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A Collaborative Crusade: Economic Incentives for Religious Tolerance in Sicily, 1061-1189

By

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As the geographic and cultural crossroads of the Mediterranean, the island of Sicily represents the product of conflict and cooperation. Through both its role as a trade center and its history of foreign invasions, Sicily has seen empires at the height of their power. Each shift in the island's rulers resulted in an influx of different languages, religions, and ethnicities to Sicily. This has manifested a richly heterogeneous culture and people, and these changes that occurred centuries ago can be still seen in the island's population today.

As a person of Sicilian descent, the mixed DNA of Sicily's past is the same as my own. A DNA test revealed that Sicily's many cultural shifts had each contributed to unique parts of my genetic makeup. I first found that I had large quantities of Italian heritage— a given considering the long occupation of the Roman Empire and the inclusion of Sicily in the modern Italian nation. My results also included Greek genes, reminiscent of Greek occupation in Sicily during the eighth century BCE. I even exhibited some Anatolian traits, possibly brought to my family tree by the Byzantine Empire. All of these patterns in my genes were unsurprising and even expected. However, there was one anomaly in my own ancestry: significant traces of Arab and Levantine DNA. These groups reside in a geographic area that is predominantly Muslim, both historically and in the present day. This cultural heritage raised the curiosity of how Sicily— a land commonly associated with Christianity— had allowed for the intercultural mixing with Muslims in my own bloodline.

The answer to this lies with one particularly important shift in the island's history: the Norman invasion of Sicily in 1061 CE. During this event, the Catholic Normans from France took over the island from the Arabic Muslims, who had ruled the island since their own invasion in 827 CE. This shift was significant not only because it represented a change between ruling powers, but it also changed the state religion from Islam to Catholicism. Thus, Norman Sicily

highlighted the interaction between Christianity and Islam: the two largest competing religious worldviews in the Middle Ages. Beyond the island of Sicily, this period saw the two religions pitted against one another throughout Medieval Christendom. Fueled by differing ideologies, Christians and Muslims fought and killed each other for territory and power, each claiming to have been gifted the favor of God.

These interreligious tensions were especially apparent during the example of the Spanish Reconquista (722-1492 CE), in which Christians retook control of Spain from the Muslims. As Joseph O’Callaghan states, the Reconquista was fueled as “the Christian rulers were reminded of the constant domestic peril caused by the presence of vast numbers of Muslims within their dominions.”¹ In this case, Christians and Muslims felt inherently threatened by each other’s presence and subsequently fought for their respective faiths. Driven by the desire to reclaim the Iberian Peninsula for the Church, Christians violently fought to push Muslims out of Spain over the course of nearly 800 years. This long-lasting strife in is a clear example of the typical bloodshed that stemmed from the perceived diametric opposition of Christians and Muslims.

Similarly, these violent tensions were brought to a head once again during the First Crusade (1096-1099 CE). In 1095, Pope Urban II delivered a speech from Clermont that urged Christians to take up arms against Muslims, who were threatening the Byzantine Empire in the East. As Peter Frankopan describes in his book *The First Crusade: The Call from the East*, Pope Urban II’s speech condemned Muslims as “a foreign people and a people rejected by God,” and urged Christians to take up arms against them.² The Pope further implored, “Not I but God exhorts you as heralds of Christ... to hasten to exterminate this vile race from our lands and to

¹ Joseph F. O’Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 358.

² Peter Frankopan, *The First Crusade: The Call from the East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2

aid the Christian inhabitants in time.”³ The Pope’s speech resulted in a war of religions as both Christians and Muslims fought brutally to maintain control of the holy city Jerusalem. Violent events such as the Spanish Reconquista and the First Crusade have heavily influenced modern preconceptions of Christian-Muslims relations during the Middle Ages.

In contrast, when the Normans established their new monarchy in Sicily and removed the Arabs from ruling power, their treatment of the Sicilian Muslim population did not fit the persecutory mold of the Reconquista and First Crusade. Muslims in Sicily were still permitted to hold office, practice their religion, and live in their own Arabic communities following the Norman conquest. Arabic was even held in high regard and became a language of sophistication in Norman Sicily, resulting in several Norman Kings including Arabic inscriptions on their royal garments. Despite the eventual development of anti-Muslim sentiments in Sicily, the most fascinating aspect of Norman Sicily is the relative levels of religious tolerance when compared to the rest of Christendom. By examining the positive interactions between Christians and Muslims in Sicily during the Age of Crusades, Sicily serves a case study of Medieval Christian-Muslim interaction. This turn, Norman Sicily elicits a more nuanced view of a diverse population in history, refuting typical over-generalizations regarding interreligious interaction in this period.

The transition from Arabic to Norman Sicily showed that intercultural interaction in the Middle Ages was not as polarized as in other areas of Christendom. Sicily was not purely an island of hostility in which religions competed against each other for dominance, nor was it a haven of diversity that championed unconditional intercultural acceptance. In reality, Sicily’s past reveals a degree of cooperation and mutual respect based on economic opportunities

³ Frankopan, *The First Crusade: The Call from the East*, 2.

between elite Christians and Muslims, which was uncommon in typical views of the Medieval Christian mindset and likely encouraged by Sicily's long history of intercultural exchange.

This paper argues that although the Normans imposed their own Christian culture and administration in Sicily after 1061, Norman rulers actually embraced many elements of Arabic culture because they prioritized economic prosperity over religion. Therefore, levels of religious tolerance towards Muslims depended on economic utility to the crown, fueling both conflict and cooperation between the two religions. This concept is apparent in the high levels of cultural exchange between Norman rulers and elite Muslims, the poor treatment of lower-class Muslims by the Norman Kings, and the basis of interreligious cohabitation in the lower classes apart from conflicts caused by the Normans.

Literature Review

The majority of secondary literature regarding Norman Sicily focuses on the rulers and high-ranking Muslims within their courts. This is largely due to the expansive number of sources detailing the lives of the wealthy and educated classes who were able to record their own accounts, interact with educated contemporary scholars, and make major political decisions in Sicily that became recorded in its official history. Sources detailing the lives of non-elite Sicilians during this period are sparse. Despite this limitation, this paper distinguishes itself from existing literature by analyzing examples of cultural interaction between Christians and Muslims at the royal level as well as average citizens.

