

Henna for Christmas Mass in Sicily, 1184

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Ibn Jubayr spent some winter weeks in Palermo on his return from his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1184. He observed Sicilian women going Christmas mass at the Church of St. Mary of the Admirals, *La Martorana*.

“The Christian women's dress in this city is the dress of Muslims; they are eloquent speakers of Arabic and cover themselves with veils. They go out at this aforementioned festival clothed in golden silk, covered in shining wraps, colorful veils and with light gilded sandals. They appear at their churches bearing all the finery of Muslim women in their attire, henna and perfume.”¹

¹ Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr*, (Beirut 1962) 307. Translated by A. Metcalfe, Muslims and Christians 97. *La Martorana* (c. 1143) was commissioned by George of Antioch, the chief vizer of Roger II

What was it about these hennaed, veiled women going to Christmas mass that caught Ibn Jubayr's attention, and why did he feel that it was important to comment on them? Ibn Jubayr was a highly educated Muslim geographer, traveler, and poet from Valencia, Spain, when *al-Andalus* was a cultural mosaic of European and North African people, Christian, Jewish and Muslim, as was Sicily.ⁱⁱ

Ibn Jubayr traveled to Mecca to expiate a transgression and to gain a greater understanding of the changing world around him. Though Muslim culture had expanded into southern Europe and been welcomed as an improvement on the collapsing Roman Empire and European Dark Ages, the Muslim territories were under pressure by Northern European armies. Ibn Jubayr worked as a secretary to the governor of Granada. The governor insisted that Ibn Jubayr, a Muslim, drink seven cups of wine as proof of his loyalty, under threat of retaliation. Muslims in Spain were often required to prove that their faith was subordinate to their loyalty to Christian governors. For personal redemption of what he felt to have been a shameful act, though forced, and to gain a greater understanding of the world of his time, he decided to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. He left Granada in February 1183. He later wrote of his travels, his *Rihla*, which is regarded as a definitive and influential early travelogue and commentary about the interplay of Christendom and the Islamic world.

In the *Rihla*, Jubayr observed the assimilation and fragmentation of Islam's northern frontier in the early eleventh century which Christian polities exploited to retake Arab-conquered territories. Relations between Muslim rulers and their Christian and, to a lesser degree, Jewish subjects, were deteriorating in response to a fracturing of Muslim unity in North Africa.² This changing dynamic created the political strife, instability, and opportunism that resulted in the crusades and the Inquisition,³ and later the erasure of the Islamic influence in science, medicine, literature, art, and music that gave rise to the Renaissance.

From this perspective, Jubayr observed Sicilian women going to Christmas mass, dressed and adorned in henna and stylish Arab clothing. Were these Christian women who had adopted

2 LÁZARO, FABIO LÓPEZ. 2013. "The Rise and Global Significance of the First "West": The Medieval Islamic Maghrib." *Journal Of World History* 24, no. 2: 259-307.

3 Leiser, Gary La Viere. "The Crusader Raid in the Red Sea in 578/1182-83." *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 14 (1977): 87-100. doi:10.2307/40000370.

Muslim culture during 250 years as an Islamic caliphate? Were these crypto-Muslim women; Muslimas who had made superficial changes to their names and ceremonies for the sake of carrying on their lives with less interference from Christian authorities? These Christian women were wealthy and privileged enough to afford whatever fashion they desired, but they chose henna, beautiful shoes, and fine cloth in the fashionable Arabic style. They had not chosen Byzantine or Northern European style. They were citizens of a splendid, wealthy, enlightened Islamic Sicily. As Ibn Jubayr described Al-Kasr and Al-Khalisa, Sicily,

“The capital is endowed with two gifts, splendor and wealth. It contains all the real and imagined beauty that anyone could wish. Splendor and grace adorn the piazzas and the countryside; the streets and highways are wide, and the eye is dazzled by the beauty of its situation. It is a city full of marvels, with buildings similar to those of Córdoba [sic], built of limestone. A permanent stream of water from four springs runs through the city. There are so many mosques that they are impossible to count. Most of them also serve as schools. The eye is dazzled by all of this splendor.”

Was festive holiday henna a new concept for Sicily, or had henna always been an off-and-on part of Sicilian culture? Sicily was on the northern margin of viability for the henna plant and there is no reason to assume that it could grow in sheltered areas, or be easily transported from nearby Tunisia,⁴ where henna has grown since the recession of the most recent Ice Age.⁵ Was henna set and reset century after century into whatever happened to be the dominant religious/cultural/political framework of the time? In this particular time of wealth and enlightenment for Sicily, henna was cast within the Islamic cultural framework, not the earlier Byzantine, Greek, or Roman, and not yet forbidden by the papacy as heresy.

