Practices of Re-naming and Re-semanticizing Places in Ibn Gubayr's Journey (Rihla, XII century)

Monica Morazzoni*, Giovanna Giulia Zavettieri**, Lisa Scafa**

1. *Introduction and method of analysis*

Several decades of geographical research have enhanced our understanding of the complex meanings of local action (Turco, 2016; Farinelli, 2003; Cosgrove, Daniels, 1988). To give new meanings to places, environments, and landscapes, numerous inter- and intra-disciplinary approaches exist in the literature (Tuan, 1976; Botta, 1989; Brosseau, 1994; Papotti, Tomasi, 2014; Rossetto, 2014; Rosenberg, 2016; Rossetto, Peterle, 2017). Indeed, the stratifications proper to geographical spaces demand a "new philology" (Gelling 1978; Cooper, Gregory, 2011; Douglas, 2014; Gregory *et alii*, 2015; Cantile, Kerfoot, 2016, 2019; Grava *et alii*, 2020; Gallia, Scaglione, 2021) to complement traditional geographical inquiry: new analytical approaches to construct multidisciplinary research models. This research is thus shaped as a study of historical geography devoted to toponymic analysis and, precisely, to the act of naming a Mediterranean liminal space (Sicily) as a stage in the process of territorialization.

This paper is part of a – theoretical and methodological – multidisciplinary investigation that draws on travel literature, cartography, toponymy, and historical-geographical research to examine the re-naming of Sicilian places as informed by the outlook and perceptions of the Arab traveler Ibn Gubayr.

In 1184, Gubayr embarked on a journey that took him to Sicily, as recorded in his admirable work *Adab al Rihla*, wherein he described the tangible spatial dimensions through a personal perceptual-sensory filter (his own emotional-affective experience and cultural conditioning).

* Milan, IULM University, Italy.

** Rome, Tor Vergata University, Italy.

In the present study, which offers a novel educational perspective, the qualitative-quantitative method developed by Jan Tent (2015) was used to systematically classify the Sicilian place names mentioned in Gubayr's travelogue. The aim has been to "discover", on the one hand, the meanings underlying the toponyms used to name places and, on the other, to present Gubayr's narrative as a "tool" for recovering the meaning of the history of Arab rule in Sicily. To this end, the translations of the *Rihla* by the Arabists, Celestino Schiaparelli (1906) and Michele Amari (1880, 1923 edition) have been studied, and specifically the section devoted to Sicily. The Sicilian place names and descriptions in the *Rihla* were compared with those on the map drawn by Amari in 1859, based on the itineraries and monumental 1154 work of the geographer Idrisi[1]. For Sicilian toponymy, in accordance with Jeremy John's (2004) findings on the work of the traveler Ibn Hawqal, there are numerous limitations of these studies since the correct and original reading of place names cannot always be established with certainty. Furthermore, Sicilian place names are not documented in Arabic works, which requires further investigation. And finally, maps of medieval Sicily do not provide a realistic picture of the island's topography. These difficulties are also related to the lack of studies using toponymy analysis of non-European culture.

The method of analysis comprised the following stages: 1) The reconstruction of Gubayr's travel route using GIS technology; 2) the production of a table with the current name of each Sicilian locality, the corresponding toponyms found in Gubayr's *Rihla* as translated by Amari (1880) and Schiaparelli (1906), and the description of the locality offered by Gubayr; 3) the comparison of the current map of Sicily with Amari's 1859 map, on which the place names are given in both Italian and Arabic; 4) the drafting of a table cataloguing the place-naming practices brought to bear by Gubayr on the Sicilian coast, according to Tent's (2015, p. 71) distinction between descriptive, associative, occurrent, shift, evaluative, eponymous, and indigenous toponyms[2].

Combining historical-cartographic investigation and analysis of travel literature yields the processes of territorialization of the period and the geographical characteristics of the area.

2. *Discovering lands from a sea voyage perspective: the trajectory of Ibn Gubayr*

Ibn Gubayr (Valencia, 1145-Alexandria, 1217) made three separate journeys to Mecca. The first, during which he wrote the *Adab al Rihla*, began in 1183 from Granada and ended back there again two years later.

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[1] The research, in another publication, could be deepened through comparative work on the toponymy presented in Ibn Jubayr's Rihla and in the works of other Arabic authors, such as Ibn Battuta.