In addition, some scholars conclude that the Norman conquest of Sicily was yet another crusade in which Christendom attempted to reclaim territory and power from non-Christians. Antonio Marongiu argues that the Norman kingdom of Sicily was quite literally “a model state in the Middle Ages,” and its rulers—particularly Roger II and Frederick of Swabia—are akin to the

ancient Roman-Byzantine emperors because they established a “monarchy which knows no superiors, no institutional limitations, and no concessions to its subjects.”⁴ This comparison overlooks the necessary cooperation of the Norman monarchs with their Muslim subjects, in which the Norman rulers recognized the opportunities to be gained from collaboration rather than elimination. They chose to make some concessions to their Muslim subjects— such as the continuance of the Arabic language and Islam in a Christian kingdom— to procure a better economic and political position in Sicily, which is further demonstrated by their tolerance and even embrace of Arabic culture in Sicily after their rule had been established.

More recent scholarship has shifted the debate to include more discussion on the Norman tolerance of Arabic culture. In *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam*, Alexander Metcalfe describes Sicily’s linguistic shift after the Muslim invasion in 827 CE and Norman invasion in 1060 CE. This work analyzes the interaction of Arabic and Romance languages in Norman Sicily to show distribution and shifting margins of the Arabic-speaking communities and the effects that social change and religious conversion had on these groups. Metcalfe primarily utilizes linguistic analysis as an indicator of cultural interaction.⁵ In comparison, this research paper includes the continued use of Arabic under Norman rule but argues beyond linguistics to make a wider statement about Christian-Muslim social relations in Norman Sicily.

Similarly, Joshua Birk also examines a singular aspect of Norman-Muslim interaction by examining religious fluidity and coexistence in Sicily. Birk argues that the Norman Christian rulers of Sicily depended on Muslims to “form their own royal identities and depended on

⁴ Antonio Marongiu, "A Model State in the Middle Ages: The Norman and Swabian Kingdom of Sicily," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 6, no. 3 (1964): 308.

⁵ Alexander Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2013), XV.

Muslim subjects to project their political power.” Birk goes so far as to refer to the Norman Kings as “Baptized Sultans:” religiously Christian but culturally Islamic. This source refutes the idea of “cultural clash” between religious groups in Sicily, an important point in refuting the traditional crusade-like view of this period.⁶ While Birk focuses on the religious interactions of the elite in Sicily, my project further explains that elements of language and culture were also shared between the Normans and their Muslim subjects.

While Birk describes Sicily’s religious elite, Timothy Smit contributes a primarily economic perspective on relations between Sicilian Normans and Arabs. He argues that the monarchy’s tolerance towards Muslims in Sicily was “tied to their usefulness to the crown.” The collaboration of Christian rulers with Muslims in their court existed because of the economic and political advantages they provided to the Normans. While it is true that the value placed on high-ranking Muslims was directly due to their usefulness to the rulers, Smit does not consider that part of this coexistence and embrace of culture is also due to Sicily’s rich history of cultural mixing. For centuries, the island had been primed for this kind of cultural cooperation through the intercultural mixing after each foreign invasion, no doubt facilitating the acclimation of the Norman rulers to the existing Arabic culture. Additionally, Smit’s argument of economic motivation as the basis of cohabitation focuses on solely the elite classes in Sicilian society, similar to the focus of scholars in this field.⁷

This paper draws on Smit’s argument that the Norman rulers were primarily motivated by the economic and political usefulness of Arabic culture, respectfully seeing past religious differences of high-ranking Muslims deemed “useful” yet also acting violently towards Muslims

⁶ Joshua C. Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 1.

⁷ Timothy James Smit, “Commerce and Coexistence: Muslims in the Economy and Society of Norman Sicily,” PhD diss., (University of Minnesota, 2009) 3.

without any economic or political assets to offer. However, his argument does not analyze the role of peasants in interreligious cohabitation in Sicily. Tolerance in Sicily extended beyond economic and political realms, characterized by the cooperation of lower-class Christians and Muslims. Without any power to gain or lose from one another, lower-class Christians and Muslims still lived relatively conflict-free, just as the upper classes did. Rather than drawing motivation exclusively from economics like the Norman rulers, lower-class cooperation shows that the Sicilian mindset was fundamentally more inclusive than other parts of Europe. Therefore, this paper's argument expands to include both examples of Norman intolerance towards low-ranking Muslims as well as religious coexistence amongst the lower classes.

Embracing Elite Arabic Culture

The tolerant attitudes of the Norman rulers towards high-ranking Muslims were economically motivated. Because of their experience ruling the island as well as access to existing trade connections, Sicilian Muslims were seen as economic and political assets. This caused the Normans to not only extend religious tolerance to them but also heavily embrace elements of Islamic culture as a sign of sophisticated status and economic prosperity. Indeed, as Timothy Smit states, "Muslims in Sicily were allowed considerable autonomy and tolerance by the Christian rulers of the island, and the tolerance shown to them was always tied to their usefulness to the crown."⁸

Before further analyzing this economic alliance, it is important to note that this interreligious collaboration was as surprising during that time as it may seem now. Spectators from other parts of Christendom largely failed to understand this intercultural dependence in Sicily and instead viewed the Norman administration as champions of the Christian faith for their

⁸ Smit, "Commerce and Coexistence: Muslims in the Economy and Society of Norman Sicily," 1.

successful conquer of Muslim territory. One such observer was Amatus of Montecassino, a monk living in mainland Italy. Amatus of Montecassino wrote *The History of the Normans* between 1078 and 1086, making it the earliest account of Norman Sicily. The first book in this history describes who the Normans were, how they treated the people they conquered, and several specific events that took place during the Norman conquest of Italy. Amatus states that the Normans were not inclined to placing themselves in the service of others, and they “desired to have all people under their rule and dominion.”⁹ When discussing specific prominent figures, he provides an overwhelmingly positive description of the Christian Norman invaders, such as Richard of Capua and Robert Guiscard, and denounces anyone opposed to their invasion. Amatus even states that the success of the Norman conquest was proof that they had the divine support of God.¹⁰

This source gives insight into the outside perspective of Christendom on the Normans. Amatus’ intense support for the Christian Normans in their endeavor to take over Muslim Sicily gives the events a crusade-like motive, drawing support from Christendom. This is important when considering the actual motives of the Normans, which seem to not only be religious, but also economic. As a monk, Amatus most likely chooses to see past this ulterior motive and champions the Normans as restorers of the Christian faith. However, if the conquest of Sicily has been primarily motivated by religion, undoubtedly the Norman administration would have made greater efforts to enact policies to Christianize. The Normans had invaded a foreign land to spread Christianity, yet they did not pass any laws to demand conversion, outlaw other religions, or mandate the speaking of French and Latin. This is because, fundamentally, the Normans were

⁹ Amatus of Montecassino, *The History of the Normans*, trans. Prescott N. Dunbar and G.A. Loud (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2004) 53.