The Muslim world expanded rapidly outward from the Arabian Peninsula through conversion and conquest following the establishment of Islam by Prophet Mohammed in 610 CE. As Islam expanded into the Mediterranean, Sicily was used as a base by the Byzantines against the Islamic

4 Boubaya, A., Hannachi, H., Marzougui, N., Triki, T., Guasmi, F., Ferchichi, A., 2013. “Genetic diversity assessment of *Lawsonia inermis* germplasm in Tunisian coastal oases by ISSR and RAPD markers.” *Dendrobiology* 69, 31-39.

5 Boubaya, A., Marzougui, N., Yahia, L.B., Ferchichi, A., 2011. “Chemical diversity analysis of Tunisian *Lawsonia inermis* L. populations.” *African Journal of Biotechnology*. 10, 4980-4987.

countries in North Africa between 681 and 682. Arab armies expanded into Sicily in 727, further into Sardinia, later into Corsica, Spain, and southern provinces in Italy. In 827, the Byzantines were defeated in Sicily, and the first mosque in Sicily was built in 859 in Castrogiovanni by Abbas ibn Fadl. By 872, there were many mosques in Palermo, where Muslims and converts lavishly celebrated the *Id al-Fitr*, and *Id Al-Adha*. For 250 years Sicily was an emirate, a province of the Aghlabid Emirate of Ifriqiya (831–909) and of the Fatimid Caliphate.

Muslim culture rather than Islamic religiosity spread in Sicily, and Sicily prospered as an Emirate. The Arabs introduced new crops and industries to Sicily: they cultivated sugar cane and manufactured sugar; they cultivated mulberry trees and expanded the silk industry with brocade loom techniques. They cultivated dates, oranges, lemons, and pistachio trees that had higher profits per water and soil usage than wheat. The population, culture, and wealth of Sicily grew through increased trade with Arabs, Berbers, Germans, Slavs, Iranians, Jews, Turks and Black Africans, in addition to the Greek and Byzantine Roman Mediterranean population already present. Visitors from the Caliphate complained that Sicilian Muslims were neither particularly pious nor strict.⁶

The henna plant itself did not change during Sicily's political transition from Phoenician to Punic to Roman to Byzantine and Greek to an Emirate, as the plant did not change during the politics of previous centuries.ⁱⁱⁱ Henna can grow in any frost-free area with sparse rainfall, high summer heat and long droughts.^{iv} Henna has probably grown during warmer centuries in Sicily since withdrawal of the last Ice Age,^v and in cooler centuries, henna could easily have been imported from Tunisia if there was cultural or medicinal inclusion of henna as an ethnobotanical plant. (Henna can grow in the same climate as aforementioned oranges, lemons, dates and pistachios.) Women used henna as a devotion to Anath in the Phoenician⁷ culture, and to Tanith during the Punic Empire⁸ in Tunisia and the southern Mediterranean.^{vi} Sicily was a cultural and trading partner of both of those empires when it was not one of their colonies. Both Christian and Roman polytheistic women dyed their hair with henna in third century Carthage. Though Saint

6 A. Ahmad, *A History of Islamic Sicily* Edinburgh 1975, p 41.

7 De Moor, Johannes C. (1971) *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu According to the Version of Ilimilku*, Verlag Butzon & Berker Kevelaer, Neukirchen – Vluyn

8 Harrison, R., (1988) *Spain at the Dawn of History*, Thames and Hudson p. 88

Cyprian⁹ preached against henna around 300 CE as pagan vanity,¹⁰ Coptic Christian women continued to henna their hair and use it to color their hands and nails.¹¹ The fact that Ibn Jabayr saw women with hennaed hands going to Christmas Mass indicates that henna was cultivated and dried: henna growing live is at its poorest quality in December because of cool weather. If women were wearing henna at Christmas, they had purchased dried leaves or powder, indicating a henna-processing industry as there was in Spain.¹²

Therefore, the use of henna was not unfamiliar to Sicilian women, nor was henna antithetical to Christian religion, though their use of henna may have been culturally reframed if they converted to Islam or adopted Arab habits during the 250 years that Sicily was an Emirate.¹³ Henna had been part of Arab women's culture of cleanliness, cosmetics, and celebration at least since the Bronze Age; the Prophet Mohammed approved henna as an ethno-pharmaceutical and as self-care for women. Women used henna as a stain for their fingertips and fingernails, for their feet and soles, and to mask graying hair. "The night of the henna" was a polytheistic Levantine Bronze Age woman's social celebration for puberty which was incorporated into Muslim culture. Henna was a part of women's economies in Muslim culture: a Mamluk ruling designated women as specialists in applying henna,¹⁴ using henna as a hair stylist,¹⁵ and dressing a Muslim, Jewish, or Christian bride with henna.¹⁶ Whatever Phoenician and Punic henna culture might have still been present in Sicily following the Roman and Greco-Byzantine cultures was reintroduced or reinforced by Muslim culture during the period of the Emirate.

9 Saint Cyprian, 3rd Century, *On the Dress of Virgins*, 16. "With evil presage of the future, you make a beginning to yourself already of flame-coloured hair; and sin (oh, wickedness!) with your head -that is, with the nobler part of your body!"

