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Hindered Passages. The Failed Muslim Conquest of Southern Italy

Abstract: The establishment of an Aghlabid, then Fāṭimid-Kalbid dominion in Sicily had a deep impact not only on the island and on Mediterranean power constellations, but also on mainland Italy, especially in its Southern parts. Although the Peninsula was under continuous attack between the ninth and eleventh centuries, all attempts to place it under submission failed on a long-term basis. Examining three examples of ‘hindered passages’, this article proposes some new considerations about the question of this missed Muslim conquest. Besides the numerous raids, the establishment of many military bases and Christian-Muslim agreements on the mainland during the Aghlabid and Fāṭimid-Kalbid period points to a targeted politics of conquest. Furthermore, the fragmentation of Southern Italy, often claimed as the main cause for the ‘Saracen’ destructions, could, on the contrary, also be seen as the main obstacle to Muslim expansion due to its many fortified centres.

Keywords: Southern Italy, Muslim Sicily, Islamic conquest, Aghlabids, Kalbids

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1 State of the Art

Between the ninth and the eleventh century, Southern Italy and Sicily were confronted with a strong Muslim presence structurally linked to the two great Islamic dynasties of North Africa, the Aghlabids and the Fāṭimids.¹ In Sicily, soon after the first successful operations of the Aghlabid military leader and “qāḍī” Asad ibn al-Furāt (d. 213/828), a Muslim dominion was founded and destined to conquer piecemeal – with varying degrees of success and failure over 150 years – almost the whole island and to persist until the Norman con-

¹ Still fundamental for the Muslim history of medieval Italy is the work of AMARI 1933–1939. See also the more recent monographs CILENTO 1971; GABRIELI/SCERRATO 1979; MUSCA 1992; METCALFE 2009; CHIARELLI 2011; NEF 2011a; FENIELLO 2011.

quests. On the Italian mainland, however, a durable Muslim authority could never be established. In both regions, local governors and people showed great resistance and, through hard-fought battles, were able to prevent a quick conquest, so that a type of frontier guerrilla operation (“guérilla frontalière”) prevailed for decades.² In both regions, pillage, destruction and force were the order of the day, especially in territories not yet under submission. And, in both regions, we also had significant collaborations between Muslims and Christians. Sicily and Southern Italy were fluid border regions which we could term a kind of “Passagenraum” in Walter Benjamin’s sense, a mobile transcultural and transreligious area of passage, both to a certain degree permeable and in continuous transition.³

But despite all similarities: why did the ‘passage’ of a centralized, sustained Muslim power to the Apennines Peninsula fail in a long-term perspective, making a sustainable arabisation and islamisation impossible? Analyzing this question means casting light on complex historical processes that, in certain moments, were hindered or interrupted by various factors.⁴ But it means also taking a position within the debate as to what extent the “amīrs” and governors of Ifriqiya and Sicily planned and tackled expansion to mainland Italy. The different points of view in this regard depend, for the most part, on the understanding of the permanent raids witnessed by our sources and on the way the practice of “ḡihād” in the Peninsula is reflected. Some historians distinguish different phases: a first one characterized by planned expansion to the Peninsula under the sign of “ḡihād” until the 870s, and a second one marked by uncontrolled raids of ‘bands’ and only few short-term official wars.⁵ Others are con-

² NEF/PRIGENT 2013, p. 32.

³ Obviously this applies also to other contexts not considered in this article, for instance for the Norman and Staufian times. For ‘passages’ as a new paradigm of transcultural medieval studies see BORGOLTE/TISCHLER 2012a, p. 12–15; TISCHLER 2013.

⁴ In our case, speaking of ‘forbidden’ passages seems inappropriate, because there never existed a general prohibition which banned Muslims from setting foot on the mainland. What we have, however, are occasional or local prohibitions, such as a passage in the *Divisio Principatus Beneventani* (848), in which any cooperation with and any sojourning by the “Sarraceni” was interdicted in the duchies of Benevent and Salerno, or pope John VIII’s eloquent letters in which any contact between Muslims and Christians was denounced as a sin and an act that endangered the whole of Christianity: “... ut pariter expellamus de ista provincia nostra omnes Sarracenos quomodocumque potuerimus; et amodo ... nullum Sarracenum recipiam vel recipere permittam, preter illos qui temporibus domni Siconis et Sicardi fuerunt Christiani, si magarizati non sunt”, *Praeceptum concessionis sive capitulare*, p. 212; IOHANNES VIII PAPA *Epistolae* passim.

⁵ GABRIELI 1974, p. 3; MARAZZI 2007, p. 182 sq.

vinced that not even during this first period was there any sustained or systematic attempt to consolidate territory out of Sicily or to establish defensible bridgeheads which could have facilitated a wider invasion, whereas raids tended to acquire quick booty or to act as a distraction for the disaffected among the Muslim ranks.⁶ On the other hand – perhaps influenced by Francesco Gabrieli’s assumption that the Strait of Messina constituted a borderline between Sicily as ‘the house of Islam’ (“dār al-Islām”) and Southern Italy as ‘the house of war’ (“dār al-ḥarb”)⁷ – some scholars interconnect raids and “ḡihād” without expounding on their possible different nature and without intensively reflecting on to what extent and in which way both phenomena were related to each other.⁸ In such a perspective, the more than two hundred years of Muslim mainland presence becomes simply a history of permanent ‘holy war’, while theories based on the Islamic law are consciously or unconsciously placed as the backdrop of countless acts of violence and possible differences in local praxis are both temporally and spatially neglected. Recently, these and other questions have been re-examined in terms of Aghlabid Sicily – with interesting points that are worthy of reflection also in connection with the Italian mainland because of the many striking similarities between the two regions. That’s why the question of ‘hindered passages’ gains new relevance as differences between Sicily and Southern Italy must probably be explained by factors other than the political and military approach of the Muslim authorities or the character of the Christian-Muslim frontier space.

