

## A case of socio-cultural and military integration

# The Sicilian crucible and Lucaera Saracenorum

Have you heard the one about the Polish Bishop, a French Saint and a Sicilian Syndicate? This may sound like the opening of an irreverent joke, but the link between these seemingly odd bedfellows is real enough, and one that solves an old enigma within the world of medieval military history. Furthermore, it gives us a unique insight into a remarkable experiment of cultural and military syndication in Sicily and southern Italy during the High Middle Ages.

By Nils Visser

The Polish Bishop was Cardinal Bernard Maciejowski (1548-1608), Bishop of Kraków. In 1608, this cleric sent Shah Abbas the Great (1571-1629), king of Persia, a diplomatic gift: an extraordinarily beautiful bible filled with spectacular illustrations representing Biblical tales. This connection gave the bible its name: the *Maciejowski Bible*.

The book dates back to the mid-thirteenth century, when it was commissioned by King Louis IX of France (1214-1270), who would later become Saint Louis. The illustrations in the book are believed to have been drawn by five or six different

artists from northern France. The work commenced between 1244 and 1254, but it wasn't until the turn of the thirteenth century that it was sent to Naples to be completed by the addition of text.

The *Maciejowski Bible* is remarkable for its richly coloured and detailed illustrations. When leafing through these portrayals of Biblical scenes, a comparison with a comic book is hard to avoid, albeit that in drawing an analogy with a comic book, the artwork contained in the *Maciejowski Bible* represents the high quality artwork of a *bande dessinée* graphic novel compared with, for example, the cartoon style depictions of the Bayeux Tapestry.

Although the content of the *Maciejowski Bible* is Biblical, the visual

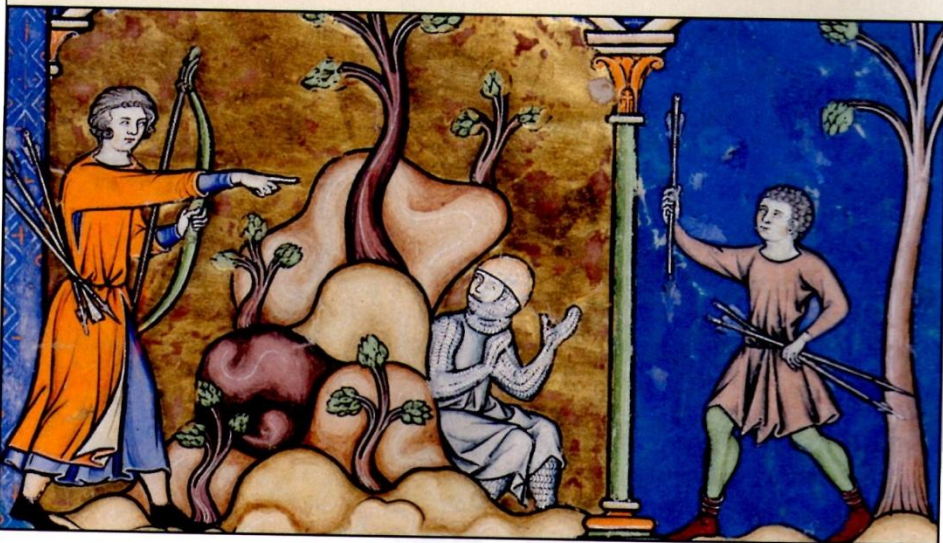
representation is that of thirteenth century France, thus forming a veritable treasure trove of information regarding dress, armour and weaponry. It is often cited as the source for replica items or the portrayal of martial capacities and materials, such as crossbows and bows.

### The Maciejowski bow

The depiction of bows in the *Maciejowski Bible* has initiated some debate. Bows can be seen in a variety of settings, from pastoral hunts to battles. They all have in common that they appear to be composite bows, to judge by the proportions, the hints at recurved limbs and the clearly visible *siyahs* (stiff 'ears' protruding at an angle from the limbs of the bow).