10 De Habitu Virginum: http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0200-0258,_Cyprianus_Carthaginensis,_Liber_de_Habitu_Virginum_%5BSchaff%5D,_EN.pdf

11 Emily Anne Beaufort: Egyptian sepulchers and Syrian shrines: including some stay in the Lebanon, at Palmyra and in Western Turkey ; in 2 vol. (Band 1), London, 1862, page: 389

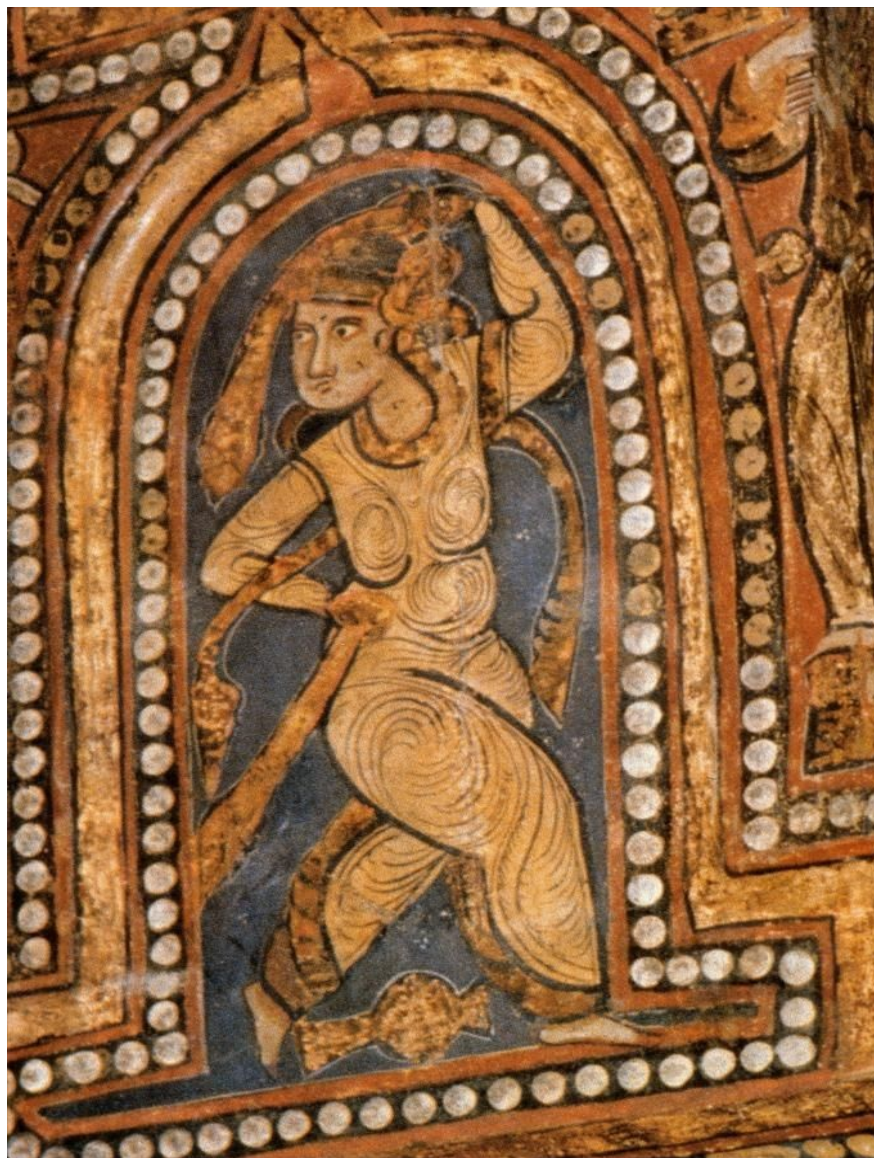
12 Harrison, R., (1988) *Spain at the Dawn of History*, Thames and Hudson, p, 52

13 The island of Sicily was the Province of the Aghlabid Emirate of Ifriqiya (831–909) and of the Fatimid Caliphate (909–948), after 948 autonomous emirate under the Kalbids.

14 Wansharisi, *Mi'yar*, vol, XII, fatwa of Ibn 'Araga

15 Ahmad 'Abd Ar-Raziq, 1873, *La Femme au Temps de Mamlouks en Egypte*. p 82

16 S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1, p 127



Scarf Dancer with hennaed hands and hennaed toes, the Painted Wooden Ceiling of the Palatine Chapel, "Cappella Palatina" Palermo, Sicily, 1140 CE

The Scarf Dancers' toes and soles are colored as if to represent hennaed feet. The markings on her raised hand are consistent with dark henna patterns, and may represent a complex henna pattern on her palm. Her lower hand, turned to the side, is also depicted with markings consistent with henna.



Detail: Scarf Dancer, the Painted Wooden Ceiling of the Palatine Chapel, "Cappella Palatina"
Palermo, Sicily, 1140 CE.