2 The Sources

But what about the sources? If we first want to consider “ḡihād” officially proclaimed as a manifest indication of a planned expansion on mainland Italy, we are able to glean little information from the sources. Unless we include numerous references to looting, destruction, captivity, and killing, witnessed especially in Latin texts, the term “ḡihād”, explicitly relating to the Peninsula, appears connected only to two episodes in medieval Arabic sources: the first time for the Aghlabid “amīr” Ibrāhīm II in the years 900–902, and the second

⁶ METCALFE 2009, p. 16.

⁷ GABRIELI 1979b, p. 109.

⁸ VENTURA 1982, p. 81 sq.; DEL LUNGO 2000, especially p. 71; FENIELLO 2011, *passim* and in particular p. 65 sq.

time for the Kalbid “amīr” Abū ‘l-Qāsim in 982.⁹ A second aspect to consider is that attempts to conquer mainland Italy were seen as a sort of negative appendix to the broader phenomenon which is commonly defined as the ‘great Islamic conquests’. It is well known that also the military expeditions led by the Prophet and those led by the Muslim generals sent by the first caliphs to occupy Syria and Iraq are actually, at least in their initial phase, nothing more than raids. In particular, the famous ‘Battle of Badr’, which, according to the Islamic historians and jurists, represents the classical archetype of the “ḡihād”,¹⁰ was little more than a raid against a Meccan caravan. Equally, the first Arab attacks against Syria began already in the last years of the life of Muḥammad, on a small scale and without too much success, in the form of sudden attacks on villages and caravans aimed at the acquisition of booty.¹¹ Those to the Mesopotamian region also began, under the leadership of al-Muṭannā ibn al-Ḥārīṭa, as raids and plunders carried out in order to affirm the right of nomads to demand a tribute.¹² The apparently impromptu character of the early Islamic conquests led some scholars to focus on their incidental factors: the movement would not have had any consistency and would not have been led by a central authority, but would have consisted mainly of a series of raids accidentally crowned by success; the idea of a planned conquest was therefore something of a myth invented by Muslim historians and traditionalists at least a century after the events in question.¹³ In a fundamental study, Fred McGraw Donner has highlighted the limits of this approach, showing that the conquest was ideologically and strategically organized by the central power (the so-called ‘well-guided Caliphs’) and that also those that might seem to have been small tribal raids were carefully planned by the elite of the new Islamic State, according to a very precise strategy.¹⁴ It is therefore crucial to return to dealing with the issue of the Islamic presence in Central and Southern Italy, in order to understand the purposes of the Muslim penetration strategy.¹⁵ In particular, a new analysis of the

⁹ For the term “ḡihād” regarding the military expeditions of Ibrāhīm II in 900–902: IBN AL-AṬĪR *al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīḥ* 7, p. 196; ABŪ ‘L-FIDĀ’ *al-Muḥtaṣar*, p. 50 sq. (a. 261); AN-NUWAYRĪ *Nihāyat al-‘arab*, p. 87; regarding Abū ‘l-Qāsim’s campaign in 982: IBN AL-AṬĪR *al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīḥ* 9, p. 10 sq.

¹⁰ On the prototypical character of the ‘Battle of Badr’ see above all FIRESTONE 1999, p. 111–114.

¹¹ See especially DONNER 1981, p. 96–112; KENNEDY 2008, p. 65–71.

¹² DONNER 1981, p. 157–190; KENNEDY 2008, p. 95–101.

¹³ KOREN/NEVO 1991.

¹⁴ DONNER 1995. On the technique of ‘attack and retreat’ (“al-karr wa‘l-farr”) see the interesting comments of CARRETTO 1992, p. 154 sq.

¹⁵ MARAZZI 2007, p. 166.

main phases of the Islamic presence in Italy, which mines the little data that might be derived from the Arab sources as much as possible, is necessary in order to reconstruct the historical framework (not only Italian, but also Mediterranean) in which they have to be placed.

3 Three Examples of ‘Hindered Passages’

In the following, the focus is on three historical moments which, seen from the outside, signaled the failure of great Muslim enterprises in the Peninsula in different periods: 1) the already mentioned “ḡihād” of Ibrāhīm II, which can be seen as the climax and at the same time the turning point of the Aghlabid policy;¹⁶ 2) the end of the Muslim settlement near the river Garigliano in 915, which represented the loss of one of the most important mainland bases during the shifting of power from the Aghlabids to the Fāṭimids; and 3) the “ḡihād” of the Fāṭimid-Kalbid “amīr” Abū ’l-Qāsim against emperor Otto II, which ended with a painful defeat on the Christian part and recently also provided material for a historical novel.¹⁷ Observed in greater detail, these three examples show us just how complex situations were, and how difficult it is to find clear answers to our questions. But all three cases make us aware of how closely the island of Sicily and the Italian mainland were connected and thus how important it is not to consider the two regions separately.

