

# Urban decay and abandonment in western medieval Sicily: a problem for the study of strong earthquakes

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## Abstract

This paper forms part of a study being conducted on the historical and habitational context of urban centres in medieval Sicily in relation to the study of powerful earthquakes in the Middle Ages. The investigation is limited to the western part of the island, for which a long documentary silence regarding destructive seismic phenomena has been noted. To try to explain this lacuna by a knowledge of precise contextual contexts, the research aimed to provide a large data base covering the characteristics of the towns and settlement pattern in question. On the basis both of historiographical studies and new archival investigations, some situations which can be defined as «structural» were revealed. After the Norman conquest, the towns of Western Sicily were subjected to a dual transformation: the creation of a Latin town, fortified and surrounded by a circuit of walls; and the formation of a separate quarter, the *rabato*, inhabited by the population of Moslem origin and subject to a constant process of deterioration. The persecutions and deportations of Moslems in the 13th century, and the transformations of the habitat between the 14th and 15th century, concurred to stabilize these areas of building decay within numerous urban centres. This factor may have «obscured» possible strong earthquakes, which here encountered a context in which ruin and abandonment already formed part of urban «normality».

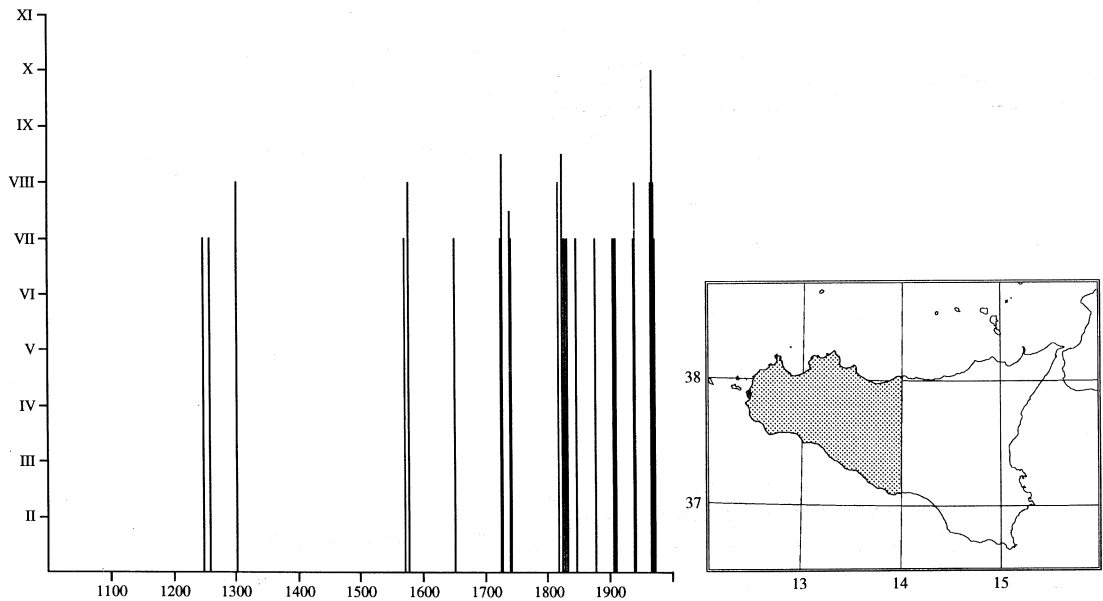
**Key words** *historical seismicity – Western Sicily – medieval sources*

## 1. Introduction

The need has been felt in the study of historical seismology in recent years to include among the research parameters the historical context of the settlement pattern and urban typologies of the regions under examination (Guidoboni and Stucchi, 1993). In fact, the nature of constructions of the towns and the social-economic situation of the town directly conditioned both the effects of the seismic phenomena on the territory and the capacity of the individual urban centres to react in situations of emergency and to produce sources of information relating the effects (Fumagalli and Guidoboni, 1989).

All these are elements subject to marked variations depending on the period and the area under examination. For example: the capacity for renewal of a city undergoing a marked process of expansion like Messina around 1169 (Boschi *et al.*, 1995) probably attenuated the destructive effects of the earthquake that occurred in that year, hence justifying the silence of the contemporary documentary sources. But situations quite the reverse may also occur: situations in which a persistent «culture of destruction», widespread in already decayed urban contexts, makes less visible the consequences of seismic events and more especially reduces, or even destroys, the capacity or the will of eye witnesses to preserve the memory of them (Valensise and Guidoboni, 1995).

In the course of research promoted by the Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica on the medieval earthquakes of Sicily (1990-93; the research



**Fig. 1.** Frequency and Intensity (MCS) of strong earthquakes located in Western Sicily according to the Postpischl catalogue (1985). 42 shocks occurred, 11 of which were correlated to the earthquake of January 1968.

was conducted by Emanuela Guidoboni in two phases: 1988-90 and 1992-93), the persistence of some significant contextual factors was revealed, adding a new parameter to the new data which have emerged: namely, the presence of widespread stabilized urban decay in the medieval cities of Sicily. The presence of large areas of decay within inhabited centres seems in fact to characterize the urban landscape of a large part of medieval Sicily: depressed quarters, occupied by disadvantaged inhabitants, who were actively discriminated against, and had neither the opportunity nor the interest to improve their own conditions; individual buildings, even major ones such as ecclesiastical buildings, which remained in a state of abandonment for decades; empty urban spaces unfilled by the planned expansion of the inhabitants; and, especially, different populations «by race and by caste» (Peri, 1978), divided by the impassable borders of the urban quarters, rigidly hierarchized on an ethnic basis.

