TWO POETS AND THEIR NOSTALGIC LOOK BACK TO SICILY: IBN HAMDIS AND MUHAMMAD IQBAL

"But I am a lover; loud crying is my faith"

(M Iqbal)

Emanuela Mignani, Modena

I. Sicily: a short historical survey up to I266

During the VIII century B.C. Sicily was colonized by the Greeks and the Phoenicians and, five centuries later, it became a Roman province. During the early Middle Ages it was occupied by the Vandals, the Ostrogoths and in the early VI century (535) the Byzantine general Belisarius started the conquest of the island which remained under the Byzantine rule for about three centuries.

In the meantime, in 633, brave and courageous Arabs left Hijaz and their country to spread Islam and conquer new lands: only less than a century later, from Spain to Khorasan, pious people, victors and vanquished, prayed Allah five times a day.

Starting from 646, under the rule of Mu'awiyah, the first Arab ships were built and the fleet was soon a significant element in the process of spreading the Arab supremacy over the neighbouring coasts and the Mediterranean islands. The crews of the Arab ships were mainly composed of people coming from the north-western and northern coasts of Africa, the area called Ifriqiya.

In the VII-VIII centuries Sicily was object of Arab raids but the Byzantine ships were able to repel the attacks of those still weak attempts to invade the island.

But in June 827, under the approval of Ziyadat Allah I, the Aghlabid *amir* of al-Qayrawan, the seventy year old Asad ibn al-Furat up to then devoted to religious and law studies took the lead of the fleet, about seventy ships, and headed for Sicily. They reached the western coast of the island, landed at Mazara and won the enemy Byzantine forces. Shortly after the successful exploit, Asad moved towards Syracuse, the capital, but along the way he died of plague: that is how it finished the life of a man who, born in Khorasan, reached Ifriqiya when he was a child, devoted his life to Islam and as a true believer ended his days in a foreign land where he wanted to spread his faith. Asad's surviving forces, helped by new forces who joined them coming from Ifriqiya now and then, continued their task and took possession of important towns: Palermo (83I), Messina (842), Ragusa(849). Khafagia, the new leader of the Arab forces, conquered Noto in 864 and Syracuse in 878, after a long siege. Almost all Sicily was now under the Arab rule. Ibrahim II, the Aghlabid amir who went to Sicily in 902 to complete the conquest of the island, won the remaining enemy forces in a few months.[412]

From 902 to 1060 Sicily was completely under the Arab rule: the first rulers were the Aghlabids, followed by the kalbits. In 947 Hasan al-Kalbi settled in Sicily: the years of the kalbit dynasty government of the island (947-1053) might be called the "golden age" of Islamic Sicily.

Towards I040-60 there was a number of independent signorias (local independent governing bodies) and the Arab emirate started splitting into some independent principalities: that uncertain situation, no longer stable and strong, caused the end of the Arab supremacy in Sicily and in thirty years (I061-I091) the Normans conquered all the island)[413] Palermo was the new capital of the island.

---

412 The brave *amir* died the same year in the South of Italy where, after crossing the Straits of Messina, he wanted to continue his war against the unbelievers.

413 The Normans were originally pagan barbarian pirates from Denmark, Norway and Iceland. They settled in France Normandy in the IX century, then they converted to Christianity and adopted the French language. They invaded Britain in 1066. Another expansionary campaign brought them to southern Italy and Sicily, where they remained up to I266.

In the battles against the Normans a lot of Arabs were killed, some left Sicily taking refuge in Ifriqiya, Egypt or Spain. But a number of them did not leave the island: most of them had a poor and simple life but some were greatly appreciated by the Norman kings as they were good merchants, excellent craftsmen and men of letters. The rough Normans were fascinated by the refined Arabic lifestyle and culture, even if they supported their Christian faith, they allowed the Arabs to practise their religion. Even if they considered the Arabs a subjugated people, they were able to appreciate and recognize the good qualities of the Arab artisans and learned people. Near the Norman churches and palaces (often built and ornamented by Arab artisans) the elegant minarets still stood out.

Rare are the finds (intact and unaltered by the passing of time and unappropriate use) belonging to the Arab "golden age" in Sicily. What we know about that period is mostly due to the scientific, literary and artistic activity of those Arab and Muslim who lived during the Norman occupation of the island.

A tombstone can give us an idea of the multicultural education of the age and of the great esteem and consideration for the Arabs in general and the Arabic language in particular. The tombstone was made in I049 to commemorate the death of the mother of a Christian priest; the text is in four languages: Arabic, Greek, Latin and Hebrew.[414]

2. Ibn Hamdis and his nostalgia for Sicily

As we know, starting from the VII century the Arabic culture spread all over the territories the Arabs conquered. It drew new impetus from the contacts with the peoples subdued and the frequent migration, from one area to another, of significant learned people contributed to create the splendid medieval Arab paideia, a unique phenomenon in the history of literature and science.