Rather than consisting of a single stave of wood like the war bows used by medieval English archers, composite bows are a combination of different components (wood or bamboo with horn or bone, and sinew) which have been glued together. The general assumption is that this type of bow has no business being in northern Europe, as the wet northern climate is considered to be harmful for the glue that holds the composite bow together, just as the southern climate is considered to be harmful to war bows, as they would dry out quickly. Hence an easy to understand division has arisen: composite bows to the south and east, war bows to the north.

However, that argument conveniently ignores the fact that pictorial and physical evidence from the High Middle Ages suggest that crossbows from this period were



A hunting scene from the *Maciejowski Bible*. Note how detailed the manner in which the string is attached to the *siyah* is portrayed, as well as the different types of arrowheads.



also of a composite nature.

Moreover, there is evidence that composite bows had been used in northern Europe before. The Romans, for example, had stationed the First Cohort of Hamian Archers (*Cohors I Hamiorum Sagittariorum*) at Hadrian's Wall. The Romans were well aware that bows could be protected from northern climates by bark and lacquer, a method also used in the Far East, where composite bows were by far the most common type of bow, and where tropical humidity posed just as great a threat to the composite's glues.

Furthermore, this type of model, relatively flat when unstrung, circular when strung and drawn without multiple curves, is typical for composite bows made in colder climates. Bows of this type exist in northern Finland, Burjat and Tibet.

We also find usage of this bow much closer to the time frame of the *Maciejowski Bible*. None other than Richard Lionheart, king of England, employed Saracen mercenaries from the Holy Land. Richard had 120 of these mounted archers at his disposal and he used them during his campaign to re-conquer Normandy (1195-1199).

Other arguments that dispute the validity of the pictorial evidence in the *Maciejowski Bible* suggest that it was fashionable to draw longbows in a style that depicted them as composite bows. However, this seems at odds with the widely accepted reputation for accuracy enjoyed by the Maciejowski illustrations.

Another line of argument suggests that the artists deliberately depicted the bow in a Saracen style because the scenes took place in the Middle East. This not only begs the question as to why they didn't draw other weapons and armour in the distinctive Saracen style, but also poses a rather tricky dilemma. The man who had commissioned the *Maciejowski Bible* had been soundly defeated in the Battle of Al Mansurah and the Battle of Fariskur during the Seventh Crusade, the very places where King Louis had seen these types of bow in action. How wise would it be to remind a king, even one with a saintly reputation, of major military defeats?

### The Sicilian Syndicate

A new lead was provided by the *Oxford Companion to Military History*, which states that composite bows were used

in medieval Italy and France more or less continuously. Since France seemed to pose more questions than answers, eyes turned towards Italy. There was plenty of evidence of the use of composite bows during battles in the Early and High Middle Ages, and, surprisingly enough for the location, they were often wielded by an elite force of Saracen mercenaries.

The story of these mercenaries leads us back to the eleventh century, 1061 to be precise. It was in this year that the Muslim dominion of Sicily came under attack by the Normans, who completed their conquest of Sicily by 1091. The manner in which the Norman Kingdom of Sicily was occupied forms a striking contrast to the manner in which William the Conqueror was securing his hold on England at roughly the same time. Roger d'Hauteville, the Norman who had conquered the island under the leadership of his brother Robert Guiscard, became count (1071) and later king of Sicily. He wanted a Sicily in which all the diverse segments of the population co-existed peacefully. In other words, he respected the cultural heritage and religions of all, as the Muslim author Ibn al-Athir wrote: "They [the Muslims] were treated kindly, and they were protected, even against the Franks. Because of that, they had great love for king Roger." (translated in: Pierre Aubé, *Les empires normands d'Orient*, pp. 168)

This policy of tolerance and equality was continued by Roger's successors, as the geographer Ibn Jubair discovered when he stopped at the island in 1184. Ibn Jubair was astounded by the manner in which the Norman rulers treated the Muslim population: "The attitude of the king is really extraordinary. His attitude towards the Muslims is perfect: he gives them employment, he chooses his officers among them... The king has full confidence in the Muslims and relies on them to handle many of his affairs, including the most important ones." (Bernard Lewis, *Les Arabes dans l'histoire* (Brussel 1958), pp 148)

