra*.

⁸ Regarding the epithet ‘al-Ṣiqillī’, Alex Metcalfe states: ‘In terms of insular regional identity, it was not uncommon to find individuals with names containing references to some ancient Arab tribe or to the island itself: for example, the scribe Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ṣiqillī al-Anṣarī; the scholars ‘Alī al-Rabī‘ī al-Ṣiqillī and Aḥmad al-Qurayshī Ibn al-Ṣiqillī; or the poet Ibn Ḥamdīs al-Azdī al-Ṣiqillī. Nor was it unusual to find the demonym “Sicilian” in naming strings alongside Arabic names: its use was not confined to Muslim émigrés and notables, but was also found in a cross-section of the population’. Alex Metcalfe, ‘Before the Normans: Identity and Societal Formation in Muslim Sicily’, in *Sicily: Heritage of the World*, edited by Dirk Booms and Peter John Higgs (London: British Museum Press, 2019), 107.

circumstance, the inclusion of some poetical fragments of Ibn Makkī in *al-Durra al-Khaṭīra*, the well-known anthology of the poetry of the Arabs of Sicily compiled by Ibn al-Qaṭṭā'.⁹

There are scant records of Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī's works: a few have been preserved but many have been lost.

The *Tathqīf al-lisān* is one of those works by Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī which has survived to the present day. According to 'Abd al-'Azīz Matar, the text was written between 1063 and 1067 (456 and 460 AH).¹⁰ The *Tathqīf al-lisān* belongs to a category of works, found as early as in the eighth century CE, known as *kutub laḥn al-'amma* (treatise on common language mistakes). These works aim at correcting Arabic sayings that deviate from the norm, and they highlight the difference between widespread customs and the standards approved by grammarians and lexicographers. Treaties often classified within this category usually resort to this formula: the error is introduced with the words 'they say' (*wa-yaqūlūna*), followed by the saying in question, and then the correct expression preceded by the phrase 'but the correct form is' (*wa al-ṣāwābu*). Apart from following the same structure, many of these works also have recurring titles.¹¹

With regard to the word *laḥn*, its meaning has been translated historically as 'double entendre, variant or idiom'. These meanings, however, have been lost because of the codification of the *al-fuṣḥā* standard of the language. This resulted in the term *laḥn* acquiring the new meaning of 'grammatical error', from the verb *laḥana* (to err), the meaning of which is: to speak broken Arabic, to blunder, to make grammatical mistakes.¹²

⁹ Rizzitano, 'Ibn Makkī'.

¹⁰ Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī, *Tathqīf al-lisān*, 4.

¹¹ Some examples, in chronological order according to the death dates of their authors, are: *Laḥn al-'awām* by al-Zubaydī (d. 989); *Al-Talwīḥ fī sharḥ al-faṣīḥ* by al-Hirawī (d. 1041); *Durratu al-ghawwāṣ fī awḥām al-khawāṣṣ* by al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122); *Al-Iqtidāb fī sharḥ adab al-kuttāb* by Ibn al-Sayyid (d. 1127); *Al-Madkhal ilā taqwīm al-lisān wa-ta'lim al-bayān* by Ibn Hishām al-Lakhmī (d. 1181); *Taqwīm al-Lisān* by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200); and *Sharḥ durratu al-ghawwāṣ* by al-Khafāji (d. 1658).

¹² For further information on the term *laḥn al-'amma*, see the entry of that title in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., by Ch. Pellat. He writes that *laḥn al-'amma*, "errors of language made by the common people", is an expression which characterises a branch of lexicography

In grouping the grammatical errors in the *Tathqīf al-lisān*, Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī adopted one main criterion: he privileged the grammatical rules of the Arabic language.