Of course poetry, the chief art form in the age of Jahiliyya (when it had also a high social importance), continued to be a significant form of

[414] F. Gabrieli, U. Scerrato, *Gli Arabi in Italia,* nano, 1993, p. 158.

artistic expression.

During the Umayyad caliphate the contact with other peoples enriched poetry with new themes and during the Abbassid caliphate also the style of some poets changed. The "new poets" (the muhdathun), who lived in the learned and refined setting of the age, wrote poems which were mostly outstanding for their elegance, linearity and straight forwardness. The new literary trend reached Spain and from there Sicily (X century), where, especially under the Kalbit caliphate, a large number of poets were active– Ibn al-Qatta' collected, in an anthology, the poems of about one hundred and seventy poets of Sicily. Unfortunately most of the anthology was lost in the course of time.[415]

Therefore our knowledge of the Arabic poetry in Sicily would have been poor (based on a few manuscripts and later quotations of names and lines) if Michele Amari (1806-I889) had not collected what is probably Ibn Hamdis' complete poetic output, about 350 poems. Celestino Schiaparelli (184I-1919) edited the poems of Ibn Hamdis, which were first published in 1897 in the original Arabic version. Only in 1998 Stefania E. Carnemolla edited and published the first Italian version of Ibn Hamdis' diwan. It is Sciaparelli's translation based on Amari's Italian version of the poems.[416]

Ibn Hamdis is considered the most significant Arab poet born in Sicily. 'Abd al-Jabbar ibn Muhammad ibn Hamdis was born in Syracuse, probably in 1055. We know that he came from a wealthy family and that his adolescence and youth were light-hearted and carefree. But in I078-9 he had to leave Sicily. The Normans had already begun the conquest of the island and a lot of Arabs left, looking for a peaceful refuge. He never returned to Sicily. He reached Spain and he spent some years in Seville, at the court of al-Mu'tamid[417] who, patron of poets, had made the town and his palace a refined and brilliant meeting centre of learned people in general and of

---

415 Ibn al-Qatta' (Sicily 1041- Egypt 1121): he was a great lexico grapher and grammarian.
416 Ibn Hamdis, *Il Canzoniere,* translated by C. Schiaparelli, ed. Stefania Elena Carnemolla, Palermo, 1998.
417 *Amir* of the Muslim-Arab 'Abbasid dynasty that arose in Seville at the beginning of the XI century.

poets in particular. Those years were for Ibn Hamdis a second pleasant period of his life. He took part in the life at court, wrote poems greatly appreciated and celebrated the memorable events of the age, in particular al-Mu'tamid's victory over the Christian troops of Alfonso VI (in the battle of az-Zallaqah, I086). But also that pleasant portion of his life was to be short. In 1091 the Almoravid amir Yusuf Ibn Tashufin besieged Seville and won the army of al-Mu'tamid. Ibn Hamdis had to leave Andalusia and reached the norther coast of Africa.

The third part of his life was spent mainly in Mandiyah and Bijdyah where he was appreciated by the amirs of the two towns, but on the whole his life was now sad and nostalgic for the golden days gone by. He ended his life in Bijayah or, more probably, in the isle of Lajorca. It was July 1133.

Ibn Hamdis drew inspiration for his poems (more than six thousand lines) mostly from the pleasant moments of his life and from episodes which took place at the courts of the amirs who gave him hospitality. So he described the amirs, their successful deeds, their feasts and entertainments, splendid gardens, palaces, sweet girls, flowers, animals, rivers, the waning moon, the sea. ln these poems his style is often elaborate, rich in skilful similes, figurative and formal, always refined. But the poet is actually great when he speaks about his lost youth and his Sicily, the land of his fathers, of his pleasant adolescence, of the splendid society, culture and way of life of the Arabs. He speaks to us with sincere and moving words, pointing out his nostalgic feelings. His style seems to have been influenced by the poets "muhdathun" and is now more fluent, natural, spontaneous and elegant.

His Sicily is

A country the dove lent its collar

and the peacock covered with the mantle of its feathers.

The poppies seem wine

and the courtyards the glasses.[418]

But the sad notes soon prevail and pervade the lines about his life in Sicily

I remember Sicily and despair renews at its recollection.

…….

lf my tears did not taste bitter

I would believe they are its rivers[419]

Now the poet is old,

My youth has passed away and my white hair

has frightened my antilopes and scattered them away.[420]

And he often lingers over his past youth, thinks of the Arabs defeated by the Normans and expresses a wish:

May God guard a house in Noto[421]

and rain clouds converge there.