¹⁰ Amatus of Montecassino, *The History of the Normans*, 53.

not focused on spreading their religion. The Normans were motivated by the desire to expand their economic and political spheres, in which collaboration with and tolerance of Arabic Muslim culture was actually helpful. Coupled with Sicily's rich history of intercultural mingling, the Normans were able to collaborate with the Muslims, appearing under the guise of conquest to the rest of Christendom.

While Amatus of Montecassino heralds the Normans as idealistic crusaders of the Christian faith, Norman rulers actually chose to preserve and promote key aspects of Arabic culture, including perhaps the most obstructive difference between the groups: language. After conquering the previously Arab-controlled island, King Roger I, the first Norman ruler of Sicily, did not actively attempt to eliminate the Arabic language from being spoken in favor of Latin, the language of the Church. Instead, King Roger I maintained spoken Arabic in his royal court, and it became an esteemed language of the upper classes. As Alexander Metcalfe confirms:

Many key figures among the kingdom's ruling elite and administration were either Muslims, converts from Islam, or Arabic-speaking Christians. In addition, we know that the record books for the fiscal administration were kept in Arabic and that many of its charters were composed in Arabic too. Therefore, there is a clear sense in which Arabic was one of the most important languages of the kingdom at the highest level.¹¹

From its wide use and acceptance in the royal court, it is clear that Arabic was preserved for its administrative utility, demonstrating that the Norman rulers extended strategic tolerance towards Muslim subjects or aspects of Muslim culture that were beneficial to the administration.

The acceptance of the Arabic language by the Norman rulers is further demonstrated by their decision to include Arabic inscriptions on official royal garments. As Isabelle Dolezalek describes, the royal garments of several Christian Kings of Sicily— Roger II (r. 1130-1154) and William II (r. 1166-1189) for example— have been preserved and are still on display in the present

¹¹ Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam*, 99.

day. The mantle of King Roger II, in particular, is made of bright crimson fabric and covered with golden figures of Islamic lions and camels. But most notably, the outline of the mantle is surrounded by Arabic inscriptions. Funerary garments of high-ranking Christians from this time also commonly contained Arabic words.¹² The inscriptions and artistry of these garments are ornate and regal, clearly designed to exhibit royal authority and elicit respect from their subjects. The splendor of these garments is explicitly mentioned in the account of Muhammed Ibn Ahmed Ibn Jubayr al-Kenani, a Spanish Moor who visited King William II's palace in 1183. He described the King's clothing as "embroidered in gold," which was a practice first introduced by the Arabs.¹³ Therefore, the inclusion of Arabic phrases and imagery on the very garments that symbolized Norman power shows the huge extent to which Norman rulers embraced Arabic culture within their courts.

In addition to actively promoting the Arabic language, the religion of high-ranking Sicilian Muslims was also preserved through the tolerant policies of the Norman rulers. The official religion of Sicily shifted from Islam to Catholicism, and conversions from Christianity to Islam were illegal. However, Muslims were not forcibly converted by the Normans. They were actually permitted to continue practicing their own religion, although they were required to pay higher taxes. This is evident in Ibn Jubayr's account, in which he describes the grand Mosque situated right beside the Norman palace in the island's capital city of Palermo. A lively Muslim community frequented the Mosque, and evidence not only of Arabic culture but also Islamic religious practices were evident and visible throughout the island's capital city.¹⁴

¹² Isabelle Dolezalek, *Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily* (Boston, Massachusetts: De Gruyter, 2017) XII.

¹³ Muhammed Ibn Ahmed Ibn Jubayr al-Kenani, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr, Being the Chronicle of a Mediaeval Spanish Moor concerning His Journey to the Egypt of Saladin, the Holy Cities of Arabia, Baghdad the City of the Caliphs, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, and the Norman Kingdom of Sicily*, (London: J. Cape, 1952) 347.

¹⁴ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 341-347.

Indifference to religious practices in their domain further supports the fact that the Normans' involvement in Sicily was not motivated by a desire to fervently spread Christianity. Rather than forcing conversions, the Norman Kings supported their subjects' choice to practice Islam. This, in turn, not only helped to legitimize their rule in Sicily and garner political support from their Muslim subjects, but it also allowed the Normans to make profits from the extra taxes imposed on practitioners of Islam. Therefore, instead of viewing Sicilian Muslims as morally reprehensible, the Normans looked to the Islamic beliefs of their subjects as an opportunity to increase their economic power through taxation.

The Norman rulers further reflected their tolerance of economically powerful Muslim subjects in the royal laws passed during this period. King Roger II was the third Norman king of Sicily, and he passed a series of laws in the 1140s, aptly referred to as "The Laws of King Roger II." Norman rulers and Church officials at this time were primarily concerned with protecting their economic and political authority and possessions, which is reflected in the numerous mentions of property rights in the laws. Because incorporating Arabic culture and traditions was actually beneficial in maintaining economic power, Roger II's laws make no outward affronts towards Muslims or Arabic culture. In fact, the laws even state, "Because of the variety of different people subject to our rule, the usages, customs, and laws which have existed among them up to now are not abrogated unless what is observed in them is clearly in contradiction to our edicts here."¹⁵ The Norman administration established by King Roger II did not seek to outwardly control the lives of non-Christian Sicilians. They were not forced to give up their customs and traditions that are not directly in contrast to the laws of this edict, which only mentions religion a few times throughout the document.

¹⁵ "Laws of King Roger II," trans. G. A. Loud, in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, ed. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, Joanna H. Drell, and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 175.

While the laws establish that the monarchy is decidedly Christian, the Norman idea of defending the faith is almost entirely based around protecting Church property, rather than Church doctrines:

Let all those subject to our power know that it shall always be our intention to protect, defend, and augment in every way the churches of God, for which the Lord Jesus Christ shed his blood, as our predecessors were at pains to do, with their traditional generosity. As a result, many and uncountable benefits have always been granted by God to their advantage. Thus, we shall defend and guard inviolate all the property and possessions of the holy churches which have been entrusted to our custody, after that of God and the saints, with the temporal sword which has been granted to us by God. We commend this to [our] princes, counts, barons, and all our faithful subjects, who should know that whosoever should attempt to violate our decree shall incur the wrath of our majesty.¹⁶

This statement demonstrates the administration's dedication to the Catholic Church, yet it seeks to "defend" the Church's economic assets rather than theological homogeneity. It makes no mention of defending the Church from non-believers, particularly Sicilian Muslims, who were also permitted to practice their faith. This tolerance based on economics starkly contrasts the common view of the Medieval Catholic monarchies as Crusaders, fighting against all forms of religious infidelity. Later in the same decree, this emphasis on material protection of the Church is reaffirmed by the statement, "Whosoever shall dare to violate the privileges of holy church shall, once the offense is removed, pay compensation according to the harm done to the church."¹⁷ Rather than being subjected to mandatory penance, prayer, or spiritual atonement, the punishment for wronging the Church was a monetary fine. This penalty also applies to Christians and Muslims alike, making no differentiation. From this evidence, it is clear that the laws passed under King Roger II are concerned with protecting the economic assets of the Church rather than defending the Christianity spiritually from Muslims.

