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# Cultural Complexity in Medieval Sicily

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Rebecca Wrightson  
Honors Project Final Paper

### Cultural Complexity in Norman Sicily

Sicily under Norman rule, dating from 1091 to 1266, exemplifies a multi-cultural society which produced some of the most eclectic architecture of the middle ages. Located in an immensely strategic area, Sicily was inhabited and influenced by various cultures residing in and crossing through the Mediterranean. Each culture that inhabited Sicily left a lasting impression that is evident in the medieval architecture of the Norman rule. The Normans sponsored art and architecture that incorporated the traditions of the Latin Christian, Greek Christian, and Muslim cultures. The artistic traditions are present in the structural forms, such as a Latin basilica or Greek cross-in-square plan, and in the decoration, including Byzantine and Latin mosaics, Islamic woodwork, and western European stone sculpture. Roger II and his descendents exercised a tolerant rule and created architecture that reflects the accepted presence of different ethnic groups. Roger II and his grandson William II are the men responsible for founding the architectural structures that reflect the multifaceted society. The structures of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, the Cathedral of Cefalù, the Church of the Martorana, and the Cathedral and Cloister of Monreale exemplify the diverse architectural elements and decoration which combine to create the style of Norman Sicily. Culture

The form and decoration of these four structures express the functions of the building and conveys the message of cultural mixing that Norman Sicily embodies. In studying the diverse architectural elements and decoration of the four structures we can differentiate ethnic identity, which allows us to understand how the different cultures played a role in Norman society. We will also understand which communities were involved in the creation of these structures, such as craftsmen coming directly from Byzantium, Fatimid Egypt, France, and Italy to contribute

their culture's distinctive artistic tradition. Through studying the cultural mixing displayed in these four structures we may better understand the cosmopolitan character of the Norman rule.

### **History:**

In order to understand the architectural elements in the later Norman structures it is essential to understand the dense cultural history of the region. Sicily has long been a strategic location for the people of the Mediterranean basin, with trade and military settlements dictating much of Sicily's history. The earliest archaeological record of Sicily dates to around 20,000 BCE, but for this study the relevant occupation appears much later with the coming of the Greeks. The Greeks started to inhabit the island around 750 BCE, pushing the native Sicels, Elymians, and Sicans back. The Greeks founded large cities such as Syracuse, Selinunte, Akragas, Himera and Gela and built temples throughout.<sup>1</sup> Through the next several hundred years Sicily becomes almost fully Greek, with inhabitants speaking Greek language, writing in Greek script, and practicing Greek religion. As more Greeks migrated to Sicily, skilled craftsmen and architects joined, bringing the Greek artistic traditions with them.<sup>2</sup>

Although Greece colonized much of eastern Sicily, Carthage had also established a city in the eighth century on the northern coast, Palermo. Greece and Carthage were constantly fighting for power in the following centuries, which opened the door for a new, larger power to intervene: Rome. Rome became involved in the struggle and fought against the Carthaginians during the First Punic War from 264 BCE until 241 BCE. Rome defeated the Carthaginians and Sicily became a Roman territory. Rome succeeded in conquering the Greek capitol of Syracuse in 211 BCE and destroyed Carthage as a major power by the end of the Second Punic War,

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<sup>1</sup> Holloway, Ross R. *The Archaeology of Ancient Sicily*. New York: Routledge, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987.

leaving Rome in control of the Mediterranean, including Sicily.<sup>3</sup> The Latin language spread throughout Sicily under control of the Roman Republic, but many people continued to speak Greek and practice Greek traditions until the first century BCE. Throughout the Roman Republic the prosperity of the upper and middle classes is evident in the presence of Roman amphitheaters, theaters, baths, and aqueducts. In the later Roman Empire, private wealth is evident through villas, such as the villa at Piazza Armerina, which is an extravagant, large villa comprised of four levels, nearly fifty rooms, decorated with extensive mosaic pavements, many of which seem to have been completed by artists from North Africa, demonstrating cosmopolitan interaction. Throughout the first and second centuries CE there was also a variety of religions practiced throughout Sicily, including many cults, such as those worshiping Isis and Serapis, which had mixed with the more traditional Greek and Roman gods. In the third century CE Christianity spread to Sicily, evident through the presence of Christian catacombs beginning to appear. After 313, when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, some Greek temples were converted into churches.<sup>4</sup> The Temple of Athena in Syracuse, a Doric temple built by the Greeks around 470 BCE, was transformed into a Christian church in the seventh century CE and its hybrid nature is still visible today.<sup>5</sup>

General Belisarius, under order of Justinian, captured and converted Sicily into a Byzantine province in 535. Under Byzantine rule, Sicily officially became Christianized and monasteries and churches were established around the island. Although the island was now under the umbrella of Christianity, there was still tension over control between the church, centered with the papacy in Rome, and the Emperor, centered in the Byzantine capitol of Constantinople. The two powers remained balanced in Sicily until the early eighth century when the problem of

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<sup>3</sup> Finley, M.I., *A History of Sicily*. New York: The Viking Press. 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

<sup>5</sup> Holloway, Ross R. *The Archaeology of Ancient Sicily*.

iconoclasm erupted in the eastern Mediterranean. This conflict led to the annexation of the papacy in Rome by the patriarchate in Constantinople in 751 CE. From the beginning of Byzantine rule in Sicily until the annexation in 751, the church was predominantly Latin in practice, and its officials looked to Rome for religious guidance. After the annexation, the Sicilian churches become closer to the Byzantine church and based their liturgy in Greek traditions.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the rest of the Byzantine rule, until the 870's, Sicily was a peaceful place in the Mediterranean, populated by an array of people practicing different religions, including Muslim merchants, a Jewish community, and both Latin and Greek Christians.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in the seventh century, the Muslim community grew in power after the establishment of Islam by the prophet Mohammad in 622 CE. Islam began to spread and the Muslim world began to conquer areas throughout the Mediterranean, including Spain and North Africa, while also defeating Byzantine troops near the Sea of Galilee and pushing eastward into parts of modern day China. By the mid-eighth century the Islamic world had become an extensive Empire and a force to be reckoned with.<sup>8</sup>

In the ninth century the Muslim invaders took advantage of the unstable situation in Sicily, caused by Byzantium's problem with one of its officers in Sicily, Euphemius. In 827 Euphemius rebelled against the empire, sending a fleet under his control to Syracuse and proclaiming himself the emperor of Sicily.<sup>9</sup> Euphemius was not only ordered to be arrested by the Emperor of Byzantium, Michael II, but after he had declared himself ruler one of his deputies rebelled against him. These issues forced Euphemis to seek outside help, which led him to appeal to the Aghlabid emir, the Arab ruler from the Aghlabid dynasty of Ifriqiya on the Northern coast

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<sup>6</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*. New York: Riverside Book Company. 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

<sup>8</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>9</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

of Africa, for help. Ephemius promised Sicily as a tribute-paying province with the condition that he become governor.<sup>10</sup> Although the request from Euphemius was received with some trepidation, the Islamic force agreed by justifying that the Byzantine rule in Sicily had violated the peace treaty between the Byzantine and Islamic North African empires.<sup>11</sup> With this arrangement, an army of one hundred ships and 10,000 Arabs, Berbers, and Spanish Muslims invaded Sicily. The Arabs sought to colonize Sicily and fought the Byzantine Empire for the region until 878 when the city of Syracuse fell to the Arabs. At this point Sicily was no longer a Byzantine province and was now under complete control of the Arabs.<sup>12</sup>

Palermo became the new Muslim capital, and the regime was characterized by a tolerant rule. During the Muslim reign Greeks, Lombards, Jews, Slavs, Berbers, Persians, Africans, and Arabs from Spain, Syria, and Egypt populated Sicily, and were allowed to practice their own religions, as long as they paid higher taxes.<sup>13</sup> Many churches became mosques, but in general local institutions were retained. In the beginning of Sicily's Muslim period the island was dependent on the Aghlabids, who supported the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, but in the early tenth century a civil war overturned the Aghlabid dynasty and the Fatimids succeeded them. This split in caliphate support started a new polity in the Islamic Mediterranean. In 969 the Fatimids moved their capitol eastward to Cairo, which lessened their attention on Sicily and the Muslim North African Empire, to which Sicily belonged, broke apart. With the movement of the capitol and the fall of the North African empire, Sicily gained much more independence. This

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<sup>10</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

<sup>11</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>12</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

<sup>13</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

independence left Sicily vulnerable and gave the Latin Christian world a chance to re-claim it from the Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

In the eleventh century, after serving as mercenaries in southern Italy for the Lombards and Byzantine Empire, the Normans, decedents of the Vikings who had settled in Normandy, had succeeded in conquering much of southern Italy.<sup>15</sup> With this conquest, the Roman church saw an opportunity to take back southern Italy, which had been under the control of the Eastern church in Constantinople since the eighth century, and then under Muslim control.<sup>16</sup> In 1059, Pope Nicholas II authorized some of the Norman mercenaries to govern as much of southern Italy as they had conquered. Two such mercenaries were Robert Guiscard and his younger brother Roger. They controlled territory in Calabria and Apulia, and in the 1060's they turned their sights toward Sicily. The task of taking Sicily fell to Roger, and by 1064 he had successfully taken Messina and the north-east. Roger returned to Calabria and spent the rest of the 1060's building up a naval fleet, necessary to take over all of Sicily. In 1071 Robert arrived in Palermo with mercenaries and siege engines and after a blockade of five months, Palermo surrendered. The non-Christian inhabitants would pay tribute in return for acknowledgement of their religions and some autonomy. Robert Guiscard returned to the mainland to defend his possessions there, and left Roger as Count of Sicily and Calabria to complete the conquest. Roger captured the last remaining Muslim enclave in 1091, but died in 1101, leaving his son, Roger II, as the first King of Sicily.

