



FIG. 1. View of Church and Martyrium of Sta. Lucia, Syracuse (all photos courtesy of Mariarita Sgarlata and Grazia Salvo).

GLENN PEERS

## Finding Faith Underground: Visions of the Forty Martyrs Oratory at Syracuse <sup>1</sup>

ALTHOUGH now integrated into mostly nondescript post-war residential housing, the complex of the martyrdom of Sta. Lucia on the northern outskirts of ancient and medieval Syracuse has a great deal to tell us still about medieval Sicily (Fig. 1). This site is the object of great devotion on the part of Siracusani still, because Lucia is the patron of the city, and her feast day, 13 December, is marked with great celebratory sadness. Her remains are kept in the octagonal martyrdom ascribed to the seventeenth-century master Giovanni Vermexio, and the church communicates with that building by means of an underground passageway (Fig. 2). That join reveals one of the remarkable aspects of Syracuse: its extensive subterranean passages and chambers that comprise a catacomb system second only to Rome. Even though scholars have studied these catacombs, beginning with the great Paolo Orsi in 1916 and 1919, and although Mariarita Sgarlata and Grazia Salvo have continued to do important work here, much remains to be done. The catacombs below Sta. Lucia have rarely been open to the public, but work is being done to change that situation; and they have suffered damage over the centuries that make them rather sad testimonies to an important aspect of the history of Mediterranean culture and religion.<sup>2</sup>

1. This project on medieval Syracuse, of which this article forms a part, began in teaching students from the University of Texas at Austin in that fascinating Sicilian city, and I should like to thank those students who made the experience so memorable. I should also thank Lucia Orti and the staff at the Mediterranean Center for Arts and Sciences, as well as Grazia Salvo and Mariarita Sgarlata, all of whom made Syracuse a happy and stimulating “home”; William Johnson and his family made me realize how important friendship is; to them, warm gratitude. To colleagues who lis-



FIG. 2. Plan of Buildings and Catacombs, Sta. Lucia, Syracuse.

tened and talked about Syracuse, my thanks for their indulgence and advice: Franco de Angelo, Anne-Marie Bouché, Peter Brown, Martin Eisner, Barry Flood, Oleg Grabar, Herbert Kessler, John Osborne, Barbara Roggema, Ramzi Rouighi, and Rabun Taylor. Marica Tucker at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, very kindly helped me with some bibliographic puzzles. Finally, Mariarita Sgarlata and Grazia Salvo allowed me to use their photographs here, and my heartfelt thanks for that—for art historians—ultimate collegial kindness. (Note that abbreviations below conform to the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.)

2. On the Oratory, see M. Sgarlata and G. Salvo, *La catacomba di Santa Lucia e l'Oratorio dei Quarante Martiri* (Syracuse, 2006); *La catacomba di Santa Lucia a Siracusa: Nuove indagini per un progetto di conservazione*, ed. by M. Sgarlata (Syracuse, 2004); M. Falla Castelfranchi, “Pitture ‘iconoclaste’ in Italia meridionale?”



FIG. 3. View of Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, Syracuse.

Among other important aspects of the medieval shrine, an Oratory lies below and near the martyrrium of Sta. Lucia and the church dedicated to her (Fig. 3). Now called the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, it lies in the complex of passages and rooms dug out of limestone, like much of the catacomb system in the area, which began as aqueducts and were enlarged between the third to sixth centuries to accommodate burials for the diverse citizenry of Syracuse. The Oratory was originally a discrete chamber, but in the early modern period this area was enlarged for use as a cistern. It then lost its walls, including the apse, and its use during the Second World War provided the catacombs with no real benefit, unless one counts the electrical wiring. The surviving frescoes are fragmentary, but they do reveal what must have been a powerful, compact ensemble of figural painting: on the side wall, the best preserved passage of the paintings shows six bust-length saints against a neutral background defined by a colonnade swathed with drapery. These figures include local heroes Lucia (Helena is also a possibility, however) (Fig. 4), Marziano—the legendary disciple



FIG. 4. Detail Side Wall, Female Saint (Lucia?), Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, Syracuse.

of Paul and first leader of the Christian community in Syracuse—(Fig. 5), two male figures identifiable perhaps as Ss. Cosmas and Damian, and two male ecclesiastical figures. None of the figures have surviving inscriptions, and so the identifications are not without difficulties (Fig. 6).

On the vault of the Oratory, a rendering of the martyrdom and vision of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste is discernible, although very poorly preserved (Fig. 3), and one has to rely on early twentieth-century drawings for its full interpretation (Fig. 7). In any case, the iconography is still quite clear: the Forty are divided

Con un'appendice sull'oratorio dei Quaranti Martiri nella catacomba di Santa Lucia a Siracusa," in *Bisanzio e l'Occidente: arte, archeologia, storia. Studi in onore di Fernanda de' Maffei*, ed. by C. Barsanti et al. (Rome, 1996), 409–25; T. Velmans, "Le décor de la voûte de l'Oratoire Santa Lucia: Une iconographie rare des Quarante Martyrs," in *La Sicilia rupestre nel contesto delle civiltà*

*mediterraneae*, ed. by C. D. Fonseca (Galatina, 1986), 341–54; G. Agnello, *Le arti figurative nella Sicilia bizantina* (Palermo, 1962), 162–9; *idem*, *L'architettura bizantina in Sicilia—Sicilia bizantina*, vol. 2 (Florence, 1952), 180–92; and P. Orsi. "Siracusa: La catacomba di S. Lucia. Esplorazioni negli anni 1916–1919," *NS* ser. 5, 15 (1918), 282–5.





FIG. 5. Detail, Side Wall, Male Saint (Marziano?), Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, Syracuse.



FIG. 6. Detail, Side Wall, Male Saint (Cosmas?), Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, Syracuse.

into four groups according to the quadrants created by an elaborately decorated cross.<sup>3</sup> The Forty are shown nude with water to their waists, and crowns descend from above to mark their achievement. The episode of the bath attendant, who takes the place of the turncoat fortieth, is shown in the southwest corner of the cross. Typically, the mother who adds her still-living son to the martyred group is missing. An unusual element was added, however: an unidentified writing figure in the northwest corner of the vault, who is in the act of writing. The spine of the cross runs east-west, from entrance to apse—the dimensions of the Oratory

are modest, the vault measuring 4.3 m × 2 m—and the lateral arm bisects the vault on a north-south axis (Fig. 8). At the center of the cross is a medallion containing Christ, while at the lateral ends are two archangels; the orans Virgin Mary occupies a medallion at the base of the cross. Unfortunately, if a medallion was depicted at the top of the cross at the east end of the Oratory, the evidence is lost, just as the north wall was demolished for the creation of cisterns, with no record being made.

The program, then, is fragmentary, and its fragments resist clarity in all their details. Likewise, the situation in which we find the Oratory is historically

3. On the iconography of the Forty, see T. Velmans, "Une icône au Musée de Mestia et le thème des Quarante martyrs en Géorgie," *Zograf* 14 (1983), 40–51; Z. Gavrilovic, "The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste in the Painted Programme of Zica Vestibule: Further Research into the Artistic Interpretations of the Divine Wisdom-Baptism-Kingship Ideology," *JÖB* 32/5 (1982), 185–93; G. P. Schiemenz, "Wunderkraft gegen kämpfende Widersacher," *EEBS* 44 (1979–80), 165–221; D. T. Rice, "Ivory of the Forty Martyrs at

Berlin and the Art of the Twelfth Century," in *Mélanges Georges Ostrogorsky*, ed. by F. Barisic, 2 vols. (Belgrade, 1963), 1:275–9; O. Demus, "An Unknown Mosaic Icon of the Palaiologan Epoch," *ByzMetabyz* 1 (1946), 107–18 [= Demus, *Studies in Byzantium, Venice and the West*, 2 vols., ed. by I. Hutter (London, 1998), 1:164–72.]; and *idem*, "Two Palaeologan Mosaics Icons in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection," *DOP* 14 (1960), 87–119 [= Demus, *Studies in Byzantium*, 1:192–222].

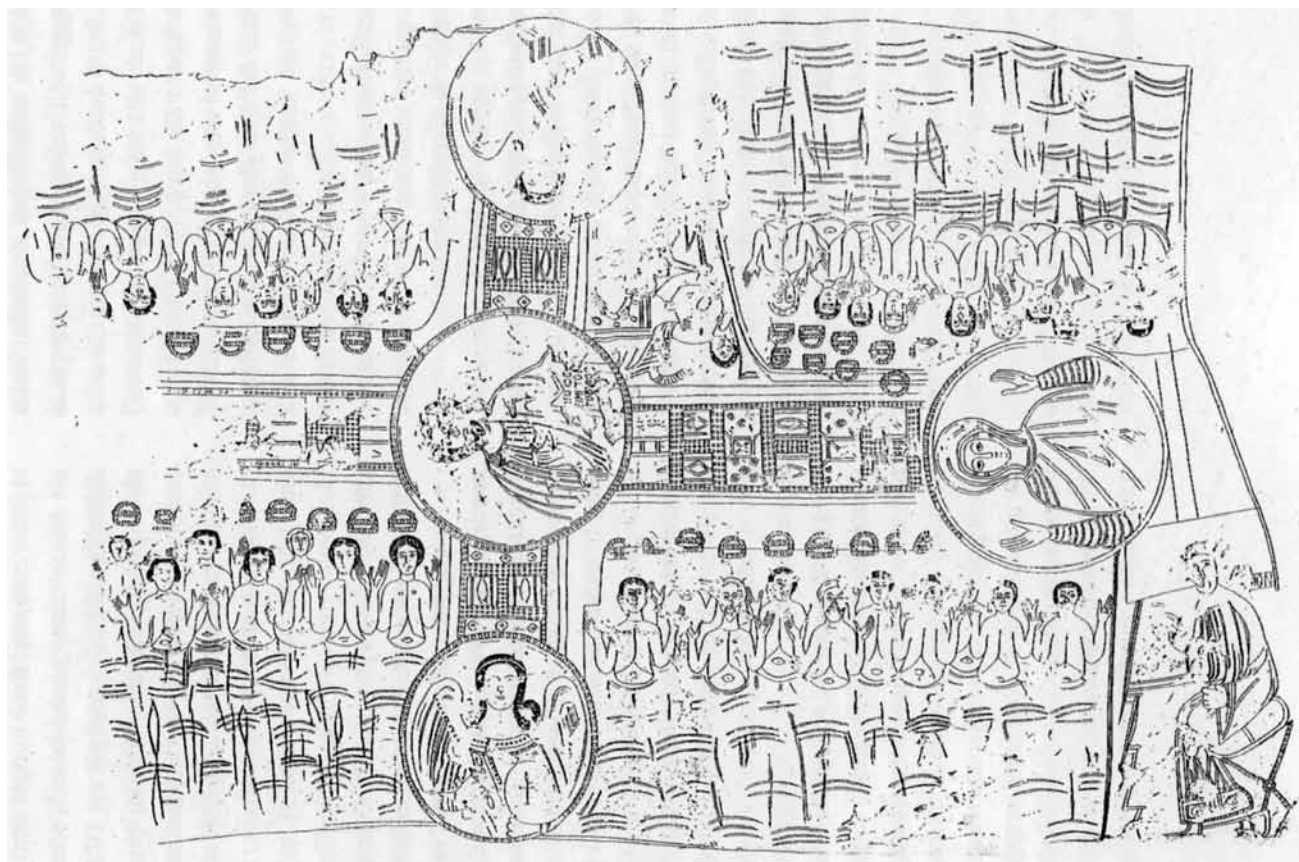


FIG. 7. Drawing of Vault, Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, Syracuse.