In this perspective, attention was concentrated on the situation of Western Sicily in the

medieval period. A gap of information on this area was revealed from the 10th to the 16th century in the catalogue of Italian earthquakes (Postpischl, 1985) concerning the events of intensity of MCS grade  $\geq$  VIII. This part of the research concerns, in particular, the period between the 11th and the 14th century (fig. 1). For this area only few strong earthquakes are known from the Xth century (for the preceding period see Guidoboni and Traina, 1995), whose effects are gauged to be of intensity of MCS grade  $\geq$  VII, as the Table I shows (Postpischl, 1985).

**Table I.** Western Sicily: earthquakes  $\geq$  VII MCS Intensity from 11th to 16th century (Postpischl, 1985).

Year	Located	Intensity max MCS	Mk
1248	Basso Tirreno	VII	4.6
1259	Trapani	VII	4.6
1301	Palermo	VIII	5.1

According to the catalogue data (Postpischl, 1985 and Boschi *et al.*, 1995) the most important seismic event in Western Sicily is the earthquake which struck the river Belice valley on January 15, 1968 (Io = IX MCS, Mk 5.6, MI 6.0). The object of the research is to find other strong earthquakes comparable with this event, or to allege the absence of information.

The silence of the local historiographic sources underlined the need to examine the historical and urban context of the region, both to target the documentary research and to reconstruct the context of eventual seismic effects.

## 2. Eastern and Western Sicily

Medieval Sicily presents two very different urban and economic areas. In the eastern area a marked economic dynamism prevailed: Messina, where the autochthonous Greek substratum was stronger, represented right from the start the bridgehead of the Norman advance. The predomination of the Latin community was favoured both by a precocious immigration of Italians from the north into the main urban centres, and by the definition of trade routes. The prestige of Messina as a harbour town, seat of a royal dockyard and a royal palace as an alternative to the less secure Palermo, increased considerably in the course of the 12th and 13th century (Ioli Gigante, 1986). Messina's town plan was gradually modified, with the formation of a «new town», the expansion into hitherto uninhabited areas (the *fiumare*) and the creation of quarters for immigrants, named after the places from whence they came. The diffusion of place-names linked to the various trades is also a sign of the economic and social vitality of Messina's population (Ciccarelli, 1986, p. XLV). In the major centres of Eastern Sicily (Randazzo, S. Lucia, Nicosia, Mascali, Aidone) Latin immigration consisted in large part of a middling-to-low stratum of people linked to land ownership. The Latins however received numerous privileges from the Norman crown, including exemption from impositions, and a secure patrimonial basis (house and land). These privileges placed this new class of

landowners in a middling-to-high position vis-à-vis the autochthonous population of Greek origin and in a position of considerable superiority vis-à-vis the Moslem population (Peri 1978, p. 97 and Peri, 1959).

By contrast, in Western Sicily, which was profoundly arabized, the implantation of a new domination on a ethnic and religious basis was politically inspired by a radical opposition to the Arab population. During an initial phase a kind of tolerant form of cohabitation with the Moslem and Greek population was not lacking under the first Norman kings. It was nonetheless a cohabitation based on the segregation of cults, laws and persons, which precluded the Sicilian population from being reunited in a single socio-political context. It was this struggle that profoundly marked the habitational structures and the entire geography of the settlements for almost three centuries.

## 3. Lines of expansion of the Norman conquest: the castle

The Norman conquest of Sicily lasted some thirty years, from 1060 to 1090. Right from the start the need was felt to militarily organize the Norman presence in the newly conquered towns, even though in Western Sicily the Norman occupation cannot be said to have been definitive before the first half of the 12th century. The first sign of the conquest was therefore a building in defence of the Norman garrison charged with the control of the town in question: the castle, clearly distinguished in the Latin sources from the *castra* of the territory. The construction, or at least the foundation, of castles thus followed the advance of the Norman armies from Eastern to Western Sicily: Petralia in 1062; Troina in 1063; Catania in 1070; Palermo, where there were two castles, in 1071; Mazara in 1072; Paternò in 1073; Trapani in 1077; Taormina in 1079; Messina in 1081; Syracuse in 1086; Girgenti in 1087; Noto in 1091 (Maurici, 1992, pp. 90-99; Peri, 1953). In some cases these castles were on a considerable scale, as at Messina and Catania; in others they consisted of a temporary fortification of prominent buildings, often used for

defensive purposes under the Moslems too. However, the formation of the settlement pattern under the Norman Regno of the 12th century was not casual, as has been shown by a recent fundamental study of the Sicilian castles by Maurici (1992). The Normans inherited the Arab structure, but they modified its strategic nature, creating a coastal line of fortifications, from Cefalù to Licata, which was explicitly aimed against the predominantly Arab hill-country of the interior. A second transverse line of fortifications was added in the course of the 13th century, along the line of demarcation between the Madonia and Nebrodi mountain ranges, with the aim of isolating the Western Moslem part from the Eastern Greek and Latin part. It was a project on a huge scale, capable of conditioning the structure within the individual settlements according to their distribution over the territory, and the vicinity or not of arabized *casali* (isolated farmsteads).