The first example of ‘hindered passages’ to examine in greater detail is the famous “ḡihād” declared by the Aghlabid “amīr” Ibrāhīm II.¹⁸ At the beginning of the year 289/902, Ibrāhīm received an envoy of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Mu’taḍid at Tunis; secret talks followed, having most likely as their subject a common strategy aimed at stopping the Shiite expansion. In fact, in the months immediately after the meeting of Tunis, an ambitious political and propagandistic programme focused on the concept of “tawba” (repentance, conversion) was put in place.¹⁹ The “amīr” took some important steps in this direction and

¹⁶ Most recently, for the question of the ‘turning point’ concerning Ibrāhīm II, CHIARELLI 2011, p. 67.

¹⁷ DAVID 2012.

¹⁸ For Ibrāhīm II (874–902) see especially the following recent publications: NEF 2009; NEF 2011c; DI BRANCO/WOLF 2014b.

¹⁹ IBN ‘IDĀRĪ AL-MARRĀKUŠĪ *al-Bayān al-Muḡrib*, p. 131 sq. According to NEF 2009, p. 221 sq. (see also NEF 2011c, p. 88–90) [the] extreme change of behaviour ... attributed to Ibrāhīm II ... is described by the chroniclers as the consequence of a movement towards ‘tawba’ or repentance. This description is the result of a later reinterpretation, in the light of Ṣūfī practices, which

then set off to accomplish the “ḥağğ”, the pilgrimage to Mecca – one of the five pillars of Islam and a religious duty which must be carried out by every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so at least once in his or her lifetime. But once he got to Sūsa, he changed his plans and turned decisively towards Sicily, although – according to the historian Ibn al-Aṭīr – his ultimate goal was to conquer Constantinople.²⁰ When the Aghlabid power was consolidated in Sicily, Ibrāhīm looked at “al-arḍ al-kabīra” (the Italian Peninsula) as the next stage of the expansion of the Islamic community. As is generally known, Ibrāhīm passed the Strait of Messina on September 3, 902, and on October 1, gave the order to attack Cosenza, one of the most important urban centres of Calabria.²¹ Here, however, according to all sources, he was hit by a piercing attack of dysentery that soon led to his death.²²

First of all, what significance can be attributed to Ibrāhīm’s “ḡihād” in the framework of Aghlabid politics in general? The same Ibrāhīm was said to have represented his military campaign as extremely innovative and as the result of a

became more common from the 4th/10th century onwards’. But, in support of this hypothesis, she only refers to the fact that in the famous *Risālat iftitāḥ al-da’wa* by al-Qāḍī an-Nu’mān, the “amīr” is described wearing a dress of raw wool, in the manner of the Sūfis (AL-QĀḌĪ AN-NU’MĀN *Risālat*, p. 92). On the contrary, it seems wholly plausible that the concept of “tawba” was an integral part of Ibrāhīm’s propaganda offensive and that it was indeed one of the reasons for the sympathy towards the “amīr” we can find in some Fāṭimid milieu, where the idea of “tawba” enjoyed particular favour.

20 IBN AL-AṬĪR *al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīḥ* 6, p. 350; IBN AL-AṬĪR *al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīḥ* 7, p. 195–199.

21 On the importance of Cosenza between the ninth and tenth centuries see VON FALKENHAUSEN 1978, p. 7 sq., 28 and 36. Reggio, capital of the duchy of Calabria and residence of the Byzantine duke, had already been conquered on July 1, 901 by the “amīr”’s son Abū ‘l-‘Abbās ‘Abd Allāh; see TALBI 1966, p. 508 with n. 2.

22 As reported by the anonymous author of the *Kitāb al-‘Uyūn*, p. 98, based on the story of the physician and historian Ibn al-Ġazzār (d. 395/1004–1005), the death of Ibrāhīm II took place on “ḏū ‘l-qa’da” 17: ‘Then Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad invited the people to the ḡihād and left Sūsa to Nubah, on Monday, the first day of ḡumādā al-‘ulā, and reached Sicily on 3 of raḡab. Then he went to Taormina, which he conquered on Sunday, nine nights before the end of ša’bān (August 1, 902). He died in the country of the Rūm, in a place called Cosenza which is nine days from Sicily. His death occurred on Monday, but somebody says on Saturday, thirteen nights before the end of the month of ḏū ‘l-qa’dah (October 23, 902)’. This agrees perfectly with the news, reported by other Arab historians (Ibn ‘Idārī, an-Nuwayrī and Ibn al-Abbār), according to whom the duration of the emirate of Ibrāhīm would have been 28 years, 6 months and 12 days; see the list of Arab sources on Ibrāhīm’s death in TALBI 1966, p. 526 sq. n. 4. This latter element, considering that he became “amīr” on “ḡumādā” 6, 261 H., sets his death right on the seventeenth day of the month of “ḏū ‘l-qa’da” 289 H; see AMARI 1933–1939, 2, p. 117; TALBI 1966, p. 528 n. 1.

genuine ‘ethical turning point’,²³ but in reality, it fits perfectly with the Aghlabid policy towards Sicily and “al-arḍ al-kabīra”. Therefore, the only substantial difference compared to the past consists of the fact that the military expedition of 289/902 was led by the “amīr” himself. Moreover, this is not a small difference, because it had never happened before that the “amīr” of Ifriqiya led his troops into combat operations against the infidels in person. It is therefore understandable that the sources insist on the extraordinary character of the event: an “amīr” at the head of the army could bring to mind the not so distant era of the great Islamic conquests when Muslim soldiers were led by the great Qurayshite “amīrs”.