¹⁶ "Laws of King Roger II," 175.

¹⁷ "Laws of King Roger II," 177.

King Roger II's reputation as a tolerant leader also extended beyond these written laws. According to Ali Ibn Al-Athir, a Muslim scholar from Mosul whose account of Sicily dates from 1144 to 1145, King Roger II was actually rumored to be a Muslim because of his close association with Muslims in his court: "At this time there lived in Sicily a learned Muslim, a pious man. The lord of Sicily honored and venerated him. He consulted his words and gave precedence to him over any among his priests or monks, and because of this a rumor began among the people that he [Roger II] was a Muslim."¹⁸ While the king was undoubtedly a Christian ruler, the speculation over his religious sincerity illustrates the extent to which Roger II embraced Arabic culture and respected his Muslim associates. His reliance on a Muslim advisor not only demonstrates high levels of tolerance, but it further proves that the Norman kings were willing to extend these honors to useful, high-ranking individuals regardless of religion.

The "learned Muslim" with whom Roger II formed a close relationship was a political and economic asset to the crown, thereby allowing his Muslim beliefs to be overlooked. This close relationship supports Joshua Birk's assessment of the Norman rulers as "baptized sultans." He states that, "In reality, an examination of representations of Muslims within Sicily and anti-Islamic rhetoric against Sicilian rulers reveals a remarkable amount of fluidity."¹⁹ Therefore, the circulation of this semi-slandering rumor about the King's religious loyalties corroborates the idea that the Norman rulers were far from the strict Catholics that Amatus of Montecassino believed them to be. In reality, King Roger II exemplified a truly Sicilian mindset: a fluid mixture of different cultures and beliefs combined in a singular entity.

¹⁸ Ali Ibn Al-Athir, "The Complete Treatment of History," trans. Joshua Birk, in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, ed. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, Joanna H. Drell, and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 122.

¹⁹ Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 2.

This culturally inclusive mindset persisted through the next generations of Sicilian monarchs. King William II, the grandson of Roger II, also heavily incorporated Arabic culture and Muslim advisors within his royal court. The persona of William II— also known as “King William the Good”— is described in the journal of Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Jubayr al-Kenani, an upper-class Spanish moor who served as secretary to the governor of Granada. Ibn Jubayr travelled across the Mediterranean on a pilgrimage from al-Andalus to Mecca in 1183-1184. He was shipwrecked in Norman Sicily on his return voyage and travelled around the island, describing his experiences and observations of Sicily and the relations between its Christian and Muslim populations.²⁰

In his entries from 6 December 1183 to 4 January 1184, Ibn Jubayr traveled to Messina, Palermo, Trapani, and several smaller towns around the island. When his ship first crashed onto the shore of Sicily near Messina, King William II himself came to survey the wreck. Ibn Jubayr, as an elite-class Muslim, was most likely given this honor and subsequent preferential treatment due to his status, just as high-ranking Muslims were greatly respected in the Norman court. His positive personal interactions with King William the Good are indicative of respect shown towards upper class Muslims in Sicily. Ibn Jubayr notes that, “Their King, William, is admirable for his just conduct, and the use he makes of the industry of the Muslims... He has much confidence in Muslims, relying on them for his affairs, and the most important matters,” and “One of the remarkable things told of him [King William II] is that he reads and writes Arabic.²¹ While this observation gives insight into the high level of religious tolerance of William II’s court, the King’s utilization of the “industry” of these Muslims reveals that his motive for tolerance is heavily associated with their value as workers, advisors, and most importantly

²⁰ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 340-341.

²¹ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 340-341.

economic assets. This distinction shows that the high levels of religious tolerance in Sicily was based on the economic mindset of the Norman rulers, who embraced Arabic language and culture for their utility to the crown.

Ibn Jubayr elaborates on the situation of Muslims within William II's palace by expressing his surprise that the Muslim influences on the court had even extended into the King's most intimate affairs: "The handmaidens and concubines in his palace are all Muslims. One of the strangest things told us by this servant, Yahya ibn Fityan, the Embroiderer, who embroidered in gold the King's clothes, was that the Frankish Christian women who came to his palace became Muslims, converted by these handmaidens. All this they kept secret from their King."²² Clearly, the influences of Arabic culture within the palace were so strong that Christian women—the King's own concubines—felt compelled to abandon their faith in favor of Islam. Although officially forbidden by laws that made converting from Christianity to Islam illegal, these illicit conversions of women so close to the King further indicate the lack of emphasis placed on the Christian cause by the Norman rulers. Rather than promoting the Crusader vision of uprooting and replacing Islam with Christianity, the Normans focused their administrations on gaining economic and political power, which involved the use of elite Muslim allies. This subsequently created a hotspot of intercultural exchange within the royal court.

Hardships of Lower-Class Muslims

While elite Muslims were held in high esteem for their economic and political utility by the Norman Kings, the Muslim experience was not identical in every part of the island. Lower-class and foreign Muslims were often barred from economic mobility and treated violently by the Norman rulers because they offered less economic and political opportunities than higher

²² Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 341.

ranking members of their faith. This contrast in tolerance between elite and lower-class Muslims is evident in Ibn Jubayr's account of Sicily. While Ibn Jubayr held King William II in high esteem, he described Messina as a dirty city that was "cheerless" because no Muslims lived there.²³ This observation of Messina fits the larger geo-social context of Sicily: a stark divide existed between the northeast and southwest sections of the island. While the Sicily's southwest region served as a stronghold of Arabic culture, the northeast lacked strong Arab-Muslim influences. Instead, the northeast was culturally comprised of predominantly Latin and Greek influences.²⁴ Ibn Jubayr's description of Messina, situated in the northeastern corner of the island, as a Christian stronghold corroborates the social layout of Sicily. Ultimately, Ibn Jubayr expressed his disappointment as a Muslim traveler, lamenting the plight of other Muslims who had to live in a predominantly Christian city.