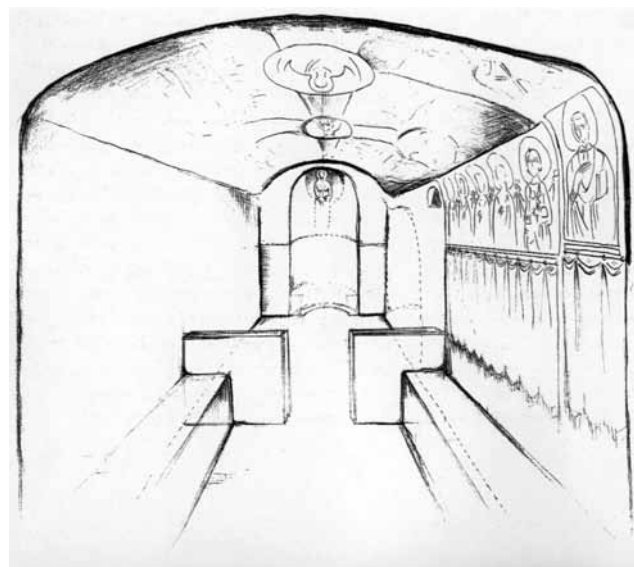


FIG. 8. Reconstruction of Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, Syracuse.

difficult. We assume a shrine for Lucia existed from an early date, and Gregory the Great (r. 590–604) mentioned a monastery at this location in the late sixth century,<sup>4</sup> but the archaeological record for that complex or any other from before the twelfth century, when the monastery was rebuilt along the general lines visible today, is meager indeed. Such difficulties only increase the attraction for some scholars, and, beside the work already mentioned by Orsi and a recent book co-written by Sgarlata and Salvo, Marina Falla Castelfranchi and Tania Velmans have published studies on the Oratory in 1996 and 1986, respectively. All of these scholars have interpreted the Forty and the six saints

4. See G. Salvo, "Monachesimo e monasteri siracusani nel VI secolo" in *Di abitato in abitato: 'In itinere' fra le più antiche testimonianze cristiane degli Iblei*, ed. by F. P. Rizzo (Pisa and Rome, 2005), 117–33.

in the context of Byzantine monastic art, and they have rightly situated the program within a particularly Sicilian context that bridged monastic and religious trends in both Constantinople and Rome.

Despite the state of preservation of the Oratory frescoes, I should like to offer a different interpretation of the program, one that does not deny the importance of the bridge between those two centers, but that directs the focus of its interpretative analysis to larger issues of the Mediterranean in the early Middle Ages: that of Christian self-definition and survival in a region either under threat of absorption into the Islamic *ummah* or already within it. My argument, in other words, takes issue with seemingly natural dating of this monument—and many others like it—to the period before the Islamic conquest of Sicily, which began in 828, and specifically of Syracuse, with its defeat after a long, bitter siege in 878. In spite of the condition of the frescoes, I shall offer an argument for dating them within the range of the ninth to eleventh centuries, and consequently for situating them in a different cultural context, when Muslims were a threat or dominant. The program survives to the degree that one can argue for a necessary presentation of self-image on the part of Greek Christians in early medieval Syracuse, in which they were able to look beyond in ways that provided comfort and resolve: the Oratory revealed to that community its historical claims to covenant, its reward for self-sacrificing faith, and its promise of deliverance in the theophany overhead and so near.

### *Early Medieval Christian Painting on Southeastern Sicily*

Dating of painting in this period is notoriously difficult, if the proof is style<sup>5</sup>—witness the sliding chronologies in Cappadocian painting in work of the last de-

cade or so.<sup>6</sup> Absolute proof in such a matter is likely out of reach, but connections among Syracusan painting, painting in the southeastern corner of Sicily and southern Italy generally, and in Rome, make a case for associating the Oratory frescoes with ninth- to eleventh-century programs, and, thus, for establishing another cultural milieu in which the paintings need to be situated.

The dating of the Oratory has rested on an assumption that Christian art was not produced during the period from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, when Sicily was ruled from Ifrīqiyā rather than Constantinople. The argument for a dating of the frescoes from the late seventh, eighth, or early ninth centuries, which has been offered so far exclusively, rests on the presumption that Syracuse was following the trend of devotion to the Forty Martyrs shown most vividly now in the frescoes of the seventh and eighth centuries in the Oratory of the church of Sta. Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum. Stylistically, the frescoes appear unrelated, and the iconographic similarities are slight, given the disposition of the martyrs in quadrants on the Oratory ceiling and the three scenes of martyrdom and reward on the walls of the vestibule at Sta. Maria Antiqua. Castelfranchi also adduced the small “chapel” at the church of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura in Rome, which has traditionally been dated to the eighth century, but John Osborne has established that that fresco program dates to the twelfth century.<sup>7</sup> Other elements in the Oratory give some good possibility of a late ninth- to tenth-century dating: the swags of drapery between the pillars, serving as honorific backdrops to the row of saints, were revived in the post-iconoclastic period in Byzantium, and the “pearled” haloes do not appear in Rome and in Byzantium until about the tenth century.<sup>8</sup> And yet the Roman overtones of the series of saints on the lower part of the wall seem

5. But also building materials, for which see E. Pezzini, “Alcuni dati sull’uso della terra nell’architettura medievale a Palermo: Fonti documentarie e testimonianze materiali,” in *III Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale. Castello di Salerno, Complesso di Santa Sofia. Salerno, 2–5 ottobre 2003*, 2 vols., ed. by R. Fiorillo and P. Peduto (Florence, 2003), 11:624–8.

6. See, for example, H. Wiemer-Enis, *Spätbyzantinische Wandmalerei in den Höhlenkirchen in der Türkei* (Petersburg, 2000), and

N. Thierry, “De la datation des églises de Cappadoce,” *BZ* 88 (1995), 419–55.

7. J. Osborne, “Dating Medieval Mural Paintings in Rome: A Case Study from San Lorenzo fuori le mura,” in *Roma felix: Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, ed. by É. Ó Carragáin and C. L. Neuman de Vegvar (Aldershot, 2007), 191–206.

8. See, for example, A. Cutler and J.-M. Spieser, *Byzance médiévale: 700–1204* (Paris, 1996), 24, 132, 137, 201.

clear, too, and parallel passages like that found in the temple of Fortuna Virilis / Sta. Maria Egiziaca in Rome, painted in the 870s.<sup>9</sup>

For establishing not only a date for the Syracusan Oratory, but also for providing a wider cultural context, those monuments in Rome are key. Christian art *was* produced when Sicily was Muslim, and the region of southeastern Sicily offers vital information for the art-historical context. Near Syracuse, the honey-combed-flanks of the ravines at Pantalica reveal a great deal of evidence of habitation and decorated shrines.<sup>10</sup> This area is a rich nature reserve with great quantities of water, but despite these natural resources, Pantalica was settled only in the Late Bronze Age, up to the period of Greek colonization in the seventh century B.C.E., and in the early Middle Ages, from the seventh and into the twelfth century. These medieval settlers took over some of the rock-cut habitations from the prehistoric period, as well as decorating some of the rock-cut chapels with frescoes, some of which survive in very poor condition. For that reason, these frescoes are hard to date, but there is no reason to deny them a date after the ninth century. The shrines are Greek: the inscriptions are in Greek, even if they are not quite legible. The style of the painting is consistent with a date of the ninth to the eleventh centuries. Whether the rock-cut chapel of S. Nicolicchio was freshly dug in the Middle Ages is difficult to say, and the archaeology performed by Paolo Orsi in the late nineteenth century in the area is not very useful in that regard. But the documentary evidence shows that settlement in the area dates between 1093–1151, and one coin

hoard dates to the second half of the seventh century. Clues such as the pearled halo of the saint from the rock-cut chapel of S. Micidiario at Pantalica and of the saints in the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs allow a hypothesis that these paintings were done between the ninth and eleventh centuries.<sup>11</sup>

A cave church, S. Nicolò Inferiore, in the town of Modica, about 100 kms from Syracuse, is a vivid example of the discoveries made on Sicily.<sup>12</sup> Examples from southeastern Sicily fill out a picture of art production in the Early Middle Ages that otherwise appears largely blank. In the early 1990s, some boys were playing soccer and kicked the ball against the wall of what was a storage shed. Bits of plaster came away from the wall and revealed some painted fresco underneath; a restoration campaign was mounted and this chapel was found, a chapel that seems to have had a very long life. The rock-carved chapel has a synthronon in the apse, which suggests an early date for its founding, perhaps the sixth century, and the frescoes themselves reveal a long use of the space, apparently into the early modern period. The earliest layer of fresco, still visible in the vault and peeking through other layers on the apse wall, reveals an Ascension scene with Christ seated on a rainbow arc and borne aloft by angels. A Virgin and Child composition, or an orans Virgin, was likely in the lower apse. Stylistically and iconographically, the scene of the Ascension has its closest parallels in the wall paintings found in rock-cut churches in Cappadocia. According to a recent argument by Castelfranchi, this lowest stratum belongs to the same period to which the paintings in

9. S. Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Peintures médiévales dans le temple dit de la Fortune virile a Rome* (Brussels, 1959).

10. See E. Blake, "The Familiar Honeycomb: Byzantine Era Reuse of Sicily's Prehistoric Rock-Cut Tombs," in *Archaeologies of Memory*, ed. by R. M. van Dyke and S. E. Alcock (Malden, Mass., 2003), 203–20, as well as A. Messina, *Le chiese rupestri del Siracusano* (Palermo, 1979), and G. Agnello, *L'architettura bizantina in Sicilia* (Sicilia bizantina, vol. 2), (Florence, 1952).

11. Examples from southern Italy show connections with Sicily, and Marina Falla Castelfranchi has recently published a fresco from Naples, the *hypogeum* of Sant'Aspremo. See her "La pittura bizantina in Italia meridionale e in Sicilia (secoli IX–XI)," in *Histoire et Culture dans l'Italie Byzantine. Acquis et nouvelles recherches*,

ed. by A. Jacobi, J.-M. Martin and G. Noyé (Rome, 2006), 216–8. The fresco is damaged, but it shows a gemmed cross with figures in the quadrants created on the vault by the cross; and the swags of drapery, too, show incidental parallels with the details of the Syracusan program. The date for this fresco appears to be the second half of the tenth century.

12. Falla Castelfranchi, "La pittura bizantina in Italia meridionale e in Sicilia" (as in note 11), 215, *eadem*, "La decorazione pittorica bizantina della cripta detta di San Nicolò Inferiore a Modica (RG): Una testimonianza significativa d'epoca araba," in *Studi in memoria di Patrizia Angiolini Martinelli*, ed. S. Pasi (Bologna 2005), 155–63, and G. Di Stefano, *La chiesetta rupestre di San Nicolò inferiore a Modica* (Ragusa, 2005).



Cappadocia are normally dated, that is, the tenth or eleventh century. The Ascension with orans Virgin below from the eleventh-century frescoes in Karanlık Kilise, Göreme, is a telling comparison for showing the points of contact between Cappadocian and Sicilian programs in this period.<sup>13</sup>

One can make a case, then, for the production of good quality painting from the ninth to the eleventh centuries in the south of Italy, not only in the Christian part of the peninsula, but also in the Muslim-controlled areas of Sicily. Monuments in Rome, Syria, Constantinople, and Cappadocia share features, stylistic and iconographic, with the Oratory in Syracuse, but none match it in every detail.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, painters and their workshops traveled across borders, just as hagiographies from the period tell us saints did, too.<sup>15</sup>

13. On common practices and common interest in caves as sanctuaries, see A. Wharton Epstein, "The Problem of Provincialism: Byzantine Monasteries in Cappadocia and Monks in South Italy," *JWarb* 42 (1979), 28–46. On the importance of cave churches in Eastern Christian practice, see S. Curcic, "Cave and Church: An Eastern Christian Hierotopical Synthesis," in *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. by A. Lidov (Moscow, 2006), 216–36. Connections between Syria and Sicily were also strong in the period preceding the Muslim conquests. See L. Cracco Ruggini, "La Sicilia fra Roma e Bisanzio," in *Storia della Sicilia*, 10 vols. (Naples, 1977–81), 111:38. At the church of Mar Musa al-Habashi, near Damascus, Mat Immerzeel has discerned a version of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste at the earliest level of the fresco program, dating 1058–88. See M. Immerzeel, "Some Remarks about the Name of the Monastery and an Enigmatic Scene," *Journal of Eastern Christian Art* 4 (2007), 125–30, and *idem*, "Monasteries and Churches of the Qalamun (Syria): Art and Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages," forthcoming in *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 7 (2007).