[2] Our analysis (see Section 3) identified the use of descriptive, shift, and eponymous toponyms. Specifically, Ibn Gubayr renamed places in order to describe their inherent characteristics (descriptive); he borrowed toponyms, in whole or in part, from other locations or features (shift); and he commemorated or honored a person or other named entity by adopting proper names as toponyms (eponymous).

Fig. 1 – Gubayr's landings in Sicily. The map shows both the current place names and, in italics, those attributed by Gubayr.
Source: GIS processed by the authors.

It was during this first journey that, while returning from Mecca, and after setting sail from Acre (*Akkah*), Ibn Gubayr made his "discovery" of the Sicilian coast (Schiaparelli, 1906, pp. XXV-XXVII), landing initially at Messina (fig. 1): «Paese avvolto nelle tenebre dell'incredulità, il musulmano non vi fissa dimora; zeppa di adoratori della croce, i suoi abitanti vi stanno soffocati […]» (Ibn Gubayr, translation by Schiaparelli, 1906, pp. 320-321).

It was first in Cefalù (Safludi) and later in Termini Imerese (Tarmah) that Gubayr began to detect an atmosphere evocative of the Arab world, noting a rich natural lushness that inspired confidence to the outsider, encouraging an overall positive view of Sicily:

> Città di costiera [Cefalù, ndr], molto ferace di territorio, abbondante in derrate, tutta circondata da vigneti ed altre piante, con mercati ben disposti. Vi dimora un certo numero di Musulmani. […] […] I Musulmani vi hanno [a Termini Imerese, ndr] un sobborgo grande dove trovansi le loro moschee [*ibidem*, pp. 326-327].

In Palermo, where Gubayr spent seven days, he dwelt in great detail on the features that recalled Medina and Islamic culture:

> In questa città i Musulmani conservano traccie di lor credenza; essi tengono in buono stato la maggior parte delle loro moschee e vi fanno la preghiera alla chiamata del muezzin. Vi hanno dei sobborghi dove

dimorano appartati dai Cristiani [...]. Non tengono adunanze congregazionali il venerdì, essendo la hutbah loro proibita; la recitano però nelle feste solenni, facendo l'invocazione a nome del [Califfo] 'abbasida. [...] la più parte servono di scuola ai maestri del Corano. In generale questi Musulmani non praticano coi loro confratelli alla dipendenza degli infedeli [*ibidem*, pp. 330-333].

Again, in Alcamo (*Alqamah*), Gubayr was keen to point out that the inhabitants and those of the *masserie* «che trovansi lungo tutta questa strada» (*ibidem*, p. 333) were Muslims. In Trapani, furthermore, «si trovano mercati, bagni e tutte le comodità cittadine che possono occorrere[...]» (*ibidem*, pp. 333-334).

On March 5, 1185, Gubayr left Sicily for Spain, making his final Sicilian stops at Marettimo (*Malitimah*), Levanzo (*Yabisah*) and Favignana (*ar-Rahib*). This part of the sea was difficult to navigate, hence his perception of encountering isolated and unsafe territories:

Arrivammo all'Isola del Romito (Favignana) [...] appena si accorsero di noi, si posero ad adocchiarci dalla nave […], alzando le voci per salutarci e darci il benvenuto […]. Fu questo un giorno solenne che, dopo la festa, ritenemmo come festa novella [*ibidem*, pp. 343-346].

3. *Sicily in Ibn Gubayr's Adab al Rihla: an experiment in analyzing the renaming practices of the Arab traveler*

Adab al Rihla offers a key case study in interpreting travel accounts within Muslim geography[3]. Nevertheless, literary reinterpretations and geographical insights are scarce – with the exception of Amari's translation, cartography, and criticism, and Schiaparelli's translation. Regarding Sicily between the 10th and 12th centuries, Amari states in a footnote that the «varied, plentiful, and ancient information» on the topography of the island was available at the

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[3] The first hints of a Muslim geography began to take shape in the Abbasid era (IX century) informed by what Martínez (2001, p. 65-67) summarized as three forces, which are the requirements of state administration, the impressive works of translation, and the narratives of early travelers to the lands beyond *Dar al-Islam*. These drivers yielded different branches of geography (scientific, technical, popular shaped by the literary models of the *adab* or Islamic travel literature). Almost all the geographic literature cited above was produced by non-travelling authors based on the material of others. This changed from the tenth century onwards, when geographers began to write accounts informed by their own travels, yielding narratives that remained in line with the *adab* but combined the conventional format with '*iyan* or "personal observation", making for greater realism. Islamist scholars note that Islam has traditionally encouraged Muslims engage in various forms of travel: *hajj* or the pilgrimage to Mecca; *hijra*, migration from *dar al kufr* to *dar al islam* (Morazzoni, Zavettieri, 2019); *ziyarat*, visits to shrines (Morazzoni, Zavettieri, 2020); *al rihla*, journeying in quest of both religious and secular knowledge. Some journeys combined two or more types of travel: for example, for medieval Muslims, *hajj* and *rihla* usually coincided (Eickelman, Piscatori, 1990). The medieval travelers who pioneered the *adab al rihla* or travel tale genre were Ibn Gubayr (1145-1217) and Ibn Battuta (1304-1368).

Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula and on his own *Carte comparée de la Sicile moderne avec la Sicile au XII siècle. D'après Edrisi et d'autres géographes arabes*[4] (fig. 2).
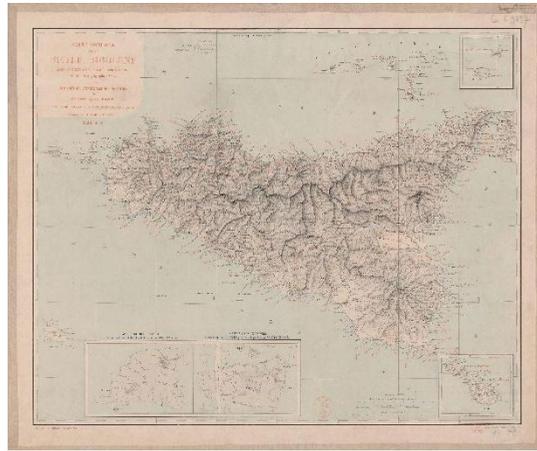

Fig. 2 – *Carte comparée* by Michele Amari, 1859.
Source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53099608z/f1.item.zoom (last accessed July 2022).

The map, based on Idrisi's official itineraries «and some other information» (Amari, 1923, p. XIII), was published in Paris in 1859, accompanied by a *Notice* in French authored with Auguste Henri Dufour, and an index of topographical names drawn from medieval Arabic accounts. The main source of topographical information about Sicily during Muslim rule was Idrisi, who wrote in Arabic and published *Sollazzo di chi brama di percorrere le regioni* in Palermo in 1154.

We found no particular discrepancies between the travelogue of Gubayr, a contemporary of Idrisi, and Amari's map[5]. The latter features place names used by Gubayr and later transliterated into Arabic by Amari. For example, Trapani remained the same, but instead of the *p*, which does not exist in Arabic, the *b* was used, yielding *Trabani*. Similarly, Alcamo remained *Alqamah*, while Marettimo continued to be rendered as *Malitimah*.

Interestingly, Gubayr referred to a number of places (fig. 3) under toponyms not included by Amari. For example: Castellammare del Golfo, which Gubayr alluded to as *Hisn al-hammam* (Castle of the thermal waters) appears

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[4] While Amari sourced his Arabic toponymy from the work of Idrisi, he drew his map from eight plates produced in the late 18th century by Monsignor Airoldi, a Sicilian ethnographer and geographer (Dufour, Amari, 1859, pp. 6-7).

[5] Notably, Amari pointed out in his footnote (1923, p. XIV) that some of the toponyms used by Ibn Gubayr or Idrisi likely do not describe observed phenomena but rather may reference the proper names of landowners of the time. This makes the work of contemporary scholars seeking to shed light on processes of renaming, resignifying, and resemanticizing places even more challenging.

in Amari as *Hisn al-darj*, where *darj* may mean "neutral", yielding "neutral castle". Levanzo is transcribed by Gubayr as *Yabisah*, meaning "solitary", in keeping with the morphology of an island. Possible alternative meanings include "locked up" and "prisoner". In contrast, on Amari's *Carte comparée*, the toponym for Levanzo is *al-jazeerat aliabst*, where *al-jazeerat* means "island" and *aliabst* may be an incorrect transliteration of *alubst* ("lobster"), hence "lobster island". The castle at Maredolce is *Qasr' Ga'far* in both the *Rihla* and the *Carte comparée*. Similarly, Favignana is listed in both documents as *ar-Rahib* meaning "hermit", a personage described by Gubayr as the only inhabitant of Favignana.

Fig. 3 – Detail of Castellammare del Golfo and Alcamo in the *Carte Comparée* of Michele Amari, 1859. *Source*: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53099608z/f1.item.zoom (last accessed July 2022).