In all fairness, it must be observed that Norman tolerance and acceptance of Muslim cultural identity wasn't based on humanitarian principles as much as the basic mathematics of survival. The Normans had gained a foothold in Sicily simply because internal strife had led one of the warring parties to invite them to



Detail from a larger picture in the *Maciejowski Bible*, showing the figure who has become the symbolic representation of the *Maciejowski Bible Archer*. Note the distinctive shape of the bow.

Sicily as mercenaries, after which they had continued to play one party off against another until their conquest was completed. Even then, the Norman presence was never large enough for numerical dominance, so in the first instance cooperation and mutual respect was an essential element in maintaining the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. However, we can state that the clarity of vision with which the Normans realized this was remarkable, considering the fact that they were known not so much for subtlety of approach or intuitive understanding as they were for enforced acquisition and an instinct for violence.

Not much later the Norman rulers assimilated many local ways, having been charmed by aspects of Muslim culture. The Muslims themselves, in the meantime, flourished. The new political and military stability imposed by Norman rule allowed the Muslims to focus on something other than internal strife, namely the finer aspects of life. Sicily became a centre of learning, with the promotion of literature, poetry and science. Thus, it played a unique part in transferring essential elements of Islamic civilization to the Europeans, whose culture was crude in comparison, as witnessed by the maintenance of Norman judicial practices – which included trials by fire, water and hand-to-hand combat – for some time yet.

The Norman-Sicilian acculturation reached new levels when Frederick II became King of Sicily in 1198. Frederick's father had been the Holy Roman Emperor, a title which Frederick assumed in 1220. Frederick was of the house of Hohenstaufen, but he was also the son



of the Norman Constance of Sicily, and grandson of King Roger II of Sicily. It seems almost beyond doubt that he inherited a cultural sensitivity from his Sicilian-Norman forebears. Frederick spoke six languages and supported science and the arts, especially literature and poetry. He held Muslim culture in high regard and adopted so many facets of it that he was often considered half a Muslim himself, thus earning himself even more enmity of the Pope.

All the more ironic then that deteriorating relations between the Sicilian Saracens and some of the Norman landowners in Sicily led to religious uprisings, which Frederick had to suppress. When this was done, he expelled all the Muslim inhabitants of Sicily, sending many to live in the town of Lucera on the Italian mainland, so that he could exercise better control over them. By the 1240s, they numbered some 40,000 souls. Because of this, Lucera was often called *Lucaera Saracenorum*.

In both Norman Sicily and Lucera the spirit of co-operation extended to the military, partially because of the concept of military bondage owed by a defeated foe to

*One of the towers of Lucera Castle, now ruined, but still impressive. After religious uprisings in Sicily, Frederik II sent many Muslims from the island to live in this town. In 1300, the city was attacked by Charles II, who had decided to remove as many Saracen inhabitants from southern Italy as possible. The city was taken and all Muslim buildings were destroyed.*