Arabic speakers consider following the grammatical rules of their language a duty, since language forms a bond among members of the community and gives them the means to communicate with each other. The criterion that considers language as part of ‘what is right’ implies a social rule of the community imposed on individuals that accepts what is correct while rejecting errors in the spoken language; thus, linguistic errors are moral errors. Georgine Ayoub states:

The aim of these treatises is puristic: the authors do not intend to understand the errors but rather to denounce them and to recall the *kalām faṣīḥ*. [. . .] In some treatises, the correct form is legitimized by a sentence from the *kalām al-‘Arabī*: a Qur’ānic verse, a line of poetry.¹³

But let us now analyse several passages from our author’s treatise. Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī also classified errors according to the following categories: paradigms and word structures, conjugation and etymology, the specialists’ errors in reciting the Qur’ān, errors made by the *ahl al-ḥadīth* and errors pertaining to medical science. To strengthen his linguistic theories, he used verses of poetry and Arab proverbs that added value to his linguistic work, making the text a true guide to the language.

designed to correct deviations by reference to the contemporary linguistic norms, as determined by the purists. [. . .] Apart from its ancient connotations such as “word with double meaning, obscure allusion”, “intelligence” etc., between which a subtle line of association may be traced, *lahm* also appears to have signified originally, “manner of speaking”, “use of a word or pronunciation of a phonem peculiar to an individual or ethnic group”, in such a way that it could be considered an equivalent of the word *lugha*, adapted by the grammarians to take on the technical meaning of “dialectical or regional variation” [. . .] Having become a synonym of *khaṭā’*, it is with this meaning that it figures twice in the *Kitāb* of Sībawayh. In the following century, the use of the term in this precise sense had become so widespread that al-Djāhiz himself, commenting on a verse in which *lahm* signifies “word with double meaning, obscure allusion”, spontaneously, but erroneously, gave it the name of “fault”.

¹³ Quote taken from Georgine Ayoub, *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 629.

The *Tathqīf al-lisān* opens with a prolegomenon (*muqaddima*) and helps us to define the representations relating to language in the Kalbid era:

Once the demonstration had been completed and the argument clarified, decay spread through the language. The inconvenient mixed with the good and it insinuated itself in the tongue of the Arabs. Every day the pillars of this language are destroyed, and its knights die and its honour is offended and its essence is made impure, its traces are deleted and its lights turned off. Many people continue to make mistakes believing [themselves] to be correct while many laymen use the right words without knowing it. In some cases, the person that is wrong teases the person that is right and thinks to have won and, in fact, people have become equals in being wrong and in making grammatical mistakes, except for a few. Those few people, despite being a minority, distinguish themselves in arguments, in writing, in reading books and in researching them. During an argument or a debate, these cannot disagree with what is in people's mouths and is used by the masses. The error continues to spread among people and takes the lead, retaining control to the point that [the people make] mistakes in reading and quoting the most famous sayings of the Prophet, making blunders in the most clear and common sayings. In addition, in the chapters of the book of God, the Mighty and Glorious, [these people make] interpretations where interpretations are not allowed. They [have] changed the poems of the Arabs, making mistakes in the pronunciation and transcribing the text wrongly, and they have wrongly classified the legal books and other works without [conducting] due diligence [of] the structure of the terms used and without noticing errors made while reading. Actually, when they hear the correct word, they deny and contradict it because they are used to incorrectness and loathe correctness.¹⁴

The following observations can be drawn from this *muqaddima*: firstly, Ibn Makkī observes that the *ʿamma* social class has an imperfect knowledge of classical Arabic but does not ignore it; on the other hand, the *ḥaṣṣa* (élite) is made up of Arabic-language specialists who still continue to make some mistakes. Moreover, the author notices that the *ʿamma* often communicates more correctly than the *ḥaṣṣa*, the 'true erudites'. Lastly, Ibn Makkī acknowledges his

¹⁴ Quote taken from Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī, *Tathqīf al-lisān*, 15–17.

own mistakes, thus reporting on his personal experience.¹⁵ *Laḥn* often consists of an incorrect ending or an error in pronunciation, and for this reason Ibn Makkī devotes many chapters to matters of pure pronunciation of some consonants. But among the most serious errors listed are those concerning the sacred text.