A common denominator of the towns of Western Sicily, which were for the most part domanial, *i.e.* under the direct control of the crown, was the openly defensive function of the castle. Most of them were located in centres of administrative importance in the previous period, thus in substance taking over the Moslem territorial order. In the individual urban centres, moreover, the castle marked a precise demarcation of the urban space: it was the place occupied by the conquerors, an inevitable focal point for the buildings and functions of the ruling class which was gradually formed during the phase of consolidation of the conquest, with the decisive support of the Church, the Franco-Norman feudal elite, and the Italian emigration of the «Lombards» (Amari, 1933, V, pp. 225-227, 229-231). The aim of the castle was not to protect, but to control the town: it created a clear division at the urbanistic level; it separated quarters by points of attraction and differentiated habitational structures. The residential nucleus of the Latin rulers was identified by the contiguous presence of the cathedral church and the fortress, while the Moslem population was gradually displaced into the more decentralized and less fortified quarters: the *rabat*, which were situated outside the circuit of walls and controlled by the castle.

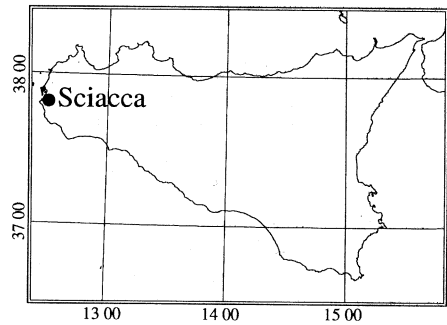
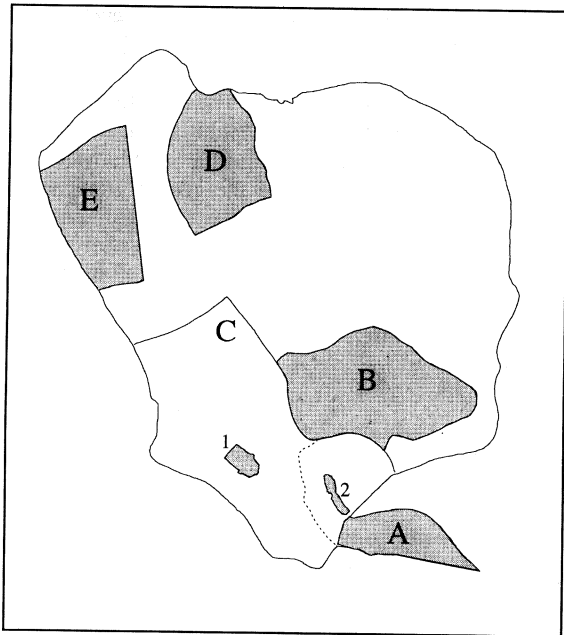
#### 4. The consolidation of the conquest: the divided city

The distinction between a fortified Latin quarter and an external Arab quarter, the *rabato*, is documented in many Sicilian towns: Sciacca, Agrigento, Carini, Tusa, Geraci, Nicosia, Enna, Cefalù, Termini, Salemi, Roccella, Caltavuturo. We are dealing here with a particular urban typology: a city divided into opposing nuclei successively formed according to the ethnic components of its inhabitants, without ever achieving social and urban homogeneity.

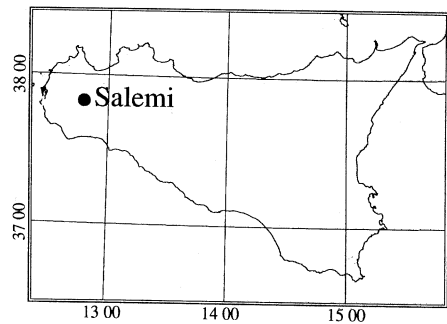
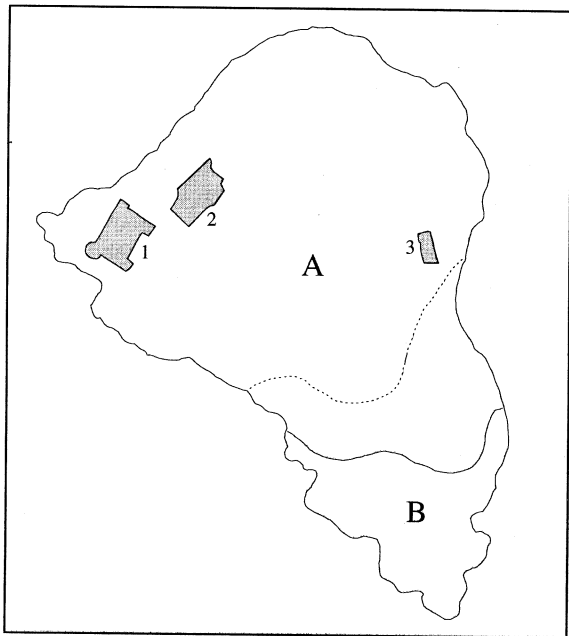
A striking example of this division is Sciacca, where this structure of quarters formed by successive ethnic aggregations distinguished the town's entire urban development down to the 15th century. A juxtaposition of different quarters according to the phases of occupation and the formation of definite ethnic units is clearly detectable (fig. 2): a) the Figuli quarter, inhabited by the Greek-Siculan nucleus, largely of artisan or handicraft vocation; b) the *rabato*, first Arab settlement, naturally defended by the mountain; c) the Norman quarter, with castle and mother church as powerful points of attraction; and lastly two quarters added at a later date; d) the Jewish quarter, and e) the quarter of Catalan merchants formed in the 14th century (Piazza, 1983).