14. Devotion to the Forty Martyrs began very early in Cappadocia, in the early fourth century, and frescoes depict their martyrdom in churches in that region, naturally. For example, in a two-naved church dedicated to them near Sahinenfendi (1216–7), in the north nave, the Forty are shown on the vault and west tympanum. While at Hagios Basilios at Göreme (tenth century), a vivid cross in glory is in the vault, but no figuration. See C. Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce médiévale: images et spiritualité* (Paris, 2001), 336–7, and 65, respectively. The motifs at Syracuse were combined in a highly unusual manner.

15. See C. Morrison, "La Sicilie byzantine: Une lueur dans les siècles obscurs," *Numismatica e antichità classica* 27 (1998), 307–34.

16. See *Vita di sant'Elia il Giovane*, ed. by G. Rossi Taibbi

The hagiography of Elias the Younger (823–903) is a remarkable text in many ways, not least for what it reveals about the peripatetic quality of the monastic life possible for some men.<sup>16</sup> People and culture moved around the Mediterranean, of course, and the shared experience and common beliefs of Greek-speaking Christians in the east and central Mediterranean, and maybe also of Christians generally within or near Muslim-dominated regions, aided that movement.<sup>17</sup> And precious evidence does exist from Syracuse itself for building and decoration, in the form of inscriptions on marble architectural fragments that date from the tenth century. Two inscriptions, now in the Museo Bellomo, Syracuse, are evidence of decoration of churches in the city during a period when Christian patronage has been said to be moribund.<sup>18</sup> Naturally,

(Palermo, 1962), as well as S. Efthymiades, "Chrétien et Sarraïns en Italie méridionale et en Asie Mineure (IX<sup>e</sup>–X<sup>e</sup> siècle). Essai d'étude comparée," in *Histoire et Culture dans l'Italie Byzantine. Acquis et nouvelles recherches*, ed. by A. Jacob, J.-M. Martin and G. Noyé (Rome, 2006), 600–2; G. Da Costa-Louillet, "Saints de Sicilie et d'Italie méridionale aux VIII<sup>e</sup>, IX<sup>e</sup> et X<sup>e</sup> siècles," *Byzantion* 29–30 (1959–60), 95–109; and M. Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia*, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (Catania, 1933–39), 1:654–61. See for the earlier period, F. P. Rizzo, "Fulgenzio a Siracusa," in *Studi di filologica classica in onore di Giusto Monaco*, 4 vols. (Palermo, 1991), IV:1473–82.

17. On the necessity of travel for Muslims in Sicily, see W. Granara, "Islamic Education and the Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Sicily," in *Law and Education in Medieval Islam: Studies in Memory of George Makdisi*, ed. by J. E. Lowry, D. J. Stewart, and S. M. Toorawa (London, 2004), 150–73, and, more broadly, M. McCormick, *Origins of European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001), 510–5. Intellectual exchange between Christians and Muslims in Sicily was not only likely, but the further exchange with centers in the eastern Mediterranean was also surely a possibility. For example, see A. Ahmad, *A History of Islamic Sicily*, Islamic Surveys, Vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1975), 41–7. The fact that Nilus of Calabria read John of Damascus may be more likely due to Sicilian contacts with the Holy Land than with Constantinople; see *Vios kai politeia tou hosiou patros emon Neilou tou Neo*, ed. by P. Germano Giovanelli (Grottaferata, 1972), 71 (23), as well as V. von Falkenhausen, "La vita di S. Nilo come fonte storica per la Calabria bizantina," in *Atti del congresso internazionale su S. Nilo di Rossano* (Rossano and Grottaferata, 1989), 295.

18. A. Guillou, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques médiévales d'Italie* (Rome, 1996), 231–3. Eleventh-century inscriptions from Kairouan reveal Christian presence and activities there, too; see



these inscriptions belonged inside churches, typical of the prohibition on new church building and public declarations of Christianity in *dhimmitude*.

No evidence exists, to my knowledge, that shows the persecution or oppression of Christians in Syracuse or in the general area after the Muslim conquest. Although the fall of the city was memorably terrible, the prisoners taken in 878 were ransomed and returned to the city within several years, so resources were still available to some of the Christians left in the city and the surrounding area, it would seem.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the break may not have been so cataclysmic when the government changed in 878, and the transition to an economic network based in the Maghrib and Egypt was apparently not difficult, according to historians.<sup>20</sup> However, the end of Muslim rule was by no means a peaceful transition, and the instability of the Norman conquest makes it unlikely that conditions were right for commissioning art.<sup>21</sup> One has to fit the Oratory into a Muslim-dominated milieu where the resources, opportunity, and need to decorate a Christian chapel at a locally venerated shrine existed. Before I proceed to make an argument for what the program means in such a milieu, I wish to address briefly the historiography of Muslim Sicily for the light it sheds on why we understand Muslim Syracuse as we do.

### *History and Islamic Sicily*

The historical trajectory of the understanding of Muslim Sicily has been subject to the same currents of ethnic, religious, and political engagement that have affected every humanistic discipline.<sup>22</sup> This is especially evident in the silences around the centuries of Muslim rule in and around Syracuse.

In the late eighteenth century, Islam's history in Sicily was little understood and was only beginning to be of interest. In the 1780s, a priest, Giuseppe Vella, published a series of studies claiming to be based on manuscripts he had found containing correspondence among Count Robert Guiscard, of Apulia and Calabria, Count Roger I of Sicily, and the Fatimid caliph, al-Mustansir, in Cairo.<sup>23</sup> By 1792, six volumes had appeared, financed and patronized by the King and papal representatives. The studies were scholarly bestsellers, immensely popular amongst patriotic Sicilians, who wanted to see a prestigious history of the island made better known. While the books struck a responsive chord among patriots, they were based on simple forgeries devised by the priest. He was arrested in 1793, but shortly after released to his order, and he continued to forge nonetheless.

A. Mahjoubi, "Nouveau témoignage épigraphique sur la communauté chrétienne de Kairouan au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Africa* 1 (1966), 85–103.

19. See the *Cambridge Chronicle*, G. Cozza-Luzi, *La cronaca siculo-saraceni di Cambridge con doppio testo Greco scoperto in codici contemporanei delle biblioteche Vaticane e Parigina* (Palermo, 1890), 34; *Biblioteca arabo-sicula*, trans. by M. Amari, 2 vols. (Turin and Rome, 1880), 1:279; and Vasiliev, *Byz. Arabes*, 11/2:100; as well as M. Talbi, *L'émirat aghlabide (184–296/800–909): Histoire politique* (Paris, 1966), 485–9; and Amari, *Storia* (as in note 16), 1:551.

20. See C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), 737–8, and McCormick, *Origins of European Economy* (as in note 17), 508–15.

21. See A. L. Udovitch, "New Materials for the History of Islamic Sicily," in *Del nuovo sulla Sicilia musulmana (Roma, 3 maggio 1993)* (Rome, 1995), 193. From a letter written by a refugee, who fled from Sicily to Fustat ca. 1060: "Indeed God did well to you, since nothing good remains in Sicily ... Let me now begin to describe to you the civil strife that has occurred in Sicily. We saw

something I would not wish to see (again) at all; there was such bloodshed that we were walking on corpses as one would walk on the ground. There also was a tremendous plague." Trans. by M. Gil, "The Jews in Sicily under Muslim Rule, in the Light of the Geniza Documents," in *Italia Judaica* (Rome, 1983), 87–134, text 107–11, here 110.

22. On these issues, see R. M. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (Durham-London, 2007), 172–217; K. Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100–1250: A Literary History* (Philadelphia, 2005); *eadem*, "Translating Sicily," *Medieval Encounters* 9 (2003), 140–63; and A. Nef, "Jalons pour de nouvelles interrogations sur l'histoire de la Sicilie islamique," *MEFRM* 116 (2004), 7–17. See also J. Johns, "Arabic Sources for Sicily," in *Byzantine and Crusaders in Non-Greek Sources. 1025–1204*, *ProcBrAc*, Vol. 132, ed. by M. Whitby (Oxford, 2007), 341–60. For the comparable situation in the history and historiography of Spain, see A. Christys, *Christians in al-Andalus (711–1000)* (Richmond, Surrey, 2002).

23. See Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily* (as in note 22), 17–8, and R. Gottheil, "Two Forged Antiquities," *JAOS* 33 (1913), 306–12.

That scandal did bring about more energetic study of Muslim Sicily, and for reasons that appear to have had particular resonance for those who wished to relive eras when Sicilians ruled Sicily, or when it knew glory and fame. The great scholar of Muslim Sicily, Michele Amari (1806–89), began his career as such an historian, when he wrote his account of the Sicilian Vespers, the popular uprising against Angevin domination of 30 March 1282. He wrote the book as a thinly veiled attack on Bourbon rule; it did pass the censors, but when he was called to court to explain, he went into exile in Paris. That episode has interest because it shows the nationalistic underpinnings of his work, especially in contradistinction to the French biases evident in the history of the Vespers by Adolphe Noël de Vergers (1805–67); exile also provided Amari the opportunity to begin his training as an Arabist, which is the basis of his longstanding scholarly fame.<sup>24</sup>

More than anyone else, Amari put the study of Muslim Sicily on firm ground—and by extension Christians' relations to it. His identification of what was and was not Muslim is of the first importance, as before his multi-volume work on the history of Muslims in Sicily appeared, monuments like La Zisa, which we now know to be Norman, were believed to be from the period of Muslim dominion over Sicily. The building's inscriptions, for instance, needed the penetrating reading of a gifted scholar like Amari; before that, they were largely opaque. Amari radically remade visions of the past. Up to that point, Sicilians could proudly see buildings like La Zisa as evidence of a rich heritage, with a more progressive view of Islam to Christianity. But after him, they had to take account of the relative emptiness of the period preceding the Normans.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, as traces of Islam were recognized and absorbed, they were read in ways appropriate to

the dominant culture. Amari's project began as patriotic scholarship, since he was early in his life a fierce proponent of Sicilian independence. As his scholarship developed in Paris and elsewhere, his political views also developed to the point that he is now considered a great champion of Italian unity. That trajectory leading from Sicilian independence to Italian nationalism was conditioned, one can argue, by his growing understanding of the experiment in diversity and co-existence of Norman Sicily. Reclaiming the memory of that Norman experiment and re-writing the previous memory of an Islamic Sicily was the great work of Amari, but for the most part those memories cancelled other memories, some admittedly false, a great material culture of Muslim Sicily. The nature of that canceling was in part the doing of that great scholar, but the real canceling of Muslim relics had been performed many times over and in the distant past.

### *Muslim Syracuse*

We are confronted in Sicily with a loss of a memory that has been discovered only in the last century and a half. That loss is poignant in the early twenty-first century, when a desire to find a world where Islam, Christianity, and Judaism could co-exist (and very well indeed in medieval terms) is intense. The precariousness of that co-existence is vivid, and reclaiming an imagined world of relative harmony is of great importance.<sup>26</sup> In and around Palermo, we see those traces of a memory of Islam, naturalized to a Christian kingdom, and they are extraordinary. In other places, real silence prevails. In Syracuse, the ghosts of Islam prevail unrecognized, except in the longing voice of the great exiled poet, Ibn Hamdīs (1056–1133), from the nearby ghost town of Noto.<sup>27</sup> In the city and region,

24. As well as her studies above, see also K. Mallette, "Orientalism and the Nineteenth-Century Nationalist: Michele Amari, Ernest Renan, and 1848," *Romanic Review* 96 (2005), 233–52.