The hand near her hip is also marked with a dark color on the palms and fingertips, consistent with henna. Her toes are marked with color consistent with henna. Professional dancers were highly regarded artists by the Muslim elite, and in Safavid Persian manuscripts and Qajar paintings are similarly depicted with hennaed hands and feet. Her hand and foot markings are similar to the hennaed hands of the female chess player, 1251-1282, Seville, Spain.¹⁷ Henna on hands drew attention to a dancer's gestures. Her pose is similar to the Spanish dancer from the ceiling of the Cathedral of Teruel, Spain, 13th century, who was also depicted with hennaed fingertips. Henna on feet was protective as well as beautiful; when dancers had long performances on tile floors; henna kept their feet free of blisters and callouses, and reduced swelling.

¹⁷ *Libro de acedrex, dados e tablas*, or Chess, Dice, and Backgammon, commissioned by Alfonso X between 1251-1282 in Seville by Alphonso X, King of Leon and Castile.



Nude woman with hennaed hands and feet to wrists and ankles, tattooed breast, cheeks, and forehead, with wine and flowers, carrying a lute, from Fatimid Egypt,¹⁸ ink on paper, Jerusalem, Israel Museum, M 165-4-65¹⁹

The dancer's henna may be interpreted as having more complex patterning than seen in the ceiling painting, if compared to an Egyptian Fatimid illustration of a hennaed, tattooed, nude lutenist. Complex henna patterning was certainly achievable during the Fatimid period, 909-1171 CE, and the most beautiful, privileged women were happy to indulge in it.

18 Muqarnas: *An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*, Volume 17, edited by Gulru Necipogulu, David J. Roxburgh, p. 21

19 Rachel Milstein and N. Brosch, *Islamic Painting in the Israel Museum*, (Jerusalem, 1984) p. 23



Female frame drummer with hennaed drum and hennaed fingernails, tattooed cheeks, forehead, and ankles the Painted Wooden Ceiling of the Palatine Chapel, "Cappella Palatina", Palermo, Sicily, 1140 CE

The frame drummer from the Cappella Palatina has a drumhead marked with henna, and she is depicted with conspicuously long, darkened fingernails on her drumming hand. Fingernails are often used for percussive effects on frame drums in North African and Levantine music; henna would have been helpful in growing long, strong fingernails. This hennaed drumhead is similar

to the hennaed drumhead shown in the manuscript, “The Golden Haggadah” from the 14th century, Spain.²⁰



Female musician with Muslim style dress, tattooed cheeks and forehead, possibly hennaed fingertips and soles depicted in the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, Sicily, 1140 CE.²¹

20 Golden Haggadah, c. 1320, northern Spain, probably Barcelona (British Library, MS. 27210, fol. 15 recto)

21 <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/category/past-present/race-class-religion/race-racism-and-the-middle-ages/page/3/>



Female musicians depicted in the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, Sicily, 1140 CE ²²

Both women in this painting have tattoo marks on the backs of their hands, cheeks, and ankles. The colored tip of the thumb on the bowing hand of the woman in red playing a rebec is consistent with her thumb tip being hennaed. The index finger tip color of her fingering hand is

²² Reproduction in Antinino Buttitta "Les Normands de Sicile" <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%3AMuslimMusiciansAtTheCourtOfRoger.JPG>

also consistent with those fingertips being hennaed. The red on her palm might represent henna. Henna provides protection for musicians fingering stringed instruments through practice and long performance: a hennaed fingertip is less likely to become blistered, to have a callus split, or to become sore from string pressure.



Muslim Arab Musicians at the Court of Roger II, Palermo, Sicily, 1140 CE, detail

Beginning in 1059, Normans, Viking mercenaries supported by European and papal authority, began to retake the Emirate of Sicily after 250 years of Arab control. The spread of Muslim culture in Sicily was not through forced conversion; non-Muslims were allowed privately practiced freedom of religion with *jaziya* (a tax on non-Muslims). During the three hundred years

of Christians and Jews, and Muslims living together in Sicily,²³ their cultural practices co-mingled. There continued a policy of official tolerance by the government of Roger I and his successors following his victory over the Saracens in 1063. His political orientation was towards Cairo and Constantinople rather than to the regions north of Rome; the court culture of Roger II²⁴ was that of the Fatimid caliphate.²⁵ Women veiled their faces, wore hijab, and hennaed their fingers.²⁶

Christians and crypto-Muslims²⁷ practiced aspects of Muslim culture as they had before the Normans retook Sicily, as recorded by Ibn Jubayr in his visit to Sicily when he saw women wearing henna when going to mass on Christmas. His description of hennaed women is consistent with the depictions of women with hennaed fingertips, soles, and palms represented in the Palatine Chapel, Palazzo Reale in Palermo, painted only forty years earlier.²⁸

Sicily remained an autonomous emirate until 1071. During the reign of William I, Muslims were increasingly persecuted in Sicily, forced to change their names and convert, or migrate. Friday prayers were banned and the mosques were converted into Catholic Churches. In 1189, the remaining Muslims of Palermo were massacred. In 1199, Pope Innocent III declared the remaining Muslims of Sicily and Apulia to be “hostile elements” in “Christian Italy;” intellectuals and elites fled to Andalusia and Egypt.²⁹ The last Muslim city, Noto, was conquered by the Normans in 1091.