It was only after the Norman occupation, however, that the fundamental division occurred: during an initial phase in fact the Normans established themselves in the upper part of the town, readapting the castle which had already been present in the Arab period, and building the mother church. The new circuit of walls was erected in the 13th century, automatically creating the *rabato*, which coincided with the part of the Arab town which had remained outside the walls.

The division is also clear-cut in the documents, especially in those of the towns in which the conflict with the Moslems was more marked. At Agrigento, too, the first nucleus of the Norman settlement (consisting of royal functionaries, ecclesiastics, groups of *militēs*), was located in the upper part of the town, where the castle, the bishop's residence and the



**Fig. 2.** Sciaccia (Agrigento, Sicily). Urban structure in 12th and 13th centuries. Demarcation of the quarters: A = Greco-Sican *Figuli*; B = Arab *Rabato*; C = Norman *Ruccera*: 1. mother church, 2. castle; D = Jewish *Cadda*; E = Catalan *Borgo di Mezzo* (elaborated from Piazza, 1983).



**Fig. 3.** Salemi (Agrigento, Sicily). Urban structure in 12th and 13th centuries. A = Latin town: 1. castle, 2. mother church, 3. S. Maria della Catena church (XIIth century); B = *Rabato*, Arab quarter (elaborated from Di Stefano, 1980).

cathedral church with a fortified tower were constructed (Peri, 1978, pp. 21-22). This group of buildings was surrounded by walls to protect itself from the *rabato*, which was mainly inhabited by Moslems and had already sunk into decay by the end of the 12th century. At Agrigento, inter alia, the not negligible presence of cave dwellings is also documented. From the early 12th century onwards, therefore, there was a clear division between old and new town, to which very different building types corresponded (Collura, 1960, p. 25). Mistrust in the Moslems was motivated moreover by the persistence of bilateral conflict: it is enough to recall that as late as the early 13th century Bishop Urso was taken prisoner by the Moslem rebels and only freed on payment of a large ransom (Collura, 1960; Peri, 1978, p. 123).

A similar pattern is found at Salemi, where the *rabato* corresponds to the triangular extension to the town situated below the castle (fig. 3). The *rabato* was probably a quarter founded *ex novo* under the Arab domination and detached from the rest of the town after the Norman conquest. The castle was reconstructed in the Hohenstaufen period, as too was the circuit of walls that delimited the «new» Latin town. The Arab plan of the town was gradually changed by new points of attraction: the mother church in the 12th century, the churches of the mendicant orders in the 13th and 14th century, and the seignorial palaces in the 15th century. The *rabato*, by contrast, maintained virtually intact its street pattern of Islamic type. Even more markedly, it maintained unaltered its social destination as a quarter inhabited by workers of the land, as is demonstrated by the «Riveli» of the 18th century, confirming long-term continuity between the villeins of the Norman-Hohenstaufen period and the rural classes of the early modern period (Di Stefano, 1980).

The phenomenon of the «divided» city is of crucial importance for the study of historical seismology: on the one hand, an area of urban and social decay, incorporated in the fabric of most Sicilian towns, can be identified; on the other, the area of potential damage which the contemporary sources may have had an interest

to document is consequently restricted. It is important to note in fact that the *rabato* did not coincide with the whole Moslem town, but only with that part of it which remained excluded from the part occupied by the Normans. The *rabato* became a quarter which was isolated from the whole of the central nucleus of the town, and in which, for strategic reasons, the Moslems had concentrated. In other words it was a ghetto quarter, destined to be inhabited by a population which was legally and economically inferior, and separated from the rest of civic life.

### 5. Social decay and violent repression of the Moslem population

Already in the 12th century the legal status of Moslems was being curtailed; they were increasingly being turned into a legal minority. This was a decline also reinforced by the parallel process of restructuring the land ownership pattern. The lands expropriated from Moslems in Western Sicily ended up in the hands of the large ecclesiastical bodies. These subjected the smallholdings and their inhabitants to a status of «villeinage» (status of dependence of the farmer on the lord) by so-called «ragione delle persone»: this meant that the Moslem population, both in the towns and in the countryside, became subject to villeinage on the basis not of ownership of land, but simply of ethnic identity (Peri, 1978, p. 92; Maurici 1992, p. 109). Amari, recalling the numerous donations of land and men, or even men without land, to monastic bodies, has likened the status of the Moslems to a form of semi-slavery, barely disguised by their status as villeins (Amari, 1933, V, pp. 243-244). This process, which also involved in part the population of Greek origin, rapidly transformed the conditions of the majority of the non-Christian inhabitants of the urban centres from *cives* (citizens) to *villani civitatenses* (persons subjected to links of dependence, resident in the towns); as such they were often employed in the agricultural sector and extraneous to the urban social and productive processes.