Chapter 35 of the book, titled ‘*Ghalaṭu qurrā’ al-Qur’ān*’, is a very important section of the *Tathqīf al-lisān*. Here, our grammarian lists the errors made by the specialists (*mutakhaṣṣiṣūn*) during their recitation of the Qur’ān. For example, he states errors in pronunciation like that of the *nūn al-khaṭifa* (by ‘light *nūn*’ the author means a distinct pronunciation of the letter *nūn*, especially when it is between two words). He also lists grammatical errors caused by the wrong intonation of voice and by the ignoring of the *al-tajwīd*, that is, the rules that dictate the correct way to recite the verses of the Qur’ān – the articulation of words, the pauses and so on.

By way of example, Ibn Makkī states:

And I asked Abū ‘Aliyy al-Ḥalūlī – may God have mercy on him – [his opinion on the matter of] praying standing behind the imām who pronounces the light vowels ‘*nūn*’ and ‘*tanwīn*’ on the letter *yā*’ and the letter *wāw*. He said: ‘We detest performing the prayer behind him because he broke the unanimous consensus (*ijmā*)’ as well as he recited the Qur’ānic verses as no one had recited them before’. And said the Shaykh Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq – God help him – ‘Someone among the people of science (*abl al-‘ilm*) believes that the inadmissible grammatical error such as [not] clearly pronouncing the light vowel *nūn* and *tanwīn* on the letter *yā*’ and *wāw*, and changing the letter *dād* to *zā*’ and vice versa and so on, if it did not occur in the Umm al-Qur’ān, the prayer behind someone reciting that way is permissible.¹⁶

In Chapter 36, titled ‘*Ghalaṭu abli al-ḥadīthi*’, Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī continues in much the same way, as he exposes errors made by the scholars of

¹⁵ A careful analysis on *Tathqīf al-lisān* was conducted by Annliese Nef in her study: ‘Analyse du Tathqīf al-Lisān d’Ibn Makkī et intérêt pour la connaissance de la variante sicilienne de l’arabe: Problèmes méthodologiques’, *Oriente Moderno* 16 (1997): 1–17.

¹⁶ See Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī, *Tathqīf al-lisān*, 202; see also Patrizia Spallino, ‘La faute de grammaire entendue comme mal et le mal de la faute de grammaire dans le *Tathqīf al-lisān* de Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī’, *Studi Magrebini* 20/1 (2022): 29–46.

aḥādīth. In particular, he refers to the inaccurate pronunciation of the titles of some important texts, of the names of people and places and of several words. For example, . . .

They say: ‘Muwaṭṭā Mālik’ without the hamza, instead the correct thing is: al-muwaṭṭa’u with the hamza. They say: al-mulakhkhaṣ (summary, compendium) with the vowel *fatḥa* over the consonant *khā*’, but it is correct al-mulakhkhiṣu with the vowel *kasra* under the letter *khā*’, so named by its compiler because he summarized what is referred to in his *isnād* of the ḥadīth of the practical handbook of Islamic law al-Muwaṭṭa’u. They say: He performed the major ritual ablution with a vessel that removes the state of severe impurity, called al-farqu, with the *iskān* on the letter *rā*’. They brought the envoy of God a basket made of palm leaves filled with dates, called ‘*arqi*, also with the *iskān* on the consonant *rā*’. Instead, it is correct to put the *fatḥa* over the consonant *rā*’ in both terms.¹⁷

Likewise, the author does not omit documenting the linguistic errors of jurisconsults (*al-fuqahā*, Chapter 37) and errors pertaining to the medical lexicon (Chapter 39).¹⁸

A clear tone of superiority emerges in the *Tathqīf al-lisān*, and it is directed towards the ignorant speakers noted above. It does so in a way that is reminiscent of that found in a description of Palermo by the Iraqi traveller and geographer Ibn Ḥawqal during his visit to the Kalbid city in 973. In this passage, the writer scathingly comments on the *mu’allimūn*, the so-called schoolteachers:

Various categories of stupidity and folly, superior in folly and stupidity to the schoolteachers and the fools of any other place [. . .] Around 300 or less are present in the city, a quantity nowhere to be found anywhere else. And they are many despite their poor value, thanks to their repugnance for military expeditions and the holy war, [even though] their country is at the border with the land of the Rūm and a war zone where the *Jihād* is always in force and the call to arms permanent since the conquest of Sicily [. . .] There was in fact a rule in force for some time that made schoolteachers exempt from hard work