Every hour I think of it

and I send it the tears I shed.

I am nostalgic for the house,

---

[418] lbn Hamdis, *ll Canzoniere*, *op. cit.*, p. 429. (The English version of the poems is mine).

[419] *lbid.*, pp. I89, 190

[420] *lbid.*, p. 264

[421] A town where the poet probably lived for some time

the neighbours, the honesty of the girls.

He who left his heart in that place

with his body desires to return.[422]

Now

I see my country insulted by the Rum who

promenade where the inhabitants lie buried,

they do not have to face the strong defenders any longer.

If those graves could be opened wide they would fling outside fierce lions to attack them.

But I see that when a lion is far from the bush the arrogant wolf shows off.[423]

He addresses the wind and the sea to voice his endless longing for Sicily:

Oh wind! when you blow the rain clouds

to water the parched fields

send me the dry clouds

so that I may wet them with my tears.

……

Oh sea! beyond there is my paradise

---

[422] *Poeti Arabi di Sicilia*, ed. Francesca Maria Corrao, (Messina, 2002), pp. 143-45.

[423] Ibn Hamdis, *II Canzoniere, op. cit.*, pp. 252,253.

where I wore joy, not sadness.

When I tried to find there a dawn

you interposed a sunset.

If I could have got what I desired,

when the sea prevented me from meeting it,

I would have crossed it, riding the crescent moon as if it

were I could embrace there the sun.[424]

The recollection of his relatives buried in Sicily and his deep love for the island and for the Arabs who lived there make him express a desire, almost a prayer:

Long live that island and its learned people,

long live its vestiges and remains.

Long live the perfume which exhales from there

and which the mornings and the evenings bring up to us.

Long live the living and the dead whose limbs

lie peacefully in their graves.[425]

Yes, Sicily will live on, it will resist the passing of time so as to become an everlasting token of its past Muslim glory. One day another great poet will be able to look at it with renewed love for the island and his Arab forefathers.

---

[424] *Ibid.*, pp. 78,79

[425] F.Gabrieli, U. Secerrato, *op. cit.*, p. 737.

3. Muhammad Iqbal's "Sicily"

SICILY

Cry your heart out, eyes of mine,

That are weeping tears of blood!

There is the tomb of Arabian civilisation!

Once this place was full of commotion

Because of those desert-dwellers

Whose ships sported the ocean as if it were a playground,

Who made the courts of kings quake,

And in whose swords dwelt lightening;

They were harbingers of a new world –

Their restless sword devoured the Old Era

They revived the dead world with the call of 'Rise!'

Releasing man from the fetters of superstition.

Their resounding call– "God is the Greatest!"–

Is still music to the ears– is that call now stilled forever?

Sicily! You are the pride and honour of the seas.

You are like a guide in this desert of water.

May your beauty spot forever adorn the ocean's cheek,

And may your lights reassure the manner.

May your scenes forever be pleasing to the traveller's eye,

And the waves forever dance on the rocks round your shore.

You once nurtured the civilisation of that nation

Whose world-inflaming beauty dazzled the beholders' eyes.

The nightingale of Shiraz lamented over Baghdad;

Dagh wept tears of blood over Jahanabad;

And, when the heavens destroyed the state of Granada,

The grieving heart of Ibn-i Badrun cried out in pain.

A sorrowful Iqbal must carry out the duty of mourning you –

Fate chose a heart that was your intimate.

Whose is the story that your remains conceal?

The silence of your shores is as eloquent as speech.

Speak to me of your sorrow – I too am sorrowful.

I am the dust of the caravan that came to you as its destination.

Add colour to that old picture and show it to me;

Tell the story of old times and fire me with longing.

35 *I will carry your gift all the way to India:*

Here I myself weep– there I will make others do so.[426]

In 1905, Muhammad Iqbal was sailing from Bombay to England. He wanted to study there and to get in touch with western civilization. He was twenty– eight years old, a distinguished young man of refined features and piercing eyes.

While sailing the Mediterranean he found himself in front of a beautiful sight, Sicily at a distance. We may suppose that he was leaning on the rail, motionless and fascinated by the view, perhaps with his eyes screwed up he tried to see the island better and to visualize its past story.

The poet is emotionally prostrated with grief at the thought of what Sicily meant for the Arabs:

Cry your heart out, eyes of mine,

That are weeping tears of blood!