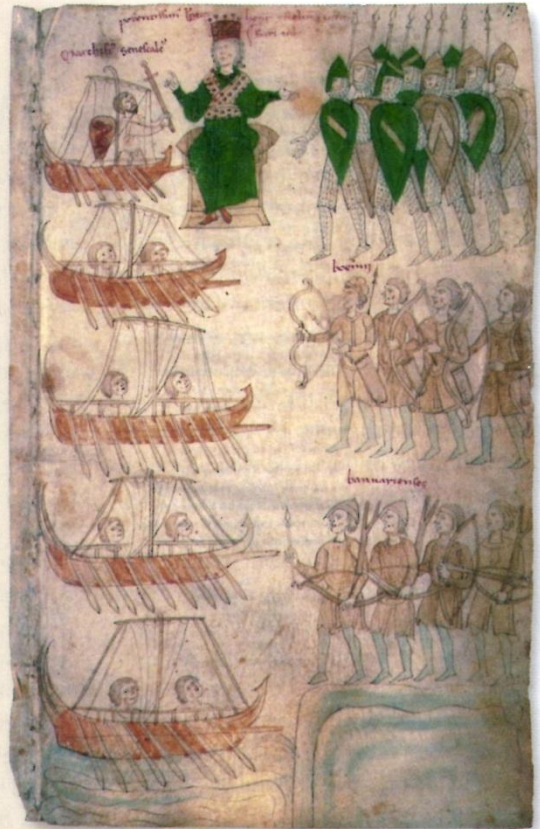
© Picture from Puglia tourist board

his new liege lord, which proved very useful for the numerically inferior Normans. This practice was continued by Frederick II and Charles of Naples in Italy.

The strengths and weaknesses of the Normans and Saracens complemented each other. The Normans had at their disposal formidable heavy cavalry units. The Normans in the Mediterranean, however, did not have a great deal of long-range missile units. One contemporary commentator conveyed his surprise that archery was deemed unimportant and delegated to young lads and elderly men. The Sicilian Saracens, on the other hand, did not have the staying power of the Franks, but did have the mobility and long range striking power of their (mounted) archers. David Nicolle described them as the most effective infantry in twelfth century Europe, armed as they were with powerful composite bows.

The most likely origin of the composite bows used by the Sicilian Saracens is in a mixture of the Arab bow and the eastern composite bow that was reintroduced to the Middle East by the Seljuks from Central Asia. The Arab bow is of a composite nature, usually two components, but doesn't have recurves, and when strung is straight-limbed. It was these bows that accompanied the original expansion of Islam. The prophet Muhammad himself was an archer. Some bows that might have been his can still be seen in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. There are some 40 *Hadith* (traditional sayings or stories) related to Muhammad and archery. He saw archery as beneficial for body and soul, and as something every devout Muslim should actively strive to practice: "The hand of man has wielded no weapon which was not excelled by the bow," (Anonymous, *A Book on the Excellence of the Bow and Arrow and the Description thereof (Arab Archery)*, introduction; c. 1500 AD), and "Everything with which a man amuses himself is vain except three [things]: a man's training of his horse, his playing with his wife, and his shooting with his bow and arrow." (Sunan Abu-Dawud, *Kitab Al-Jihad*, Book 14, Number 2507; probably from 860-890 AD).

The Sicilian Muslims originally hailed



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*Illustration from the Liber ad Honorem Augustis, depicting a Norman/Sicilian army on the move in the late eleventh – early twelfth century. Note the typical Norman armaments in the top group. The lower group of archers wear more simple garments and their bows are simple selfbows. The middle group has Mamluk style quivers and are armed with different types of composite bows. These latter Saracen soldiers were probably in the service of the Normans.*

from North Africa, Berbers from Morocco or Moors from Andalusia. When the Islamic conquest of Sicily began in the ninth century, archers would not yet have had access to more complex composite designs and weren't mounted archers in the sense that they had skills akin to the Turkish nomads whose arrival was still more than a century away. Once the Seljuks arrived and were converted to Islam, the techniques for building and using composites would have spread throughout the Mediterranean. By the thirteenth century, the Saracen archers from Lucera were foot archers as well as mounted archers, the numbers in recorded levies being roughly equal. Both types had access to *arcu de cornu* (horn bows) and *arcu de osso* (bone bows), indicating more complex eastern composite bows.

To give an indication of what an Arab composite bow was like, we turn



to Taybugha Al-Ashrafi Al-Baklamishi Al-Yunani, who wrote *The Complete Manual of Archery for Cadets* in 1368. His description of a Syrian made bow was as follows: they "have power, strength, speed of recovery, suppleness, liveliness, and efficiency of performance. Furthermore they have beauty and grace, give a smooth and comfortable draw and are light and elegant to carry."

