IBN JUBAYR, Description of Sicily, 1184


The Andalusi Muslim secretary to the Almohad governor of Granada, Ibn Jubayr, wrote an eyewitness account of Sicily in Arabic on his return from pilgrimage to Mecca. Although the organization of the material in his travel log is sometimes haphazard, his memoirs and testimony from personal interviews remain a significant source for the towns and palaces of Sicily, the royal administration, and the condition of the kingdom’s Muslims.

1. Description of Sicily and its rich resources

The island exceeds description other than to say it is the daughter of al-Andalus [Muslim Spain] in the extent of its estates and its great fertility and comfort… All its hills have orchards rich with apple trees, chestnuts, hazels, pears, and other types of fruit trees… It is bursting with all sorts of produce and full of every type of fruit.

2. Critique of Christians in Sicily and Description of its Muslim Inhabitants

[Sicily] is populated by the worshippers of crosses who roam its hills and are safeguarded in their shelter. Muslims are among them as well, on their holdings and estates and are treated well in their employment and work, but they impose a tax on them which they render twice a year. They have come between them and the wealth of the land likely used to have. May great and almighty God improve their condition and by his kindness make everything turn out well for their property!

3. Description of Palermo, Sicily

The finest city in Sicily and the seat of its king the Muslims know as al-Madina ["the city"] and the Christians as Balarma [Palermo]…. It is the Great City [Palermo] which is home to its king, William [II], the largest and most frequented city with Messina second. If God wills it, we will make our stay in Palermo, and from there we hold out hopes for our departure to whichever town in the Maghreb great and almighty God decrees, if he has so willed.

4. Critique of the City of Messina, Sicily

Recollection of the city of Messina on the island of Sicily (may God almighty return it!): this city is inundated with infidel merchants [that is, Christians] and a destination for ships from all quarters with many parties there for its low prices. No Muslim has settled
there; it is grim with godlessness and crammed with slaves of crosses choking its inhabitants and almost squeezing the life out of them. It is full of smells and squalor, a cold place in which the stranger will find no friendly atmosphere. There are no Muslims in this Messina except a few who are insignificant as their work has dried up, and so the Muslim stranger would feel alienated there.

5. Description of the Markets in Messina, Sicily

Messina's markets do a brisk and lively trade with an extensive range of goods to support a life of plenty. Your day and night pass by in safety even if your face, presence and tongue are unfamiliar.

6. Description and Praise of King Roger II of Sicily

The character of this, their king is surprising, for his decent conduct, his employment of Muslims, and the use made of completely castrated slaves, all of whom, or most of whom, conceal their faith and adhere to Shari’a law of Islam. He puts a lot of trust in the Muslims, relying on them in his affairs. Important matters of business to the extent that even the supervisor of his kitchen is a Muslim. He also has a unit of black Muslim slaves whose commander is picked from among them. His ministers and chamberlains are eunuchs, of whom he has a large number. They are the people of his state and described as his elite. Through them radiates the splendor of his kingdom because they abound with magnificent clothes and swift horses, and each has his own retinue of slaves and attendants.