Nevertheless the feat of Ibrāhīm was destined to become a complete failure, mainly because of the strong resistance by the people of Southern Italy, where urban realities were heavily militarized, and because of the deep crisis of the Aghlabid emirate which led, within a decade, to its ultimate decline. In any case, it is quite clear that the “amīr”’s inglorious end and the subsequent fall of the Aghlabids led medieval sources – and contemporary historians – to devalue greatly their general expansion plans. In particular, a crucial bit has gone almost completely unnoticed and has led to an oversight regarding the political and military interests of the dynasty in Southern Italy: the expansionist aims of Ibrāhīm in “al-arḍ al-kabīra” were not the result of a sudden infatuation, but constituted a permanent feature of the Aghlabid policy, at least since the fall of the emirate of Bari (871), which, as is well known, was followed by the creation of a “wālī ’l-arḍ al-kabīra”.²⁴ The same Ibrāhīm, who in the early part of his reign devoted most of his military efforts to laying the foundations for the conquest of Syracuse and to strengthening his power in Sicily, tried in every way to resist and respond to the Byzantine offensive in Southern Italy – without success.

The second example of a ‘hindered passage’ we would like to examine is the settlement near the river Garigliano. Founded in the Aghlabid times, it survived the Aghlabid dynasty, to which it was related, only by a few years. In a recent study, we have tried to show that it was not a pirate nest or a completely independent settlement of Muslim raiders.²⁵ Although, in comparison to the other Muslim installations on the mainland (for example, Bari, Taranto or Benevento), it was founded relatively late, in 883, it was one of the most important and long-

²³ So in particular IBN ‘IDĀRĪ AL-MARRĀKUŠĪ *al-Bayān al-Muġrib*, p. 131 sq. Concerning this point, see also DI BRANCO/WOLF 2014b, p. 133.

²⁴ See AMARI 1933–1939, 1, p. 526; MUSCA 1992, p. 128 sq.

²⁵ DI BRANCO/WOLF 2014b, especially p. 130–132 and 158.

lasting Muslim establishments on the mainland. In the Arabic sources there is almost no reference to the history of this settlement, but it is fairly well documented by the Latin sources. In the local historiography we have, for example, specific information on the origin of its Muslim troops: they did not come to the Garigliano directly from Sicily or Ifriqiya, because they were already present on the mainland: first in the city and port of Naples, then at Mount Vesuvius, and then in Agropoli. Subsequently, some ‘Agropolitans’ settled near Formia and finally at the Garigliano. Unfortunately, we don’t know exactly how these groups of fighters were composed; however, the mentioned itinerary reflects a high mobility and flexibility of the Muslim troops, but also another very important aspect: the cooperation with the Christian potentates and the conflicts provoked by it. While the Muslim settlements in the Naples area were connected to the philo-Muslim policy of the duke-bishop Athanasius, the establishments near Formia and at the Garigliano were born thanks to the “hypatus” of Gaeta Docibilis, who applied to Agropoli for military support against his rival, the count of Capua. Furthermore, the same Docibilis allowed the free passage of the Muslims through the territories of Gaeta. The Muslim settlements near Formia and at the river Garigliano were not, therefore, the result of previous conquests, but of negotiations and very complicated relationships with some Christian authorities. The transfer from Formia to the Garigliano area is connected to the donation of lands made by pope John VIII in favour of Gaeta. This gift was the price of the expulsion of the Muslim troops near Formia – an enterprise which created many victims among the Gaetans and great devastation in the Gaeta territory. Therefore, on the death of the pope (December 882), the “hypatus” Docibilis requested a new pact from the Muslims. As a result, the cantonment of the Muslim troops was decided on in a strategic place at some distance from the urban centres – no longer near Formia, but, in agreement with the new boundaries of the territory of Gaeta, at the river Garigliano. What were the causes of this agreement? The objective of Gaeta seems pretty clear: the Muslim troops – probably those already present in the region – had to contribute to the defence of the Eastern border of the territories subjected to the “hypati”: in fact, these territories were at a high risk of attacks by the neighbouring potentates. On the other hand, from the Muslim point of view, the agreement with Gaeta guaranteed some security in a ‘hostile’ region, a rich booty and the benefits derived from the control of important trade routes.²⁶

The settlement at the Garigliano lasted for a period of more than thirty years, until 915. The Latin sources speak of countless plunders perpetrated by

²⁶ WOLF 2014.