According to Giovanni Amatuccio, "These bows were built by (...) the Saracens of the South: the most important example is the so-called 'Ghazena' Lucera, i.e. a workshop for the construction of missile throwing weapons..." (*Saracen Archers in Southern Italy*, paragraph 14)

### The Lucera Saracen Archer

We can now begin to form a picture of a Lucera Saracen archer in the thirteenth century.

He would have been based at the Castle of Lucera, and although bound in military service to his monarch, i.e. a *servi camera regie* (servant of the crown), he would have been paid for his services fifteen golden *tareni* a month. His family would have lived in the town of Lucera, and during peacetime he might well have been employed in the armaments industry, perhaps as a fletcher or bowyer's assistant.

It is likely that our archer was a devout Muslim, as faith was strong in the Lucera community. As a believer, our archer would have associated archery with a sacred obligation, a *fard kifayah* assigned by holy writings or the Quran. The spiritual interpretation of archery went as far as seeing the composite bow as being symbolic of the human body, with the wood akin to bone, the horn to flesh, the sinews to arteries and the glue to blood. It is even said that arrows shot at target ranges were retrieved barefoot, out of respect for the hallowed ground between the shooting position and the target, although a more practical view is that bare feet would have helped to locate arrows burrowed into the ground.

Our archer would have been a good shot. Archers were expected to hit a metre-wide target at a distance of 75 metres, and if he was mounted he would have been able to fire a succession of arrows from the back of a galloping horse. Although probably not as well trained as his Mamluk counterparts further to the east (whose



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training purportedly took eight years), he would have been better trained than many of the opponents he was likely to meet on Italian battlefields.

Our archer would have had access to increasingly standardized equipment. A *giubetta* (quilted coat); a light helmet called a *cerveilliera*; a sword; a dagger called a *coltello con punta*; a bow of bone or horn; a *coccar* quiver; small round shields called *rotelle*; shoulder protectors called *spalliere*; and something called a *tacche*, which is generally assumed to mean an archer's thumb ring. He also would have had a bow case, references to which indi-

*Depiction of two Luceran archers in the thirteenth century. Characteristic of the Luceran archers is that they were allowed to retain their own cultural identity, and remained recognizable as Saracen troops. Later attempts to isolate Lucera from contacts with the Islamic world only strengthened this sense of identity. Also typical is the inclusion of Norman/European equipment, like the straight swords and gambesons. The bows are based on a reconstruction by bowyer Magén Klomp of the bows in the Maciejowski Bible, a less complex form of the eastern composite bow suited to colder climates and mass production as practised at the Lucera Ghazena workshops.*



cate composite rather than regular bows, as the latter is much too long to fit into a case.

Our archer would probably have been able to read. The Arabs wrote a large number of treatises on matters of war which were studied throughout the Islamic world. The manuals are comprehensive and varied. Besides containing information with regard to the basics of archery (stance, arrow types, nocking an arrow, etc.), they also contain all sorts of tactical advice. A few gems that come to mind include what the best course of action is when confronted with a wild lion, and how to use a Georgian quiver to determine the progress of pursuit by enemy horsemen.

He would have probably served under one of the Muslims who had been knighted and granted land. Perhaps our archer served Captain Ibrahim, who was sent to Achaea in Greece in 1273. Possibly he served the Muslim knight Riccardo, who led a unit of archers to Romania that same year, and who brought another unit of 100 archers to Albania in 1275, where they spent three months defending the city of Dyrrhachium against a Byzantine force.

In larger battles, the Sicilian Saracens, partially on foot, partially mounted, didn't wholly imitate Seljuk tactics, which relied on fully mounted armies and lightning quick strikes. The foot archers, mixed with regular infantry, provided backup for the units of heavy cavalry. The mounted archers used their mobility and speed to outmanoeuvre enemy formations or strike at the enemy flanks or supplies.

Sicilian archers were used as auxiliary troops early on in the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. In 1076, they played a part in the capture of Salerno, and in 1091 they partook in the siege of Cosenza. Further references place them at Castrovillari, Amalfi and the crossing of the Messina Strait in, respectively, 1094, 1096 and 1098. From 1130 onwards, King Roger II used them in his Royal Guard.