Ibn Jubayr also commented the social situation of Sicily as a whole, stating that it was very luxurious and wealthy, and Christians lived easily at the top. Although Christians treated Muslims as "friends," Muslims were required to pay an extra tax that put them at a disadvantage.²⁵ Ibn Jubayr's observation of this tax exemplifies the economic focus of the Normans, who began demanding an additional tax from non-Christian populations in the late eleventh century as a tool to increase the financial power and the status of themselves and their allies. As Birk describes, "The Norman rulers either retained this valuable source of revenue for themselves or doled out the right to collect taxes from certain non-Christian communities to favored subjects."²⁶ Because they were not able to shoulder the extra financial burden as easily as upper-class Muslims, the non-Christian tax primarily affected lower-class Muslims. This led

²³ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 339-340.

²⁴ Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam*, 31.

²⁵ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 339-340.

²⁶ Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 4.

to the impoverished living conditions amongst the lower-classes that Ibn Jubayr noted in his account. Thus, the same economic motivations of the ruling elite that resulted in religious tolerance and prosperity in the upper echelons of society led to negative effects in the lives of lower-class Sicilian Muslims.

After his time in Messina, Ibn Jubayr travelled to Palermo, where he observed that the city had a very large Muslim population that freely practiced their faith, although they lived in suburbs separate from the Christians.²⁷ However, Ibn Jubayr also gives insight into the living conditions of lower-class Muslims, reflecting the stark contrast in the Muslim experience of the island. This contrast between the friendly interreligious relations of elite Christians and Muslims and the extra hardships placed on lower-class Muslims indicates a more complex reality of Islamic life in Sicily. Karla Mallette, a scholar and translator of texts from this period, also comments on this observation in Ibn Jubayr's journal: "From these paradoxical elements, Ibn Jubayr attempts to produce a coherent portrait of a Christian land where Muslim visitors are honored and Islamic learning and culture are embraced in the royal court, but Muslim citizens endure economic and religious injustices, mourn the fall of the Islamic state, and dream of escape to a better land."²⁸ Indeed, Ibn Jubayr's observations both exemplify the culturally tolerant attitudes of the Norman rulers while also illustrating the disadvantages placed on lower-class Muslims. Both behaviors of the Normans point to an intense focus on economic and political gain, which motivated the Normans to extend or retract tolerance towards their Muslim subjects depending on financial status.

²⁷ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 341.

²⁸ Karla Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100-1250: A Literary History*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) 1.

Not only were the Norman rulers disinterested with lower class Muslims because the nobility offered more utility in their administration, but the Normans also imposed new economic barriers that prevented upward mobility for non-Christians in Sicily. In the Laws of King Roger II, which vehemently protected the material property of the Church rather than its spiritual integrity, the Normans established legislature that inhibited the economic gain of all non-Christian Sicilians– including both Muslims and Jews– by forbidding the ownership of a Christian slave by a non-Christian master. The laws states:

No Jew or pagan shall dare either to buy or sell Christian servants, or to possess them by any title [whatsoever], or to hold them as a pledge. If he should presume to do this all his property will be confiscated to the fisc, and he shall become the servant of the Court. If he should by some wicked trick or persuasion have the servant circumcised or make him deny his faith, then he shall be punished by capital penalty.²⁹

The explicit reference to Jewish people in this law and the statement of their religious practices as “wicked” shows that Islam was favored by the Normans due to its perceived sophistication and association with the high-ranking Muslim officials of the Norman court. The Jews were clearly targeted much more explicitly than the Muslims in this law, but Muslims nonetheless are considered to be “pagans” in this circumstance.

Although the Normans greatly valued their elite Muslim contemporaries, they once again drew the line at economic gain: no Muslims should be able to exert such financial power over the Church by owning a Christian as a servant. The inability of Jews and Muslims to own Christian servants indicates the economic barriers imposed upon non-Christians in Sicily. It was not legally possible for them possess a Christian servant, meaning that only non-Christians could serve non-Christians. Muslims at the bottom of the social hierarchy were needed as slaves to serve the upper-class Muslims in roles that low-ranking Christians might have otherwise

²⁹ “Laws of King Roger II,” 178.

occupied. Stuck in their roles as slaves, these Muslims could not rise up in the ranks of society. While this law limited the Muslim upper class' ability to climb further up the ranks of the Norman court, its larger effects were in the lower classes. This slave law severely stunted social mobility for lower class Muslims. Thus, the Norman's desire to maximize their own economic standings had the largest negative impact on lower-class Muslims.

In addition to imposing economic hardships and poor living conditions on low-ranking Sicilian Muslims, the Norman Monarchs further championed their own economic interests by inciting violence towards Muslims outside of Sicily. Despite King Roger II's embrace of elite Sicilian Muslims and veneration of Arabic influences in his court, he did not extend this favor to Muslims living in foreign territories conquered by his troops. Ibn Al-Athir– the same source who claimed that Roger II was rumored to Muslim– later chronicled a story circa 1153 that demonstrated the King's cruelty towards foreign Muslims. After the Norman invasion of Bone (modern Annaba) in Alergia, Roger II sentenced his high commander to death for failing to capture a small group of Muslims in the city. The commander, Phillip of Mahidya, was also suspected to be Muslim, and Roger II burned him alive for his failure.³⁰ Although the rest of the city's Arabic population had been captured and stripped of their belongings, the escape of this small minority still seemed to be enough reasonable justification to prompt Roger II's execution of his failing officer.³¹

This depiction of King Roger II as the harsh conqueror of foreign Muslims and executioner of his own Muslim commander contrasts sharply with the high levels of tolerance for Arabic culture and his close association with high-ranking Muslims in Sicily. This key difference lies in Roger II's economic motivation. The King had no further economic or political use for

³⁰ Ibn Al-Athir, "The Complete Treatment of History," 123.

³¹ Ibn Al-Athir, "The Complete Treatment of History," 123.

Muslims in Bone. He subsequently subjected them to harsh captivity and plunder, executing any person who failed him in this endeavor. Through this exploitation of the Muslims of Bone, Roger II was able to acquire even more economic assets through stealing the belongings of these people. This pattern of violence committed against Muslims in the name of material gain continued throughout the rule of the Normans. As Ibn Al-Athir states, this instance of religious violence from their ruler was only “the first injury to befall the Muslims of Sicily.”³²

The Normans’ inclination to inflict violence upon Muslim populations for economic gain is further corroborated by the account of an anonymous author who went by the name of “Hugo Falcandus.” In his work aptly titled *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily*, Falcandus wrote about the situation of Norman Sicily after the death of King Roger II in 1154. This source describes the personality and actions of King William I— or “King William the Bad”— and the tragedies he committed against the Sicilian people. Falcandus was particularly critical of events that pitted Christians and Muslims against one another, usually resulting in unjust harm on the Muslim populations. As Mallette points out, “Falcandus consistently makes the argument that the factor most propitious to peace in Sicily is accord between the Muslim and Christian populations; the presence of a foreign army could only exacerbate tensions between the two communities, particularly since the Germans [Normans] have no understanding of or love for the beauty and riches of Sicily.”³³ Due to this mentality, Falcandus wrote a particularly stringent account of the rebellion in 1161, in which a coup was planned by lower class Christians to overthrow King William I. Although the rebels were able to capture the King, this event was ultimately unsuccessful in permanently removing the King from the throne because he was released and

³² Ibn Al-Athir, “The Complete Treatment of History,” 123.