In the towns of Western Sicily, the forma-

tion of quarters separated from the rest of the urban centre and inhabited by a population rendered inferior by legal status and economic capacity, is even better defined in the Hohenstaufen period. In the early decades of the 13th century the conflict against the rebel Moslem forces was conducted by Frederick II by a radical political project: it was aimed at the physical eradication of the Moslem presence from Western Sicily, where the resistance of the rebels and fugitive peasants had permitted the survival of a strong political organization of the Islamic community. Already the anti-Moslem pogroms at Palermo and in other areas of Central and Eastern Sicily in the second half of the 12th century had dramatically heralded the campaigns of violent repression of the Moslem component. Let us recall the main episodes: in 1160 the Lombard rebels against the king expelled the Moslems from Piazza Armerina; in 1190, in the course of a revolt of the barons, the Moslems of Palermo were forced to flee to the mountains of the Val Mazara, where they remained barricaded till the first two decades of the 13th century (Amari, 1933, VI, pp. 498, 557-583; Maurici, 1987, 1992, pp. 116-117). The reprisals of the Moslem rebels, exasperated by the draconian taxes of the Hohenstaufen court and the condition of servitude into which they had been forced, had as their objective, among others, Palermo, where the church of San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi was attacked, Cefalù and Agrigento. Other better organized groups from a military point of view formed fortified centres of resistance in the castles of Giato and Entella (Agrigento), both of them destroyed by Frederick II. It was during these years that Frederick II hatched his plan to deport the defeated Moslems en masse from Sicily, resettling them at Lucera in Apulia (Bresc, 1984, pp. 167-168). The first deportation took place in 1223, and involved the Moslem inhabitants of Agrigento who had barricaded themselves at Giato. A second campaign against the Moslem rebels took place in 1225. In 1232 the deportation took place of the inhabitants of Centorbo and Capizzi at Palermo, in the *contrada* of Albergaria. In 1243 Entella was destroyed (Amari, 1933, VI, pp. 613-614). We do not precisely

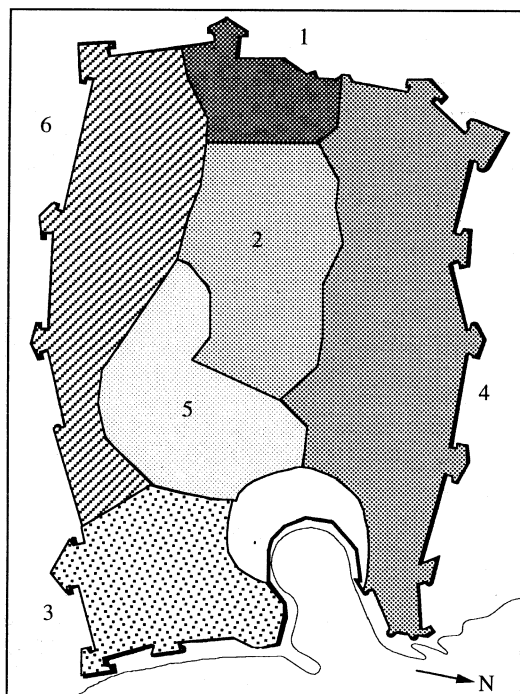
know what part of the Moslem population was involved in the forced emigration. It is possible nonetheless to gauge the effects on the urban structures of what must have been in any case a massive exodus of inhabitants, and probably the most active and best organized part of the Moslem population. Peri (1978) has indeed tried to explain the relative decline of the western part of Sicily, and of Palermo in particular, by the lack of any real replacement of the Sicilian ruling class, once the Moslem element had been excluded.

#### **6. Ethnic quarters and urban decay in the Hohenstaufen period (end XII-middle XIII century): the case of Palermo**

The situation of Palermo in the 13th century perhaps represents the most explicit case of the selective decay of the city according to ethnic quarters. Both under the Arabs and under the Normans the city was divided into at least five distinct quarters (fig. 4), each with its own circuit of walls and its own well-diversified urban vocation:

- the Cassero, the city par excellence, the historic walled quarter at the heart of the city;
- the Galka, pre-eminently political quarter, seat of the Moslem power with the palace of the emir and the mosques;
- the Kalsa, commercial quarter facing onto the port;
- the Seralcadio and Albergaria, both quarters for immigrants.