the Muslims who had a strong economic and demographic impact on the involved areas. All the initiatives oriented to eliminate the Muslims from the region had no success, because of the support that Gaeta continued to provide its allies. The situation changed only with the so-called ‘Battle of Garigliano’ in 915, when a Christian league, to which Gaeta joined only at the last moment, gave the coup de grâce to this Muslim military base. The events of the year 915 are the last link in a chain of several other attempts to drive the Muslim troops out of the territory. During the more than thirty years of the existence of their stronghold, the Muslims of the Garigliano were threatened at least two other times: around 885–887 and in 903. The first attempt to expel the Muslims from this stronghold was made by Guy II duke of Spoleto, which, according to Erchempert, “castra eorum [sc. of the “Saracens”] dirructa depredavit et aliquantos eorum gladiis interfecit; reliqui montis per opaca ut aqua diffusi sunt”.²⁷ However, the action taken by Guy, who on other occasions had not disdained to deal and even to ally with the Muslims,²⁸ was not decisive. The Muslims had in fact time and a way to reorganize themselves and, with the support of the Gaetans, they were able to repel a new attack, launched in 903 by Atenulf I, prince of Benevento and Capua, Gregory duke of Naples and the Amalfitans.²⁹ But in 915 a new league was established which, promoted by pope John X, was formed by Byzantine troops led by the “strategos” Nikolaos Epigingles (Nicolaus Picingli), the princes of Capua Atenulf II and Landulf I, the duke of Naples Gregory IV and the “hypatus” of Gaeta John, whom a difficult diplomatic negotiation led to break the thirty-years pact with the Muslims of the Garigliano.³⁰

The two phases of the so called ‘Battle of Garigliano’ show the complexity of the situation, which cannot be simply summarized as a clash between Christians and Muslims. After a pitched battle (“Horrida satis denique inter eos pugna exoritur”, writes Liutprand of Cremona),³¹ the Muslim troops withdrew on the “mons Garilianus”; the Christian army began a siege of three months (“per tres menses continuos obsidentes”),³² that culminated with the victory of the league. Nevertheless, the *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis* and Liutprand offer two slightly different reports on the conclusion of the event: according to the bishop of Cremona, the battle was a total and indisputable success: “Poenorum

27 Ch. 58, ERCHPERTUS *Historia Langobardorum*, p. 258. See also FEDELE 1899, p. 185.

28 HLAWITSCHKA 1983, p. 84–89; DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2003, p. 356.

29 I 50, *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis*, p. 130 sq.

30 FEDELE 1899, p. 188–190. For Nikolaos Epigingles see LILIE e. a. 2009–2013, 5, p. 111–113 n° 25945 (“Nikolaos/Νικόλαος”).

31 II 52, LIUDPRANDUS CREMONENSIS *Antapodosis*, p. 57.

32 I 52, *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis*, p. 134.

nec unus quidem superfuit”, and the triumph of the Christians is sealed by the appearance of the princes of the Apostles;³³ on the contrary, the *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis* reports a more ambiguous version of events, in which the fundamental role of the Neapolitan duke Gregory and of the Gaetan “hypatus” John is immediately evident: the text, although laconic and reticent, suggests that they must have conducted a negotiation with the Muslims, persuading them to abandon voluntarily the site of “mons Garilianus”, which was set on fire by the same occupiers, with the implicit (or explicit) guarantee to save their lives. From this point of view, the emphasis on the massacre committed by Christians and on the small number of escaped Muslims seems to have intended to diminish the importance of the negotiation and to hide the fundamental fact that the fights were won by the Christian league only thanks to an agreement with the Muslim enemy.³⁴ Also the absolutely neutral tone with which the chronicle refers to the episode in question minimizes the consequences, avoiding any accusation or recrimination against the Neapolitans and Gaetans. On the other hand, we have seen that, only a few years earlier, a Christian army, having arrived at Setra in order to do away with the Muslims of the Garigliano, was put to flight by the joined troops of “Saraceni cum Caietanis”.³⁵

The so-called ‘Battle of Garigliano’ marks the end of a ‘passage’ inasmuch as the Muslim settlement near the river Garigliano disappeared forever from the map and paved the way for pushing back the Muslims further to the South. In the maelstrom of political unrest during the first years of transition from Aghlabid to Fāṭimid power in Ifrīqiya and Sicily, the Muslims near Gaeta must have been in quite a difficult position. Although we have no information about troop supplies, the number of embattled Muslim men must still have been consistent at the beginning of the tenth century. Whether they were somehow involved in the anti-Fāṭimid revolt of Aḥmad ibn Qarhab, a powerful Aghlabid rebel leader, during the years 913–916, is beyond our knowledge.³⁶ Anyway, it

³³ II 54, LIUDPRANDUS CREMONENSIS *Antapodosis*, p. 57.

³⁴ According to ARNALDI 1954, p. 130 sq., the account reported by the *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis* would be “assai poco credibile”, but the same scholar is forced to admit that it is perfectly in line with the ‘philo-Saracen’ policy of Naples and Gaeta.

³⁵ I 50, *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis*, p. 131.

³⁶ For the revolt see AMARI 1933–1939, 2, p. 172–183, as well as the recent publications NEF 2011b, p. 108 sq.; MANDALÀ 2012. Giuseppe Mandalà interprets the revolt as an informal quest for legitimacy obtained through alliances and contingencies that, unexpectedly, seems to move the island’s centre of gravity from the North African shore to the orbit of influence of the Umayyad emirate of al-Andalus. One of the fronts on which Aḥmad ibn Qarhab’s forces were fighting was in Byzantine Calabria, where they could make a truce with the Byzantine “strate-

was probably mainly for the support of Gaeta, fixed since 883 by an agreement, that the end of the Garigliano-settlement was only sealed in 915. So, for more than three decades and despite a generally strong local resistance against Muslim penetration, Gaeta's "hypati" were a kind of 'passage'-opener for Muslims until the risk for them was too large and the ratio between the advantages and disadvantages of Christian-Muslim cooperation threatened to turn negative.