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<sup>14</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

<sup>15</sup> Loud, Graham A and Thomas Wiedemann. *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily by 'Hugo Falcandus' 1154-69*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

Roger II succeeded in creating one unified Kingdom of Sicily between 1127-1130<sup>17</sup> and celebrated his coronation on Christmas day of 1130.<sup>18</sup> During the Norman reign Sicily officially became Western in religion, or Latinized, instead of Eastern, and many Italians migrated to Sicily. Roger II was tolerant of other religions and cultures and issued laws in different languages, such as Arabic, Latin, and Greek, depending on which community he was addressing.<sup>19</sup> He also kept Muslim officials in his administration to help keep continuity within the administration from the previous Islamic rule. The court of Roger II was highly cosmopolitan, as evident by the presence of an Arab geographer, who was commissioned by Roger II to create a map of the world, Arab poets, who sang praise of Roger II, the famous Byzantine theologian, monk Filagato da Cerami, and Nilo Doxopatres, who had been a deacon of Hagia Sophia.<sup>20</sup> The palace workshop of Roger II employed Arab, Greek, and Jewish artisans. Although the religious practices during the Norman reign were distinctly Latin, Roger wanted to emulate the kings of Byzantium. During the rule of Roger II, his coins and seals were based on the images of previous Byzantine Emperors. He petitioned to the Byzantine Emperor for a Byzantine princess to be his bride, and he fashioned the culture of his court on the model of the Byzantine state.<sup>21</sup> Roger II died in 1154, but secured the succession of his only surviving son, William, in 1151 by making him co-ruler.<sup>22</sup> William's reign saw the dominance of the Latin culture and its growth in the royal administration. William I left the Kingdom of Sicily to his son, William II, in 1162. William II ruled Sicily during a period of rising tension between the Muslim and Christian communities that ended with the Latin Christian community attacking the

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<sup>17</sup> Loud, Graham A and Thomas Wiedemann. *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily*

<sup>18</sup> Johns, Jeremy and Nadia Jamil, "Signs of the Times: Arabic Signatures as a Measure of Acculturation in Norman Sicily," *Muqarnas*, Vol 21 (2004), pp. 181-192.

<sup>19</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

<sup>20</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>21</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1989. pp 164.

<sup>22</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.



Muslim community at William's death in 1189.<sup>23</sup> The two groups fought until the demise of the Muslim community in Sicily in 1246.<sup>24</sup> William II had no heir and at his death the Hauteville dynasty came to an end. The Hohenstaufen dynasty came to rule Sicily until 1266 when Sicily was taken by the French duke, Charles of Anjou.<sup>25</sup>

### **Interpreting the Sites:**

The Norman conquest and rule of Sicily may not have lasted long, but it did produce some of the most impressive works of architecture seen in the middle ages. The Cappella Palatina, Cathedral of Cefalù, the Church of the Martorana, and the Cathedral and Cloister of Monreale display the mixing of cultures in Sicily through architectural style and ornamentation. These four sites, some of the best preserved in Sicily, are most fitting to demonstrate the concept of cultural complexity through their form and decoration. The four sites discussed were commissioned by the Norman kings of Sicily, Roger II and William II, but were produced by craftsmen from the varied cultures: mosaicists from Byzantium, artists from Greece, and craftsmen from North Africa combine their artistic traditions in the four royally commissioned structures. These architectural and decorative elements reinforce the liturgical function of each site, while displaying the different cultures artistic traditions and religious practices through specific motifs, materials, and stylistic trends. In looking at these artistic traditions patterns of materials emerge, the Byzantine and Greek influence is present in sanctuary mosaics, the Latin influence is present in nave mosaics, Islamic influence is present through the uses and working of wood, and the Norman and Romanesque traditions are prevalent with the use of stone. Roger and William used the combining of artistic traditions to display and emphasize the cosmopolitan nature of their kingdom.

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<sup>23</sup> Loud, Graham A and Thomas Wiedemann. *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily*

<sup>24</sup> Johns, Jeremy and Nadia Jamil, "Signs of the Times"

<sup>25</sup> Finley, M.I., Denis Mack Smith, and Christopher Duggan. *A History of Sicily*.

### **Cathedral of Cefalù:**

Roger II commissioned the Cathedral of Cefalù in 1131 soon after taking the throne in 1130. The structure was completed shortly after one year, while the decoration and furnishings took much longer, until 1148.<sup>26</sup> The church was built to be the royal burial location of Roger II, although his body was later moved to the Palermo Cathedral.<sup>27</sup> The Cathedral of Cefalù is a prime example of Byzantine, Latin, and Islamic artistic traditions combining to create an artistically diverse structure. The structure of the cathedral is an Italian Romanesque basilica based on Benedictine and Cluniac models, whose services include a processional route down the central nave. The Italian basilica plan is combined with distinctly Norman architectural features, including the shape of the transepts and the apse and the form of the two-towered façade.<sup>28</sup> The cathedral has a wooden roof, transepts and a vaulted presbytery and is constructed with a nave and two aisles, which are separated by a series of pointed arches supported by spolia, or re-used, columns.<sup>29</sup> The pointed arches used along the nave come from the Cluniac model, from the monastery at Cluny France, while the recycled columns show the influence from classical models seen around Sicily from the previous Greek and Roman periods. The form of a Latin basilica reflects the practice of Latin Christianity in Sicily under Norman rule.

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<sup>26</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>27</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 169.

<sup>28</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>29</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 169.

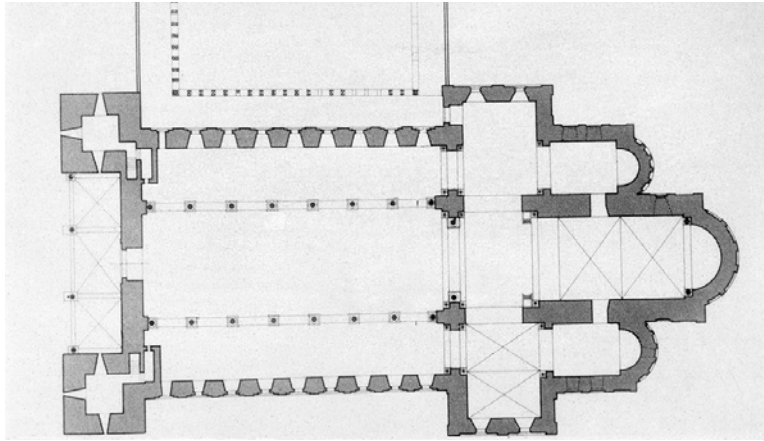


Fig 1. Plan of the Cathedral of Cefalù, showing the Latin Basilica form  
Image from Artstor

These architectural features combine to create the structure of Roger's first royal commission.

The decoration of the Cathedral of Cefalù compliments the diverse nature of the architecture. The wooden trusses on the interior of the cathedral are decorated using an Arabic tradition. They are painted with a series of motifs that include scenes of music and dance, animals, and imaginary beings that run one right after another.<sup>30</sup>



Fig 2. Cefalù ceiling paintings showing animals, imaginary beasts, and figures engaged in drinking, dancing and making music.  
Image from Gelfer-Jørgensen, Mirjam. *Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral*.

<sup>30</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

This decoration is secular in nature, but, according to the Qur'an, Arab tradition favors these depictions as symbols of the delights of Paradise.<sup>31</sup> The paintings are markedly similar to a rare collection of beams from eleventh-century Cairo, which are believed to have come from the Fatimid Palace.



Fig 3. Fatimid Palace beams from Cairo depicting similar images of the Delights of Paradise  
Image from Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*

These beams depict images of figures engaged in activities such as dancing, drinking, and music-making.<sup>32</sup> The images of the Delights of Paradise are also used in the Islamic decorative arts, often on ceramics, wall paintings, wood and ivory carvings, and metalwork.<sup>33</sup> It is likely that

<sup>31</sup> Gelfer-Jørgensen, Mirjam. *Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral*. Netherlands: E. J. Brill Leiden. 1986. pp 72-91.

<sup>32</sup> Gelfer-Jørgensen, Mirjam. *Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral*. Pp 176-178.

<sup>33</sup> Gelfer-Jørgensen, Mirjam. *Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral*. Pp 176-178.



artists brought to Sicily from Fatimid Egypt created these images because the paintings have no counterparts outside of the Muslim territories.<sup>34</sup>

Although the form of the Cathedral of Cefalù is clearly Latin, the mosaics have a characteristically Byzantine quality. The mosaics were completed by 1148, over fifteen years after the completion of the architecture. Only the presbytery, the bay next to it, and the cross vaulting covering the bay are decorated with mosaics.<sup>35</sup> The mosaics have the Byzantine features of a gold mosaic background, isolated, linear figures, and include the Pantokrator mosaic scheme, which was common for the naos of Middle Byzantine churches.<sup>36</sup> In the conch of the main apse of the cathedral is the Christ Pantokrator, below which are the Virgin orans and Archangels, and below them is another zone filled with the twelve apostles.