25. A point made by Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (as in note 22).

26. The recent fiction of Barry Unsworth, *The Ruby in Her Navel: A Novel of Love and Intrigue set in the Twelfth Century* (2006) and Tariq Ali, *A Sultan in Palermo* (2005) is an indication of the attraction that precious—and doomed—equilibrium has for us.

27. Ibn Hamdis' poetry of nostalgia evokes the pain of loss of Muslims when Sicily was lost to the Normans. Ibn Hamdis paints a landscape in which Greek monks strike the plank to call the faithful and in which Christian sounds were then heard, not those of the true faith. For these poems, see *Diwan Ibn Hamdis*, ed. by I. 'Abbas (Beirut, 1960), 274–6, trans. by Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily* (as in note 22), 134–7. S. Sperl, in "Crossing Enemy Boundaries: al-Buhturi's Ode on the Ruins of Ctesiphon Re-read in the Light of Virgil and Wilfred Owen," *BSAOS* 69 (2006), 365–79, describes

real forgetting happened, intentionally on the part of the later Christians, and additionally through the great destructive force of the earthquake that shook the southeast corner of the island in January 1693. The old neighborhoods of Ortygia give a sense of medieval patterns of living and interacting, but except for some street names, they are not forthcoming about the different inhabitants the city once housed. Signs of a multi-faith past *are* visible, but we need to look at these little-known monuments with eyes a little less dazzled by the Norman achievement and give back some of the credit that Amari took from the Muslim and Greek-Christian inhabitants of the area.<sup>28</sup>

Evidence of absorption and transformation certainly exists in Syracuse. The façade of the Duomo reveals its post-earthquake identity without any hedging, and the heterogeneity of the rest of building, maybe the best thing one can say about the Duomo, is likewise clear and highly compelling. The Doric temple of the early fifth-century B.C.E. emerges from the walls on the north side of the Duomo, but the date of the transformation is not clear. It appears that by the late sixth century the Bishop had moved from Sta. Lucia on the mainland to this converted building.<sup>29</sup> This move implies that the building had been left empty until its conversion in the sixth century. The building was ab-

sorbed into the Christian cityscape long after it had been neutralized. This pattern is typical throughout the Mediterranean not only for conversion of temples, but also for retrenched settlement, where raids from the sea made retreat to easily defensible positions necessary.<sup>30</sup> Siracusani mainly lived within Ortygia by the sixth to seventh century, and the Duomo was in active use when Muslims finally gained control of the city on 21 May 878. The great loot from the city and its churches was widely reported.

Mystery surrounds Muslim Syracuse. In the absence of any evidence, everyone assumes that the new rulers altered the Duomo to function as a mosque.<sup>31</sup> No traces remain, naturally, as the Normans, who took the city in October 1086, renovated the Duomo by adding a new roof and mosaic decoration (all of which is lost). No other likely candidates for the city's Friday mosque have been found or offered. It must be noted, too, that Normans did more than suppress evidence of Muslim power at Syracuse. They also altered the east end of the Duomo to make distinct chapels to either side of the sanctuary, and this new arrangement fundamentally altered the liturgical function of the east part of the church from the Greek usage, which had been the dominant form at the city from at least the sixth century and presumably through the Muslim pe-

---

the self-knowledge that comes from empathy for one's adversaries, a process which has meaning in this context, too.

28. On the history of medieval Greek Sicily, see V. Von Falkenhausen, "La presenza dei greci nella Sicilia normanna: L'apporto della documentazione archivistica in lingua greca," in *Byzantino-Sicula IV: Atti del I congresso internazionale di archeologia della Sicilia bizantina* (Corelone, 28 luglio–2 agosto 1998), ed. by R. M. Carra Bonacasa (Palermo, 2002), 31–72; *eadem*, "Il monachesimo greco in Sicilia," in *La Sicilia rupestre nel contesto delle civiltà mediterranee*, ed. by C. D. Fonseca (Galatina, 1986), 135–74; and *eadem*, "La lingua greca nella Sicilia medievale," *CorsiRav* 27 (1980), 55–8; but also J. Irigoin, "Viri divites et eruditi omni doctrina, graeca quoque et latina," *Kokalos* 43–44 (1997–98), 139–51; D. J. Geanakoplos, "The Greek Population of South Italy and Sicily and its Attitudes toward Charles of Anjou and Michael Palaeologus before and during the Early Phase of the Sicilian Vespers (1282)," in *Constantinople and the West: Essays on the Late Byzantine (Palaeologan) and Italian Renaissances and the Byzantine and Roman Churches* (Madison, 1989), 189–94; J. M. Powell, "Friedrich II's Knowledge of Greek," *Speculum* 38 (1963), 481–2; R.

Weiss, "The Greek Culture of South Italy in the Later Middle Ages," *ProcBrAc* 37 (1951), 25–50; and C. H. Haskins, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), 155–93.

29. See S. Giglio, *Sicilia bizantina: L'architettura religiosa in Sicilia dalla tarda antichità all'anno mille* (Catania, 2003), 107–11; T. W. Lyman, "Syracuse after Antiquity," in *Syracuse, the Fairest Greek City. Ancient Art from the Museo Archeologico Regionale 'Paolo Orsi'*, ed. by B. D. Wescoat (Rome and Atlanta, 1989), 49–51; P. Magnano, *La cattedrale di Siracusa* (Syracuse, 1990); S. L. Agnello, "Chiese siracusane del VI secolo," *Archivio Storico Siracusano* 5 (1978–79), 115–36 [= *CorsiRav* 27 (1980), 13–26]; A. Agnello, *Siracusa nel medioevo e nel rinascimento* (Caltanissetta-Rome, 1964), 13; and G. Agnello, *L'architettura bizantina in Sicilia* (as in note 2), 35–77.

30. N. Christie, *From Constantine to Charlemagne: An Archaeology of Italy A.D. 300–800* (Aldershot, 2006), 44, 93, 132.

31. On relations between church and mosque buildings, see P. Wheatley, *The Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands Seventh through Tenth Centuries* (Chicago, 2001), 232–3.

riod.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Normans revised the building from mosque *and* from Greek-rite church when they re-made it at the end of the eleventh century.

That medieval Greek memory is almost lost, just as one could say that the silence of Islam at Syracuse is nearly total—I say nearly because, for example, one Arabic graffito was found during the cleansing program that led to the creation of the precinct for the Temple of Apollo at the north end of Ortygia before and after the Second World War.<sup>33</sup> Of course, this precinct reflects attitudes about the right kind of memory that a culture should have, and the proper kind is that pure moment of early Doric, when the Syracusans may well have built the first temple of this magnitude. That is a significant claim, but sacrificed to it were the tenements that had grown up, one presumes, in the course of the later Middle Ages. This after-growth saw an Arabic-speaking presence, for on the north-facing wall of the cella was found the graffito in Arabic with one word in the second line decipherable, Muhammad. This evidence is tenuous, but some have hypothesized that this building, converted to a church, too, before the ninth century, was another mosque in operation sometime between the late ninth and late eleventh centuries. Despite plans like this one that show a hypothetical use as a mosque, that use has left no discernible trace, as the building became a Norman church in the twelfth century, and, like the Duomo, its identity as mosque was erased. Moreover, if the graffito was difficult to decipher in the late 1940s, it is entirely invisible now.

### *Community in Muslim Syracuse:*

The difficulty posed by the archaeology of Syracuse is not unusual for Muslim Sicily, although discoveries are being made, for example, the foundations of a mosque at Segesta in the west.<sup>34</sup> And yet these traces are disappointingly slight. At Syracuse, a stele now in the Museo Bellomo, but found near Sta. Lucia, shows that a community of Muslims was not an abstract notion for Christians focusing devotion on that martyrdom.<sup>35</sup> And a twelfth-century document made it evident, too, that a Jewish community sought burial ground nearby and had to pay compensation to the Monastery of Sta. Lucia there.<sup>36</sup> Although we can catch only a dim glimpse of it, the landscape of Sta. Lucia included Jews and Muslims both. The sources for the period are not a great deal more extensive than the archaeological record, and this relative void is one of the serious obstacles that any scholar of the period—from Amari on—confronts.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Muslim culture in Sicily, before the Normans, has left few reminders, and we cannot simply assume that the transformed cultures of the Norman kingdom reflected continuity. Jeremy Johns has demonstrated the break in administrative practice that occurred in the decades between 1111–30, and this gap in the use of Arabic must also have had consequences for cultural production.<sup>38</sup> In this way, the Islamic splendor of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo was not the result of a natural absorption of Aghlabid culture, but a conscious rejection of it in

32. Giglio, *Sicilia bizantina* (as in note 29), 107–11.

33. A. Messina, “Sicilia medievale: I. Le chiese rupestri di Cava d’Ispica (Ragusa); II. Resti di una moschea nell’area dell’Apollonion di Siracusa,” in *Scavi medievali in Italia* (Rome, 1995), 92–4; G. M. Agnello, “Epigrafi arabiche a Siracusa: Nota bibliografica,” *Archivio Storico Siracusano* 5 (1978–79), 222–36; and G. Cultrera, “L’Apollonion-Artemision di Ortigia in Siracusa,” *Monumenti Antichi* 41 (1951), 724.

34. See *L’arte siculo-normanna: La cultura islamica nella Sicilia medievale* (Palermo, 2007), 213–5. For a general overview, see F. Ardizzone, “Sicilia: epoca islamica,” in *Enciclopedia dell’arte medievale*, 12 vols. (Rome, 1991–2002), x:594–8.

35. Agnello, “Epigrafi arabiche a Siracusa” (as in note 33), 225, Pl. xvi/2.

36. J. Wansbrough, “A Judaeo-Arabic Document from Sicily,” *BSAOS* 30 (1967), 305–13. See, also, N. Golb, “A Judaeo-Arabic Court Document of Syracuse, A.D. 1020,” *JNES* 32 (1973), 105–23, for the unusual Syracusan tradition of swearing oaths on an open Torah and also reciting the Ten Commandments. The Jewish minority in Syracuse through the Middle Ages, until their expulsion in 1493, is an important, nearly invisible undercurrent in the cultural history of the city and region. See, generally, A. Scandaliato and N. Mulè, *La sinagoga e il bagno rituale degli ebrei di Siracusa* (Florence, 2002).

37. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (as in note 22).

38. J. Johns, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Diwan* (Cambridge, 2002).



favor of more current practices and trends at Fatimid court centers, most importantly at Cairo.<sup>39</sup>

The silences, then, of ninth- to eleventh-century Sicily are both assumed and imposed. They are forced on us by the limited archaeological remains on the island, because of the natural erasures of time. But assumptions are strong, too, because subsequent cultures successfully re-made or suppressed that earlier Muslim voice. The silences, however, are momentous and are only slowly being broken.

The attempt to contextualize Christian art in a Sicily where Christians, Muslims, and Jews worked, lived and practiced their faiths is open to pitfalls, but just the same, it needs to be made in order to reclaim the meaning of monuments otherwise without voice. The Oratory at Syracuse is strikingly elusive on this count, but it needs to be examined in light of issues of community and faith in Sicily, and in view of the consequence of the interaction, positive *and* negative, amongst Christians and Muslims in the central Mediterranean. In the final part of this essay, I should like to argue that the fresco program makes its own case for how “looking beyond” is an especially Hellenic Christian response to pressures from outside their community, both to define their own faith and to withstand the pressures being brought to bear on them from a dominant culture outside. The Forty Martyrs—rewarded by theophany of the Incarnate God and attended by saints who are local and universal—are a vision themselves of how community forms and is formed by its art practices.<sup>40</sup>

39. Johns, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily* (as in note 38), 266–7, and see also W. Tronzo, *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Princeton, 1997).

