

What became of medieval Sicily's Arabs? Genetic Demographic Evidence

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Some portions of this paper appeared previously in the author's general-interest book, *The Kingdom of Sicily 1130-1860* (New York 2015), pp 265-367.

The way historians present their views sometimes leaves one with the impression that they are overlooking the most recent developments in the multidisciplinary approach to their studies. This succinct paper is not intended to rebut the views of any specific historian, nor to present a scientific treatise, but to bring a modicum of attention to a growing body of evidence that sheds light on what certain scholars still seem to regard as “perplexing” questions about the “disappearance” of the Arabs from Sicily by around 1250.

It should be observed, *pro forma*, that by a widely-accepted definition an “Arab” was a speaker of Arabic. Most of Sicily's Arabs were Muslim, at least initially. Such artefacts as the *Harley Trilingual Psalter* (Harley MS 5786 in the British Library) reflect the nature of their conversions to Catholicism as a knowledge of Latin and (by around 1220) Middle Sicilian¹ was acquired and Arabic abandoned. Not that being an Arab Catholic, or an Arabic-speaking Catholic, is, in itself, an anomaly (*viz.* the Catholics of Lebanon and Syria), but in Sicily the change of language accompanied the change in faith.

As I wrote in *The Peoples of Sicily* (New York 2014):

By 1250, there were no Byzantine dioceses in Sicily; only a few Orthodox monasteries remained. Following a series of revolts, a few thousand Muslim Arabs were deported to Lucera in Apulia, while thousands more converted to Catholicism. By 1250, mosques were a rare sight.

And in *The Kingdom of Sicily* (p 152):

Following the execution of the Muslim rebel leader Morabit, in 1222, thousands of Muslims from the Iato area revolted with their leader Ibn Abbad, or Benaveth. Frederick deported them to Lucera in Apulia. Most Muslims had already accepted baptism and were integrated into Sicilian society as Arab Catholics, some for two or three generations. It seems that there remained a few Muslims in the west of the island, particularly at Mazara and Erice, and there may still have been a few mosques in Palermo, but this mass transfer to Apulia marks the effective end of the widespread practice of Islam in Sicily. As many as twenty thousand Muslims were resettled in Lucera.

Those are merely general observations. Some fine work has been done in this area, including recent research by scholars writing in English.² There is no need to summarize it here.

Essentially, what began in 1222 was a series of deportations to Lucera (in Apulia) and several smaller towns in Calabria and Lucania (Basilicata). These localities and their populations are mentioned in the *Jamsilla Chronicle*, which covers the years from 1250 to 1258. This too is available in English.³

The genetic record revealed by DNA haplotyping confirms what historians have always known about the diversity of Sicily's historic populations.⁴ The geographic origins of these peoples are indicated in the accompanying map. Sicily's population, like its culture, has been essentially endogamous since around 1300.

Phylogeography is the most important development of the last twenty years in the field of historical research, particularly where it involves the migrations of ancient and medieval peoples. Every region of the world benefits differently from our knowledge of the genetic record. In the case of Sicily, it has validated recorded history rather than challenged it.

It used to be that genetic studies addressed subjects such as specific physical traits, identifying, for example, those in the population having blue eyes (around fifteen percent of Sicilians) or red hair (five percent), or the segment of the population carrying the gene for thalassemia (compliments of the Phoenicians and Greeks) or multiple sclerosis (the Normans).

Favism (hemolysis from G6PD deficiency) has been identified genetically. Genetic factors may partially account for the rarity of alcoholism among Sicilians.

What follows is only a very general approximation reflecting data from a constantly evolving field of study. Here there is no gospel. There exists no single “Sicilian haplotype” or haplogroup, no “Sicilian DNA” *per se*.

By percentage of the population, Sicily's Y (patrilineal) haplogroups are approximately: J (35), R (25), I (15), K (10), H (10), Others (5).

These proportions vary somewhat by locality. Allele frequencies usually change over time owing to

factors like “genetic drift,” so today’s percentages may not precisely reflect what existed in 1300 or 1500. They are a footprint rather than a photograph. Therefore, one is cautioned against simply assuming, based on present statistics, that the “typical” Sicilian is 35 percent Greek, 20 percent Norman, 15 percent Berber, and so forth.

Useful as this information is, attempts to ascertain specific patrilineal Sicilian “ethnic” origins based on it should be undertaken with a certain degree of caution because haplogroups do not correspond precisely to medieval or modern notions of nationality or ethnicity. At best, they are approximate. For example, J2 is identified with Greeks but also with some Germans, while R1b is identified with Normans but also with some Spaniards. The isolation of sub-clades within a major haplogroup helps to identify smaller populations in more specific geographic areas at more specific dates.

