

'The Book of Curiosities'

Book Two: The Book of Curiosities (fol.32a lines 1-28)

The island of Sicily is the largest of the Islamic islands, and the most honourable on account of its continuous military expeditions against the enemy – may God forsake them! – and the perennial efforts of its people and [governors] in this respect. The island is seven days' long, and is covered by mountains, strongholds, and fortresses. Its capital city is known as Palermo (Bulurm). Around it is a strong wall, tall and impregnable. The merchants live there. It had a sanctuary in which was a piece of wood to which the Christians used to attach great importance and address prayers for rain. Most of [Palermo's] markets lies between the mosque of Ibn Siqlāb and the Ḥārat al -Jaḍīdah ('the New Quarter'). All the markets are outside the wall, except for the grain-merchants, a group of butchers, and the sellers of vegetables and fruits. The Ḥārat al-Ṣaqqālibah has had a wall for forty years. In the town are approximately one hundred and fifty butcher's shops, and many mosques. It has well-known springs such as al-Qādūs to the [south], al-Fawwārah al-Ṣaghīrah ('the Little Spring'), al-Bayḍā' ('the White'), al-Ghirbāl and 'Ayn Abī Mālik ('the Spring of Abū Mālik'). It [Palermo] has such an excess of school-teachers that every Qur'ānic school has two, three, four, or [even] five of them. This is because there is no burden upon the school-teachers, for whom holy war (al-ghazw) is not an obligation as it is for the rest of the population.

The predominant characteristics of the population are that they are rough and quarrelsome. Some of them intermarry with their neighbours amongst the Byzantines of the island on the condition that if they are given a boy child he will retain the religion of his father, and if a girl, the religion of her mother. Seldom are their wealthy people seen to have 20,000 dinars and, according to al-Ḥalūqī [n.d. = al-Ḥawqālī], the maximum [income] from all [Sicily's] taxes (qawānīn) – the fifth (khums), the taxes on produce (mustaghallāt), the tax on wine (māl al-luṭf), the poll-tax (al-jawāl), the sea-tax (al-baḥr), tribute (al-hadīyah), and the duty on fishing (al-qabālat lil -ṣuyūd) – amounts to 20,000 dinars. This despite their lack of kindness to the merchants who travel to them needing their cooperation. But then it is their inborn nature to be rough and intellectually depraved. Sometimes their crops rot on the threshing-floor before they are brought into the store-houses.

The market [of Palermo] runs from the east of it to the west and is called al-Simāt ('the Great Street'). It is paved with stone from beginning to end. It is surrounded by many springs flowing from west to east that turn [mills]. The drinking-water of the population of the city and of its suburbs [is taken from the springs which extend] from near the Bāb al-Riyād ('Gate of the Gardens') to 'Ayn Shifā' ('the Spring of Healing'). The drinking-water of the population of al-Khālīṣa and of the quarters [is drawn] from the wells that are in their houses. The drinking-water for the population of al-Mu'askar is from the springs known as al-Ghirbāl, 'Ayn al-Tis', which is less [abundant] than al-Ghirbāl, 'Ayn Abī Sa'īd and ['Ayn] Abī 'Alī. As to al-Qaṣr ('the Citadel'), which is inseparable from the Old City, and its gates: the most famous is the Bāb al-Baḥr ('the Sea Gate'), because of its proximity to the sea . Close to it lies the Bāb Aḥmad ibn Abī al-Ḥasan Aḥmad ibn Abī al-Ḥusayn. Next is the Bāb Shantaghathāt ('the Gate of St Agatha'), which is an ancient gate . [Then comes] a gate which was

created by Aḥmad ibn [Abī] al-Ḥusayn, where there is an excellent spring [which powers] many mills. [Then come:] the gate called Bāb Ibn Qurhub; the Bāb al-Abnā' ('Gate of the Buildings'), which is the oldest of [the city's] gates; the Bāb al-Sūdān ('the Gate of the Blacks') opposite the blacksmiths; the Bāb al-Ḥadīd ('the Iron Gate' or 'the Gate of Iron'), from which is the exit to the Ḥārat al -Yahūd ('the Jewish Quarter'); and another gate near to it which was renewed by Abū al-Ḥusayn. The total number of gates is nine. This city was originally a long rectangle, with a market from its east to its west, but it was subsequently built up and became circular. Fifty years ago, it acquired a new quarter called al-Ja'farīya, which has 10,000 houses.

The drinking-water of the district known as al-Gharbīya comes from the spring called 'Ayn al-Ḥadīd, where there is an iron mine, which once belonged to the Aghlabids. [This region] has many gardens and orchards watered only by rain, and not irrigated, as in Syria and elsewhere. Most of the water of the city is unpleasant. Its population is afflicted with corruption of their intelligence because of the great many onions that they eat. Few of them do not eat them. The astrologers claim that [when] the House of Leo rises obliquely, it exercises, despite its reputation for beneficence, malign influence so that in every land in which it is influential, it is difficult for the ruler to govern. And it [Leo] rules over Samarqand, Ardabīl, Mecca, Damascus [and Sicily]. These cities do not suit their rulers and their rulers do not suit them. The [Italian] mainland lies opposite Sicily. Between it, [that is] between Barqa and Sicily is about fifteen days journey. Sicily was raided by Ḥabla, a freedman of al-Aghlab ibn Sālim, but he could not hold on to it, even after capturing many Byzantines. Then Khalfūn the Berber raided it, and conquered it in the days of al-Mutawakkil. He conquered twenty-four of the fortresses of this island. After Khalfūn, al-Mufarraj ibn Sallām tried to establish himself there and he built a mosque, but his companions killed him. After him, there came a man called Sawdān, and he asked al-Mutawakkil to grant him authority over it, but he was killed before his messenger arrived. Then Ibrāhīm ibn al-Aghlab raided it, after the revolt that was raised against him amongst the blacks, as a consequence of which he killed his daughters, his sisters, his son, his eunuchs, and his familiars, and acted excessively. He struck deep into it for some fifteen days, and captured A.k.s.nah (Cosenza). Mu'āwīyah ibn Ḥudayj was the first to raid Sicily in the days of Mu'āwīyah ibn Abī Sufyān. Then al-Aghlab ibn Sālim conquered some twenty cities; which are amongst the cities of the Muslims to this day. And Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Aghlab conquered, during the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil, Qaṣr Yānah (Castrogiovanni, modern Enna) and Ḥisn Ghalyānah (Gagliano). 'Abd Allāh ibn Qays ibn Mukhallad al-Raqqī obtained in Sicily idols of gold and silver crowned with jewels, and he sent them to Mu'āwīyah. [Sicily's] Ascendant is Leo, and the Lord of the Hour is the Moon. Its distance from Alexandria, to the direction of the west, is one hour and one third and one half of a seventh [of an hour]. The maximum number of [daylight] hours in its longest day is fourteen hours and three quarters of an hour. Its circumference is 500 miles. This the map of [Sicily].