40. I should like to thank Barry Flood here for allowing me to read passages from his forthcoming book, which greatly helped me in my thinking about this Siracusan situation. See F. B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval ‘Hindu-Muslim’ Encounter*, forthcoming from Princeton University Press.

41. See Efthymiades, “Chrétien et Sarrasins en Italie méridionale et en Asie Mineure” (as in note 16), 593–5; F. Ciccolella, *Cinque poeti bizantini: Anacreonte dal Barberiniano Greco 310* (Alessandria, 2000), xxviii–xxxiii; *Spicilegium Romanum*, ed. by A. Mai et al., 10 vols. (Rome, 1840; repr. Graz, 1974), iv:xxxix; B. Lavagnini, “Anacreonte in Sicilia e a Bisanzio,” *Diptycha* 1 (1979), 291–9; *Nicholas I Patriarch of Constantinople: Letters* (Corpus fon-

Although Syracuse was not the last center to fall to the Muslim armies in Sicily—the northeast region held out until the end of the century—its defeat sent shockwaves through Byzantium. The heroic defense of the siege and the terrible destruction of this wealthy, cultured city made a deep impression on contemporaries. Leo VI (r. 886–912) wrote poems about this tragedy, and theologians attempted to understand how God could have allowed the greatest Greek city of the west, visited and converted by Paul himself, to be overcome by unbelievers. Answers included the divine anger at the sins of his people and for the divisions in his church, such as the rifts caused by the patriarchal disputes between parties of Ignatius (r. 847–58, 867–77) and Photius (r. 858–67, 877–86).<sup>41</sup> Evidently, the fall of the city in 878 was another traumatic proof of the unstoppable expansion of Islam that the ninth century had seen so frequently.

However, the historical picture of Christian life in Muslim Sicily is a combination of accommodation and struggle. Several years after the fall of Syracuse, in 884–5, the inhabitants were able to ransom back prisoners for cash.<sup>42</sup> Only the mention survives, but it does suggest that the city had not been entirely decimated. Its Christian inhabitants had been allowed, apparently, to keep an economy functioning sufficiently well to recover to some degree. Such a reaction on the part of Aghlabid governors would not have been out of character, in any case. Despite the fact that *jihadi* ideology was an important foundation for the military actions of the Aghlabid conquerors,<sup>43</sup> that ideol-

tyum historiae byzantinae, Vol. 6), ed. and trans. by R. J. H. Jenkins and L. G. Westerink (Washington, D.C., 1973), 326; Nicephorus David Paphlagon (late ninth/early tenth century), *Vita Ignatii*, PG 105:573B; Zuretti, “La espugnaione di Siracusa nell’880” (as in note 34), 1:165–7.

42. See citations in note 19 above.

43. W. Granara, “Sicily,” in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by J. W. Meri, 2 vols. (New York and London, 2006), 11:744–5; *idem*, “Jihad and Cross-Cultural Encounter in Muslim Sicily,” *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 3 (1996), 42–61; Y. Lev, “The Fatimids and Byzantium, 10th–12th Centuries,” *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995), 191–2; and A. Pellitteri, “The Historical-Ideological Framework of Islamic Fatimid Sicily (Fourth/Tenth Century) with Reference to the Works of the Qadi L-Nu’man,” *Al-Masaq* 7 (1994), 111–63.

ogy was not a principle guiding their policy towards the *dhimmi* communities, because *jihad* against a *dhimmi*, a protected community, was forbidden. Criticism was directed at them for their slackened sense of purpose for *jihad*,<sup>44</sup> but the Muslim governors made many improvements in the economic functioning of the island. Amari even saw the Aghlabids as liberators from the corruption and parochialism of the Byzantine Empire.<sup>45</sup>

This statement of the benefits of Aghlabid material self-interest does not wish away the instances of injustice and the humiliations of the newly subjected Christians of Sicily generally. As in most *dhimmi* communities elsewhere, Sicilian Christians had to wear identifying clothing, not display any outward and public signs of Christianity, and make degrading concessions to Muslims in many aspects of public life.<sup>46</sup> For example, the practice of neck sealing is attested archaeologically on Sicily in this period, in which lead seals were worn by payers of the poll tax;<sup>47</sup> this practice was probably continued on from late Roman and Byzantine administrators, who had used it for tax purposes, slavery and executions.<sup>48</sup>

44. Granara, "Jihad and Cross-Cultural Encounter in Muslim Sicily" (as in note 43), 51. More generally, see A. Borruso, "Some Arab-Muslim Perceptions of Religion and Medieval Culture in Sicily," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. by J. Wardenburg (New York and Oxford, 1999), 136–42.

45. See Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (as in note 22), 201–2. M. A. Handley, "Disputing the End of North Africa," in *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives in Late Antique North Africa*, ed. by A. H. Merrills (Aldershot, 2004), 291–310, has persuasively argued for a new interpretation of the survivals of Christians in post-conquest North Africa, and this view needs also to be integrated into our understanding of how Christians adapted on Muslim Sicily. One might also cite the recent book by Christopher MacEvitt on Eastern Christians under Latin Christians in the Crusader kingdoms as a useful parallel for the situations Christians faced in Muslim realms; see his *The Crusades and the Christian World of the East: Rough Tolerance* (Philadelphia, 2008). Finally, recent work in the Persian Gulf reveals evidence for flourishing Christian communities after the rise of Islam; see R. A. Carter, "Christianity in the Gulf during the First Centuries of Islam," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 19 (2008), 71–108.

46. Efthymiades, "Chrétien et Sarrasins en Italie méridionale et en Asie Mineure" (as in note 16), 596, and Talbi, *L'émirat aghlabide* (as in note 19), 468.

And yet acculturation did occur: for example, the traveler, Ibn Hawqal, who compiled his accounts in the *Sūrat al-Ard* or *The Face of the Earth* in 977, wrote disapprovingly of the accommodations Muslims had made on Sicily to their Christian neighbors. Ibn Hawqal described the phenomenon of intermarriage of Christians and Muslims as common, and he disapprovingly noted the practice of both faiths within the same family—daughters could be Christian like their mothers, but sons had to become Muslim.<sup>49</sup> In economic and political terms, sources speak of the wealth of the Christian community of Sicily, which tried in 1023–4 to buy with a large sum of money the relics of a saint taken from a miraculous shrine near Carthage and being transported to Andalusia by Franks.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Christians also appear to have been active in the civil service and able to attain high office.<sup>51</sup>

In some ways, the successful integration of Christians into this new Muslim land was a potential threat to self-identity amongst some Christians of the island. *Dhimmitude*, on the positive side, meant more power for self-governance devolving to the different groups within the faiths of the book. And it also meant in the

47. P. Balog, "Dated Aghlabid Lead and Copper Seals from Sicily," *Studi Magrebini* 11 (1979), 125–32.

48. See C. F. Robinson, "Neck-Sealing in Early Islam," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48 (2005), 401–4, and D. Woods, "St. Maximilian of Tebessa and the *Jizya*," in *Homages à Carl Deroux. V. Christianisme et Moyen Âge, Néo-latin et survivance de la latinité*, Collection Latomus, Vol. 279, ed. by P. Defosse (Brussels, 2003), 266–76.

49. *Configuration de la Terre (Kitab surat al-Ard)*, trans. by J. H. Kramers and G. Wiet, 2 vols. (Paris-Beirut, 1964), 1:128. On Ibn Hawqal, see W. Granara, "Ibn Hawqal in Sicily," *Alif* 3 (1983), 94–9, and F. Gabrieli, "Ibn Hawqal e gli Arabi di Sicilia," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 36 (1961), 245–53. One can presumably use, in general terms, the conditions available for Christians in North Africa to understand how Christians on Sicily lived; see R. Marston Speight, "The Place of the Christians in Ninth-Century North Africa, According to Muslim Sources," *Islamochristiana* 4 (1978):47–65.

50. E. Lévi-Provençal, *La Péninsule Iberique au Moyen-Age d'après le 'Kitab ar-Rawd al-Mi'târ fi Habar al-Aktâr' d'Ibn 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Himyari* (Leiden, 1938), 182.

51. H. Bresc and A. Nef, "Les Mozarabes de Sicilie (1100–1300)," in *Cavalieri alla conquista del Sud. Studi sull'Italia normanna in memoria di Léon-Robert Ménager*, ed. by E. Cuzzo and J.-M. Martin (Rome and Bari, 1998), 138–9.

context of Sicily greater unity within the *dhimmis* than was possible for the different Muslim groups that comprised the dominant segment of that society.<sup>52</sup> On the negative side, Greek-speaking Christians went from being the faith of the Empire to one Christian group among several. Evidence exists for a Coptic village outside Palermo and for Christian services in Latin, Greek, and Arabic continuing into the fourteenth century, though Ludolf de Sachsen (ca. 1300–1377/8) also noted in 1330 that the three did not get along.<sup>53</sup> Sicilian Greeks of the eastern seaboard were always seen as being loyal to the Empire, and therefore being a suspect group, and this perception was confirmed by the popular uprising that greeted the ill-fated invasion in 1038 by the Byzantine general George Maniaces.<sup>54</sup> The situation for Greek-speaking Christians on Sicily may have been similar to that faced by Chalcedonian Christians after the invasion of Egypt in the seventh century, when they went from being adherents of the dominant, official religion to being another Christian *dhimmi*—and one not in particular favor with Muslim authorities.<sup>55</sup>

“Looking beyond” in this sense means the possibility of visual art declaring and demonstrating the unique truth of a faith community put in a defensive position by dominant Islams and competitive Christianities.<sup>56</sup> Encroaching, threatening, oppressing, all-too-cooperative, Islam from the ninth to the eleventh

centuries was the foil for Greek-speaking Christians in eastern Sicily, but, additionally, one should not discount that other *dhimmis* were permitted in Syracuse. In either case, the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs manifestly worked on a variety of levels to distinguish and preserve the dogma, practices and history of Greek Christianity. That work did not simply involve a statement of allegiance to Constantinople, for Rome was an important node of this identity, too.<sup>57</sup> But the special past that bound its church to the Holy Land, to Constantinople, and to Rome in a chain of venerable figures of ancient Christianity made Syracusans particularly mindful of the claims they could make to belonging to an exclusive covenant with God.

To be sure, the program at the Oratory is fragmentary and was more elaborate and developed than can be shown in its current state of preservation. But the elements that do survive are sufficiently expressive of their historical context that an argument for their meanings can certainly be developed. The choice to decorate an underground chapel with figures from the local and universal history of Christianity, and with an epiphany validating those figures and their sacrifices, can only be understood in terms of “looking beyond” present pressures and tensions to ultimate arbitration, where God appears in bodily form to make perfectly clear who his favored are and how they are to remain so.

52. Granara, “Jihad and Cross-Cultural Encounter in Muslim Sicily” (as in note 43). Moreover, Aghlabids and Fatimids professed different ideas about the meaning of Islam. For example, the Aghlabids were strongly opposed to the Khāridjites amongst Berbers, and so this diversity of Islam was also a factor in the lack of political and military unity amongst the ruling Muslims of Sicily and Ifrīqiya.

53. Ludolphi, *rectoris ecclesiae parochialis in Suchem, De itinere Terrae Sanctae liber*, ed. by F. Deycks (Stuttgart, 1851), 20. And despite the fact that Muslims were deported from Sicily in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, testimony survives for a mosque again in seventeenth-century Palermo. See A. Fuess, “An Instructive Experience: Fakhr al-Din’s Journey to Italy, 1613–18,” in *Les européens vus par les libanais à l’époque ottomane*, ed. by B. Heyberger and C.-M. Walbinder (Beirut, 2002), 34. On the expulsion, see J. Taylor, “Muslim-Christian Relations in Medieval Southern Italy,” *Muslim World* 97 (2007), 190–99, and *eadem*, *Muslims in Medieval Italy: The Colony at Lucera* (Lanham, Md., 2003).