<sup>34</sup> Gelfer-Jørgensen, Mirjam. *Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral*. Pp 176-178.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, Mark J. "The Episcopal and Royal View at Cefalù." *Gesta*. Vol 33 (1994), pp. 118-131.

<sup>36</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 169.

Fig 4. Cefalù apse showing Christ Pantokrator, the Virgin orans with the archangels, and the twelve apostles  
Image from Artstor database

The bust of Christ in the apse is depicted with his right arm reaching out and a book held in his left arm. The book announces, in both Greek and Latin, “I am the Light of the world,”<sup>37</sup> which demonstrates the importance of both Greek and Latin cultures in Norman Sicily. The artists who completed the apse mosaics compensated for the distance of the apse from the viewers by making the images placed higher up gradually increase in size. Christ is the tallest and the virgin and archangels are smaller, but are still taller than the apostles below them.<sup>38</sup> The imagery of religious hierarchy is distinctly Byzantine and can be seen in many Middle Byzantine churches throughout the Empire, such as in the Church of the Dormition at Daphni.<sup>39</sup> The Byzantine mosaicists adapted the traditional Pantokrator image, which would have been in the dome of a Greek cross-in-square church, to a Latin basilica with no dome. All of the figures in the apse are identified with Greek inscriptions, suggesting Greek workmen completing the scheme.<sup>40</sup> The north and south walls of the presbytery are divided into four registers each. Old Testament prophets occupy the upper two registers on both sides and various saints decorate the lower two. The highest register on either side is fitted into the lunette under the vault and they depict two figures and a medallion. All of these figures in the presbytery, not including the apse, are identified by Latin inscriptions, except the Greek Fathers of the south wall, whose inscriptions are in Greek. The vault contains images of cherubim, seraphim, and angels who slant their heads towards Christ in the Conch.<sup>41</sup> The mosaic figures decorating the walls of the presbytery are also Byzantine in their isolated, linear rendering. Cefalù has no narrative scenes, unlike the other Sicilian churches. The mosaics at Cefalù have their nearest analogues in composition and style to

<sup>37</sup> Demus, Otto. *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1949. 9-14.

<sup>38</sup> Lasareff, Victor. “The Mosaics of Cefalù.” *The Art Bulletin*. Vol 17 (Jun 1935) pp.184-232.

<sup>39</sup> Lasareff, Victor. “The Mosaics of Cefalù.” pp.184-232.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, Mark J. “The Episcopal and Royal View at Cefalù.” pp. 118-131.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, Mark J. “The Episcopal and Royal View at Cefalù.” pp. 118-131.

the mosaics made by Constantinopolitan artists, such as the mosaics in the Church of the Dormitian at Daphni.



Fig 5. Interior dome at Daphni showing same Constantinopolitan school of mosaic work  
Image from Artstor database

This iconographic familiarity indicates workmen were summoned to Sicily from Byzantium to complete the mosaics, bringing with them the traditional Byzantine approach to mosaics found in the productions of the Constantinople school.<sup>42</sup>

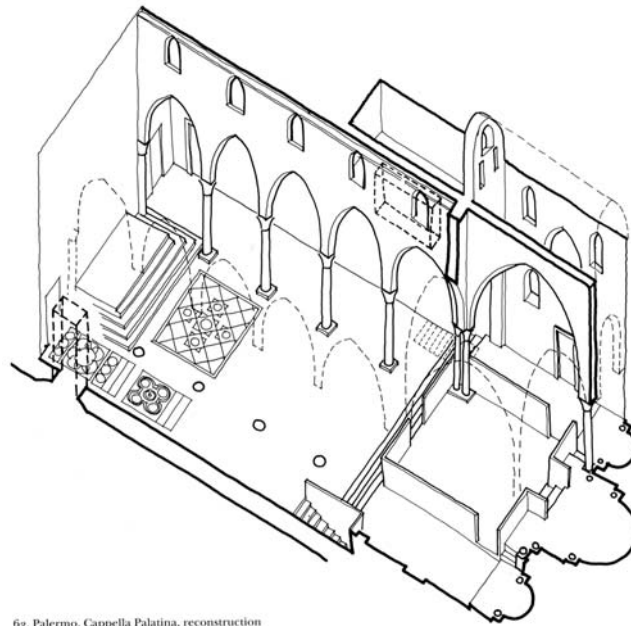
### **The Cappella Palatina:**

Roger II commissioned the Cappella Palatina in 1132, shortly after his first commission at Cefalù, and the structure was completed in 1140. The Cappella Palatina is Roger's royal chapel and is part of the Palazzo Reale, the royal palace in Palermo.<sup>43</sup> As one of the major construction projects of the reign of Roger II, it embodies the diverse nature of his newly united

<sup>42</sup> Lasareff, Victor. "The Mosaics of Cefalù." pp.184-232.

<sup>43</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

Sicilian kingdom. The form of the chapel is a combination between a Latin basilica and a Greek cross-in-square plan.<sup>44</sup> From this floor plan the influences of both the Latin and Greek churches are evident.



62. Palermo, Cappella Palatina, reconstruction

Fig 6. Plan of the Cappella Palatina showing Latin basilica form with Greek cross-in-square sanctuary  
Image from Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*

The religion of Sicily during Norman rule was the western, Latin, version of Christianity. The main form of this structure is a Latin basilica, affirming the practice of Latin Christianity, while also combining the cross-in-square plan by shortening the transept arms and including a dome over the crossing, crediting the presence of eastern Christianity in Sicily as well. The nave is comprised of three aisles, which is common in Latin basilicas. The nave is topped with a dome, which is indicative of Greek church plans. The form of this structure reflects the function as a Latin practicing church, whose rituals include a processional route down the nave, with Greek ritual influences, through the increased attention to the naos area.

<sup>44</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatine in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects". *The Art Bulletin*. Vol 31 (Dec 1949) pp. 269-292.



The mosaic floor pavement of the Cappella Palatina also indicates the mixing of artistic styles. The floor pavement is rendered in *opus sectile*, using a variety of colored stones cut in circular, triangular, and square shapes fitted together to form geometric designs. This artistic practice was commonly used in the liturgical arts of twelfth and thirteenth century Rome and in later medieval structures.<sup>45</sup> The pavement in the Cappella Palatina is present through the sanctuary, transept arms, nave, and aisles and was laid as a single coherent entity when the chapel was first built. The predominant motif throughout the sanctuary is a group of disks, in porphyry, which has a deep red color, or serpentine breccia, which has a dark green color, surrounded by interlace patterns, in a series of square and rectangular compartments. These interlace patterns divide into two types, that are either curved or angled strips. The curvilinear patterns are predominantly in the sanctuary and the south aisle, while the rectilinear pattern dominates the transept arms, the north aisle, and the nave.<sup>46</sup> The curvilinear patterns of the pavement derive from Byzantine models while the rectilinear pattern has a distinctly Islamic look.

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<sup>45</sup> Glass, Dorothy. "Papal patronage in the Early Twelfth Century: Notes on the Iconography of Cosmatesque Pavements." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. Vol 32 (1969) pp 386-390.

<sup>46</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, c1997. pp 29-38.

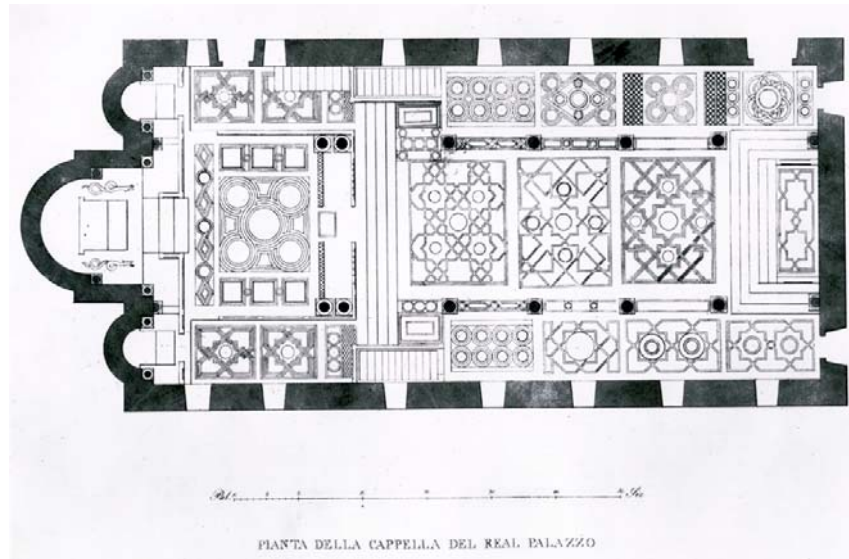


Fig 7. Mosaic pavement plan showing motif of disks and interlace pattern and the different curvilinear and rectilinear patterns.

