
**Reviewed by** Paul Oldfield

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (March, 2014)

In recent decades research on the medieval city has increasingly produced ever more holistic analyses informed by methodologies from across multiple disciplines. As an endeavour it has proved both enriching and hugely demanding. There are, arguably, few medieval cities more open to such inter-disciplinary and synthetic examination than the Sicilian city of Palermo; and there are, equally, few cities which offer up more challenges in doing so. Between 600 and 1500, Palermo felt the full effects of its location in a frontier zone where the worlds of Greek Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Latin Christianity all intersected. The city moved in and out of the orbit of different political hegemonies, its constantly fluctuating urban topography (street-plans, quarters, architecture) testament to that process. The city also experienced significant demographic shifts, economic up-turns and down-turns, and socio-cultural transformation as the linguistic, ethnic and religious make-up of the city was seemingly in a constant flux.

No surprise then that such rich subject matter has attracted the attention of scholars for generations, and that there exist several excellent edited syntheses on the city. However, significantly, most of these works have been published largely in Italian and French. Thus the collection of essays in "A Companion to Medieval Palermo. The History of a Mediterranean City from 600 to 1500", edited by Annliese Nef, represents a much-needed and most welcome volume for the English-speaking audience. Indeed, the transmission in English of some of the latest research (primarily from Italian and French academic circles) is identified by the editor as one of the volume's major objectives. Of course, the process of translating complex studies into another language can be challenging, and in truth some of the vocabulary within the volume can seem, at times, rather opaque to the English reader. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly clear that the essays within this volume offer a superb new resource, as do the copious bibliographic references throughout the volume to previously published works, many of which often appear in specialist works which otherwise might not have come to the attention of an English-speaking readership. In this most fundamental sense, this vol-
ume represents a reference archive of the highest value.

At the same time this volume sensibly aims to avoid some well-trodden paths, namely social and political analyses of the city. Instead, the avowed focus here is on the religious and cultural, and, as emphasised in the volume's final section ('Transversal Approaches'), to achieve this by shaking off the traditional restrictions imposed by, in many ways, arbitrary chronological divisions (delineated as the Byzantine, Islamic, Norman, Staufen, Angevin, and Aragonese eras). That said, one further objective of the volume is chronologically-driven. It aims to offer more coverage on the earlier period, the sixth through to the mid-eleventh centuries, than the later; arguing, quite rightly, that more attention has been directed towards the later era. There are indeed four excellent essays on the earlier period, but taken as a whole it is not clear that this volume does in fact redirect sufficient focus on pre-1050 Palermo. The six essays (numbers 10 to 15) in the 'Transversal Approaches' section, in many ways the centrepiece of this volume, are theoretically intended to cut across chronological boundaries, but on closer inspection most of them focus heavily on the post-1050 period. Add to this contributions no. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 16, all covering the Norman period and later, and there is an evident sense of imbalance here despite efforts to the contrary.

There are other ways in which this volume could, arguably, have strengthened the excellent analyses contained within it. A danger of works focused on one case-study, in this instance a city, can be that we lose context and perspective. How representative or unusual was Palermo’s history? It would perhaps have been useful to have seen more comparative discussion in this volume, either throughout individual contributions, or through short introductory chapters before each section. Indeed, Annliese Nef offers a kind of short contextual chapter for the section on ‘The Hauteville’s Experiment’ which was valuable, and one wonders if the other sections in the book might have been treated similarly. Finally, the last contribution is assigned its own section with the title ‘Conclusive Perspectives’. This is rather misleading as we are not presented with any sort of synthetic summary of the volume but instead with Fabrizio Titone’s excellent examination of urban liberties and citizenship in the post-1282 era.

However, these structural issues aside, this volume is full of exhaustively researched work by expert scholars and which genuinely explores the city of Palermo from new perspectives. Collectively, all the contributions are successful in constructing a new vision of the city. We are able (thanks above all to the contributions, diverse in their methodological approaches, of Vivien Prigent, Annliese Nef, Alessandra Bagnera, Mirella Cassarino, Elena Pezzini and Laura Sciascia) to see how through varied channels and mechanisms the city developed into a ‘capital’ both in physical and cultural terms. Rosi Di Liberto and Sulamith Brodbeck extend this with meticulous treatment of the city’s rich architectural landscape and how it can be read. The city’s civic, social, economic, linguistic and religious make-up is elucidated by extensive analysis offered in the contributions of Henri Bresc, E. Igor Mineo, Gian Luca Borghese, Benoît Grévin, Giuseppe Mandalà and Fabrizio Titone. What emerges from all of these contributions is a Palermo that appears quite different from the one embedded in the existing historiography. The city was not a passive vehicle for events that occurred within it, or upon it. Instead we may view it as an actor, indeed a protagonist, in some of Sicily’s and indeed the Mediterranean World’s defining transitions. The contributions by Sciascia (on Palermo as a ‘Stage’ and ‘Mirror’) and Titone (on urban freedoms) invite this explicit conclusion, while the other contributions implicitly concur. In the final analysis, this volume is a valuable addition to the existing scholarship on the city. Although there are structural weaknesses, and issues with the balance of
the coverage, any researcher working on Palermo should indeed consult it for the rich, holistic picture it ultimately provides.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41422

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.