23 Geoffrey Malaterra, *The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of His Brother Duke Robert Guiscard* (Ann Arbor) 2005) tr. K. Baxter Wolf.

24 Roger II began rule in the court of Sicily in 1105, then was Duke of Apulia and Calabria in 1127, and became king of Sicily in 1130, ruling to 1154.

25 Britt, Karen C. "Roger II of Sicily: Rex, Basileus, and Khalif? Identity, Politics, and Propaganda in the Cappella Palatina." *Mediterranean Studies* 16 (2007): 21-45.

26 Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlah* (Beirut, 1964) English translation of *The Travels of Ibn Jubair* by R. J. C. Broadhurst (London, 1952) p. 298

27 Crypto-Muslims being people who had converted from Islam to Christianity, but who still maintained Muslim cultural habits.

28 The Palatine Chapel (Italian: Cappella Palatina), is the royal chapel of the Norman kings of Sicily situated on the first floor at the center of the Palazzo Reale in Palermo, Sicily. was commissioned by Roger II of Sicily in 1132 to be built upon an older chapel (now the crypt) constructed around 1080. It took eight years to build, receiving a royal charter the same year, with the mosaics being only partially finished by 1143.

29 KOPANSKI, ATAULLAH BOGDAN. "Islam in Italy and in its Libyan Colony (720-1992)." *Islamic Studies* 32, no. 2 (1993): 191-204

Genocide and ethnic cleansing of Muslims and their cultural practices ensued in Italy and Sicily as part of the Crusades and the Inquisition. The science, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, music, and literature brought to southern Europe by Islamic expansion were erased in holy bonfires of books written in Arabic. Persons who attempted to maintain their Muslim culture were accused of heresy, and could be subject to torture or death for witchcraft. European-authored history praises the Renaissance for a flowering of intellect, but neglects to connect it to the Muslim culture which brought southern Europe out of the collapse of the Roman Empire.

“World historians now accept that the period 1100–1300 is a critical global watershed, an of cross-cultural interaction that set the stage for the modern era, with an antithetical divide between the Arab (or eastern) world and the European (or western) world. This divide did not naturally exist; the cultures moved fluidly, enriching each other during convivencia.”³⁰

Ironically, a woman who was a famous Sicilian³¹ performer, like the hennaed female performers painted on the wooden ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, is credited for bringing henna back into European fashion after centuries of suppression. Adelina Patti was an internationally famous opera singer, considered the finest singer by Giuseppe Verdi; she could demand \$5000 per night in gold for her performances.

Madame Patti (1843 –1919) was born in Spain where the Inquisition had once forbidden the use of henna because it was associated with Muslim culture, and was therefore a heresy and punishable by death.³² She used henna to mask her graying hair (naturally dark brown to black in her youth) towards the later years of her long career, to retain the appearance of youth. Her audiences across the world were enchanted with her hennaed hair, and the first wave of fashionably henna-haired European woman began after centuries of suppression. As an older woman, she continued to henna her hair, and was caricatured at the end of her life in Madame

30 George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, (1981), p. 283

31 Adelina Patti (10 February 1843 – 27 September 1919) though born in Spain, was a subject of The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies because her father was Sicilian. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adelina_Patti

32 Cartwright-Jones, C. (2003, rev 2017) *Henna in Medieval Spain and the Spanish Inquisition*, TapDancing Lizard® LLC http://www.tapdancinglizard.com/AS_henna_for_hair/chapters/chap2/Medieval_Spain.pdf

Patti dolls with vivid henna-red hair. Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) also hennaed her hair for her performances to maintain a youthful appearance, and occasionally hennaed her fingers to play Cleopatra.



Adelina Patti, opera diva, 1896, her graying hair dyed with henna.