Speaking very broadly, the most frequent Y haplogroups of the world’s most conquered island may be correlated generally, but not exclusively, to the following populations:

- J1 - Arabs, Berbers, Carthaginians, Jews,
- J2 (M172) - Greeks, Romans, Jews, Spaniards,
- R1b (M173) - Germans, Goths, Normans, Lombards, Aragonese, Spaniards,
- I1 & I2b - Norse (Vikings) and Normans,
- I & I2a - Elymians,
- G - Arabs and Elymians,
- N - Norse and Normans,
- E1b1b - Arabs, Berbers, others,
- K - Arabs, Greeks, Berbers, Carthaginians,
- H - Arabs,
- T - Phoenicians, Carthaginians

What we are actually identifying is common descent over many generations from a remote male ancestor. For example, everybody in the J2 haplogroup has the same patrilineal ancestor in the northern part of the Fertile Crescent around 6,000 BC (BCE).

Female lines are not to be overlooked. Matrilineal haplogroups trace mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) through one’s mother’s mother’s mother and so forth. Bryan Sykes identified a number of European ancestresses he named the “Seven Daughters of Eve.” He has since added greatly to this number with haplogroups on other continents. The haplogroups H (Helena), J (Jasmine), K (Katrine), T (Tara), U5 (Ursula), V (Velda) and X (Xenia) all reflect lineages found in Sicily.

Population genetics dispels simplistic theories about race, societal development and ancient migrations, complementing theories about the Neolithic Revolution based on discovery of sites such as Göbekli Tepe. The most viable hypothesis advanced regarding Haplogroup J2 and the earliest Sicilians is that it correlates with the first neolithic farmers, as opposed to simple hunter-gatherers, making their way from western Asia across the Mediterranean.

Genealogists are reminded that Sicilians are descended, through one line or another, from ancestors in *all* of these haplogroups, and it should be remembered that the haplotyping described here isolates only *two* ancestral lines (through the father’s father and the mother’s mother), omitting all the others. For example, one has eight great grandparents, with Y and mtDNA haplotyping relating to (or identifying) only two of them.

Nevertheless, genetics has some interesting genealogical applications apart from proving close kinship; an aristocratic family’s claim to medieval Norman ancestry in the male line, built upon several centuries of boastful lore (a common occurrence among the presumptuous Sicilian nobility), can be cast into the realm of doubt by a simple DNA test.

In its essence, the genetic evidence suggests that the greater part of Sicily’s Arabs did not simply leave the island (for Tunisia or other Fatimid lands), nor were they deported during the reign of Frederick II. Rather, such evidence as exists implies that the great majority assimilated with the Latin population, adopted Christianity and remained here in Sicily, in much the same manner as the Greek-speakers were Latinized.

More generally, the author advocates for a wider, more practical application of genetic evidence to the study of medieval history, particularly in places like Sicily where, over time, there were various ethnic populations. Let’s use haplogroup data with caution, but let’s use it.

NOTES

1. For a translation (along with notes and the original text) of the earliest surviving narrative in Middle Sicilian, see Mendola, Louis, *Sicily’s Rebellion against King Charles: The Story of the Sicilian Vespers* (2015). This is the language that the island’s last Arabic-speakers, or their children, learned as they assimilated with the dominant culture.

2. See Metcalfe Alexander, *Muslims and Christians in Norman Sicily: Arabic Speakers and the End of*

Islam (2011); also Taylor, Julie Anne, *Muslims in Medieval Italy: The Colony at Lucera* (2003). Many Italian studies consider this topic; prominent among these is the work of Michele Amari and the equally learned but oft-overlooked Salvatore Morso.

3. See Mendola, Louis, *Frederick, Conrad and Manfred of Hohenstaufen, Kings of Sicily: The Chronicle of Nicholas of Jamsilla 1210-1258* (2016).

4. There are numerous studies. Typical of these is a report published in the September 2008 issue of the *European Journal of Human Genetics*, namely “Differential Greek and northern African migrations to Sicily are supported by genetic evidence from the Y chromosome” 17(1):91-9. The paper’s authors observe: “The general heterogeneous composition of haplogroups in our Sicilian data is similar to the patterns observed in other major islands of the Mediterranean, reflecting the complex histories of settlements in Sicily.” However, it is this author’s contention that a better general indicator, which considers the haplotyping of descendants of Sicilians around the island, rather than those from just a few localities, offering a much larger statistical sampling than what is permitted by most formal scientific studies, is the database of Family Tree DNA (in the United States), readily available online. For general trends, see *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey* (2004) by Spencer Wells, Explorer-in-Residence of the National Geographic Society and a former student of geneticist Luigi Luca Cavalli Sforza, himself the author of *Genes, Peoples and Languages* (2000). Another good entry is Stephen Oppenheimer’s *Out of Eden: The Peopling of the World* (2004).