The Normans transferred the politico-economic centre from the zone close to the port to the Cassero, which had become a fortified citadel with a high density of population (Peri, 1958; De Seta, 1980, pp. 34-35; Scarlata, 1985). The fact that the Norman city had a different orientation from the Arab one, and especially the anti-Moslem revolts of the 12th century, led to the map of the urban quarters being partly redesigned in relation to ethnic and religious affiliation. The Seralcadio quarter, in particular, underwent a marked transformation: under the Moslems it was inhabited by the Christian community and by an Arab popula-



**Fig. 4.** Palermo. The Arab city and Norman quarters: 1 = ancient Palepoli: Galca; 2 = Neapoli: Cassaro; 3 = Arab citadel of Halisha: Kalsa; 4 = harat as Saqalibah: Seralcadio; 5 = harat masjid Ibn Saqlab (lost in Norman age); 6 = harat al-Gadidah: Albergaria (elaborated from De Seta and Di Mauro, 1980).

tion that had immigrated from the surrounding areas; after the Norman occupation, it became a safe-haven quarter for the Moslems especially in times of persecution by the Latins, as during the pogrom that followed the assassination of Admiral Maione (Peri, 1958, p. 431).

The formation of quarters in the course of the 13th century had in any case obeyed a logic in large part influenced by socio-economic and ethnic reasons. The many foreign communities occupied areas of the city surrounding the church of their patron saint of origin, without intermingling with the preceding substratum (Di Giovanni, 1884, 1887). The Latins enclosed themselves in the Cassero, surrounded by walls and increasingly isolated

from the rest of the non-Christian population. In general, the expansion of the city never exceeded the area of the Arab city, nor did it give rise to any marked building activity. It rather took the form of a forced reutilization of the same houses, which were fragmented into many different lots in the hands of the same family nucleus. The right of «protimisi», which reserved to close relations and neighbours the right to purchase parts of a property, favoured the incorporation of buildings on the basis of family nucleus and hence of ethnic group, and thus precluded the intermingling of foreign elements (La Mantia, 1915): this characteristic accompanied the urban development of the city throughout the 13th and 14th centuries.

After the expulsion of the Moslems in 1224, Palermo was characterized by extensive areas of urban decay, in part abandoned. «Casalini» (a term that indicated a house once it had fallen into ruin) in a state of abandonment were even to be found in the Cassero itself, but it is in the Seralcadio and Albergaria quarters that most of the abandoned houses were attested. Frederick II's attempts to forcibly repopulate these two quarters underlined the scale of the abandonment, without creating a solid basis for urban renewal. In 1239 the inhabitants of two villages close to Palermo, Centorbi and Capizzi, were transferred to the Albergaria quarter (Trasselli, 1964, p. 332). In the same year a colony of Jews from the island of Garbo applied to rent *casalini diruti* (ruined houses) in the Cassero, the central quarter, and to cultivate the palm grove (*palmareto*) now in a state of abandonment. Frederick II refused to grant them the *casalini*, but allocated them empty spaces in other parts of the city (Huillard-Breholles, 1857, V, p. 571; Lagumina 1884, doc. 22; Amari, 1933, VI, p. 630). In 1240, an attempt was made to transfer Moslems to the Seralcadio quarter from their neighbouring houses (Huillard-Breholles, 1857, V, p. 426), but in 1253 and in 1256 a royal commission assigned to the distribution of licences for the reconstruction of ruined houses was still in office (Bulgarella, 1978, doc. 16; Trasselli 1964, p. 333).

In the 13th century contracts of purchase preserved among the papers of the monastery



of the Martorana in Palermo numerous references have been found to «casalini diruti» (ruined houses) in the Galka quarter, in the «ruga marmorea» and in the «curia veteris» (Bulgarella, 1978, doc. 6, 8, 10, 21, 33). In the 14th century a large number of the houses along the Albergaria was still defined as in ruins (Trasselli, 1964, p. 340). The situation of the Seracaldio quarter was even worse: most buildings which were mentioned in the contracts of ecclesiastical bodies consists in casalini, destroyed houses, yards, uninhabited empty spaces (Di Giovanni, 1886, 1887, 1899). A sign that the quarter had by now assumed a character of permanent decay. On the contrary, the case of the Cassero quarter in the 15th century shows how the socio-economic level of the population directly affects the building structures. Mostly inhabited by well-to-do people, craftsmen, professionals (107 families of craftsmen and 21 families of notaries are recorded in 1470; Giuffrida, 1971), the Cassero displays a complex residential building typology, with workshops joined to houses, perhaps periodically restored in order to continue the economic activity.

## 7. Restructuring of the territory and urban population between the 13th and 14th centuries

Major processes of redefining the settlement pattern and the economic system concurred to permanently fix the house types of the urban centres. This led to the disappearance of the open habitat of the *casali*, the Arab *manzil* and the concentration, often forced, of the rural population in a few large agrarian centres, a kind of precocious agrostadt, which controlled a huge territory. The phenomena has recently been studied in relation to some subregions of Western Sicily, and has been shown to be of decisive importance for understanding the urban reality of the 14th century. In the whole Val Mazara all the casali censused in the 12th century disappeared in the first half of 15th century (Bresc, 1976; D'Angelo, 1977).

In the region of Termini Imerese (Palermo) there was a sharp drop in the number of *casali*

between the late 13th and first half of the 14th centuries: some 80 percent disappeared. The expansion of the latifundia and extensive agriculture, the plague and the consequent demographic decline accelerated this process, which was consolidated by the crisis of the more labour-intensive forms of cultivation, by the growth of stock-farming and by the nobility's consequent lack of interest in repopulating their feuds. A restricted urban bourgeoisie, hostile to any form of autonomy of the inhabited centres in their territory, was also reinforced (Bresc and D'Angelo, 1972; Bresc, 1986).