³³ Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100-1250 : A Literary History*, 32.

reinstated a few days later. The real outcome of the event, however, was the huge attack against Sicilian Muslims carried out by Christians.³⁴

Falcandus believed that this type of violence inhibited the collaboration of Muslims and Christians and, therefore, impeded the success of Sicily as a whole. During the rebellion, Muslims who were found outside of their homes in Palermo were killed by Knights from Northern Italy who had come to Sicily to put down the rebellion. Many Muslims were then forced to flee from the center of the city.³⁵ Additionally, when North Italian soldiers came to engage in the quell, they were ordered by their commanders to first test their forces on the Muslim populations of Sicily. Falcandus states, “There was nothing the Northern Italians would ever be more willing to hear, and they were not slow to put his orders into effect. They made unprovoked attacks on nearby places and massacred both those who lived alongside Christians in various towns as well as those who owned their own estates, forming distinct communities.”³⁶ Although it was not the Muslims who had arranged the coup and started the violence, the foreign soldiers from a far less tolerant part of Christendom immediately perceived them as the enemy. Not only does this account show that Christian soldiers gave far less priority to Muslim lives, but it also gives insight into the living arrangements of Muslims and Christians and shows that Muslims were ranked differently depending on whether or not they lived near Christians.

The instances of violence committed by Christians towards Muslims in Sicily described in Hugo Falcandus’ account show the stark difference between the honorable treatment of Muslims in the royal court and the violent reception of Muslims in other parts of the island. This hostility did not stem from Sicilian Christians’ inherent hatred of Muslims. Rather, it was

³⁴ Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 214.

³⁵ Hugo Falcandus, G. A. Loud, and Thomas E. J. Wiedemann, *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily by "Hugo Falcandus," 1154-69*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 121.

³⁶ Falcandus, *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily*, 121.

derived from their resentment of the preferential treatment extended by the Normans towards their Muslim subjects. This violence was aimed at attacking the Norman rulers themselves, who had so been heavily associated with Arabic culture, by attacking lower-class Muslims. As Birk explains, “At the same time, the court’s adoption of Islamic cultural elements, its employment of Muslim administrators and its granting of protections to Sicilian Muslims inexorably linked Sicilian rulers to their Muslim subjects and created circumstances in which resistance to royal governance was articulated through acts of violence against the Muslim subjects of the crown.”³⁷ Once again, the preferential treatment shown towards elite Muslims directly worsened the situation of lower-class Muslims. By developing relationships exclusively with elite Muslims who provided economic and political assets, the Norman rulers alienated lower-class Christians, who in turn took their aggressions out on their Muslim neighbors, driving a wedge in the collaborative system that Hugo Falcandus claimed as vital for the prosperity of Sicily.

Lower-Class Interreligious Exchange

As demonstrated by Hugo Falcandus’ account of the violent rebellion of 1161, much of the conflict that occurred between low-ranking Christians and Muslims was a result of the Norman monarch’s prioritization of economic gains. Instances of violence, such as the 1161 rebellion, are more indicative of the disgruntled attitudes of Christians towards their Norman rulers than actual hostility towards their Muslim neighbors. Apart from the added political tension from the top, the island’s lower-class inhabitants generally cohabitated without high tensions inherently stemming from religious or cultural differences. Even after the 1161 rebellion and other instances of Christian on Muslim violence, the general sense of collaboration persisted.

³⁷ Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 3.

According to Birk, “The 1161 riots did not signal a permanent and irreconcilable antagonism between the Latin Christians and the Muslim populations of Sicily.”³⁸

This continued cohabitation despite the violent outburst is primarily due to Sicily’s long history of cultural collaboration leading up to this period. Prior to the Norman Invasion in 1061, Greek Orthodox Christians who had populated the island during its era of Byzantine control had already lived and cooperating with Muslims for centuries during the Arab regime.³⁹ Although there were occasional clashes, there is not much evidence of consistently high-tension on the basis of religious differences between Norman Catholics, Byzantine Greek-Orthodox Christians, and Arabic Muslims in Sicily’s peasant class. When the economic interests of Norman rulers are removed from the equation, peoples of mixed faith traditions lived and died together in community. This continued sense of community and collaboration is apparent in evidence from the daily lives of lower-class Christians and Muslims.

Interreligious exchange in the peasant classes is first apparent through instances in which both Christians and Muslims changing their names to reflect each other’s culture. Names provide not only a sense of identity but also an indication of culture, background, and belief. However, in Sicily, traditions of changing one’s name created a more muddled picture of names as cultural indicators. This trend further deteriorated the distinction between Muslims and Christians in Sicily because it made it difficult to identify a person’s background simply by learning their name. In his chapter “At the Margins of Arabic-Speaking Communities,” Alexander Metcalfe first points out during Arabic rule in Sicily, Greek Orthodox Christians often changed their names to sound more Arabic. Similarly, after the Norman invasion, Muslims began to adopt Greek names. This did not necessarily indicate conversion on either side. Rather, the changing of

³⁸ Birk, *Norman Kings of Sicily and the Rise of the Anti-Islamic Critique: Baptized Sultans*, 208.

³⁹ Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam*, 27.

names was a cultural shift: “The tendency to adopt Greek names at the expense of Arabic ones as the Norman period progressed could be interpreted as an attempt to harmonize with the background ‘Greek’ aspect of that community... this need not tell us anything about conversion at all, rather it may add to our understanding of shifts in social alignment with regard to naming and identity.”⁴⁰ In order to align more with a communal culture, both Christians and Muslims participated in name-changing while maintaining their own distinct religions.