Although the shifting of supremacy from the Aghlabids to the Fāṭimids in Ifrīqiya had far-reaching repercussions for the political situation in Sicily during the first half of the tenth century, this was not the end of attempts to conquer and place under submission Christian territories in the Peninsula.³⁷ So, between 918 and 930, almost annual assaults were made against Southern Italy by the Fāṭimid fleet.³⁸ But also in the following period, the Fāṭimids persisted in their claims to the mainland. On the Sicilian island, some strongholds were still in Byzantine hands and Muslim power was weakening because of internal struggles, while, in the Peninsula, Muslim establishments and former agreements with Christians were increasingly at risk, mainly due to Byzantine campaigns. This was, very roughly outlined, the situation when the clan of the Banū Kalb (Kalbids, 948–1053) gained power in Sicily.³⁹ They resumed raids and "ḡihād" by land and sea, and perhaps they could have been able to expand steadily their domain in the mainland, if they had had even more support of the Fāṭimid state.⁴⁰ However, it was less up to the Fāṭimids who, at that time, had to fight on several fronts; from the very beginning, the Kalbids, being loyal Fāṭimid governors in Sicily, seem to have nonetheless sought more independence than Muslim leaders did during the Aghlabid period – a process that probably was even more accelerated by the increasing spatial distance caused by the foundation of the new Fāṭimid capital in Cairo (972).⁴¹ Soon, the Banū Kalb and their followers managed to make the last Byzantine bases in Sicily submit while having their eyes on Southern Italy as well.

gos" of Calabria (payment in return for suspending the "ḡihād"), see METCALFE 2009, p. 47; MANDALÀ 2012, p. 358.

37 For the Fāṭimids we limit ourselves to citing the important studies BRETT 2001; HALM 2003.

38 CHIARELLI 2011, p. 83.

39 For the Kalbids of Sicily still fundamental AMARI 1933–1939, 2, p. 269–421; BRETT 2001, p. 361–363; HALM 2003, p. 377–380; see also GABRIELI 1979a, p. 54–87; CHIARELLI 2011, p. 69–142. New sources regarding the Kalbid period were published in RIZZITANO 1957, p. 546–555. For the transitional period preceding the Kalbid emirate see especially AMARI 1933–1939, 2, p. 152–267.

40 This according to GABRIELI 1979a, p. 56.

41 GABRIELI 1979a, p. 55 and 85.

In this context, the last case of a ‘hindered passage’ we would like to expound upon here is the famous “*ġihād*” of Abū ‘l-Qāsim in 982. He reigned in Sicily from 969, as the third Kalbid “*amīr*”, and lost his life as a martyr in the just mentioned ‘holy war’ during a battle against the Ottonian troops, before even those, in July 982, suffered a decisive defeat on the mainland, in Columna Regia North of Reggio di Calabria.⁴² The losses on the Latin side were large, the troops from the North withdrew, and soon after, on December 7, 983, Otto II died at the age of twenty-eight. Would that not have been a good moment for a Muslim conquest of Southern Italy? Especially since Abū ‘l-Qāsim, taking advantage of political tensions in Byzantium and having finally concluded the prolonged conquest of Sicily with the capture of the last Byzantine stronghold Messina (976), had been working intensively to expand its influence outside of Sicily, in Apulia and Calabria, obliging cities such as Cosenza, Taranto and Otranto (at least temporarily) to pay tribute.⁴³ Yet, the stars were not favourable for a considerable ‘passage’ of Sicilian Muslims towards the mainland because, beyond the “*amīr*”’s death, even in their ranks large losses were to be deplored.⁴⁴ This led to great political instability and rapid succession of leadership changes within the Kalbid dynasty which made, for the time being, any far-reaching policy or military enterprise impossible.⁴⁵ Thus, rather than make use of the opportune moment that we are able to recognize as such only in retrospective, the Muslim troops withdrew, and with them a part of the contingents that were previously located on the mainland. Only around 986, when ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad held the emirate in Sicily for several years (985–989), was plundering on the mainland mentioned again.⁴⁶ Between the great instability of the political centre in Sicily and the decreasing frequency of raids in the Peninsula, there was undoubtedly a direct link. Yet, this was not a special phenomenon of the Kalbid period; the same goes also for Aghlabid times.⁴⁷

⁴² The battle did not take place in Crotone (today: Cotrone), see ALVERMANN 1995. For details concerning the military campaigns and references to the sources see AMARI 1933–1939, 2, p. 379–381; SEGL 1985, p. 56–64 and 72–77; EICKHOFF 1997, p. 57–78.

⁴³ AMARI 1933–1939, 2, p. 364–375; EICKHOFF 1966, p. 364 sq.; EICKHOFF 1997, p. 66.

⁴⁴ IBN AL-AṬĪR *al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīḥ* 9, p. 10 sq.

⁴⁵ After Abū ‘l-Qāsim’s death, his son Ġabir al-Kalbī reigned (until 983), followed by Ġa’far ibn Muḥammad (983–985) and ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad (985–989). See the list of Kalbid “*amīrs*” in AMARI 1880–1881, 2, p. 726.

⁴⁶ “Sarraceni comprehenderunt sanctam Chiriachi civitatem [i.e. Gerace], et dissipaverunt Calabriam”, LUPUS PROTOSPATARIUS *Annales*, p. 56.