After assessing the reliability of the information in the *Rihla* via the comparative analysis just outlined, further investigation was conducted into the types of toponym used. An initial check showed that, of nine locations where Gubayr landed (fig. 1), he renamed four (Maredolce Castle, Palermo, Castellammare del Golfo, Favignana Island). These instances of renaming, following the classification proposed by Tent (2015), deployed the following types of toponym:

a) eponym, e.g., the Castle of Maredolce in the *Rihla* is called *Hisn Ja'far*, meaning "castle of Ja'far". In this case, Gubayr's naming of the place was a

tribute to Emir Ja'far, the Kalbita who ruled over Sicily during the Islamic dynasty; similarly, Favignana became *ar-Rahib* in honor of the hermit who was its sole inhabitant at the time of Gubayr;

b) shift, e.g., Palermo in the *Rihla* became *al-Madinah*, the city where «[...] i Musulmani conservano traccie di lor credenza» (Ibn Gubayr, trans. Schiaparelli, 1906, p. 330);

c) descriptive, e.g., Castellammare del Golfo in the *Rihla* was rendered as *Hisn al-hammam*, meaning "thermal castle". And indeed, Gubayr described Castellammare as a «terra considerevole con molti bagni. Dio ne fece scaturire le sorgenti dal suolo [...]» (*ibidem*, p. 333).

Hence, renaming in the travelogue spanned practices designed on the one hand to celebrate personages and elements of Islamic culture (Azaryahu, 1996, p. 314), and on the other hand to emphasize representative features of Sicily, both natural and man-made, as observed by Gubayr.

4. *Conclusions: future lines of research*

The study of place names offers interesting keys to interpreting a territory. This ongoing research adds new reflections concerning the processes of territorialization that occurred in Sicily. Gubayr's journey, read through the translations of Schiaparelli and Amari, throws up previously undiscovered knowledge concerning various aspects of the Arab domination in Sicily and Muslim-Christian relations. The renaming of places means that the study of place names can offer information about the geographical characteristics of an area, with its settlement patterns, geomorphology, and changes over time, as well as the influence of names on property values (Norris, 1999) and local or foreign cultures.

The study prompts inquiry into a further series of questions: What place-naming practices did Gubayr deploy in the Arab territories? Did he also feel the need to rename and re-semanticize the places of Islamic culture that he encountered on his way to Mecca? Or did this need to re-semanticize landmarks only hold for Sicily as a land of conquest for the Arabs?

Finally, this first study stimulates to check how other Arab travelers renamed Sicilian places. For example, which place names were used by Ibn Battuta in his *Rihla*? Which ones by Ibn Hawqal in the *Kitab al-Masalik*? Which ones by Al Mas'udi in the *Murug ad-dahab*? And which toponyms are found in the numerous compendia written by Arab travelers who remained anonymous?

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Practices of Re-naming and Re-semanticizing Places in Ibn Gubayr's Journey (Rihla, XII century)

The essay delves into toponymy in the literary works of a 12th-century Arab traveler, addressing in particular the issue of the "renaming" of Sicilian places consequent to the processes of territorialization following Arab domination. The study focused on the analysis of Schiaparelli's and Amari's translations of the traveler Ibn Gubayr's work and comparison with the cartographic source of the same translator Amari. The contribution deals with the analysis of a little-known work in the field of geography.

Pratiche di ridenominazione e risemantizzazione dei luoghi nel Viaggio di Ibn Gubayr (Rihla)

Il presente lavoro prende spunto dal resoconto di viaggio di Ibn Gubayr (1145-1217) per dimostrare che la presenza araba in Sicilia ha contribuito a risemantizzare questo spazio geografico, dotandolo di significati informati dalla cultura e dalle percezioni islamiche. Riletti oggi, i toponimi offrono un punto di partenza per ricostruire lo spazio arabo nell'isola. La ricerca combina tre ambiti: la letteratura di viaggio, la toponomastica e la cartografia storica e digitale.

Pratiques de renommage et de resémantisation des lieux dans le Voyage d'Ibn Gubayr (Rihla)

Cet article prend comme point de départ le récit de voyage d'Ibn Gubayr (1145-1217) pour démontrer que la présence arabe en Sicile a contribué à ressembler cet espace géographique, en lui donnant des significations informées par la culture et les perceptions islamiques. Relus aujourd'hui, les noms de lieux offrent un point de départ pour reconstruire l'espace arabe sur l'île. La recherche combine trois domaines : la littérature de voyage, la toponymie et la cartographie historique et numérique.