Image from Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. The curvilinear patterns seen in the Cappella Palatina can also be seen at Monte Cassino and in other Byzantine pavements. The Islamic rectilinear patterns do not have any counterparts made in opus sectile, but comparable examples are commonly found in architectural panels of sculpted relief and on objects of the decorative arts.<sup>47</sup>

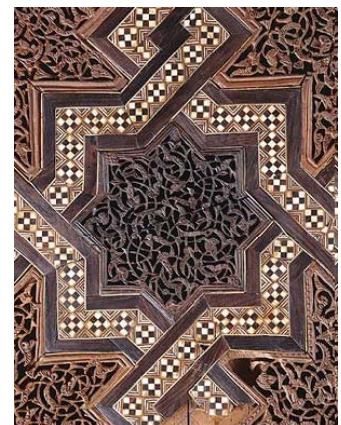
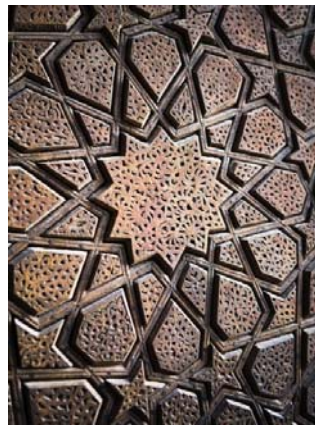


Fig 7. The image on the left shows the rectilinear patterns seen on the floor of the Cappella Palatina while the two images on the left depict similar Islamic rectilinear patterns completed with wood carving.

Images from <http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2010/04/geometric-patterned-art-at-capella.html> and <https://www.lonelyplanetimages.com/search/943460?keywords=entrance> and <http://islamic-arts.org/2012/the-masterpiece-minbar/>

<sup>47</sup> Hill, Derek, and Oleg Grabar. *Islamic Architecture and its Decoration*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1961.



Fig 8. The image on the left shows the curvilinear patterns on the floor of the Cappella Palatina, while the image on the right shows a similar curvilinear floor pavement from Hagia Sophia  
 Images from Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. and <http://www.clt.astate.edu/wallen/digits/IznikHS/IznikHagiaSophia.htm>

In the pavement of the main apse there are snake motifs, one on either side of the altar. These figures have been interpreted as guardians of the altar. At the nave entrance to the choir there are also two lions, one on either side of a schematized tree. These lions have been interpreted as being symbols of royal power associated with the king, which may indicate that only people of royal importance could enter the choir.<sup>48</sup> These motifs and their placement have counterparts in the pavement in the Desiderian Basilica at Monte Cassino, that included a pair of beast-like dogs guarding the altar.<sup>49</sup> Although these animal motifs and curvilinear pavement patterns appear at Monte Cassino, Desiderius had close artistic ties with the Byzantine world and hired artists from Constantinople to complete the pavements and mosaics of his new basilica.<sup>50</sup> One example of Byzantine animal pavements lies at the church at Sagmata in Greece in which the panel in front of the bema contains the figure of a snake.<sup>51</sup> The pavement of the Cappella Palatina also points to eastern origins because of its complementary nature to the architectural space. The tiles are fitted to the structure and flow around architectural elements. Later Italian

<sup>48</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 33-34.

<sup>49</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 33-34.

<sup>50</sup> *Die Chronik von Montecassino, Chronica Monasterii Casinensis*. ed. H. Hoffmann. Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung. 1980.

<sup>51</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 33-34.

pavements have a looser appearance, as opposed to Greek pavements which appear tighter and complementary to the structure. The church at Monte Cassino is one of the only examples, along with the Cappella Palatina, of the eastern rendering of pavements, which adds to the evidence that both were completed by Byzantine artists. The Cappella Palatina and the church at Monte Cassino bear striking resemblance to the Pantokrator monastery in Constantinople, where the central space, ancillary areas, and the soffits of the arches are reflected in the pavement design. These floor designs also look to the tradition of expressing the function of the different floor spaces. The pavements of churches such as at Monte Cassino and in Rome often show the processional route down the main axis of the nave through distinctly patterned panels. *De ceremoniis*, written by the Emperor Constantine VII of Byzantium, describes the use of great porphyry disks throughout the rooms in his Great Palace as indicators of important moments of the progress of court rituals where people would stand.<sup>52</sup> It is likely that the pavement schemes in the Cappella Palatina have a similar functional use by indicating the processional path down the nave. These traditions are combined in a purposeful way to decorate the floor of the royal chapel.

The wainscoting of the Cappella Palatina is also decorated in opus sectile patterns, similar to those of the floor.<sup>53</sup> Wainscoting refers to the wall decoration which extends from the floor up to, and including, the upper border of the band of ornamentation. The motifs run along the side walls of the chapel, including the transept arms, apse, and nave and decorate the borders and panels with a variety of over two dozen motifs.<sup>54</sup> Starting with the eastern wall of the apses, the wainscoting is divided into two registers. The bottom register consists of cipollino slabs with no decoration, while the upper register is made of the same material, but is framed at intervals

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<sup>52</sup> Glass, Dorothy. "Papal patronage in the Early Twelfth Century: Notes on the Iconography of Cosmatesque Pavements." 386-390.

<sup>53</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 40-42.

<sup>54</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 40-42.

with by narrow ornamental bands in opus sectile.<sup>55</sup> These ornamental bands contain one of the ornamental patterns in the chapel, which is of interlaced six-pointed stars alternating large and small. The other two ornamental motifs displayed on the wall of the apses consist of interlaced eight-pointed stars and diamonds and interlaced eight-pointed stars set tip to tip, which appear on the upper and lower borders respectively, framing the upper zone of the wainscoting.<sup>56</sup> On the walls of the transept arms, the wainscoting is again divided into two registers with bands of ornamentation separating them. Here the upper zone has the same ornamental patterns as the eastern apse wall, but the lower zone is framed at intervals by narrow bands of ornamentation, and the upper horizontal frame of the upper zone contains a pattern called the lotus lancéolé.

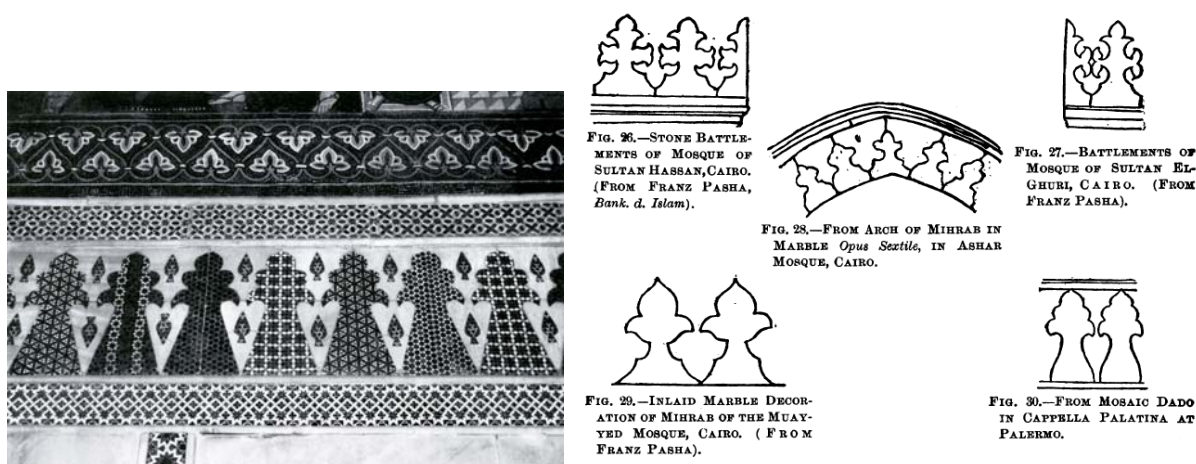


Fig 9. Lotus pattern of the wainscoting in Cappella Palatina on left and diagram of the evolution of the Lotus pattern from Islamic sources

The Lotus pattern derives directly from Muslim sources, such as mosques.<sup>57</sup> Another new pattern, the diaper pattern, is added along the upper frame of the upper zone and the large marble panels of the upper zone are decorated at intervals with crosses, which have rounded edges making them appear almost as roundels.<sup>58</sup> The lotus motif in the upper zone of the wainscoting

<sup>55</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 40-42.

<sup>56</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 40-42.

<sup>57</sup> Frothingham, A.L. Jr. "Notes on Byzantine Art and Culture in Italy and Especially in Rome." *The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts*. Vol 10 (1895) pp. 152-208.

<sup>58</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 40-42.



continues onto the north and south walls of the north and south aisles and across the western wall together with all the other ornamental patterns.<sup>59</sup> These patterns are completed in the same Byzantine influenced technique of opus sectile as the floor pavements, but look to Islamic geometric pattern motifs as inspiration.