The Lucera archers also served Frederick II in northern Italy. In 1236, 7000 were involved in the capture of Montichiari castle. In August 1237, 10,000 of them were sent to Ravenna by the Emperor, and in September 1237, 7000 reported for duty at Mantua and in November of that year fought at the Battle of Cortenuova. At this last battle they apparently saved the day at the end of the battle by "emptying their quiver", according to Pier delle Vigne

(Amatuccio, *Saracen Archers in Southern Italy*, paragraph 4).

After Frederick II died, the Saracen archers served his son Manfred. In 1254, they fought in the Battle of Guardia de Lombardi, and in that same year played a major part in the capture of San Germano, entering the city in secret and opening the main gate for the rest of the army. In 1266, they fought at the Battle of Benevento, which Manfred lost. Power over Sicily and Southern Italy passed to the victor, Prince Charles of Anjou, who would become King Charles I of Sicily. Some of the spoils of war were found in the treasure room of Lucera Castle, including a very large quantity of bows.

Charles I of Sicily continued to use Saracen archers in his armies, employing them in the Balkans, in Tunisia, during the War of the Sicilian Vespers, and onboard warships. However, the numbers of Saracens employed started to decrease. It's possible that Charles I didn't place full trust in them. Moreover, the popularity of the crossbow was steadily increasing.

By the turn of the century, Charles II of Naples decided that the presence of an Islamic community on the Italian mainland was not desirable. In 1300, his army attacked Lucera, killing the defenders and exiling or selling the survivors into slavery. All mosques and other 'alien' influences in Lucera were razed. The factory at Lucera and the expertise found there were lost.

By the by, Prince Charles of Anjou was the son of Louis VIII of France, and the younger brother of none other than Louis IX. It stands to reason that Louis, seeking to arm himself to face a possible Mongolian assault on France, would have appealed to his brother, who controlled an armoury full of composite bows, a production site, the artisans who made the bows and the archers to shoot them. In answer to the question where the composite bows in the *Maciejowski Bible* came from, we can now venture with considerable confidence that they were made by Saracen *Magistri* at the Lucera Chazena in Lucera in southern Italy – the by-product of a remarkable period of integration on a scale seldom seen in history. ●

**When Nils Visser had to decide what subject he was going to teach at school it was either going to be English or History. He opted for English, which**

**he teaches at a Dutch secondary school, while he continues to research various medieval topics. This article is part of a much wider research into the links between Europe and Asia in the Middle Ages, specifically with regard to archery, as he's also a keen traditional archer. Nils wants to thank the following people for their invaluable assistance: Stephen Selby at Asian Traditional Archery Research Network; Magén Klomp at Fairbow Netherlands; Kaouthar Chatioui and Professor Salim Al-Hassani at the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization; Peter Dekker at Traditional Manchu Archery; Muhammad Ali Hein at Faris Reenactment Bazar; Sandra Camino at le Musée de l'Archerie et du Valois.**

#### Further reading

- Giovanni Amatuccio, *Aspects of the interchange of military technology in the Norman-Swabian South*. Florence, Naples et al. 2006.
- Giovanni Amatuccio, *Saracen Archers in Southern Italy*, available at: *De Re Militarii* (2001).
- Pierre Aubé, *Les empires normands d'Orient*. Paris 2006.
- David Nicolle, *The Normans*. Oxford 1987.
- Julie Anne Taylor, *Muslims in Medieval Italy: The Colony at Lucera*. Lanham 2005.
- *The Liber ad honorem Augusti sive de rebus Siculis*.
- Taybugha Al-Ashrafi Al-Baklamishi Al-Yunani, *The Complete Manual of Archery for Cadets*. London 1970.
- *The Maciejowski Bible*. Most of the folios that make up the *Maciejowski Bible* are kept at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Two folios can be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and one folio is in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The website [www.medievaltymes.com](http://www.medievaltymes.com) has done a splendid job in making the *Maciejowski Bible* illustrations available to a global public.