⁴⁷ DI BRANCO/WOLF 2014b, p. 140 sq. and 148.

Another aspect that needs to be pointed out regarding the “ḡihād” of 982 is its basically defensive character.⁴⁸ Unlike the ‘holy war’ of Ibrāhīm II, the one of Abū ‘l-Qāsim was not primarily declared as a war of conquest in order to expand Muslim territories, but as an immediate reaction when Otto II tried to incorporate Southern Italy into his reign and to appear at least on par with the Byzantine emperor.⁴⁹ However, this aspect must not obscure the fact that the Kalbid ruler had clear aims to extend Muslim authority outside of Sicily over parts of the Apennines Peninsula. In this regard, as already indicated briefly, Abū ‘l-Qāsim stood firmly in the tradition of his predecessors. Already al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī ibn Abī ‘l-Ḥusayn al-Kalbī (947–960), the first Kalbid ruler in Fāṭimid Sicily, was involved in armed conflicts with the Byzantines when he was requiring the restoration of omitted payments of tribute in Sicily and – as the enterprises during the 950s in Reggio Calabria, Gerace or Cassano show – also in Calabria.⁵⁰ That it was not just about money but also about power and domination, is demonstrated by no better example than in the construction of a mosque in Reggio which was agreed, besides other conditions, in a temporary peace treaty between al-Ḥasan and the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (913–959) after the ‘Battle of Gerace’ in 952.⁵¹ Some years later,⁵² the mosque was destroyed, and with it the existing agreements were massively harmed. Renewed peace negotiations, during which even a perpetual payment of “ḡizya” was offered, would finally fail.⁵³ Also in the 960s and 970s, Kalbid military campaigns continued in Sicily and Southern Italy, in a time when Muslim power was broken in Crete (961), then in Cyprus (965), by forces of the Byzantine general Nikephoros II Phokas (d. 969), and the Fāṭimid capital was shifting to Egypt. Thus, despite these and other circumstances which, at that time, were causing profound changes in power relations at least in the central Mediterranean, it is impressive how the Kalbids were able to maintain and consolidate their rulership during the second half of the tenth century. It is still quite unclear to which extent elements of the Fāṭimid ideology were seized by the

⁴⁸ This is apparent from Arabic sources: IBN AL-AṬĪR *al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīḥ* 9, p. 10 sq.; IBN ḤALDŪN *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, p. 210; IBN ‘IDĀRĪ AL-MARRĀKUṢĪ *al-Bayān al-Muḡrib*, p. 247; AN-NUWAYRĪ *Nihāyat al-‘arab*, p. 250 sq. For the aspect of ‘defensive war’ see EICKHOFF 1966, p. 366; WOLF 2012, p. 132 sq.

⁴⁹ For the local and ideological background of Otto’s policy in Southern Italy see EICKHOFF 1997, p. 57–59, 63 and 68 sq.

⁵⁰ METCALFE 2009, p. 53 sq.; NEF 2013, p. 120 (only in relation to Sicily).

⁵¹ IBN AL-AṬĪR *al-Kāmil fī ‘l-ta’rīḥ* 8, p. 371.

⁵² *Cambridge Chronicle*, p. 303 sq.; AMARI 1880–1881, 1, p. 291 (= AMARI 1997–1998, 1, p. 235).

⁵³ LIENHARD 2008, p. 124.

clan of the Banū Kalb and other ruling elites in the Sicilian emirate.⁵⁴ But most likely the persistent and renewed attempts to gain a firmer foothold in the mainland or, in other words, the continuous search for ‘passage’ and penetration into new or formerly controlled Christian territories, represent a reflex of such ideological influences. However strong those may have been, the Ottonian campaign and the proclaimed “*ġihād*” of 982 led to a double ‘hindered passage’. Both imperial and Muslim forces withdrew from the scene, counting great losses, deeply wounded by the death of important political and military leaders, weakened physically but surely also morally, and eventually unable to realize their intentions to conquer Southern Italy, not only for the moment, but for several years. In any case, the year 982 did not mark the end of Kalbid attacks against the mainland. Here, the history of Muslim raids, sieges, temporary successes and setbacks continued almost incessantly, at least until 1031, when the advance of the Normans radically changed the power constellations in Southern Italy.⁵⁵ Forty years later, the capture of Palermo (1072) marked the very end of Muslim dominion in Sicily.

4 Results

In summary, the history of Muslim presence in Southern and Central Italy can be seen in the light of the permeability of frontiers both spatial and mental and as a part of very complex historical processes in continuous transition. Being a ‘space of passage’, it was at the same time a ‘space of hindered passages’ inasmuch as, from a long-term perspective, attempts by Sicilian and Ifriqiyān Muslims to integrate the Italian mainland into their dominion experienced a repetitive failure which has been explained differently. It has been rightly argued that mainland territories connected by certain agreements to the Muslim sphere could not be controlled for longer times due to demographic reasons, internal struggles and uncoordinated operations.⁵⁶ Furthermore, contingencies like the death of an “*amīr*” (for instance Ibrāhīm II’s and Abū ‘l-Qāsim’s) or a major military defeat surely could have had a remarkable influence on situations and processes, but in a wider context, including a variety of levels and perspectives, maybe those factors were not so decisive as they may

⁵⁴ See METCALFE 2009, p. 44–46.