Two fragments of monumental Arabic inscriptions completed in Kufic script, were said to have been found within the chapel in the nineteenth century and given to the Museo Nazionale of the Palazzo Abatellis . These inscriptions are almost identical in size, material, and technique. They are both carved from blocks of cipollino that is 31.7-32.8 cm wide. They both contain letters of serpentine breccia, which measure 20 cm high, and decorative elements of porphyry.<sup>60</sup> One of the fragmentary inscriptions reads, “graciously//and you make haste to kiss and to salute him. Roger has completed with...” and the other reads, “...(?)kiss its corner after having embraced it//and contemplated the beautiful things that it holds.”<sup>61</sup>

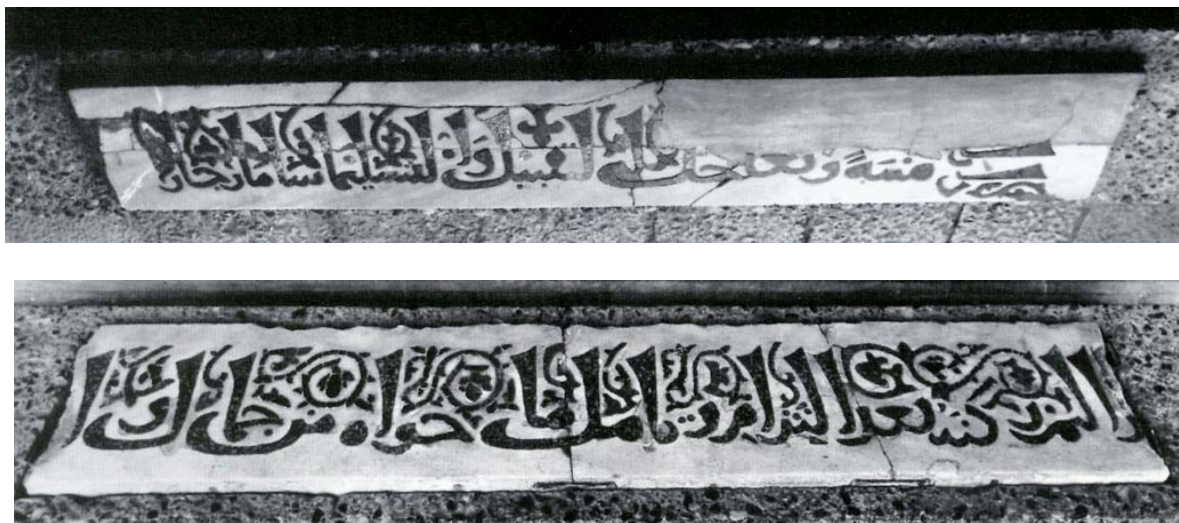


Fig 10. Large kufic inscriptions found within the Cappella Palatina, which most likely formed door frames. Image from Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*

<sup>59</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 40-42.

<sup>60</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 45.

<sup>61</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 45.

The inscriptions both address the viewer by imploring him to perform certain acts. They speak of homage to the buildings itself and the king, which are the recipients of the kisses. It is unlikely these two inscription fragments once formed part of the same object because the first inscription is rendered in kamil meter while the second is rendered in ramal meter, both of which are meters in the Arabic language.<sup>62</sup> In material and technique these inscriptions match the opus sectile decoration of the chapel, and one of the inscriptions mentions Roger by name, indicating that the inscriptions came from the Cappella Palatina. On the basis of their size and content Jeremy Johns has suggested that these once formed part of the frames of two separate doorways.<sup>63</sup> As visitors entered the chapel they were given instruction on how to perform ritual acts of homage.<sup>64</sup>

The wall mosaics presented throughout the chapel are striking in their Byzantine quality. The gold tesserae, biblical scenes, and motifs of flora and fauna are all reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics, but they also incorporate the presence of Roger II, which indicates the Byzantine scheme has been made to accommodate the Norman king. The program of the mosaics conform, to a large extent, to the Byzantine Pantokrator program. The Pantokrator bust is depicted in the apex of the choir dome. A medallion frame surrounds him, below which are rings of angels and prophets. Beneath the angels and prophets are depictions of the four evangelists on the squinches.<sup>65</sup> These figures conform to the Byzantine stylistic traits of being isolated, frontal, and linear in their appearance, and they are surrounded by a gold background.

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<sup>62</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 45.

<sup>63</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. Cites the hypothesis of Jeremy Johns. Pp 45.

<sup>64</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 45.

<sup>65</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatine in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects".pp. 269-292.



Fig 11. Interior of dome depicting Christ Pantokrator, surrounded by the script of John 8:12, with archangels, prophets, and evangelists below. Image from [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Cappella\\_Palatina\\_Kuppel.jpg](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Cappella_Palatina_Kuppel.jpg)  
The stories of Christ's life, illustrating the major feast celebrations from Annunciation to

Pentecost, are depicted on the sanctuary walls and vaults, and portraits of saints decorate the walls and soffits of the arches.<sup>66</sup> There are also three apses in the sanctuary of the Cappella Palatina, which are all divided into two zones comprised of an upper bust figure and lower full-length figures.



<sup>66</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects" pp. 269-292.



Fig 12. The three apses in the sanctuary of the Cappella Palatina, depicting Christ Pantokrator, Saint Paul, and Saint Philip in the conches.

Image from <http://www.medievalscily.com/images.htm>

The central apse again shows the Pantokrator above the figures of Peter, Mary Magdalene, the Virgin enthroned, John the Baptist, and James. The south apse depicts Paul over the figure of Philip, Anne with the young Virgin, and Sebastian. The north apse depicts Andrew above Barnabas, Joseph with the young Christ, and Stephen.<sup>67</sup> This mosaic program is the epitome of Byzantine depictions of the Christian universe and its hierarchy, depicting Christ placed above all other figures and constructed with larger proportions than the other figures, indicating his importance.<sup>68</sup> Although this Byzantine decoration is more traditional, Roger II made it quite untraditional by adding images of himself and his kingly duties to the decoration. Roger II had commissioned himself a balcony on the north wall of the north transept and from this viewpoint the kingly, secular decoration can be seen. From this balcony Roger II could see the arrangement of holy warriors, the figure of the Hodegetria, which depicts the Virgin Mary holding the baby Christ and pointing to him as the salvation of man, and the scenes of the transfiguration and the entrance into Jerusalem, which were images of power appropriate for the king to view.<sup>69</sup> Although the mosaics are Byzantine in iconography and style, Latin motifs are also present. Byzantine and Greek images fill the sanctuary, while Latin Christian images decorate the nave. The nave walls depict the Old Testament, which begins with the Creation and ends with the story of Jacob. The depiction of scenes from the Old Testament are distinctly Latin in iconography.<sup>70</sup> The Latin derived scenes are distinguished by their narrative quality. The figures interact and overlap one another, unlike Byzantine figures that are isolated and linear. These Latin derived

<sup>67</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatine in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects" pp. 269-292.

<sup>68</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 90-92.

<sup>69</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 62-63.

<sup>70</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The art of Byzantium and the medieval West: Selected studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c1976.

Old Testament scenes express the function of the Latin nave that is to process down the nave, during which the narrative stories are understood, while the Byzantine mosaic program decorates the Byzantine style crossing. The sanctuary and nave of the Cappella Palatina represent two parallel efforts of separate groups of foreign artists in the service of a joint role.<sup>71</sup>

The ceiling of the Cappella Palatina displays a distinctly Islamic artistic tradition through the use of muqarnas, a vaulting system based on the replication of units arranged in tiers supporting another tier corbelled on top. The result is a stair-like arrangement that is often compared to honey-comb like vaults or stalactite vaulting.<sup>72</sup> An entirely Muslim invention, Muqarnas had become a common architectural element of the Islamic world by the twelfth century.<sup>73</sup> The muqarnas of the Cappella Palatina are actually attached to the walls of the nave and are suspended from the ceiling, creating a false ceiling.<sup>74</sup> The muqarnas create a multifaceted surface, which is comprised of a central panel of twenty eight-pointed stars arranged two by two and a surrounding frame in the muqarnas technique.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*.

<sup>72</sup> Necipoğlu, Gülru. *The Topkapi Scroll – Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture*. Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995.

<sup>73</sup> Necipoğlu, Gülru. *The Topkapi Scroll – Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture*. Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995.

<sup>74</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 57-62.

<sup>75</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 57-62.



Fig 13. Islamic muqarnas ceiling

Image from <http://www.viaggiaresempre.it/fotogallery59iItaliaPalermoCappellaPalatina.html>

The Muqarnas were decorated with gilding and paintings of figures, ornaments, and Kufic inscriptions, which cover every facet, although much of this detail has been damaged over the years.<sup>76</sup> The paintings consist mainly of figures or small groups of figures, dancers, drinkers and musicians, a pair of women looking out a balcony, a group of chess players, lions, birds, and other beasts, which represent worldly and courtly pleasures.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 57-62.

<sup>77</sup> Gelfer-Jørgensen, Mirjam. *Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral*. Pp 72-91.