¹⁷ Ibn Makkī al-Ṣiqillī, *Tathqīf al-lisān*, 206.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222–24.

in exchange for a tax, and so all the idiots took refuge in teaching, and this became a desirable profession for these illiterates.¹⁹

Similar remarks follow in Ibn Ḥawqal regarding the grammatical errors of the imāms who did not seem to give due regard to the importance of the declination and conjugation of verbs.²⁰

Let us now fast-forward several years, to when Sicily found itself in a very different historical scenario. The Arabs were no longer the rulers, because by 1061 the Normans had conquered Sicily. When the Normans landed in Sicily, they encountered a mixed population of Arabic-speakers, whom they called Saracens, and Christians, whom they called Greeks.²¹ Invested with the title Grand Count of Sicily and Calabria by Pope Urban II, in 1099 Roger I inaugurated the dynasty which ruled Sicily until the coronation of Henry VI in 1194. The Hohenstaufen, a new dynasty, ruled the island (1194), and after a decade of turmoil, on 26 December 1220, fourteen-year-old Frederick II started his reign as emperor of Sicily. Here, we will look at a cultural aspect of the emperor's rule: his philosophical correspondence with 'Abd al-Ḥaqq Ibn Sab'īn (d. 1269 or 1270), a Sufi master from the other side of the Mediterranean.

In 1853, the famous Sicilian historian Michele Amari notified the academic community of the existence of a manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University (Hunt. 534), titled *al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyya* (The Sicilian Questions). In his article, the scholar stressed that this was a work of 'the highest importance for the history of philosophy'.²² Having recognized the importance of this work,

¹⁹ Michele Amari, 'Descrizione di Palermo e vituperi dei siciliani in Ibn Hawqal', in *Gli Arabi in Italia*, edited by Francesco Gabrieli and Umberto Scerrato (Milan: Garzanti-Scheiwiller, Credito Italiano, 1979), 735.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Charles H. Haskins, *The Normans in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915); Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Anliese Nef, *Conquérir et gouverner la Sicile islamique aux XI et XII siècles* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2011).

²² Michele Amari, 'Questions philosophiques adressées aux savants musulmans par l'Empereur Frédéric II', *Journal Asiatique* 1 (1853), 1. I will hereafter refer to my previous article with reference to the studies around the manuscript *Al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyya*: Patrizia Spallino, 'Al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyya', *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'* 56/1 (1996): 52–62.

Amari presented it to his Orientalist colleagues, demonstrating that the recipient of the *Sicilian Questions* was the Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. The date of the correspondence is fixed between 1237 and 1242, and the questions posed to the emperor are on the following topics:

- the Aristotelian thesis on the eternity of the world;
- the search for the goal of divine science by the ancient Greeks and the Sufis;
- the Aristotelian categories and their number;
- the immortality of the soul and the difference on the subject between the psychological theory of Aristotle and that of Alessandro of Afrodisia;
- an explanation of the saying of the Prophet Muhammad: ‘The heart of the believer is between two fingers of the Compassionate’.²³

As can be noticed at first sight, the text introduces the reader to questions that were avidly debated by medieval Latin, Byzantine, Jewish and Muslim thinkers alike. It is an authentic proof of the arguments debated at the court of Frederick II, a court where the discourse followed Platonic, Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and Sufi speculative traditions.

Unfortunately, apart from some excerpts and translations, Amari did not publish the work, preferring to leave the task to others. The Danish Orientalist August Ferdinand Mehren welcomed Amari’s invitation and in 1879 published a study on the *Sicilian Questions* in the *Journal Asiatique* in relation to the translation of only the fourth question, that on the immortality of the soul. In 1928, the French Orientalist Louis Massignon published an article titled ‘Ibn Sab‘in et la critique psychologique’. Much later, Otto Pretzl in Munich resumed the study of the *Sicilian Questions* in collaboration with Şerefettin Yaltkaya, professor of theology at the University of Istanbul, who translated the work into Turkish and curated the unabridged publication of the text in Arabic with a preface by Henry Corbin. The translation of the entire work continued to be an unfinished project, even after 1956, when Mario Grignaschi translated the second question on the aim of divine science. I consider mentioning these preliminary notions key to introducing the next step, which raised my own interest in this text, in its translation and, within my limits, its critical and philological analysis.