⁵⁵ AMARI 1933–1939, 2, p. 395–402.

⁵⁶ Relating to different contexts, see for instance GAY 1904, p. 130; AMARI 1933–1939, 1, p. 605; CILENTO 1971, p. 161; GABRIELI 1979b, p. 109 sq., 115 and 145 sq.

first seem, and in themselves they have no strong weight for contrafactual considerations like ‘what would have happened if the ‘amīr’ were not dead in this special moment?’ Another interesting point has been noted by Alex Metcalfe: ‘Raiding Sicily from overseas was not the same as holding it as a colony from Ifrīqiya: control could be maintained only so long as forces in Southern Italy were weak and disunited. Until the mid-eleventh century, they were precisely that.’⁵⁷ Although this view is a bit too centred on Sicily, we nevertheless could ask if behind the numerous raids, agreements and presence of Muslim troops on the mainland, there was not only a strategy to weaken resistance in order to protect and enlarge Muslim power in Sicily, but also a beginning and often interrupted process of conquest and of integration into the “dār al-Islām”. It has been argued that in Sicily, concerning the status of Christians under Muslim rule, we have to distinguish tribute-paying autonomous communities based on confession from municipalities integrated into the Islamic dominion paying annually a collective tax whose non-Muslim inhabitants were considered “*ḍim-mīs*”.⁵⁸ Regarding truces and peace treaties, in quite a similar way it has been assumed that the payment of tributes (even if the sources speak of “*ḡizya*”) was essentially a sign of ‘recognition of defeat and punishment, but not final submission whose conditions would still have to be defined’.⁵⁹ In comparison to other contexts of Muslim conquests, these interpretations are not very convincing, because – apart from problems regarding the terminology and perspective of the sources – in practice there have always been situations which do not fit in formal schemes and juridical concepts.⁶⁰ Thus, Christian submission under Muslim dominion can’t be measured only in long-term successes or on the basis of the terms used in our sources, but is to be seen against the contemporary background of different strategies of conquest and pacification with regionally and temporally varying characteristics. Turning to Christian-Muslim peace treaties and alliances in Southern Italy, in many cases we find, besides other agreements, payments in return for keeping the Muslims from attacking Christian territories and/or for military cooperation. If in these cases the sources provide information about a repeated payment,⁶¹ we can assume that, from the Muslim perspective, it was considered a kind of surrender agreement which meant a more or less strong dependence on the Muslim ruled area. Even if pay-

⁵⁷ METCALFE 2009, p. 11.

⁵⁸ CHIARELLI 2011, p. 105.

⁵⁹ NEF 2013, p. 120.

⁶⁰ HILL 1971, in particular p. 168–180; DÜRİ 2011; LEVY-RUBIN 2011, p. 8–57.

⁶¹ The terms used in our sources vary, but a clear difference between “*ḡizya*” and ‘tribute’ can’t be made.

ments were omitted – what happened in many cases because a control on the part of Muslims was not always possible – it is striking and surely no coincidence that Aghlabid and Fāṭimid attacks often returned to areas with which they formerly held agreements. Probably, once they established a more than momentary break of military enterprises, they continued to make a claim on these cities and territories, even when conditions had changed in time. In short, we can't ascribe the failed consolidation of Muslim presence in the Peninsula to a declining will to occupy and maintain occupied certain cities and regions.⁶²

Apart from those already mentioned as well as many other aspects, one of the most obvious reasons for 'failed' or 'hindered passages' of Muslims to the Peninsula was resistance both local and from outside. While in Sicily as well as in parts of Apulia and Calabria, Byzantine forces strongly opposed the attempts of Islamic penetration, in the rest of Central and Southern Italy, resistance to Muslim penetration was less centralized. Up to now, from an Occidental perspective, the weakness of the Eastern and Western Empire along with the unstable political situation in Southern Italy have been seen as the main cause for the more than two-century-long 'Saracen' raids on the mainland. However, one could conversely argue that the local powers, due to ongoing violent clashes with each other and the constant fear of the limitation of regional autonomy in the face of the claims and interventions by Byzantium, the pope and the 'Latin reigns', were on permanent alert. Not insignificantly, that's why they were able to react promptly and decisively also in case of Muslim attacks. The presence of quite a large number of various political entities which were highly militarized and focused on fortified, strategically well situated centres extremely difficult to capture is a characteristic almost entirely absent in other contexts such as Syria, Egypt and Persia, where the Arabs had an extraordinary and rapid achievement. But the Islamic society of the ninth to eleventh centuries, divided as it was into various rival dynasties, cannot be absolutely compared to the "umma" of the age of the 'rightly-guided caliphs', where conflicts and antagonisms were almost always subordinate to the common interest.

In short, the history of the interrupted long-term conquest of mainland Italy is full of significance. As historians well know, history proceeds – depending on the perspectives – between success and failure, trials and errors, changing in time certain attitudes and behaviours, aims and goals, sweeping away the failed attempts when their stratifications are an obstacle to the way to resume. As a fundamental book, *Die Kultur der Niederlage* by Wolfgang Schivelbusch,⁶³ has

⁶² Yet, so did GABRIELI 1979b, p. 109.

⁶³ SCHIVELBUSCH 2007.

reaffirmed, the study of ‘hindered passages’ is no less instructive than that of ‘successful’ ones, and the notions of decline and fall are no less worthy than those of ascent and acme.

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