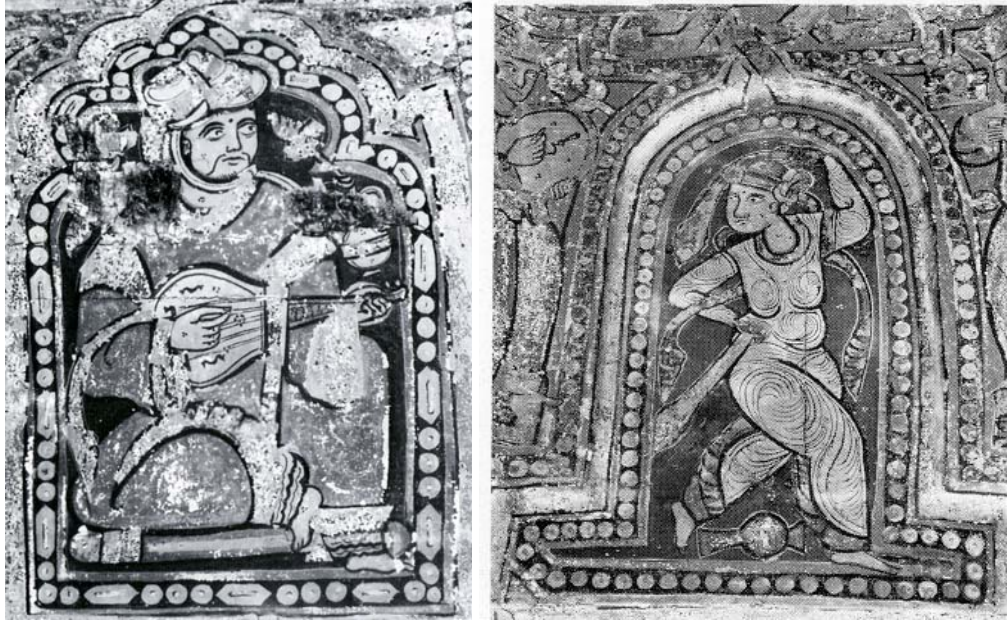


Fig 14. Islamic paintings of music and dance, examples of the Delights of Paradise depictions, on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina

Image from <http://siquillya.wordpress.com/category/12th-century/>

These scenes are distinctly similar to the rare collection of beams from eleventh-century Cairo and the motifs painted on the beams at the cathedral of Cefalù previously discussed. Along with the figures engaged in activities such as dancing, drinking, and music-making, there are also images of a ruler depicted on the beams from Cairo. The motif of a seated ruler in the Cappella Palatina, sitting cross-legged on a low platform, dressed in a caftan, wearing a three-pointed crown, and flanked by servants, repeats on the ceiling seven times.



Fig 15. Roger II dressed as Muslim ruler flanked by Muslim attendants  
Image from <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/palermo-cappella-palatina>

The figure, though presented as Islamic in dress and stature, is depicted with European facial features, hairstyle, and beard, which contrasts with the other figures represented on the ceiling. This iconography and repeating presence of this image indicates that the ruler is Roger II.<sup>78</sup> The Arabic inscription painted in Kufic script that lines the frames of the central stars states, in a non-narrative sequence, “health,” “blessing,” “good fortune,” “power,” “magnificence,” “prosperity,” and “perfection.”<sup>79</sup> These words repeat themselves, forming a network of idealist concepts that Roger wanted to emulate throughout his rule.

<sup>78</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 59.

<sup>79</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 60.





Fig 16. Detail of one of the stars in the center of the muqarnas ceiling showing kufic inscriptions lining the star  
Image from <http://fotografia.deagostinipassion.com/gallery/image/cappella-palatina-soffitto>

The descriptive words decorating the muqarnas and the depictions of worldly pleasures represent the nature of the rule of Roger II. The craftsmen who executed these forms on the ceiling were Muslim artists who were fluent in the forms and images used throughout the Islamic world and came to Sicily with the most contemporary artistic developments.<sup>80</sup> Roger depicted his power and the positive aspects of his rule in his own royal chapel.

### **The Church of the Martorana:**

The Church of the Martorana, in Palermo, was founded by the amiratus George of Antioch, Roger's chief minister. The church was originally named the church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, after the amiratus,<sup>81</sup> but it took the name of the nearby nunnery of Santa Maria della Martorana in the fifteenth century.<sup>82</sup> Roger II approved of and consented to the endowment of the church and signed the foundation charter of 1143 with his Arabic signature.<sup>83</sup> The church was founded around 1143, but there are no exact dates for the start or completion of the project.

<sup>80</sup> Tronzo, William. *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. pp 61.

<sup>81</sup> Houben, Hubert. *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler between East and West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002.

<sup>82</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990.

<sup>83</sup> Johns, Jeremy and Nadia Jamil, "Signs of the Times" pp. 181-192.

Some believe the structure was mostly finished by 1143 because in the foundation charter George of Antioch speaks of the church in the past tense.<sup>84</sup> The interior decoration was completed in phases from 1140 to 1184 with different building crews working at different times, indicated by stylistic and technical idiosyncrasies.<sup>85</sup> The Church of the Martorana is in the Greek form of a cross-in-square plan. The church is divided into four arms covered with barrel vaulting and a central dome set on four columns.<sup>86</sup>

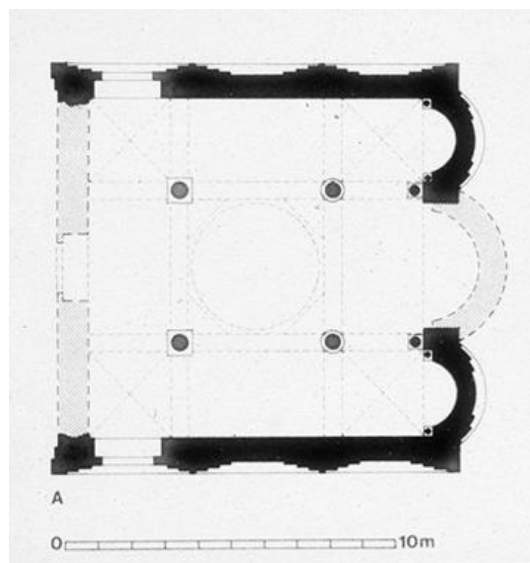


Fig 17. Greek cross-in-square plan of the Martorana  
Image from Artstor

The plan of the Martorana makes specific references to Byzantine culture and religious practices, with the services taking place in the noas area and not including a processional route down a nave, due to George of Antioch's Syrian Greek Orthodox background.<sup>87</sup>

The mosaics are Byzantine in style, with gold tesserae and Pantokrator schemes. In the dome, the religious hierarchy of Byzantine churches is depicted with Christ Pantokrator in the top of the dome, depicted as a full-length enthroned figure, with worshipping angels below,

<sup>84</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990. pp 27-30

<sup>85</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 27-30

<sup>86</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>87</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 27-30.

including the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. Below the archangels are eight Old Testament prophets holding scrolls. Below them, on the squinches, are the four evangelists, and on the barrel vaults of the northern and southern cross arms are eight figures of apostles.<sup>88</sup>



Fig 18. Dome of the Martorana depicting the full-length Christ enthroned with worshipping angels below  
Image from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/catef/304161081/>

Scenes of Biblical narratives decorate the walls of the nave and side aisles, and the pillars and archivolts are filled with mosaic figures of saints and martyrs.<sup>89</sup> Of the three apses on the eastern wall, only the two outer apses remain. The central apse space has been restored, but the original mosaic of the Virgin Mary is no longer present. The two side apses depict Joachim and Anna, the Virgin's parents.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 123-124.

<sup>89</sup> Waern, Cecilia. "Some Notes on Mediaeval Palermo. Part I". *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*. Vol 8 (1905) 25-27, 30-33.

<sup>90</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 136.



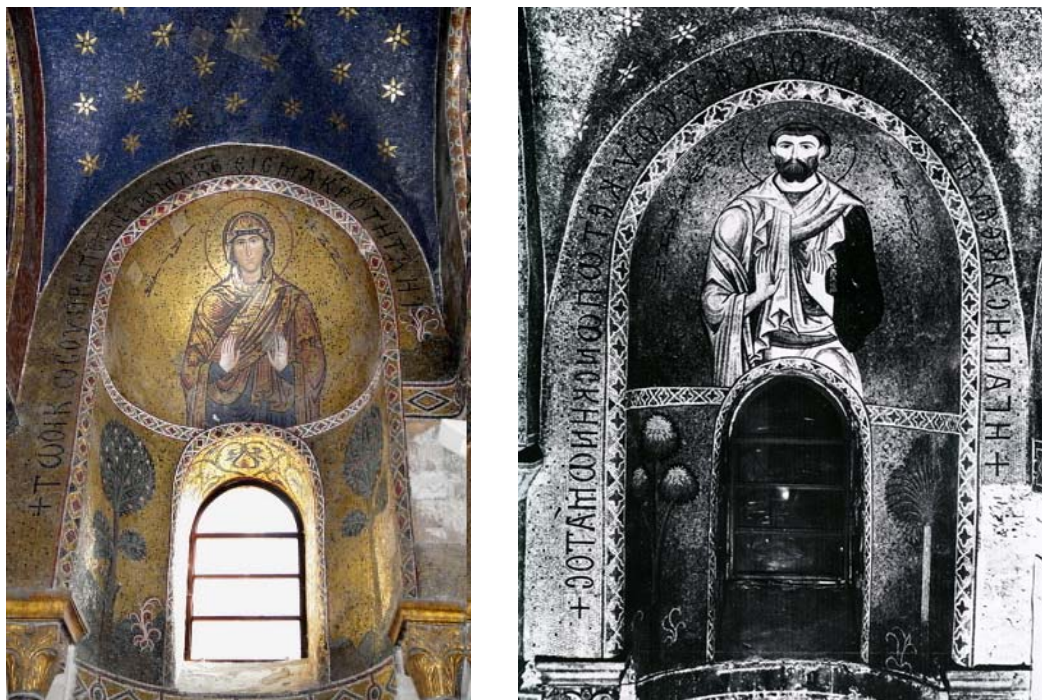


Fig 19. Side apses depicting Anna and Joachim

Images from [http://www.squinchpix.com/PHP\\_1.php?imgnum=6&setidx=858154](http://www.squinchpix.com/PHP_1.php?imgnum=6&setidx=858154) and Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*.