In the province of Agrigento the transformation of the landscape from the Norman to the Aragonese period was no less profound. The domination of the rebel Moslem forces in the estates of Monreale and in the bishopric of Agrigento had made Frederick II's reconquest more difficult and his repression more violent. The territory of Agrigento was particularly marked by the persistent destruction of buildings from the mid-12th century onwards: destroyed churches were granted by the bishop of Agrigento in 1154 and in 1170, a mill in 1171, a hospital in 1199 (Collura, 1960, doc. 13, 20, 22, 42, 48); in 1219 the monastery of S. Maria «de Hadriano» was reported destroyed. The *casali* reconfirmed by Frederick II to the church of Agrigento in 1233 were intended as reparation for the destruction suffered, but failed to fill the gap. In a very interesting document of 1255, the papal vicar granted to the bishop of Agrigento the income derived from the tithes paid by the Jews as indemnity for the damage suffered «as a result of the war of the Saracens and the loss of [the diocese's] own villeins, whom emperor Frederick had removed from the church and transferred to Apulia» (Collura, 1960, doc. 77). The progressive abandonment of the open habitat and the old structure of the Arab colonization was thus aggravated by the military upheaval which marked the conquest of the region. In the 13th century we still find mention of 35 rural settlements, *casali aperti* with the function of settling the land. But by the end of the century only 10 of these remained, and some had reverted to land, as at Brona, Adragno, Comicchio, Burgio and Giuliano. In the 14th century only 3 *casali*

were left (Rizzo, 1992). A process of abandonment of the land, and the concentration of the inhabitants in a few settlements, is clear. Sometimes the process was involuntary, with the forced transfer of population, as in the case of the inhabitants of Adragno deported to Sciacca and to Agrigento. This led to the formation of a new urban population of low social and economic status which in some cases became absorbed into the previous agrarian quarters of the inhabitants of Moslem origin; in others it replaced them, occupying the abandoned buildings and perpetuating the existence of decayed urban zones within the town.

### 8. The landscape of ruins in Sicilian towns of the 14th-15th century

The case of Palermo and the towns mentioned above, however macroscopic, are not exceptional. Extensive areas of urban decay are attested in almost all the towns of Western Sicily between the 13th and 14th centuries.

To elucidate this aspect of major significance for defining the urban landscape in medieval Sicily and the response to seismic events in the individual urban contexts, a research project was launched aimed at examining the archival documentation relating to the towns of Western Sicily between the 12th and 14th centuries. In the course of this research, conducted with E. Guidoboni in the Archivio di Stato of Palermo, we found numerous documents which report evidence of destruction in the various urban and rural contexts. We scanned the main collections of unpublished deeds («Tabulari») pertaining to ecclesiastical bodies which had properties in various towns of the island: the church of Cefalù, San Martino delle Scale, S. Maria del Bosco, S. Maria di Gangi, S. Maria della Grotta. From all this documentation a picture emerged of persistent ruin even in the 14th and 15th centuries. The types of urban decay differ. At Cefalù, close to Palermo, we identified a block of shops in a state of ruin in the central piazza of the town in the sixth decade of the 14th century. The information was found in a deed of conveyance of 1358 concerning half of a destroyed apothecary

shop converted into a small house (*apotheca diruta et conversa in casalino*); but this house stood adjacent to another shop, it too in ruins, and to other *casalini*, the remains of buildings that once belonged to a local *cavaliere* (ASP, 1358). A similar situation can be found in Termini Imerese: in notarial deeds of the 15th century the mention of destroyed *casalini* is frequent, above all in the old quarter (Dentici-Buccellato, 1976, p. 205).

The deeds of the monastery of S. Maria del Bosco, in turn, contain numerous documents relating to Corleone (province of Palermo). The situation in this town is more complex. Impoverished by the wars against the Saracens, Corleone presented an overall picture of desolation and decay in the second half of the 13th century: many houses were in ruins, and the population was falling. In 1264 the Curia Regia granted to Corrado di Camarana the right to distribute *casalini* to the new inhabitants, mainly immigrants from Northern Italy, to enable them to build houses (*case*) from them (ASP, 1264). The deeds of the monastery thus testify to the process of urban reconstruction by immigrants who acquired the ruined buildings (again described in the documents as *casalini*) to reconvert them into houses, especially in the first decade of the 14th century (ASP, 1268, 1299, 1304, 1305, 1308, 1311). There are at least two striking factors in these transactions. The first concerns the sheer scale of the urban areas in a state of decay in the late 13th century, and affected in the following years by this gradual process of the reconversion of houses (some forty years elapsed between the allocation of the areas and the first commercial speculations). The second concerns the location of the new buildings, which were mainly concentrated in the quarter newly allocated to foreign immigrants: the «contrada Lombardie» (*i.e.* the district of the Lombards). It is precisely in this Lombard quarter that documents dating to the first half of the 14th century attest to «superior» forms of building, such as *case solarate*, *i.e.* houses furnished with a *solaio* (combined ceiling and floor of upper storey), and probably with parts in masonry, mentioned in various deeds of inheritance: it is a sign of the by now stable relation-