Not only does this practice shows an effort to achieve a community of cultural “harmony,” but it also further separates religion from society in lower-class Sicily. The distinction between changing one’s name rather than religion is important. It shows that Muslims and Christians were motivated to maintain social order, but enough religious tolerance existed in society that it was not expected for anyone to give up their religious beliefs and practices. Adopting new names blurred the lines between Christians and Muslims in society, demonstrating that cultural cohabitation was not only possible but actually commonplace in Sicilian peasant society. Additionally, naming often indicates ownership. Changing one’s name was an outward sign of the religion that they belonged to– or appeared to belong to. For this reason, Christians who adapted their names to appear Arabic and vice versa gave them the ability to hide in plain sight. During times of persecution– like the lower-class Christian riots against lower-class Muslims– a name that sounded more Christian provided a degree of extra protection. Therefore, the multicultural basis of Sicilian society allowed minority groups to maintain their identity while more discretely blending in through the use of an adapted name.

In addition to the adoption of cross-cultural names by members of both religions, the continued cohabitation of lower-class Christians and Muslims is supported by archaeological

⁴⁰ Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam*, 89.

evidence that gives insights into daily life for both groups. One specific case study that illustrates this concept of Sicilian cohabitation is the city of Segesta, located in the northwestern region of the island. This was the location of a recent archaeological study conducted in Sicily during the 2017-2018 season by the Universities of York, Rome and Lecce under the auspices of the European Union 2020 program. This study, entitled “Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily,” focused on the daily living conditions of Sicily’s populations in several sites, including Segesta’s rich demographic mixture of Christians and Muslims.⁴¹

When analyzing this archaeological research, it is important to note that the living situation of Sicilians in this time period was not uniform across the entire island. As Metcalfe states, there was a considerable “lack of demographic uniformity,” meaning that the distribution of ethnic populations was not even throughout, especially between the Latin and Greek dominated northeastern side and the predominately Arabic southwestern part of the island.⁴² Because of the inconsistent demographic makeups in each peasant community, it is important to avoid overgeneralizations regarding the overall levels of tolerance throughout the island. However, there is ample evidence of specific communities in which intercultural cooperation was a staple of everyday living. This study’s findings in Segesta include several key pieces of archaeological evidence that support the argument that of high level of cultural cooperation in Sicily’s peasant classes.

⁴¹ Carver, Martin, Alessandra Molinari, Veronica Aniceti, Claudio Capelli, Francesca Colangeli, Léa Drieu, Girolamo Fiorentino, Fabio Giovannini, Madeleine Hummler, Jasmine Lundy, Antonino Meo, Aurore Monnerieu, Paola Orecchioni, Milena Primavera, and Alice Ughi, “Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily, 2017-2018,” (Associazione Internazionale di Archeologia Classica, 2019) 27, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334083622_Sicily_in_transition_new_research_on_early_medieval_Sicily_2017-2018.

⁴² Metcalfe, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of Islam*, 71-72.

First, through analysis of pottery shards and teeth, the researchers concluded that Sicilian Muslims and Christians ate similar diets, which differs from other parts of Europe where the two groups cohabitated:

To date no evidence has emerged that diet varied with religious affiliation and so far no clear evidence for the consumption of C4 crops. This contrasts with a recent study from eastern Spain (Valencia), which found that there was a difference in diet between the two faith groups in the later medieval period (13-16th century)... This was considered to reflect socio-economic and status differences between the two populations [in Spain.] ⁴³

A shared diet is an incredibly important marker of a communal culture. Diet is a way in which people indicate their upbringing and way of life by the types and styles of the foods they eat. A communal diet between Christians and Muslims suggests that both groups identified themselves as part of one society. A lack of dietary distinctions between religious groups also suggests that there was no animosity between the groups prompted a need to differentiate themselves through dietary changes. If Christians and Muslims were fundamentally opposed to one another and refused to would seek to separate themselves from the other as much as possible, yet in this instance, there is no evidence that their diets differed at all.

In addition, because both Christians and Muslims were equally able to access and consume the same types of foods, it is likely that religion was not a large factor in determining social status and economic prosperity in Segesta. Neither group had substantially more or different foods, meaning that neither had disproportionate abundance of wealth when compared to the other. This dietary equality is especially prevalent when comparing the samples from Segesta to other parts of Christendom such as Valencia, as the study notes. The events of the Reconquista in Spain and the continued inequality apparent in the diets of Christians and Muslims helps to illustrate the overall lack of intercultural tolerance in Valencia and Spain as a

⁴³ Carver et al., "Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily," 27.

whole. This suggests the socio-economic differences between Christians and Muslims in Sicily was less pronounced than in other areas of intercultural interaction, such as Segesta. While this evidence alone is not sufficient to make this generalization for all of Sicily, these finds do point to a relatively tolerant society amongst commoners in Segesta. Sicily, with its long history of intercultural cooperation, exemplified more equality in socioeconomic status, indicating a society in which neither group forcibly subverted the other to poverty.

Just as Muslims and Christians cooperated and lived together through their shared diets during their lives, a sense of community between the two religions is also apparent in their deaths. This study also reveals that burial sites in Segesta included Muslims and Christians buried nearby one another: “In the search for variations associated with religious practice, we have at least one site where individuals using the Islamic and Christian rites were buried in adjacent and nearly-contemporary cemeteries (at Segesta).”⁴⁴ Other sites with Muslims and Christians buried nearby one another were discovered in Monte Iato and Palermo Corso del Mille.⁴⁵ As religions that support the belief in an afterlife, death and burial in both Islam and Christianity is particularly important. Death in both cultures is seen as the transition into new life in the Christian “Heaven,” or “Ākhirah,” the Muslim afterlife; therefore, great emphasis was placed upon burial rites to pray for the deceased soul. The adjacent burials of Christians and Muslims near one another shows that there was no deep stigma about sharing the ground with non-believers. Religious different did not prevent lower-class Muslim and Christian Sicilians from burying their loved ones near members of the opposite faith. This agreement shows the willingness of both groups to cooperate and cohabitate across religious boundaries.

⁴⁴ Carver et al., “Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily,” 27.

⁴⁵ Carver et al., “Sicily in Transition: New Research on Early Medieval Sicily,” 25.

Through their similar diets during life and their adjacent burials in death, it is clear that Segesta's Christian and Muslim populations demonstrated the high levels of tolerance and cohabitation between religions in Sicily's peasant class. At least a portion of the both faiths' populations did not inherently find fault with each other due to religious disagreement. The same truth is exemplified by the willingness of both Christians and Muslims to change their names to reflect the other's culture in different periods. By changing one's name, these people signaled that they valued communal intercultural living as well as acceptance of the other culture while maintaining their respective religious practices.