There is the tomb of Arabian civilisation! (II. 1-3)

The past glory of the Arabs re-emerges all of a sudden: "once" introduces the images (1I.4-I2) which remind us of that great age: the supremacy of the shins, the glittering swords, which were "restless" (l.10), eager to slash their way to destroy the old pagan world and to bring it to a new life "with the call of 'Rise!' (I.ll) Sicily is both the symbol of that grandeur and its tomb, the island is still resonant with memories and the awareness of this status leads the poet to ask a question:

Their resounding call– 'God is the Greatest!'-

Is still music to the ears - is that call now stilled forever?

---

[426] Mustansir Mir, *Tulip in the Desert*, (London, 1990), pp. 117-8.

The island is mute and the poet does not give an answer, or better, the answer, perceived as a whisper of uncertainty carried by the waves, is turned by the poet into a wish, almost a prayer, the splendid sequence of eight lines, 15-22.

Just like Ibn Hamdis, the Indian poet hopes that Sicily will live forever, the island must be a reassuring light for the travellers, must "adorn the ocean's cheek" (1.17) as if it were a jewel, precious and rare, surrounded by the waves, longing to touch its beautiful shores. Sicily must be immortal because, long ago, its beauty fascinated the Arabs who landed and settled there. Sicily housed and nourished those people, receiving, in return, the precious gift of the splendid civilization of the Arabs whose world-inflaming beauty dazzled the beholders' eyes (I.22) and the privilege to remind the future generations of its greatness. But Sicily - the poet is going to realize must be immortal above all because the sad end of the Arab supremacy on the island is such a dramatic and painful event that we, keeping its memory vivid in our minds, must act so that there are no more 'tombs' of the Arab civilization.

The poet remembers other places with the same destiny as Sicily and the poets who mourned their dramatic end in their lines. Baghdad, which was destroyed in 1258 by the Mongol Hulagu Khan and for which the "nightingale of Shiraz" (I.23), the poet Sa'di shed bitter tears; Shah-Jahanabad, the occupation of which by the British army in 1857 was commemorated by Nawwab Mirza Khan (Dagh) in his sad and moving lines; Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Spain, which was conquered by the Catholic monarchs in 1492, its tragic loss was *the* subject of the melancholic lines of Ibn 'Abdun.[427]

The recollection of those places and poems crosses the poet's mind and leaves him even more sorrowful than before, but also determined to follow the shining example of the three poets.

[427] Ibn Badrun was the editor of the poem.

A sorrowful Iqbal must carry out the duty of mourning you. (l.27)

He is the right person who can accomplish the task: he is a Muslim, a sensitive, responsive and learned young man, in fact

Fate chose a heart that was your intimate. (1.28)

In a last desperate attempt to know something more about the past glory of the Arabs in Sicily, the poet asks the island to speak to him: he is "the dust of the caravan" (1.32), the one left behind, neglected and abandoned, but perhaps the only one eager, to know. He would like to know all the sorrowful stories hidden behind the ruins and asks the island to "add colour" (I.33). The "new" image of the island and the "new" stories would be a nourishment for the poet who suffers but desires to know. But the island is still silent. The dull silence might seem to the poet a failure, a quest without achievement, but he knows that the unsaid is superior to the said. So, feeling an urging desire (sorrow and passion mixed together), perhaps with a yearning sigh, he says to the island:

Fire me with longing. (1.34)

For a moment we readers feel suspended, intoxicated by the beauty of these words: firstly because the word "fire" points out the passionate attraction of the poet towards the island which must be a light, a beacon for every Muslim passing by; secondly because the word "longing" points out the poet's nostalgic look back to Sicily, a longing which is also a warning to all the Muslim people of our age. "Fire" and "longing", seemingly negative words, have the positive connotation of "light" and "warning". In these words the poem, where nothing is conceded to fantasy or illusion, attains a perfect extraordinary poise.

The poet perceives the beauty and the meaningfulness of his sensations, is enriched by the new experience and by his emotional response to the suggestions of the island, and, now sure and confident of his task, says:

I will carry your gift all the way to India:

Here I myself weep there I will make others do so. (11. 35, 36)

Contrary to Ibn Hamdis, who was never to see his homeland again, Muhammad Iqbal will return to India and, contrary to Ibn Hamdis, he will not merely linger over a cherished longing for Sicily. He has a task he is destined for.

As a new storyteller, he will speak of the "silent" Sicily and will tell the "unsaid" stories of the island, no longer only a tomb but a warning light. His beloved Indian people will learn to love the past to improve the present, with a new full consciousness of the Arabian and Islamic civilization.

The poet was travelling westward and now Sicily was vanishing from sight. The young man kept on looking eastward and gazed at the fading shape of the island. He saw its inner light pointing to the East, the Hijaz of his ancestors and India, his present and future world. Perhaps, right then, he thought that one day he would write a poem on the island.