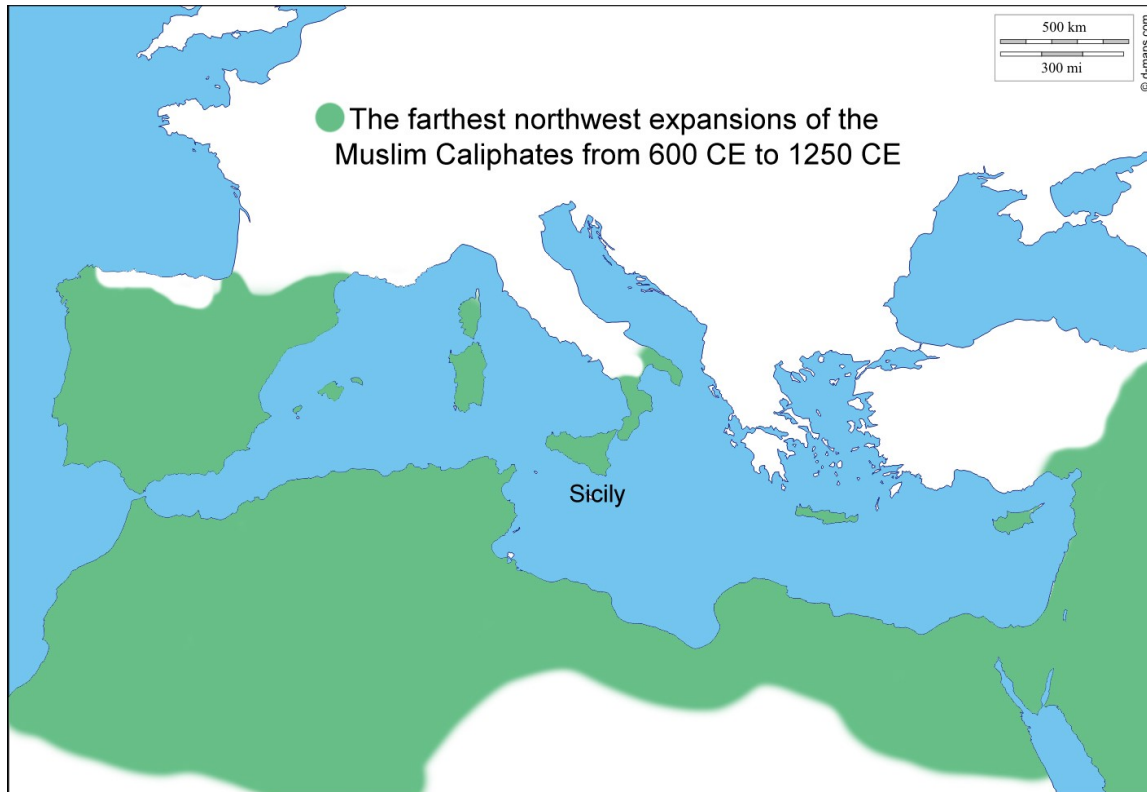
i



This hennaed hand is by Catherine Cartwright-Jones PhD. In this henna, the general shape of the pattern, line weight, and pattern density have been drawn to emulate that of the upper hand on the “Scarf Dancer, the Painted Wooden Ceiling of the Palatine Chapel,” "Cappella Palatina" Palermo, Sicily, 1140 CE. The pattern elements are adapted from 12th century Sicilian textiles. The complexity of pattern is meant to emulate the henna work on “Nude carrying a lute,” from Fatimid Egypt, ink on paper, Jerusalem, Israel Museum, M 165-4-65, done during the same time period and culture.

ii

Map of the maximum northward and westward expansions of Muslim Caliphates from 600 CE to 1250 CE.