Therefore, when conflicts did occur amongst the lower-classes, religion was not the main source. Rather, it was tensions imposed on their communities by the Norman rulers' economic preferences that prompted violence towards Sicilian Muslims. The Norman rulers, who shirked responsibilities to the lower classes as a whole, created political dissatisfaction from Christians in particular. The close affiliation of the Norman Kings with Islam created a sense of betrayal amongst lower-class Christians. However, it was not the religions themselves that caused conflict. Despite religious and cultural differences and a power dynamic exacerbated by the upper classes, lower-class Christians and Muslims in Sicily still cohabitated and cooperated in a uniquely Sicilian manner. While elsewhere holy wars pitted Christians and Muslims against each other, each group championing the honor of their own faith, Sicilians coexisted during the time of the Crusades.

Conclusion:

The transition from Arabic to Norman rule in Sicily showed that intercultural interaction in the Middle Ages was not all "black and white." Common scholarship surrounding interreligious relationships during the time of the Crusades often reflects a false dichotomy:

Muslims and Christians were fundamentally enemies and always acted in opposition of each other. However, as the example of Norman Sicily reveals, there was a degree of cooperation and mutual respect between religions uncommon in typical views of the Medieval Christian mindset. This is likely due to Sicily's long history of intercultural mingling, and it is an interesting insight into the dynamics of power and religion as a whole. The plight of intercultural conflict was not nonexistent in Sicily, but the conflicts that did arise between Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily did not stem from inherent animosity between religions.

Rather, it was the economic mindset of the Norman rulers fueled both cooperation and conflict in Medieval Sicily. With wealth— rather than religion— always at the center of their mind, the Norman rulers facilitated intercultural exchange. In fact, Arabic culture was heavily embraced by the Norman Kings due to the political and economic advantages offered by collaboration with high-ranking Muslim officials. However, this same economic motivation caused the Normans to disregard people who served little economic purpose to them— typically lower-class Muslims— and acted violently when their assets seemed threatened. In addition, the economic preference of the Normans towards the upper-class Muslims evoked resentment and violence from lower-class Christians, who lamented the Norman rulers had ignored the plights of their Christian subjects in favor of Islamic practices. The economic motivation of the Normans was the root of conflict in Sicily, which is further demonstrated by the communities of lower-class Muslims and Christians that lived and died together in peace despite their religious differences.

The significance of intercultural collaboration in Norman Sicily extends to the modern day in several key ways. First, the high levels of collaboration between the Norman monarchs and upper-class Muslim officials reflects the historical theme that elites are often inclined to help

other elites, regardless of ideology. This is a theme that has reoccurred throughout history. Norman Kings appointed elite Arabic officials to high positions in their courts. Spanish Conquistadors also used high ranking Aztecs to cement their control over their territory in the New World. In both cases, the new rulers inserting themselves into the existing power structures gives legitimacy to their rule and makes their new administrations more accepted by the people. In turn, the existing officials have a vested interest in collaborating with the new rulers because they are able to keep their positions despite a change of power. Even modern politicians, the majority of which are from elite backgrounds, engage in similar behavior. Despite political parties or ideology, politicians on both sides of the spectrum perform favors to get specific laws passed or to win reelection. From these examples and others throughout history, it is clear that class– not ideology– is often the determining factor of political collaboration.

In addition, as demonstrated by the example of Norman Sicily, Christianity and Islam are not inherently incompatible. It is, indeed, possible for people of both faith backgrounds to not only coexist but actually embrace elements from one another’s culture to enrich the wellbeing of society as a whole. However, just as Sicily’s peasant population was divided by the Norman rulers’ economic preference for upper-class Muslims, extraneous events today have contributed to the ever-growing divide between the world’s Christians and Muslims. Fears following 9/11, the Iraqi War, ISIS terror attacks, as well as the treatment of Syrian refugees are contemporary examples of the tensions growing between members of the religions today. The growing sentiment of “Islamophobia” in the western world as well as increasingly antagonistic views of Christians in the Middle East paint the picture of these two religions as diametrically opposed to one another.

Despite religious conflict arising from a world that grows increasingly complicated every day, the modern world has made also made significant strides in interreligious dialogue since the time of the Crusades. Religious leaders on both sides have begun to recognize the importance of interreligious dialogue. In July 2013, Pope Francis– the figurehead of the Catholic Church and leader of Catholic Christians worldwide– issued a message of friendship to members of the Islamic faith at the end of Ramadan. Recalling his first days as Pope, he stated, “It is not possible to establish true links with God, while ignoring other people. Hence it is important to intensify dialogue among the various religions, and I am thinking particularly of dialogue with Islam. At the Mass marking the beginning of my ministry, I greatly appreciated the presence of so many civil and religious leaders from the Islamic world.”⁴⁶ A call for interreligious peace from the current Pope– whose papal predecessors first called for the Crusades against Muslims in the Middle Ages– is a stark indicator of just how far Christendom has progressed since the time of the Crusades.

Religious leaders of Islam have also called for peace amidst recent conflicts between Christians and Muslims. In January 2016, over 250 prominent Muslim leaders from around the globe met in Morocco to discuss the treatment of members of minority religions in predominantly Muslim countries.⁴⁷ Out of this meeting came the Marrakesh document, which concludes, “We hereby call upon representatives of the various religions, sects and denominations to confront all forms of religious bigotry, vilification, and denigration of what

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, “Message to Muslims throughout the world for the end of Ramadan,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, July 10, 2013, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/vatican-council-and-papal-statements-islam>.

⁴⁷ Safi Kaskas, “Peace will require leaders, Christian and Muslim, to address real grievances,” *Religion News Service*, May 8, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/05/08/peace-will-require-leaders-christian-and-muslim-to-address-real-grievances/>.

people hold sacred, as well as all speech that promote hatred and bigotry.”⁴⁸ It is clear from this statement that the world’s Islamic leaders, as well as the Pope, recognize the need to repair the centuries-old plight between Christians and Muslims for the sake of both their peoples.

With these steps forward from both sides of the religious divide, Christian-Muslim coexistence has unprecedented support from religious leaders– the fundamental element of religious peace that Norman Sicily lacked. The conflict caused by the Normans’ economic prioritization was the driving factor behind tensions between the two groups at the time. Regardless, both cultures continued to persist, mix, and flourish during this period. Therefore, if a society of mutual respect and collaboration was possible between Christians and Muslims over 900 years ago in Sicily, people of faith in the present day– with the support of their religious leaders– can move towards more peaceful relationships between Christians and Muslims in the modern world.

⁴⁸ “Marrakesh declaration on the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim majority countries,” *Pambazuka News*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.pambazuka.org/human-security/marrakesh-declaration-rights-religious-minorities-predominantly-muslim-majority>.

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