²³ For further discussion of Ibn Sab‘in’s *Al-Masā’il al-Şiqillīyya*, see the following chapter.

A prologue, which here I prefer to quote in its entirety, opens the epistles and describes the events that led to Frederick II commissioning the answers written by Ibn Sabʿīn:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, whom I implore for help, the *shaykh* said, the *imām*, his eminence, the *imām* of the community, the prince of *imāms*, the example of the two holy cities, our lord Quṭb al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq ibn Sabʿīn, may God make him useful and may he reiterate his blessings to the Muslims with the answers to the questions posed by the king of the Rūm, emperor, prince of Sicily, when he sent a copy of them to the East, and to Egypt, to Shām, to ʿIrāq, to the Durūb, to Yemen. But the answers of the learned among the Muslims did not please him. So, he asked in Ifrīqiya, to those within it who could [. . .] answer, but he was told there was no such person. He enquired about the Maghreb and the Andalus, and he was told there was a man called Ibn Sabʿīn [hereafter referred to as Quṭb al-Dīn]. So, he wrote to the caliph al-Rashīd, of the dynasty of ʿAbd al-Muʿmin, about the matter. And the prince of the believers wrote to his governor in Ceuta to send for the man in question so he could answer these questions. The king of the Rūm had already sent a ship with his ambassador and a sum of money. Ibn Khalāṣ sent for *imām* Quṭb al-Dīn and, as ordered by the caliph, showed him the questions; he smiled – may God be pleased with him – and took it upon himself to answer them. Ibn Khalāṣ offered him the money the king of the Rūm had given him, but he [Quṭb al-Dīn] rejected it [. . .] saying: ‘I will answer these questions to gain favour with God and for the triumph of the Islamic community’. He then read the words of the Most High: ‘Say: I ask this for no reason but the love of others’ (Qurʾān XLII, 23), and he answered [the questions]. Then, when the answers reached the king, he was satisfied by them and sent [Quṭb al-Dīn] a precious gift, which was refused like the first, and so the Christian understood he was not good enough and God granted victory to Islam, elevating it above the Christian faith with decisive arguments. Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds. Answer to the said questions, and success is through God.²⁴

²⁴ Ibn Sabʿīn, *Le Questioni Siciliane: Federico II e l’universo filosofico*, introduction, translation and notes by Patrizia Spallino (Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali, 2002), 55–56. An indispensable study on the prologue of *Sicilian Questions* was conducted by Giuseppe Mandalà, ‘Il Prologo delle Risposte alle questioni siciliane di Ibn Sabʿīn come fonte storica:

The most notable fact is the request for knowledge made by Frederick II to the Islamic world. This element initiated a whole topic of research by historians and scholars of Frederick II and beyond.

As mentioned in the prologue of the *Sicilian Questions*, Frederick II had sent the same questions to several regions of the Islamic world before his cultural encounter with Ibn Sabʿīn. As a matter of fact, it is well known that, by the time of the crusade of 1228–29, the emperor had already promoted a policy of cultural cooperation with the Islamic world. During the negotiations for the surrender of Jerusalem (February 1229), he argued on various scientific topics with *shaykh al-shuyūkh* Fakhr al-Dīn (d. 1250) whilst formulating a series of questions on philosophy, geometry and mathematics addressed to Malik al-Kāmil (d. 1238), to test the intellectual prowess of the sultan’s scholars. Al-Kāmil gave the task of answering mathematical questions to *shaykh* ʿAlam al-Dīn Qayṣar (d. 1251), ‘master of this art’, while all other questions were answered in their totality by a group of scholars.