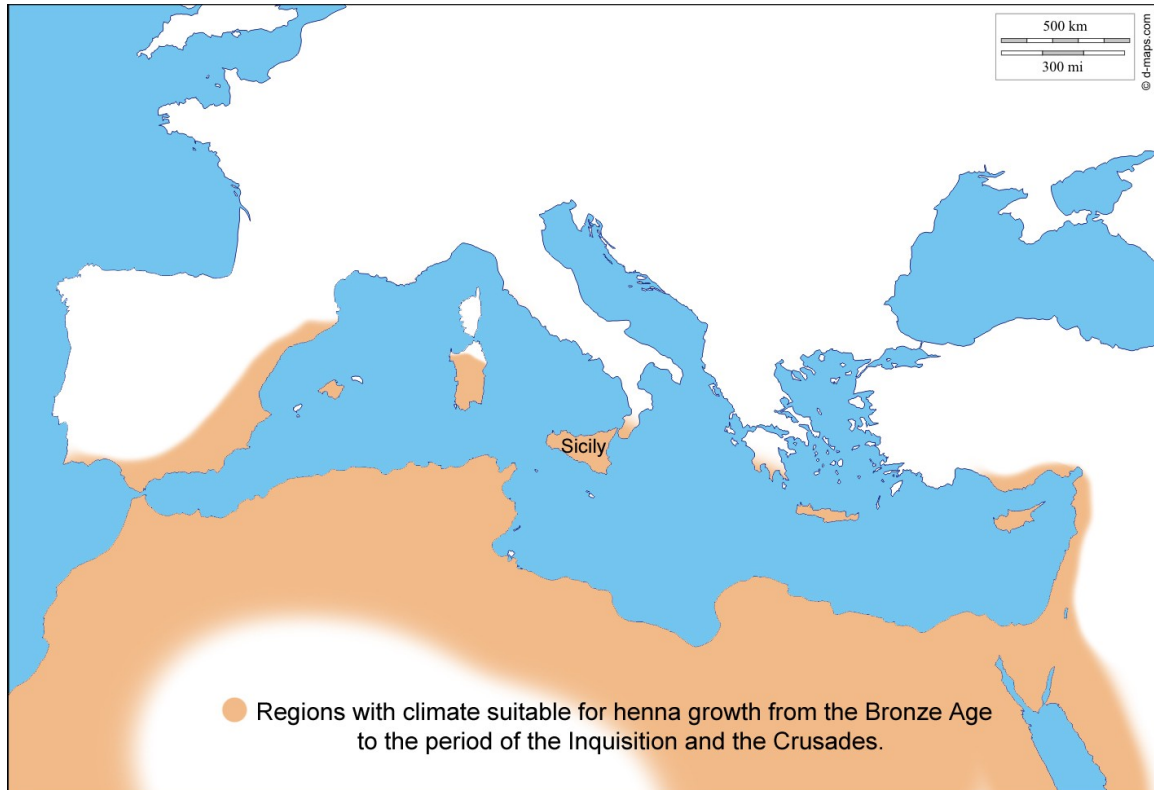
iii

A brief political history of Sicily:

- 13th c BCE, complex settlements developed by the original Sicel population
- 11th c BCE, Phoenician settlement and colonization of the western areas of the island

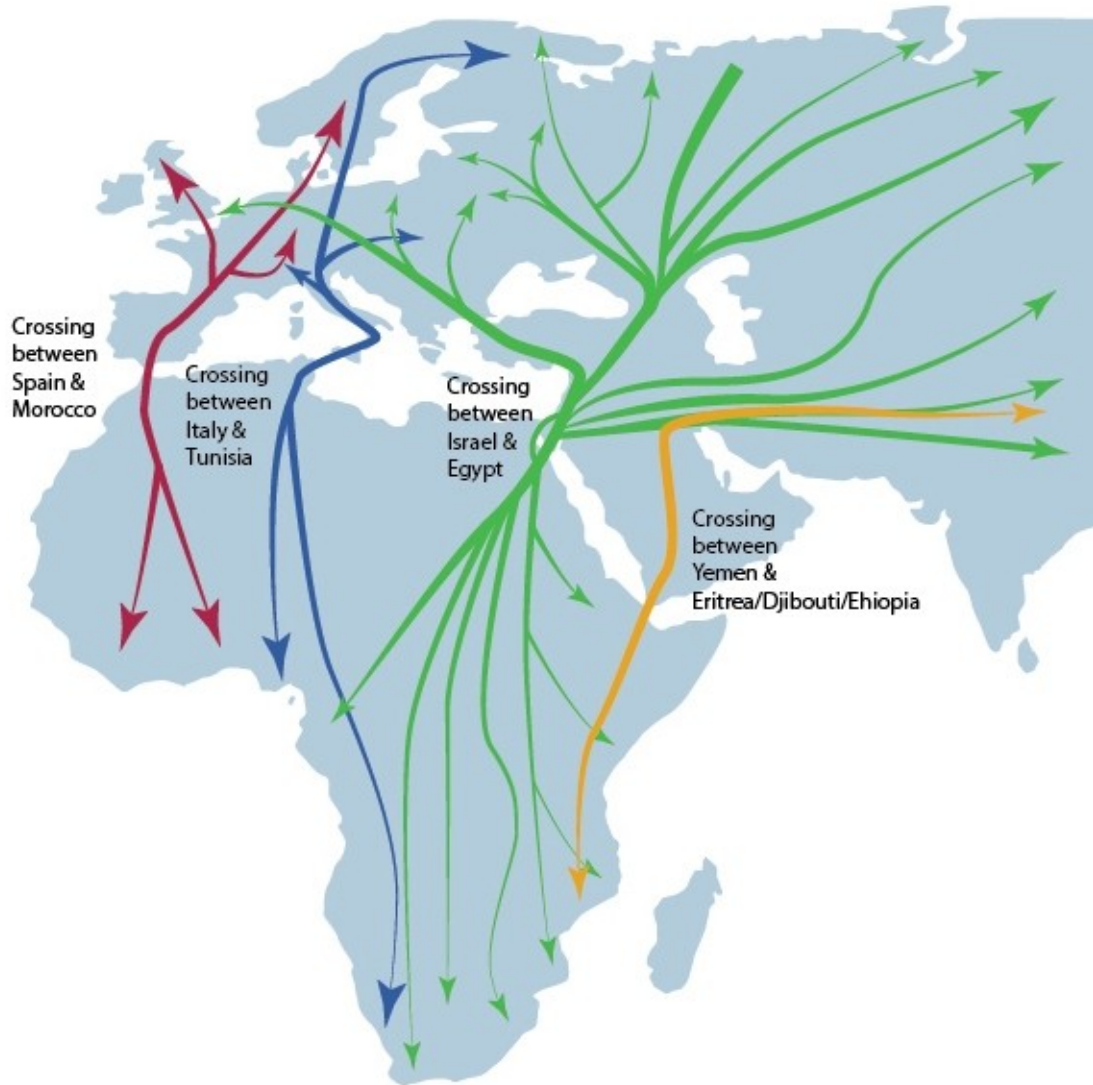
- 8th c BCE, Greek settlement and colonization of some the island, other areas were Carthaginian
- 3rd c BCE, all Carthaginians driven off Sicily by Roman armies, Sicily held by Rome for centuries
- 5th c CE, Sicily taken by Vandals, and was alternately held by Goths and Byzantines through the 7th century CE
- 8th c CE, Sicily taken by an Islamic army of Arabs, North Africans and Persians
- 11th century, Sicily taken by Norman mercenaries
- 12th century, Sicily passes into Hohenstaufen (German) rule
- Popes encourage Frederick II, the Holy roman Emperor to repress and expel remaining Muslim population from Sicily, Sicily remains Catholic to the present