ship between particular building types and the social status of the inhabitants (ASP, 1303, 1309, 1316a,b, 1317, 1324). We have no information on the other quarters of Corleone, but it is highly probable that the «Arab» quarter was not involved by a similar process of reconstruction. On the other hand, some deeds relating to Sciacca, a town previously examined, are preserved in the same Tabulario, confirming the presence of buildings in ruins in the *rabato*, the Arab quarter outside the walls, throughout the 13th century: in 1290 a *casalino*, and in 1302 a warehouse with a little house (*casetta*) adjoining, were sold (ASP, 1290, 1302). Evidence of desertion in the peripheral areas of the city can also be found in Marsala. Remains of houses close to the city's walls – which can be dated to the 12th century – were discovered during recent excavations (Valente, 1989). Then the area was abandoned at the beginning of the 13th century and has never been built-up.

In other cases the term *casalino* also seems to indicate an empty space surrounded by walls, annexed to a house as a service area. This different meaning does not however modify the delapidated character of the building; often in fact the annex seems to have consisted of a courtyard converted from the ruins of previous buildings. The multiplication of these courtyards is evident in the documents of the 14th and 15th century. Even though we don't yet have precise data, the references to houses with *casalini* annexed are numerous in the deeds relating to Palermo (Di Giovanni, 1887), Cefalù, Corleone (ASP, 1308, 1311a,b, 1321) and Gangi (ASP, 1410, 1412, 1414). The reutilization of a ruined building as a service area annexed to occupied houses is shown to be a long-term characteristic of Sicilian towns, and one which needs to be further elucidated as far as the medieval period is concerned.

## 9. Building typologies and housing trims

We obtained data about farm-houses from archaeological excavations carried out in Brucato (Pesez, 1974, 1976, 1984; Bresc, 1980). Brucato was a fortified village in the 12th cen-

ture, in decline in the 13th century, and then left owing to a destruction from 1340. Brucato had the characteristics of a large village at the foot of the castle. All of the one-storey houses were built in brickwork, with large stones bound together by clay (Poisson, 1980, p. 80); the floors were made up of tamped earth, and the rooftops were made with round tiles. They are real houses, made to last. Brucato, like the other urban centres of the 14th and 15th centuries, was besides very densely inhabited: houses crowded together, without enough space. The built-up area had an irregular structure: the walls follow the same direction, but they are not precisely adjacent. This is due to a subsequent stratification: houses had been added to the older ones, leaning on the walls of these.

This typology differs from the one we can find in the eastern part of Sicily, where wood is more widely used in house building. Besides the scarcity of wood in the western area of this island (Bresc-Boutier, 1976; Bresc, 1986), traditional building techniques and the housing trim of urban centres did not accept the use of temporary materials in house-building: most farmers lived in semi-urban centres; therefore, they requested permanent residence, constant and definitive as far as possible, though the use of clay instead of mortar destined those houses to certain decay in the medium term. Therefore, in medieval villages an urban housing typology spread out as well as in medium-range cities; the farm-houses did not differ much from the model of Brucato. They are often peripheral quarters, which have taken the place of the former *rabato*, as in Salemi, and have retained the Islamic structure of the built-up area.

Poisson (1980) compared the houses of Brucato to those of an agricultural centre of the 17th century Aliminusa, close to Brucato, finding the same characteristics. The farm-houses in Aliminusa lie in the outskirts, crowded in pairs, with their front on the street-side, having only the ground floor, and built-up with stones bound together by mortar. The only difference, compared to Brucato (which is very interesting) is that the houses of Aliminusa were bound by lime. However, the plan, the arrangement of the rooms – always monocellular – and the function of the houses are the same. A

constant continuity until the 19th century, as the still-existing farm-houses in Sicily's urban centres display today (Valussi, 1968).

## 10. Conclusions

The examination of the settlement dynamics subsequent to the Norman conquest (1060) of Western Sicily (occupation of towns, construction of castles, building of circuits of walls) has underlined a dual process of discrimination against the population of Arab origin: it was reduced to a condition of villeinage and isolated in separate quarters segregated from the Latin-occupied town centres. This process gave rise to an urban typology which is widespread in medieval Sicily: the town divided by ethnic quarters. Subsequently, under the Hohenstaufen (1220-1250), the persecutions and the deportations to which the Moslems were subjected led to the abandonment and decay of the mainly Moslem quarters, as is demonstrated by the case of Palermo. This led in turn to the formation of a nucleus of urban space characterized by a form of building which was «inferior» both in terms of function and status of inhabitants. To this was added a persistence of ruined and abandoned buildings as a normal component of the Sicilian urban landscape. This structure of towns divided into socio-economic quarters along ethnic lines was perpetuated by the creation of a new class of «citizen-villeins» as a result of a wide-ranging process of the disappearance of the open habitat and the concentration of the population in a limited number of urban centres (14th-15th century). These characteristics of the settlement pattern constitute for us an indispensable basis for research on medieval earthquakes in Sicily: they help us both to assess the seismic effects, and to explain the conspicuous «silences» of the sources.

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