The questions cited within the prologue were sent to Mosul, an important centre for the training of Islamic scholars; specifically, they were sent to the school of Kamāl al-Dīn Ibn Yūnus (d. 1242), who was a theologian, philosopher, medical doctor and one of the best-known Muslim intellectuals of the thirteenth century. Several renowned thinkers studied at the school of Kamāl al-Dīn. Among them were the jurist, theologian and grammarian Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282),²⁵ the astronomer and philosopher Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274); al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Abkharī (d. ca 1265); the logician and philosopher Sirāğ al-Dīn al-ʿUrmawī (d. 1283); and the Christian

Politica mediterranea e cultura arabo-islamica nell’età di Federico II’, *Schede Medievali* 45 (2007): 25–94. The prologue has also been studied by Anna Akasoy, ‘Reading the Prologue of Ibn Sabʿīn’s *Sicilian Questions*’, *Schede medievali* 45 (2007): 15–24.

²⁵ As specified by Dag Nikolaus Hasse, Ibn Khallikān was not a student of Kamāl al-Dīn, but rather a ‘family friend’. Dag Nikolaus Hasse, ‘Mosul and Frederick II Hohenstaufen: Notes on Atīraddīn al-Abkharī and Sirāğaddīn al-Urmawī’, in *Occident et Proche-Orient: Contacts scientifiques au temps des Croisades: Actes du colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve 24 et 25 Mars 1997*, edited by Isabelle Draelants, Anne Thion and Baudoin van den Abeele (Louvain-la-Neuve: Brepols, 2000), 146.

philosopher Teodoro d'Antiochia (d. ca 1250).²⁶ The last two travelled to the court of Frederick II. There, Teodoro took on the role of imperial philosopher and was often tasked with writing letters in Arabic to the governor of Tunis. Thus, it is probable that he might have had a role in the writing of the letters containing the Sicilian questions.

As noted by Giuseppe Sermoneta, it should be understood that the scientific and cultural curiosity that characterised the emperor was not due merely to his desire to acquire personal knowledge. Rather, it was a tool of cultural politics and diplomacy that Frederick wielded in the context of the war that he was waging against the papacy. By looking to 'other cultures and religious traditions' to grapple with the key theological issues of the time, Frederick II was undercutting the papacy's hegemonic status as the absolute cultural authority.²⁷

But let us go back to the text. The first question posed by Frederick II in his epistles within the *Sicilian Questions*, and quoted by Ibn Sab'īn, is as follows:

You [that is, Frederick II] said: The wise man [meaning Aristotle] clearly affirms the eternity of the world in all his writings and there is no doubt this was his opinion. Notwithstanding this, if he demonstrated it, what was his demonstration? And if he did not demonstrate it, of which kind would his reasoning be in this regard? This is the matter of your argument.²⁸

Ibn Sab'īn responds to the question thus:

Concerning your statement 'and there is no doubt this was his opinion', this means you are delving into a demonstration (of eternity). Otherwise, how could you have reached this conclusion? And if you did not reach it, and you

²⁶ D. Ciccarelli, 'Teodoro il filosofo, Mazzeo di Ricco, Stefano Protonotaro: Nuovi apporti documentali', *Schede medievali* 6–7 (1984): 99–110; Charles Burnett, 'Master Theodore, Frederick II's Philosopher', in *Federico II e le nuove culture: Atti del XXXI Convegno storico internazionale (Todi, 19–21 Ottobre 1994)* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1995), 225–54.

²⁷ Cf. Giuseppe Sermoneta, 'Federico II e il pensiero ebraico del suo tempo', in *Federico II e l'arte del Duecento italiano: Atti della III settimana di studi di storia dell'arte medievale dell'Università di Roma (15–20 Maggio 1978)*, edited by Angiola Maria Romanini, 2 vols (Galatina: Congedo Editore, 1980), 183–97.

²⁸ Ibn Sab'īn, *Le Questioni Siciliane*, 58–59.

wish to know (what is the right conclusion), formulate your question and we will later illustrate it to you, by the power of God [. . .] And your statement ‘And if he did not demonstrate it, of which kind would his reasoning be in this regard?’ could lead one to think that you are either looking for an elucidation or information, or you are testing the other [to see if they know the answer].²⁹

During the translation of the *Sicilian Questions*, the reason behind why Frederick asked whether Aristotle had demonstrated the eternity of the world remained unclear and, if so, which would be the proof or whether he had not demonstrated it.