Although the Virgin is no longer there, the two archangels Gabriel and Michael, were depicted a second time making obeisance to her from the barrel vault of the eastern cross.<sup>91</sup> Other saints are portrayed in the soffits of the four great arches of the crossing, on the end walls of the northern and southern cross arms, and in the soffits of the four small arches separating these arms from the corner bays. Seven medallions in the soffits of the eastern crossing arch depict busts of Greek church fathers. Equal numbers of medallions in the soffits of the other three arches depict busts of martyrs, and the martyrs in the northern arch are all soldiers. On the end wall of the southern cross arms are physician saints, which also decorated the now lost northern cross arm wall. Four scenes from the life of the Virgin are also depicted, including the Annunciation on the eastern crossing arch, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple on the western crossing arch, and the Nativity and the Dormition on the two halves of the barrel vault of the western cross arm.<sup>92</sup> This

<sup>91</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 133-35.

<sup>92</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 175-189.

Byzantine inspired mosaic scheme is quite similar to the mosaic program of the Cappella Palatina, although there are a few differences between the two. The central figure of the Pantokrator in the dome differs from that of the Cappella Palatina and of most Byzantine churches because Christ is depicted full-figured and enthroned. However, one church in Greece presents a strikingly similar iconography. H. Hierotheos at Megara in Attica also has a seated full-figured Christ in the dome with four worshipping archangels below.



Fig 20. Dome interior of H. Hierotheos at Megara with same representation of enthroned Christ and praying angels as in the Martorana

Image from Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*.

The enthroned Christ in the Martorana is enclosed in a band of biblical text, from John 8:12, which is not a style employed in Byzantine churches, but was used in the dome of the Cappella Palatina.<sup>93</sup> The words from John 8:12 are usually displayed in an open book in Christ's hands in Byzantine programs, but in the Martorana the book Christ is holding is closed, which explains

<sup>93</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 127.

the placement of the important text from John 8:12 in the surrounding band.<sup>94</sup> The mosaicists working in the Martorana looked to Byzantine influence for the majority of their iconography, including the distinctive image of the enthroned Christ Pantokrator, but they were also looking at recent developments within Sicily, such as the use of John 8:12 in a decorative band instead of displayed in an open book.

The decoration of the kneeling archangels illustrate the precise liturgical act which mortal worshipers are to perform. This idea is re-enforced by an Arabic inscription placed on the wooden beams below the dome. George of Antioch placed the Epinikios Hymn, the angel's chant of prayer, from the Anaphora and the Great Doxology, but instead of Greek it is written in Arabic Kufic script.<sup>95</sup> This use of Arabic text does not appear in Byzantine churches, but is apparent in the nearby Cappella Palatina, which indicates influence from developments within Sicily. Similarly to the Cappella Palatina, Roger II used Islamic artistic traditions in his structures to display the worldly nature of his rule.

Two mosaics that were on the original façade of the church are now displayed in the narthex. One of these mosaics depicts Roger II being anointed by Christ. The similarities between the two figures are striking, indicating the rule is the earthly counterpart of Christ.<sup>96</sup> Since Roger II did not commission this art, the depiction is how his chief minister saw him.<sup>97</sup> Although the religious practice in Sicily was of Latin Christianity, Roger II is depicted as a Byzantine King through his wardrobe, including the Greek crown decorated with pearl pendants that he is receiving.<sup>98</sup> Roger II is not receiving his kingship from the pope or his representatives, but directly from Christ. This mosaic was created around twenty years after the event of his

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<sup>94</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990.

<sup>95</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990.

<sup>96</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 164.

<sup>97</sup> Houben, Hubert. *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler between East and West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002.

<sup>98</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.



coronation, but it depicts the young king's political vision by using the iconography of the Eastern Emperors, as those who are crowned by God.<sup>99</sup>



Fig 21. The left mosaic shows Roger II being crowned by Christ and the mosaic on the right shows George of Antioch at the feet of the Virgin.

Images from <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/haskins/RogerIIKing.htm>

The other relocated mosaic depicts George of Antioch, the patron of the church, at the feet of the Virgin Mary.<sup>100</sup> The two mosaic figures depict the typical Byzantine act of proskynesis,<sup>101</sup> which refers to the act of prostrating before a person of higher rank. These secular mosaics draw influence from Byzantine models for form, with similar motifs in the nave mosaics at Hagia Sophia that depict Emperors on either side of Christ. Like the Cappella Palatina, Roger and George of Antioch have worked themselves into the religiously decorated mosaic program.

<sup>99</sup> Houben, Hubert. *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler between East and West*.

<sup>100</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>101</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

Although the mosaics of the Martorana are similar to those of Cefalù and the Cappella Palatina, there are enough discrepancies to infer a different team of mosaicists.<sup>102</sup> These mosaics have similar counterparts only within the Byzantine world, indicating that the Admiral George of Antioch procured his own team directly from the imperial Byzantine capital. These mosaicists brought with them the style of the more classic Byzantine models, such as the ones at Daphni dated to a century earlier, but they also brought significant changes in style that had occurred within the Greek world, which are apparent on wall paintings in Cyprus at the churches of Hagia Chrysostomos at Koutsovendis, Asinou. The mosaics at Daphni have characteristic qualities including showing volume through lines of shadow, depicting serene facial expressions, having the bodies grounded in space often in a contrapposto pose, and using drapery as a means to show the body's movement underneath. The wall paintings at Cyprus, dating to the early twelfth century, show a knowledge and understanding of the Daphni style, which dates to the eleventh century, but have taken the style in a new direction. The figures on Cyprus show an enhanced linear quality to the face and body, the faces are less-rounded, their stances lack a firm grounding, and the drapery forms more complicated patterns.<sup>103</sup> The Cypriot style has increased the linear facial features of the traditional Daphni style, while decreasing the linear quality of the bodies, and has made the drapery more stylized. Some of these newer Cypriot styles have mixed with the traditional Daphni mosaic style in the Martorana.

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<sup>102</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 233-239.

<sup>103</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 233-239.





Fig 22. The mosaic from Daphni on the left shows the grounded figures in contrapposto poses with rounded faces and drapery showing the bodies beneath. The Cypriot wall painting from Hagios Chrysostomos on the right shows the less-grounded figure in a pose of movement with an increased linear quality.

Images from [http://apah.lakegeneva.badger.grouppfusion.net/modules/groups/group\\_pages.phtml?&gid=87537&nid=59175&openSubNav=14291&sessionid=&printable=TRUE&sessionid=391f86e5119234ddfa4cc51a2af4a67f&portrait\\_or\\_landscape=portrait](http://apah.lakegeneva.badger.grouppfusion.net/modules/groups/group_pages.phtml?&gid=87537&nid=59175&openSubNav=14291&sessionid=&printable=TRUE&sessionid=391f86e5119234ddfa4cc51a2af4a67f&portrait_or_landscape=portrait)  
and

Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo.*



Fig 23. This mosaic depicting Mary with the Christ child and Simeon shows the blending of the styles from Daphni and on Cyprus. Both sets of figures are elongated, but Mary remains with firm grounding while Simeon is in a pose of movement. Mary is clothed in drapery which shows the body, while Simeon's drapery forms a more complex pattern.

Image from Artstor

The mosaics in the Martorana have qualities of both styles, including the more progressive highly patterned drapery, an increased linear quality, but they are still based on the conservative models at Daphni.<sup>104</sup>

### **The Cathedral and Monastery of Monreale:**

The Cathedral and Monastery of Monreale was founded by William II, Roger II's grandson, in 1174.<sup>105</sup> The structure was completed by 1183 and the decorations were completed during the following decade. Monreale was founded as the burial place for William II, just as the Cathedral at Cefalù was intended for the burial of Roger II.<sup>106</sup> Monreale was built directly over the site of another church, the Hagia Kyriaka, which had been the center for the Greek community during the Muslim occupation. Monreale was granted complete independence in 1176 by a papal bull and its abbot, a Cluniac monk, was appointed archbishop of Palermo, making him answerable only to the king and the pope.<sup>107</sup> The church is in a Latin basilica form, with a two-towered Norman façade, and a grand cloister.

<sup>104</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*. pp 233-239.

<sup>105</sup> Demus, Otto. *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*. Pp 91.

<sup>106</sup> Cilento, Adele and Alessandro Vanoli. *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy*.

<sup>107</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 172.