iv



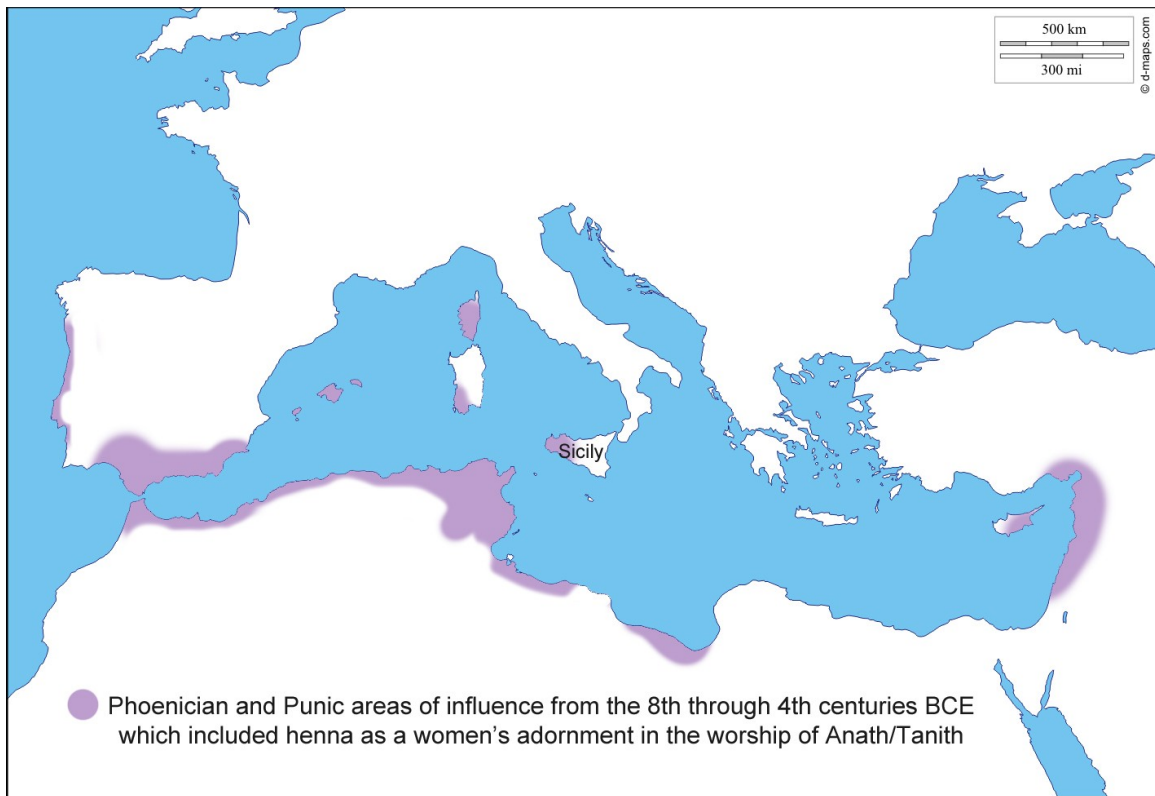
The Holocene Optimum (7,000 to 3,000 years BCE) would have extended the frost-free growth zone considerably northwards, and the Little Ice Age (1645–1715 CE) would have contracted the area southwards. The Medieval warm period, (950 CE to 1100 CE) would have extended the area slightly northwards.

v



The biodiversity of wild henna in Tunisia indicates that henna has been an indigenous plant in that region since the Holocene warming. Birds carrying seeds from henna berries consumed in a Tunisian oasis could have easily been dropped in Sicily on their annual northward migrations. Therefore, the henna plant could have been naturally seeded and growing in Sicily at any time the climate was suitable from prehistory to the present. Humans would have incorporated henna within whatever cultural scripts were dominant at the time.

http://wysinfor.com/Migratory_Birds/Migratory_Birds_Without_Boundaries.htm



Sicily was as a territory in the Phoenician and Punic cultures which used henna as a women's cosmetic and ceremonial practice in the religion of Baal and Anath/Tanit.