A plausible explanation of the nature of Frederick’s curiosity could be related to the emperor’s connection with a fundamental text of medieval Jewish culture, *The Guide of the Perplexed* by Maimonides. Here, the philosopher dedicates around twenty chapters to the question of the creation and the eternity of the world, chapters which Frederick probably knew well. Thus, we can consider this yet another example of the circulation of ideas in medieval Sicily. Further research should then lead us to investigate the extent of Ibn Sabʿīn’s knowledge of Maimonides’ *Guide* as well as the influence this had on the Andalusian philosopher’s thinking. In fact, the *Guide*, as Mauro Zonta reports, . . .

. . . was also well-known in the Islamic world in the late middle ages, especially in the mystical circles of the Sufis, who were very interested in the esoteric traits of the work: it was certainly known by both the Spanish Sufi philosopher Ibn Sabʿīn (1217–70), who was in contact with the emperor Frederick II, and the Sufi al-Ḥassan Ibn Hud (thirteenth century), and there are reports that it was still being read within the mystical circles of Fez in the first decades of the fourteenth century.³⁰

Each one of Ibn Sabʿīn’s answers follows the same structure. The author starts by criticising the way in which the question is formulated; focuses on the

²⁹ Ibid., 59.

³⁰ Mosè Maimonide, *La Guida dei perplessi*, edited by Mauro Zonta (Torino: UTET, 2003), 56; Patrizia Spallino, ‘Les questions siciliennes de Ibn Sabʿīn: Nouvelles perspectives de recherche’, *Schede Medievali* 45 (2007), 101.

definition of the terms used in formulating it; discusses the various arguments on the topic according to Aristotle, Greek philosophy and Islamic sources; critiques the theses of these arguments; and finally formulates his own theory based on his own observations and conclusions.

In light of the questions raised, Ibn Sabʿīn mentions the profound subject knowledge of his community of Muslim scholars who, in his opinion, would regard these topics as trivial matters not worth dwelling on:

All of the questions you have asked are clearer than a fire on a mountain for our community whose minds are sharper than a sword or a dagger. Ask more difficult questions, deeper and more intelligent than these, so that an erudite Muslim scholar may answer you, not wise men. They are not concerned with these matters; according to them, these questions are inconvenient to those who ask and to those whom are asked. And if they knew I gave you answers to these [questions], they would regard me as they regard these [matters].³¹

The question on the immortality of the soul also brings forth similar responses:

You don't know how to argue, and you give your opponent that which he can use to reprimand you from the start; and it will suffice him to make this preamble against your stubbornness [. . .] Talking to you is like talking to someone who is distracted and asleep; and for he who wants to teach you, it would be like striking cold iron,³² because you enquired about that which is unknown

³¹ Ibid., 135.

³² By 'like striking cold iron', he means here that the person is unteachable. Cold iron no longer changes shape. Only when the iron is hot can one work on it. Beating on the cold iron means not obtaining results. Regarding the offensive tones with which Ibn Sabʿīn addresses the emperor, some scholars have discussed the motivation. The Franciscan Arabist Dario Cabanelas reports this hypothesis: 'Lo quel tal vez pudiera sospechase es que la obra no fuera dirigida al Emperador en la forma en que hoy la conocemos, pues resulta difícil creer que llegara la impertinencia de Ibn Sabʿīn, no sólo a amonestar a Federico, interpellándole con frases ofensivas, sino hasta a excusarse, con la prisa, de tratar superficialmente las cuestiones, remitiendo la explicación más pormenorizada a un abocamiento personal o a consultas epistolares, procedimiento que, si puede admitirse, por ejemplo, en su *Budd al-ʿārif*, dirigido, al menos aparentemente, a un particular, en la respuesta a unas cuestiones propuestas par un emperador que se pagaba tanto del saber, resulta sumamente inoportuno. Sin conocer todavía el carácter de Ibn Sabʿīn en sus múltiples facetas, no es fácil predecir

by vague means. [. . .] And besides this, your religion and your cognitive skills made an effort to guide you, but your desires and convictions led you astray. He who moves away from what is true will have to bear the consequences; every man uses that which he has; [thus], leave the matter with God – may He be blessed and exalted – may you be saved. Find what is true through what is true and learn. Escape your routine and do not count on it, go first towards your innate disposition and entrust yourself to it.³³