54. E. Merendino, “La spedizione di Maniace in Sicilia del *Bios* di san Filareto di Calabria,” *Nea Rhome: Rivista di ricerche bizantiniche* 1 (2004), 135–41, and Bresc-Nef, “Les Mozarabes de Sicilie” (as in note 31), 139.

55. Communications between Egyptian Melkites and Sicilian Christians did occur. See Bresc-Nef, “Les Mozarabes de Sicilie” (as in note 31), 136–7.

56. For example, see my “Vision and Community among Christians and Muslims: The Al-Muallaqa Lintel in Its Eighth-Century Context,” forthcoming in *Arte medievale* (2007), 73–94.

57. On this relationship, see the divergent arguments of Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (as in note 20), 208; S. Pricoco, “Studi recenti su alcuni aspetti e problemi del primo cristianesimo in Sicilia,” *Kokalos* 43–44 (1997–98), 813–26; M. van Esbroek, “La contexte politique de la Vie de Pancrace de Taormenium,” in *Sicilia e Italia suburbicaria tra IV e VIII secolo*, ed. by S. Pricoco, F. Rizzo Nervo and T. Sardella (Soveria Manelli, 1991), 185–96; and E. Patlagean, “Les moines grecques d’Italie

*The Forty at Syracuse*

The choice of the Forty was surely made with real care for maximum communicative potential. The martyrs were extremely popular from the fourth century on, and their popularity was encouraged by powerful homilies written by great churchmen that included Basil of Caesarea (ca. 329–79),<sup>58</sup> Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–after 394),<sup>59</sup> Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–73),<sup>60</sup> Severus of Antioch (ca. 465–ca. 540),<sup>61</sup> and Romanos the Melodist (fl. sixth century).<sup>62</sup> The versions of the deaths of the Forty told by these writers made for a rich, multivalent tradition in which to think about martyrdom and its rewards, and these continued to resonate through the Early Middle Ages long after the Roman State had ceased to be a threat to the faith.<sup>63</sup> In the event, the Forty stood for many aspects of Chris-

tianity, faith, and identity. Since they were understood to have died from entering a freezing cold lake to have and found salvation through that element, their connection with baptism was often cited.<sup>64</sup> No one has proposed baptism underground in Syracuse, and in the absence of pre-Norman structures above ground, one cannot state what the sacramental centers of the monastery of Sta. Lucia were and where they were located. Their appeal as protective saints was also high, and they were often included in amuletic contexts because their powerful names were listed in their own, probably authentic *Testament*.<sup>65</sup> The setting of the Oratory has an obvious connection with death and burial, and, of course, the nearby martyrium of Sta. Lucia and the burials in this complex of catacomb chambers and loculi had great power for Christians in this region.<sup>66</sup> In this interpretation, the parousiac element is strongly pronounced here not only to establish the *bona fides* of

et l'apologie des thèses pontificales (VIII<sup>e</sup>–X<sup>e</sup> siècles),” *StMed* 5 (1964), 579–602.

58. Migne PG 31:508–26; “*Let Us Live That We May Live*”: *Greek Homilies on Christians Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria c. A.D. 350–A.D. 450*, trans. by J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen, and B. Dehandschutter, (London and New York, 2003), 68–76. On the dissemination of this homily into various languages, see P. J. Fedwick, *Bibliotheca Basiliana Universalis: A Study of the Manuscript Tradition, Translations and Editions of the Works of Basil of Caesarea*, 5 vols. in 8 pts. (Turnhout, 1993–2004), 11.

59. “On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste,” in *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones Pars II*, Gregorii Nysseni Opera, Vol. 10/1, ed. by O. Lendle (Leiden, 1990), 135–69; trans. by “*Let Us Live That We May Live*” (as in note 58), 93–107.

60. “Encomium in sanctos quadriginate martyres,” in *Tou en agiois patros emon Ephraim tou Syrou ta evriskomena panta*, ed. by G. L. Assemani, 6 vols. (Rome, 1743), 11:341–56 (not accessible to me).

61. “*Les Homiliae cathedrales* de Sévère d’Antioche. Traduction syriaque de Jacques d’Édesse. Homélie XVIII à XXV,” ed. by M. Brière and F. Graffin, *PO* 37,1 (1975), 6–23.

62. *Sancti Romani melodi cantica: cantica genuina*, ed. by P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis (Oxford, 1963), 487–505.

63. See J. Leeman, “‘Schoolrooms for Our Souls’: The Cult of the Martyrs: Homilies and Visual Representations as a Locus for Religious Education in Late Antiquity,” *Pedagogica Historica* 36 (2000), 113–27; P. Maraval, “Les premiers développements du culte des XL Martyrs de Sébastée dans l’Orient byzantin et en Occident,” *VetChr* 36 (1999), 193–211; and P. Karlin-Hayter, “*Passio* of the XL Martyrs of Sebasteia: The Greek Tradition: The Earliest Account (BHG 1201),” *AB* 109 (1991), 249–304.

64. K. Gulowsen, “Some Iconographic Aspects of the Relationship between Santa Maria Antiqua and the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs,” in *Santa Maria Antiqua al Foro Romano cento anni dopo: Atti del colloquio internazionale, Roma, 5–6 maggio 2000*, ed. by J. Osborne, J. Rasmus Brandt, and G. Morganit (Rome, 2004), 187–97.

65. See “*Testamentum* (BHG 1203),” in *Acta martyrum selecta*, ed. by O. von Gebhardt (Berlin, 1902), 166–70, and *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. by H. Musurillo (Oxford, 1972), 357–61 (the latter with text and translation). On prophylaxis, see F. Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants: une rencontre entre chrétiens et musulmans* (Paris, 2001), 96; D. Hagedorn, “PUG I 41 und die Namen der vierzig Märtyrer von Sebaste,” *ZPapEpig* 55 (1984), 146–53; and Schiemenz, “Wunderkraft gegen kämpfende Widersacher” (as in note 3), 181–2.

66. See S. Piazza, *Pittura rupestre medievale: Lazio e Campania settentrionale (secoli VI–XIII)* (Rome, 2006), 11–25. For another crypt-shrine dedicated to the Forty, see J. Mitchell, “The Archaeology of Pilgrimage in Late Antique Albania: The Basilica of the Forty Martyrs,” in *Recent Research on the Late Antique Countryside*, ed. by W. Bowden, L. Lavan, and C. Machado (Leiden-Boston, 2004), 145–86; and W. Bowden and J. Mitchell, “The Church of the Forty Martyrs,” *Minerva* 13 (2002), 31–3. Decoration of crypts with theophanies of God, surrounded by angels and saints, is not uncommon in western Europe, as well (as Anne-Marie Bouché brought to my attention). See, for example the eleventh-century painting in R. Favreau, M.-T. Camus, and F. Jeanneau, *Notre-Dame-la-Grande, Poitiers* (Poitiers, 1995), 42–4.



the Forty, but as proleptic theophany when God appears with his host at the final judgment. The jeweled cross, attendant angels, and the Virgin Mary indicate the moment out of time when justice will be effected for those in covenant with the true God.<sup>67</sup> These moments are indicated not only through analogy with the elders of Revelation (4:4), but also through events in the hagiographic tradition, when the sky opens to reveal the celebratory host and it is possible to look beyond the passing pain of their death to the joy and festivities it occasioned in heaven and on earth. The Forty rushed to their death like victorious athletes, with no hesitation or doubt—except for the fortieth who retreated, only to be replaced by the bath attendant.<sup>68</sup> The cosmic rightness of the number forty was remarked on by writers, and the necessity of the full complement for the divine economy made this exchange inevitable.

In a context where Islam is pressing or dominant, the representation of the Forty Martyrs being rewarded with crowns and receiving a personal welcome into paradise by Christ and court has particular meanings. Beyond the many associations already acquired in devotion to the Forty—not to say that those associations are not present, too—the martyrs are paradigmatic figures of righteous resistance and self-sacrifice for proper faith. Authority is highly suspect in the homilies on the Forty, in which the Devil and general are conflated, and, moreover, in a period when Islam

may not have turned out to be such a terrible neighbor, how much more energetically does the Church have to assert its cause? Reading the program as a self-evident document of communal resistance, in which all constituents were active and in agreement, is not necessarily the correct way to proceed to interpret its meanings. Where cultural and religious debates are raised, and positions asserted, a text or monument cannot be approached simply as a reflective mirror of opposition within an entire community.<sup>69</sup> In that sense, then, the “looking beyond” may well be to provide a vision of eternal promises over present accommodations.<sup>70</sup> Visions remind viewers of what they might otherwise neglect or forget, in this case, their Christian duty to remember *jihad* directed against them and to stay strong in their faith.

In a period in which conflict with Islam in the eastern Mediterranean was ongoing and volatile, the Forty provided models for resistance and sacrifice. Their commemoration in Syracuse, in other words, was invested not only in the historical glories of the Christian past, but also in its contemporary relevance for Christians caught in impossible situations where their lives and souls were at stake. The most dramatic instance of the Forty as exemplars of neo-Christian martyrs occurred in the hagiography of the Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorium, an important city on the steppes of western Anatolia that was taken by Muslim forces in

67. The cross is also a powerful sign of group cohesion and faith, in the face of its disturbing associations with a demeaned God. See M. N. Swanson, “The Cross of Christ in the Earliest Arabic Melkite Apologies,” in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)*, ed. by S. K. Samir and J. S. Nielsen (Leiden, 1994), 115–45. The cross in the heavens is also a sign of the end of time, and apocalyptic texts were being produced in this period in Sicily. See P. J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, ed. by D. deF. Abrahamse (Berkeley, 1985), 61–95, 98–101, and 115–6. On apocalypse more generally, see now J. Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium: Celestial Journey and Local Community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha* (Cambridge, 2007).

68. See F. Vinel, “Sainteté anonyme, sainteté collective? Les quarante martyrs de Sébastée dans quelques textes du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Du héros païen au saint chrétien, Actes du colloque organisé par le Centre d’Analyse des Rhétoriques Religieuses de l’Antiquité (C.A.R.R.A.), Strasbourg, 1er–2 décembre 1995*, ed. by G. Freyburger and L. Perrot (Paris, 1997), 125–31.

69. See A. Shboul and A. Walmsley, “Identity and Self-Image in Syria-Palestine in the Transition from Byzantine to Early Islamic Rule: Arab Christians and Muslims,” *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998), 255–87.

70. The Forty were also available to Muslims, it would seem. See the mention of a mosque and dervish monastery at the site of a shrine visited by Greeks and Armenians at Sarim in H. Grégoire, “Rapport sur un voyage dans le Pont et en Cappadoce,” *BCH* 33 (1909), 25–6. See the mention, also, of a fresco of the Forty in the Melkite monastery of Al-Kusair, church of S. Sabas, near Cairo, in B. T. A. Evetts and A. J. Butler, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt Attributed to Abu Sâlih, the Armenian* (Oxford, 1895; repr. London, 1969), 150–1, and J. Simon, “Le culte des XL Martyrs dans l’Égypte chrétienne,” *Orientalia* 3 (1934), 174–6. On this question more broadly, see A. Cuffel, “From Practice to Polemic: Shared Saints and Festivals as ‘Women’s Religion’ in the Medieval Mediterranean,” *BSOAS* 68 (2005), 401–19.

