

Sarah C. Davis-Secord. *Where Three Worlds Met: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. 316 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-0464-2.

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In the past decade, scholarship on the medieval Mediterranean has increasingly emphasized Sicily's multilayered past and acknowledged the island's role as a major node of Mediterranean networks and interactions. Sarah Davis-Secord's *Where Three World Met: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean* is an important contribution to such studies. The work focuses on the island's political and cultural affiliations between the sixth and twelfth centuries and analyzes whether Sicily's position in the Mediterranean was "representative of the fundamental shifts and changes that took place in [this area]" (p. 5).

Throughout the book, the history of Sicily is viewed from an outside perspective: the island is analyzed as a point of arrival and departure for Mediterranean travel and communication. This approach is closely linked to several pioneering Mediterranean studies (namely, those by John Pryor, Nicholas Horden and Peregrine Purcell, Michael McCormick and Jessica Goldberg). However, whereas Michael McCormick famously accumulated a vast amount of complex and varied source material, Sarah Davis-Secord's source base is deliberately restrictive and relies on "anecdotes about people and goods that entered or left the island" (p. 25). These include historiographies, hagiographies, geographical works and travel accounts, letters and documents of the Cairo Geniza,

and a number of Islamic legal opinions (*fatāwā*). This latter example represents an innovative addition to Sicilian studies and focuses attention on an often neglected reservoir of source material (see particularly pp. 195-202).

A central question of *Where Three Worlds Met* is whether Sicily was at the center of Mediterranean systems or a border region on the edge of political entities. This is pursued in five chronologically organized chapters that summarize the rise and fall of ruling dynasties and explain Sicily's role within these processes. In order to "trace patterns and their transformation over time" (p. 25), all chapters follow the same structure and examine the political, diplomatic, and military connections between Sicily and Mediterranean powers (Byzantine-Latin, Byzantine-Islamic, Islamic-wider Mediterranean, Latin-wider Mediterranean), followed by the intellectual, religious, and economic connections to these powers.

The first two chapters describe Sicily's Mediterranean contacts from the time of Justinian's reconquest in 535 to the Muslim invasion of 827. Despite its distance from the political center, Davis-Secord concedes that the island was an important place for diplomatic exchange and a transit point for messengers between the eastern and western empires. Such a "conceptual nearness" (p. 58) can further be elucidated through religious

and intellectual connections between Sicily, Constantinople, and Rome. Evidence for trade and exchange only begins to increase with the rising influence of the Aghlabids in North Africa.

This process is at the center of the following chapter, which analyzes Sicily's connections with the Islamic world (Dār al-Islām) from the earliest Muslim raids on Sicily until the island's conquest by the Aghlabids. Davis-Secord suggests that such raids should not merely be considered in terms of political expansion, but rather as a reorganization of Sicily's communication networks. As a consequence, Sicily was drawn closer to the politics of the Islamic world, while also retaining cultural ties to Constantinople. Nonetheless, the author detects that a major change was the way in which Sicily communicated with the Latin world: the exchange of "Muslim Sicilian envoys, messengers and diplomats to foreign Christian courts is virtually non-existent" (p. 101). However, it is tempting to argue that such a conclusion is limited by the selection of sources: several Latin narratives such as the *Chronicon Salernitanum*, the *Gesta Episcoporum Neapolitanorum*, and the *Translatio Sancti Severini* contain repeated references to patterns of communication and exchange between Muslim Sicily and Christian courts on the southern Italian peninsula.

As Sicily's political center of gravity shifts toward the Dār al-Islām, Davis-Secord focuses on Sicily's place in the Islamic world. From a political point of view, she argues that Sicily remained a peripheral border region. However, in contrast to the intellectual and religious connection between Byzantine Sicily and Constantinople, Davis-Secord concludes that Muslim Sicily was marginalized in the Muslim intellectual imagination and "conceptually located at the remote edge of the Dār al-Islām" (p. 127). At the same time, the documents of the Cairo Geniza have been used to show how Sicily was economically integrated into the Islamic Mediterranean. However, as such exchange is mainly attested for routes between Sici-

ly and northern Africa, Davis-Secord describes these ties as regional rather than trans-Mediterranean networks. This conclusion would support the studies of Shlomo Goitein and Jessica Goldberg, which have emphasized that the Geniza merchants attest to a "deep barrier" between the Islamic and Christian Mediterranean.

Thus, Sicily only became a meeting point for the "three worlds" under Norman rule, when the island became the center of a multinational kingdom. For this time, Davis-Secord detects intensive contacts and exchange in all her categories of investigation. In so doing, her conclusions drawn from the *fatāwā* of al-Māzarī (d. 536/1141) are particularly interesting and point to ongoing trading contacts in North Africa. Furthermore, Davis-Secord finds that the patterns of communication and exchange transition insofar as that Sicily began to function as both sender and recipient. This sense of centrality is not only evidenced by reference to diplomatic and intellectual exchange, but also by the movement of people. Here, Davis-Secord stresses that Muslim migrations were a two-way process: the Norman conquest of the island brought about emigrations from Sicily, while later famines in North Africa encouraged immigration to the island.

The study's conclusion that the "'horizons' of medieval Sicily ... shifted and moved significantly over time" (p. 247) may not represent a significant historiographical advance. Nonetheless, the *longue durée* account of Sicily's communication networks and patterns of travel encourages its readers to rethink and critically evaluate traditional terminologies and periodization. For example, peripheral does not necessarily mean unimportant, and conquests or political affiliation do not necessarily determine the density of cultural, intellectual, and economic contacts. That said, it might have been useful to contextualize certain findings with existing and ongoing scholarly discourses, for example the relationship between center and periphery. Throughout the text, foot-

notes and references are kept to a minimum. The index and bibliography are helpful, but suggest that the author's selection of secondary material was heavily weighted in favor of anglophone scholarship. This is to be regretted as a large swathe of international scholarship has not been included (e.g., the works of Jean-Charles Ducène, Christophe Picard, Vivien Prigent, and Mikaël Nichanian). Nevertheless, Sarah Davis-Secord's book undoubtedly represents a valuable and accessible study of Sicily's place in the early and high medieval Mediterranean. As such, it invites scholars and students to combine and balance both microstudies and macro perspectives.

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