hasta dónde podría llegar su impertinencia. Tal vez pudiera tratarse de dos redacciones, una más sobria, dirigida al Emperador, y otra con retoques ortodoxos y parenéticos, como la que poseemos, destinada a sus correligionarios' (What perhaps could have been suspected is that the work of art was not directed to the emperor in the shape that we know it today. This is because it is difficult to believe that the impertinence of Ibn Sab'īn not only to admonish Frederick, calling him with offensive phrases but including to excuse himself with a rush to treat superficially the issues requiring minimal explanation. For example, in his *Budd al-ʿarīf* directed at least apparently to one person in response to several issues proposed by an emperor who took great pride from knowledge resulting in something extremely unnecessary without yet knowing the character of the person. It is not easy to predict how far his impertinence could reach. Perhaps, the emperor could reach the impertinence level. With Orthodox and parental approval); cf. Dario Cabanelas, 'Federico II de Sicilia e Ibn Sab'īn de Murcia: Las 'Questiones Sicilianas', *Miscelanea de Estudios Arabes y Hebraicos* 4 (1955), 52; see also Estaban Lator, 'Ibn Sab'īn de Murcia y su *Budd al-ʿArīf*, *Al-Andalus* (1944), 382–83. Many of Ibn Sab'īn scholars have come across the Sufi's irreverent language towards Frederick II, but not all have wondered why; cf. August Mehren, 'Correspondance du philosophe soufi Ibn Sab'īn Abd Oul-Haqq avec l'Empereur Frédéric II de Hohenstaufen', *Journal Asiatique* 14 (1879), 392, which refers to a 'langage insolent'. Salvatore Tramontana defined Ibn Sab'īn's tone as 'ironica insolenza', an attitude of annoying superiority that excludes the possibility of a useful confrontation between the philosopher and the politician: 'Ibn Sab'īn [. . .] dimostrava chiaramente di non volere prendere in considerazione l'universo mentale che stava alla base delle domande di Federico [. . .]. La sostituzione delle analisi dei contenuti con considerazioni su questioni di metodo, era un modo elegante di sfuggire alla discussione'; cf. Salvatore Tramontana, *Il Regno di Sicilia: Uomo e natura dall'XI al XIII secolo* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1999), 255. Another possible hypothesis could be that Ibn Sab'īn considers himself as the *murshid* (the one who guides) and that Frederick in the text is called *mustarshid* (the one who asks to be guided). The Sufi does not consider the temporal power of the emperor but places himself above him as holder of wisdom. The wise man is superior to the ignorant, but even in this there is no real justification for the use of offensive tones.

³³ Ibn Sab'īn, *Le Questioni Siciliane*, 164–65.

The *Sicilian Questions* ends with a direct invitation by Ibn Sabʿīn to discuss these matters again but in a personal meeting, proof of the actual interest of the philosopher in educating the emperor and of his wish to continue in person a dialogue that started via correspondence: ‘And I proceeded with you as per your request, and should I meet you in person, we would speak on these topics verbally, which is the best way. Learn all this and may God grant you his gift, grace and generosity’.³⁴ Unfortunately, we have neither proof of any reply by the emperor nor traces of his reaction to these answers. What is important in the effort to translate these texts – and this ultimately eases the pain and risks associated with moving on uncertain grounds – is to give voice and therefore life to characters who would otherwise have remained silent forever in a cultural tomb. Translating medieval correspondence allows us to peek into the details of a debate that is full of personal considerations. It allows us to enter a reserved atmosphere and reveal a more intimate character compared to that of work redacted for the purpose of presenting a theory.

The two cited texts deal with differing themes the analysis of which requires complex and technical knowledge in the domains of linguistics, philosophy and Islamic mysticism. All the studies realised to date on the Islamic documents of Sicily – from philological essays to poems, literary pieces, administrative acts, or epistolary exchanges – constitute one unique puzzle. Only the contribution of each Arabist, devoted to each of these pieces, will allow us to altogether understand one of the most important cultural periods of our time.

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³⁴ Ibid., 221.

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