838.<sup>71</sup> The hagiography was written by a monk, Evodus (d. 883), who claimed to be an eyewitness to the events described in his account. The tenor of the text is remarkably factual, but also included liturgical invocations of the saints at the conclusion, before which Evodus calls them worthy rivals of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste.<sup>72</sup> The text is an intelligent account, and Evodus evidently read other texts of Muslim-Christian debates, probably the most important being the anti-Muslim texts of John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 750) and Nicetas of Byzantium (active second half of the ninth century).<sup>73</sup> The Forty-Two were not an invention for polemical purposes, however. Although they did serve that end, they were canonized and entered the liturgical calendar for annual celebration on 6 March (the Forty's feast falls on the 9th).

When the city of Amorium fell in 838, the loss for the Byzantine cause was acute, because it was a major regional power in the defense system of Anatolia. The long captivity of a group of well-born men, which appears to have been about seven years in duration, gave them plenty of opportunity for the testing of their faith; indeed, the length of imprisonment allowed them to love life less and their souls more.<sup>74</sup> Their souls became the subject of great struggle for their captors, and in this way, despite their many deprivations, the tables were turned: the prisoners gained power through their disregard for their mortal lives. The disregard was not silent, however, but was expressed in extensively reported debates in which the prisoners asserted and reasoned their stronger truths.

71. Texts of the hagiography in V. Vasil'evskij and P. Nikitin, "Skazaniia o 42 amorijskich mucenikach," *Mémoires de l'Académie impériale des sciences de Saint-Petersbourg. Classe historico-philologique*, ser. 8, 7/2 (1905), 61–78, and *AASS* March I, 880–86. See also S. Efthymiades, "Le miracle et les saints durant et après le second iconoclisme," in *Monastères, images, pouvoirs et société à Byzance. Nouvelles approches du monachisme byzantin (XX<sup>e</sup> Congrès international des Études Byzantines, Paris, 2001)*, ed. by M. Kaplan (Paris, 2006), 154; *idem*, "Chrétien et Sarrasins en Italie méridionale et en Asie Mineure (IX<sup>e</sup>–XI<sup>e</sup> siècle)" (as in note 16), 613–4; A. Kolia-Dermitzaki, "The Execution of the Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorion: Proposing an Interpretation," *Al-Masaq* 14 (2002), 141–62; A.-T. Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins et l'Islam: textes et auteurs VII<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Louvain and Paris, 1969), 163–79; and Vasiliev, *Byz. Arabes*, 1:144–77.

The debates that took place in the text amongst the Forty-Two and their Muslim captors, as well as amongst converted Christians in that camp, were not simplistic recapitulations of tired tropes.<sup>75</sup> Rather, Evodus reported the exchanges with unusual restraint, and he stands out for that reason among the many overheated theologians and historians in this genre of polemical literature. He does, however, betray his strong certainty of the rightness of his cause, and one cannot imagine this text being read by anyone but Greek Christians.

The arguments given are often carefully reasoned, along the lines of the philosophical framework used by Nicetas of Byzantium. Reason enters into the discourse, but faith has to carry some of the argument, just the same. As in any place where Islam was victorious, Christians questioned the cause of their punishment by God. In the course of the hagiography, the Muslim captors naturally argue for their new covenant with God as being proven through their victories. And Evodus recognizes the tip in the balance as when the frontier at Syria was breached and Muslims made manifest the anger of God—and worse is to come, he says.<sup>76</sup> The Forty-Two take the historical view, adducing such ancient civilizations as the Persians and Greeks, but God, they state, corrects his own.<sup>77</sup> The argument is also advanced that Muhammad was the prophet promised by God and scripture, and in an attempt at *rapprochement*, Muhammad is said to be the prophet sent to complete the promises made by Jesus. Notwithstanding, the Forty-Two deny any

72. "Skazaniia" (as in note 71), 76 (40), and *AASS* March I, 892.

73. For John, see now S. H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton and Oxford, 2008), 40–2; and for Nicetas, see his *Refutatio Mohammedis*, Migne PG 105:669–842; and Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins et l'Islam* (as in note 71), 110–62.

74. "Skazaniia" (as in note 71), 71 (27), and *AASS* March I, 883.

75. See R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, (Princeton, 1997).

76. "Skazaniia" (as in note 71), 63 (5–6), and *AASS* March I, 880.

77. "Skazaniia" (as in note 71), 61–2, 70–1 (1–2, 26), and *AASS* March I, 880, 882–3.

connection between the two, and, beyond the self-evident divinity of Christ, they contradict any claim that Muslims make to scripture foretelling Muhammad or the third covenant Islam claims.<sup>78</sup> Muslim proof-texts like Isaiah 9:13–4 are simply false, they say, and, showing the real meaning of the passages, the Forty-Two reveal the misinterpretations of Scripture that have led Muslims to this fundamental error of belief.<sup>79</sup> The moral turpitude of Muslims is also asserted by the Forty-Two, and their Muslim interlocutors obligingly agree that Islam is in fact based on polygamy, debauchery, and night-long feasts.<sup>80</sup> For all these reasons, the Christian captives hold fast to their faith, even in the face of mild coercion on the part of converted Christians and Muslims, who advise superficial adherence to the newer faith. Even on the point of their execution, they are offered a chance to pray with the governor as sufficient proof of recognizing Islam. Striking in stories like these is the degree to which Christian martyrs had to *insist* on martyrdom.<sup>81</sup> Accommodations were offered, compromises devised, but in the face of Islam, such men clung to their conviction of final rewards. In the end, because they were not iconoclasts, because they fought for their country, and because they died as witnesses to Christ, the Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorium were blessed, Evodus wrote.<sup>82</sup> Like other ninth-century group martyrs, such as the victims of the war of 811 and the prisoners in Thrace in 813, they stood for resistance to apostasy and death for faith.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the crisis the capture of Syracuse in 878 provoked in Byzantium and the sorrows described by the

monk Theodosius in his eyewitness account,<sup>84</sup> nothing like the hagiography of the Forty-Two of Amorium was produced for Syracuse. And yet a similar structure of dialogue is found in hagiographies of the ninth and tenth centuries that describe interactions between Muslims and Christians in Sicily and in southern Italy. Having been taken prisoner more than once himself, Elias the Younger intervened on behalf of Christian families with relatives who needed rescuing from Muslim captors, but he also delivered Muslims from illness, even while engaging with them in high-level disputes about theology.<sup>85</sup> For example, Elias claimed that Islam had no witness in the prophets, had no moral basis, and was, in fact, a mixed set of heresies. His defense of Christianity was direct and strong, “Believing in the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Spirit, not glorifying three divinities, or three natures, or three great or minor deities ... but we believe in a single principle of a single divinity, a single majesty, a single power, a single force, a single action, a single counsel, a single will, a single authority, a single lordship of a unique essence and nature in three persons and substance.”<sup>86</sup> Elias’ understanding of and opposition to Islam were strong, it would seem, and his relationship to the people of that faith was unusually complicated.

It is again worth recalling that not only were prisoners ransomed within several years, but also the bishop and Theodosius were taken to Palermo in 878, where they engaged in a brief religious dialogue with the emir. The assault on a city after a long siege can

78. “Skazanija” (as in note 71), 69 (22–23), and *AASS* March 1, 882.

79. “Skazanija” (as in note 71), 70 (24), and *AASS* March 1, 882.

80. “Skazanija” (as in note 71), 70 (25), and *AASS* March 1, 882.

81. See J. R. Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijoit: Assimilation and Conversion to Islam in Thirteenth-Century Egypt* (Leiden and Boston, 2005).

82. “Skazanija” (as in note 71), 76 (39), and *AASS* March 1, 884.

83. *Sancti patris nostri et confessoris Theodori Studitis praepositi Parva catechesis*, ed. E. Auvray (Paris, 1891), 220–4; Theodore Stoudite, *Petites catéchèses*, trans. by A.-M. Mohr (Paris, 1993), 145–7; *Synax.CP* 837–8 (23 July), 846–8 (26 July), 414–6 (22 January); *Menologium of Basil II*, Migne PG 117:276D–277A (22 Jan-

uary); and I. Dujcev, “La chronique byzantine de l’an 811,” *TM* 1 (1965), 216.81–6.

84. Text in C. O. Zuretti, “La espugnaione di Siracusa nell’880: Testo greco della lettera del Monaco Teodosio,” in *Centenario della nascita di Michele Amari* (Palermo, 1910), 1:165–7. See also Vasiliev, *Byz. Arabes*, 11/1:70–9, and B. Lavagnini, “Siracusa occupata dagli Arabi e l’epistola di Teodosio Monaco,” *Byzantion* 29–30 (1959–60), 267–79.

85. For Muslim-Christian relations as revealed in the hagiography, see von Falkenhausen, “La vita di S. Nilo come fonte storica per la Calabria bizantina” (as in note 17), 290–5.

86. *Vita di sant’Elia il Giovane*, 32–6 (23–4). See Efthymiades, “Chrétien et Sarrasins en Italie méridionale et en Asie Mineure (IX<sup>e</sup>–X<sup>e</sup> siècle)” (as in note 16), 600–2.

be a terrifying occurrence, and Theodosius vividly evoked it, but apparently recovery was not so arduous. Perhaps the integration of the southeastern region of Sicily into the common market of the *ummah*, most immediately the Maghrib and Egypt, provided significant benefit to Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike.

The Oratory of the Forty Martyrs at Syracuse does not arise directly out of a text, like the account of the beliefs and deaths of the Forty-Two of Amorium, but it does belong to this milieu in which Greek-speaking Christians were all too conscious of the upheavals brought about by Islam over the Mediterranean. And while arms had been proved ineffectual too often already, arguments were still needed whether Muslims were pounding on the city gate or building a mosque within the vanquished city. Perhaps the need was more compelling in the latter instance, for Islam as Other is often easier to fight than Islam as neighbor. Those arguments advanced by the Forty-Two, for example, were necessary for a Christian sense of rightness of faith, which perhaps wavered for not only some of the companions of the Forty-Two, but also of the Forty—that bath attendant took the place of the cowardly fortieth, but the average Christian's fear of persecution and of death for faith was surely a great danger for the church. Conversion was a fact of life in Muslim Sicily, for economic and social reasons, and steadfastness in faith was a strong mission of a church in a defensive position.<sup>87</sup>

The situation of intermarriage described in a critical fashion by Ibn Hawqal could not have been any more palatable to the Church than it was to him. And the moral struggle proposed in the hagiography of the Forty-Two must have been a necessary argument in situations where Muslims and Christians were living together. The Other is always morally inferior, after

all. The feasting and incontinence of Muslims is well attested as a trope of Christian polemical literature, and the martyrs were exemplars of godly virtue in the face of such temptations. The Forty Martyrs, in an effective inversion, discarded their clothes with joy, just as if they were shedding sin.<sup>88</sup> Such assertions of Christian modesty and moral correctness as one finds in the hagiographies and in the Oratory itself—and their ultimate rewards—were entirely natural to contexts of intermarriage and conversion. These were realities faced by Christians all the time, and not just in Sicily. For example, the mid-ninth-century martyrdom of St. Michael the Sabaite had the saint censure Islam for its sexual promiscuity, and more importantly for its use of that openness to entice converts.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, a Coptic hagiography told the story of John of Phanijoit, who forsook Christianity for the love of a Muslim woman, recanted and insisted on martyrdom to expunge that sin.<sup>90</sup> Faith is never an impediment to love, but that is not to say that communities tolerate these defections well, and Muslim and Christian hagiographies and art worked to convince that earthly love is no recompense for the reward of the love of the true God.

This conviction, then, is the persuasive lever of the Oratory. The sky opens to reveal that vision of God beyond, that *particular* version of the incarnate God beyond and of the joy of heaven at the Forty's sacrifice. Here, underground, community sees its rewards for cohesion. Just as the Forty stayed together, so a Christian community must stay united. The composition of this community is changeable. The community comprises the living and the dead, and the catacombs nearby naturally assert the wait for that joyous appearance granted the Forty. It comprises the monastic community, and these martyrs were also the community of monks harnessed to a common salvation-making

87. See V. Von Falkenhausen, "La presenza dei greci nella Sicilia normanna: L'apporto della documentazione archivistica in lingua greca," in *Byzantino-Sicula IV: Atti del I congresso internazionale di archeologia della Sicilia bizantina* (Corelone, 28 luglio–2 agosto 1998), ed. by R. M. Carra Bonacasa (Palermo, 2002), 31–72, and J. Johns, "The Greek Church and the Conversion of Muslims in Norman Sicily?" in *Bosphorus: Essays in Honour of Cyril Mango* (ByzF, vol. 21), ed. by S. Efthymiadis, C. Rapp and D. Tsougarakis (Amsterdam, 1995), 133–57.

88. For example, see Basil at Migne PG 31:5167A.

89. S. H. Griffith, "Michael, the Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery, at the Court of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik: Christian Apologetics and Martyrology in the Early Islamic Period," *Aram* 6 (1994), 120–2 and 130–5.

90. Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijoit* (as in note 31), 15–24.



yoke. Theodore the Stoudite (759–826) made a point of describing the ninth-century martyrs as parallels to the monk as martyr; each sacrifices an earthly life for eternal reward.<sup>91</sup> The Forty, moreover, can stand for the corporate nature of the Church itself, the institution founded by Christ and loyally supported by his followers in the face of all adversities. Ultimately, the vision beyond here makes explicit the triumphalist nature of the argument declared in the Oratory.<sup>92</sup> Gregory of Tours (ca. 538–94) reported that in 575 Persians had tried to burn the shrine of the Forty and the town of Sebaste, but had failed and been forced to retreat.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, the hagiography of St. Vitalus of Sicily (d. 990) described wondrous events during a Muslim attack in which the saint made the sign of the cross and the enemy fell at his feet; the Muslim said the cross emitted flames and stood to the heavens, and an angel came to bless the saint.<sup>94</sup> Deliverance is at hand, therefore, because like the cross, the Forty always protect, and they always endure. Just as God, suspended in the sky with his court and descending as his sign of salvation, ratifies their work and reward, so he reveals it to his local church, longstanding and lasting till eternity.

### *Christian Revelation Seen and Written*

All the subsidiary characters and scenes from the Oratory can no longer be known, but the ones that do survive provide moral support, one might say, to the Forty above and nearby. The writing figure in the

northwest corner of the vault is highly unusual and, without inscription, unidentifiable with certainty.<sup>95</sup> Various possibilities have been raised: natural candidates are Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, or Romanos the Melodist, who wrote well-known works on the popular martyrs, but the writer could also be John writing Revelation, or Paul, who is absent at least from the existing passages of painting, or the prophet Isaiah, who was often a contentious figure in Christian-Muslim polemics. Orsi also offered Ezra as a possibility and as a later parallel to the figure in the Codex Amiatinus (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, fol. 4/v recto); that identification makes possible an understanding of his writing as a restoration of the Temple—that is to the say, the Christian Church here—through study of sacred writings and work as scribe.<sup>96</sup> And like other early medieval monuments, depicting literary activity of holy figures reveals an important means for receiving the word of God. Such activities continued into the Early Middle Ages, too, of course, and one telling example is the hagiography of an Early Christian martyr, Maximilian of Tebessa, that purported to be an original of that early period, but was in fact written at Carthage in the eighth or ninth century.<sup>97</sup> The writer was asserting the inequities of Muslim rule through the lens of Christian martyrdom, and the results of his scribal falsifications mediated his own and his community's hope for God's intervention.

The movement from God to writer on the vault of the Oratory is vital, but the direction of movement

91. *Sancti patris nostri et confessoris Theodori Studitis praepositi Parva catechesis* (as in note 83), 35–9, 124–6, 220–4; *Petites catecheses* (as in note 83), 35–7, 88–9, 145–7 (the last on the Bulgarian martyrs).

92. For example, on the church of the Grand Pigeonnier, Çavusin, see C. Jolivet-Lévy, “Culte et iconographie de l'archange Michel dans l'Orient byzantin: le témoignage de quelques monuments de Cappadoce,” *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 28 (1997), 187–98 [= *eadem*, *Études cappadociennes* (London, 2002), 413–46]. Here, the Forty are arrayed in the lower register of the northeast corner and are processing behind imperial figures, including Nicephorus Phocas (r. 963–9). The presence of his portrait dates the church.

93. *Historia*, x.24, *MGH, SRM*, I.1, ed. by B. Krusch and W. Levison, 515–6.

94. *AASS* March 11, 31.

95. Inscriptions would have provided data for linguistic and cultural filiation in the program, too. On a case where such data is available—and the implications explored, see S. J. Lucey, “Art and Socio-Cultural Identity in Early Medieval Rome: The Patrons of Santa Maria Antiqua,” in *Roma felix: Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, ed. by É. Ó Carragáin and C. L. Neuman de Vegvar (Aldershot, 2007), 139–58.

96. C. Chazelle “‘Romanness’ in Early Medieval Culture,” in *Paradigms and Methods in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. by C. Chazelle and F. Lifshitz (New York, 2007), 89.

97. See Woods, “St. Maximilian of Tebessa and the *Jizya*” (as in note 48).

is not entirely clear. Is God giving inspiration to the writer by his appearance in the sky, or is the writing figure bringing about this vision through his scribal activity? Perhaps it is the reciprocity of the movement that gives this vision its special emphasis on the nature of revelation.<sup>98</sup> Mediation is clearly essential, and—with the authority that divine sanction of vision provides—the writer here brings this historical reality of the Forty into view and the prolepticizing joy of the Incarnate God in glory. The role of the writer is ambivalent, according to the state of the painting. He resembles a traditional writing evangelist, but he is raising a hand from his writing desk to address the viewer or to indicate that the vision emanating from his pen projects further into the room. Following his lead, the spectator proceeds deeper into the space and is umbrellaed by the vision above.<sup>99</sup> The stable witnesses on the sidewall only intensify the sense of the dramatic encounter above. That drama is a composite of the written tradition on the Forty, and it comes as well from the depicted writer whose authority allows him to guide the viewer into a direct encounter, a vision no one until now had quite seen, and surely never in this company. Light in this space can only have intensified this canopy of heaven, catching on the jewels of the cross, the bare torsos of the Martyrs, the face

of God at the apex. The Forty sometimes appeared in gleaming dress; here their flesh is the pale reflecting field.<sup>100</sup> The vision is emanating from the single figure in the corner, but it is also a representation, and that figure seems to recognize it as such, too, if one reads his gesture as declarative.<sup>101</sup>

The nature of this represented vision needs also to be stressed in this context, too, for it is the medium that is as significant as the message. In contrast to the strong linguistic bias of Islamic revelation, *depicting* a writer—one of a series of men informed by God—carried great persuasive power.<sup>102</sup> The history of figuration in Christianity is based on the incarnation of God, and, after the ninth century, no right-thinking Greek Christian could avoid the seventh ecumenical council at Nicaea in 787. The qualifications of the martyrs of Amorium were, of course, their deaths, their status as warriors for their fatherland, *and* that they did not profess iconoclasm. That last is crucial for understanding the reason for this fresco of the Forty in Syracuse, for this ability to show God and his creation was a characteristic that absolutely defined community in the Middle Ages. Knowing and depicting the face of God was a singular claim Christians made and could defend within the terms of their own revelation.<sup>103</sup> And the Forty, through the homily of Basil of Cae-

98. D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia, 2004), 59–60, “These themes of textual mediation downward from the realm of God to the realm of humanity complement the themes of sacrifice through which humanity renders its offerings upward to God.”

99. Useful studies of spatial cognition are D. L. Chattford Clark, “Viewing the Liturgy: A Space Syntax Study of Changing Visibility and Accessibility in the Development of the Byzantine Church in Jordan,” *World Archaeology* 39 (2006), 84–104, and G. Stavroulaki and J. Peponis, “Seen in a Different Light: Icons in Byzantine Museums and Churches,” in *Space Syntax: 5th International Symposium* (Amsterdam, 2005), 251–63.

100. Sozom. *HE*, ix.2.7; *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. by J. Bidez, Berlin, 1960, 393. See, also, P. Maraval, “Songes et visions comme mode d’invention des reliques,” *Augustinianum* 29 (1988), 592, and the hagiographic text in Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijoit* (as in note 31), 119–21, at which both Christians and Muslim are said to have experienced visions of light over the body of John the martyr.

101. V. I. Stiochita, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art*, trans. by A.-M. Glasheen (London, 1995), 115, “Sight (vision) interrupts—and subsequently provokes—the representation.”

102. See J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarial Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford, 1978; repr. New York, 2006), 141. This use of figuration as a weapon against Islamic beliefs was not always exclusively Christian, if the persuasive argument of Robert Hoyland about late seventh-century depictions of Muhammad on coins is taken into account. See his “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions,” *History Compass* 5 (2007), 593–6.

103. For example, see *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons Written in Arabic by Theodore Abu Qurrah, Bishop of Harran* (c. 755–c. 830 A.D.), trans. by S. H. Griffith (Louvain, 1997), 60–1 (xi). On theophany and iconoclasm, see W. T. Woodfin, “A *Majestas Domini* in Middle-Byzantine Constantinople,” *CahArch* 51 (2003–04), 45–53, and my “Angelophany and Art after Iconoclasm,” *DChAE* 26 (2005), 339–44.

sarea that was quoted by the iconophile Germanus, became a trope for the power of vision to reveal Christian truths.<sup>104</sup> If a defining act of Christianity was martyrdom, when one could declare—as the Forty did—I am a Christian,<sup>105</sup> then a defining act open to all Christians was looking, but “looking beyond” to what God really looked like and to what he will look like when he comes to make his own know him face-to-face.<sup>106</sup>

The character and expression of salvation history were both essential concerns in a world in which strongly competing models were available. The choice of the Forty was important for recalling great Christian centers of the Mediterranean, as did the figures on

the side wall: Rome, Constantinople, the Holy Land. And the modality of showing these great figures of the past was essentially Christian, too: face-to-face. The mode of revelation shown was not the scribal reception of Muslim history, but the active creation of holiness through the writing figure and through the epiphany generated through that writing of sacrificial history.<sup>107</sup> In the Oratory, the message was meant to be a comfort, a warning, and a benign lesson in the plan God devised for his own. It was underground, hidden, suppressed, but gloriously available to those with the faith to see.<sup>108</sup>

104. Germanus, *Epistola IV*, Migne PG 98:172CD. See Maguire, *Art & Eloquence*, 8–9.

105. See D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, 1999), 95–6. For the other side, see now the discussion by D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge, 2007).

106. Another defining trait may be the Forty’s painless suffering. See G. Kalas, “Topographical Transitions: The Oratory of the Forty Martyrs and Exhibition Strategies in the Early Medieval Roman Forum,” in *Santa Maria Antiqua al Foro Romano cento anni dopo: Atti del colloquio internazionale, Roma, 5–6 maggio 2000*, ed. by J. Osborne, J. Rasmus Brandt, and G. Morganit (Rome, 2004), 198–211.

107. See Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* (as in note 102), 44–5, and *idem*, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, 1977; repr. Amherst, N.Y., 2004), 33–8.

108. See J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London, 1990), 111, “By definition, we have made the public transcript of domination ontologically prior to the hidden, offstage transcript. The result of proceeding in this fashion is to emphasize the reflexive quality of the hidden transcript as a labor of neutralization and negation. If we think, in schematic terms, of public transcript as comprising a domain of material appropriation (for example, of labor, grain, taxes), a domain of public mastery and subordination (for example, ritual of hierarchy, deference, speech, punishment, and humiliation), and, finally, a domain of ideological justification for inequalities (for example, the public religious and political world view of the dominant elite), then we may perhaps think of the public transcript. It is, if you will, the portion of an acrimonious dialogue that domination has driven off the immediate stage.”