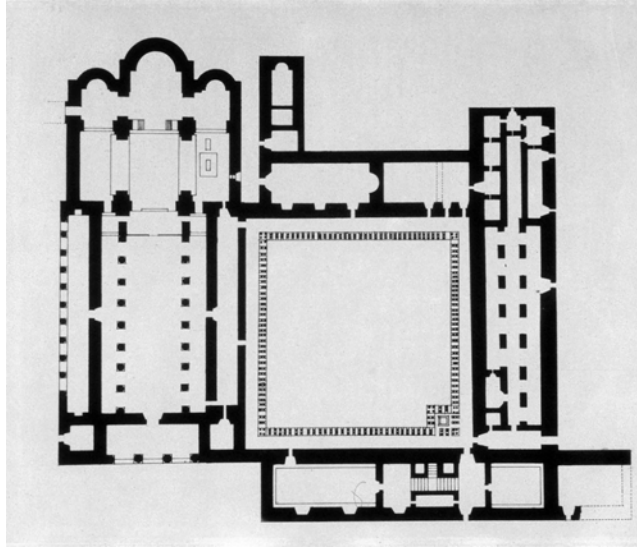


Fig 24. Plan of Monreale  
Image from Artstor

The mosaics in the Cathedral of Monreale are characteristically Byzantine. The mosaicists, following the example of Cefalù, created the Pantokrator program in the apse of the basilica. The apse is decorated with the Christ Pantokrator. Below him are the depictions of the virgin and archangels, and on the lower register are the apostles. The artists also depict Saints Peter and Paul on the conches of the two side apses and their life stories below on the side walls, in keeping with Benedictine traditions.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Demus, Otto. *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*. Pp 114.



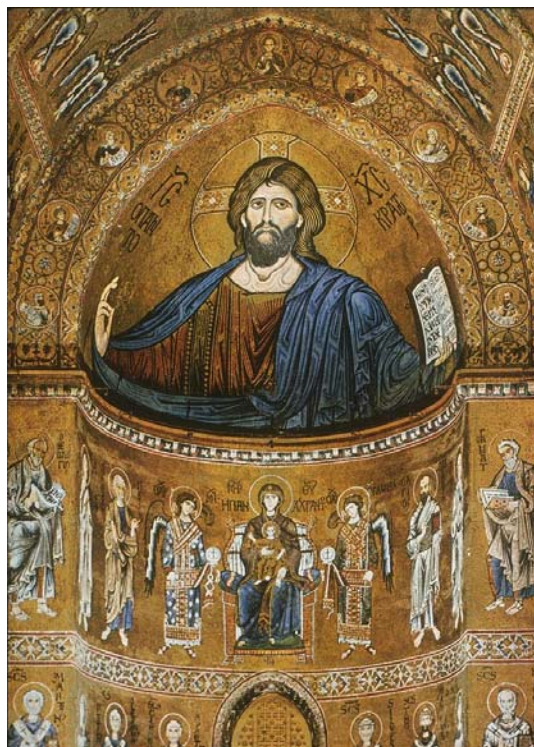


Fig 25. Christ Pantokrator in the central apse, with enthroned Virgin and Child, archangels, and apostles  
Image from Artstor

The square of the crossing and the walls of the transepts are decorated with a cycle of Christological scenes. The cycle is dominated by history, not liturgy, and extensive narratives. This cycle differs from the dominant narratives of byzantine churches, which often give emphasis to major feast events.<sup>109</sup> The nave is decorated with scenes from the ministry of Christ and in two registers above the nave arcade, the Old Testament is depicted from the Creation to the story of Jacob.<sup>110</sup> These mosaic programs are very similar to those depicted in the Cappella Palatina. Although the mosaics at Monreale were created some years after those in the Cappella Palatina, they both display characteristically Byzantine mosaics, including gold backgrounds, linear, and isolated figures, in un-Byzantine Latin basilica structures. The cathedral also contains two mosaics that depict King William II before Christ and another of the king before Mary. These two mosaics refer to the dedicatory mosaics of Roger II and George of Antioch in the

<sup>109</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 172.

<sup>110</sup> Demus, Otto. *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*. Pp 121.

church of the Martorana.<sup>111</sup> The mosaics in the Cathedral of Monreale are attributed to Greek teams of mosaicists who were brought in from Byzantium. They adapted their Byzantine style of mosaics to the basilica of Monreale, which had no characteristically Greek naos or dome.<sup>112</sup>

The cloister of Monreale is known for its combination of traditions from Byzantium, Lombardy, France and the Islamic world. The cloister is decorated with pairs of columns with carved capitals and mosaic inlay on the shafts. Out of the one hundred and nine pairs of columns, only sixteen are historiated. Out of these sixteen capitals, thirteen have religious scenes, two depict secular scenes, and one had a series of the Labors of the Months. The majority of the other columns have purely decorative elements, and many use human figures in a non-narrative way.<sup>113</sup> Some of the capitals are decorated with classical themes, such as the God Mithras sacrificing a bull.<sup>114</sup>



Fig 26. Capital of Mithras sacrificing a bull

Image from Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale."

Some of the themes are derived from the Byzantine iconographic tradition, such as images of Constantine and Helena standing on either side of the True Cross, and an image of the Triumph of the church.

<sup>111</sup> Kitzinger, Ernst. *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*.

<sup>112</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 174.

<sup>113</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale." *The Art Bulletin*. Vol 31 (1949), pp. 159-169.

<sup>114</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 159-169.



Fig 27. Capital of Constantine and Helena with the True Cross  
Image from Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale."

Other religious images are similar to the mosaics of the Cappella Palatine, the Cathedral at Cefalù, the Cathedral of Monreale, and the Martorana, such as scenes of the Fall of Man, the story of Noah, and the story of Jacob. The combination of eastern and western religious depictions is evident on the capital depicting the Women at the Sepulchre. The western tradition depicts three women walking towards a sarcophagus on which an angel is sitting, while the eastern tradition depicts two women with a seated angel who is pointing towards a cave. The capital at Monreale shows three women approaching an angel seated upon a sarcophagus who is holding a lily and pointing across his body to a cave in which is seen an empty shroud.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 159-169.



Fig 28. The Women at the Sepulchre  
Image from [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/aict/x-rq086/\\*](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/aict/x-rq086/*)

Some of the reliefs depict scenes well established in the artistic traditions of Lombardy. The Labors of the Months at Monreale are different from those found elsewhere in southern Italy and include two depictions, those of March blowing horns and August nailing-up a barrel, which are not depicted anywhere in Sicily, but are common in Lombardy. The church of San Zeno, in Verona, depicts these distinctly Italian representations of March and August, and also illustrates the exact same images for the other months, except for a few minor differences, that are seen at Monreale. Since the Labors of the Months are so similar to those from the Lombard examples, which have an earlier date than those at Monreale, the workers at Monreale must have looked to that region for the iconography or the workers went to Sicily after the completion of their work in Lombardy.<sup>116</sup> Another tradition derived from Lombardy and not seen elsewhere in Sicily is the use of virtues in connection with personages or scenes to symbolize their character.

<sup>116</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 159-169.



Fig 29. Capital of *Virtues*  
Image from Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale."

Lombardy was the first Italian region to use this type of iconography, but Monreale employs the use of virtues, such as Justice and Charity, on its capitals as well.<sup>117</sup> The historiated capitols cover a wide range of history, starting with the Fall of Man to events after the Crucifixion, but their placement around the cloister is ambiguous.<sup>118</sup> The church of Salerno, in southern Italy, contains historiated capitals and was completed before the church of Monreale.

<sup>117</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 159-169.

<sup>118</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 159-169.



FIG. 82. Salerno, Cathedral, paschal candelabrum      FIG. 83. Monreale, Cathedral, cloister, fountain  
 Fig 30. The candelabrum from Salerno, on the left, and the fountain from Monreale, on the right, both use the same motifs, indicating a direct exchange of ideas and workers  
 Image from Glass, Dorothy. *Romanesque Sculpture in Campania: Patrons, Programs, and Style*.

Since there are such similarities in motifs there may have also been Italian workers moving to Sicily to work at Monreale. The historiated capitols are stylistically French and some were executed by French artists,<sup>119</sup> which may have been influenced by the presence of a Cluniac monk as abbot. The church of Vezelay and the cloister of Moissac, both in France, are a few of the few examples of historiated capitals that were created before the time of Monreale.

<sup>119</sup> Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century*. Pp 172.





Fig 31. The capital on the left comes from Vezelay. The capital on the right comes from Moissac. Both indicate earlier examples of historiated capitals, which may have influenced the capitals at Monreale  
Images from Artstor

There is also a typical Romanesque tradition of depicting important social or political events in religious terms. The establishment of the monastery of Monreale is the subject of one capitols, which depicts William II presenting the cathedral of Monreale to the King of Kings, aided by an angel that holds a model of the cathedral. Christ sits on the Virgin Mary's lap, blessing and receiving the gift.



Fig 32. Capital of William II presenting the Cathedral to the Virgin and Christ  
Image from [http://www.lichtspeicher.de/gallery2.php?g2\\_itemId=3211](http://www.lichtspeicher.de/gallery2.php?g2_itemId=3211)

The organization of this scene is set up like the traditional adoration of the Magi.<sup>120</sup> In one area of the cloister there are scenes of the Pentecost, Presentation in the Temple, and Flight into Egypt, which are represented in the Chartrain style, reminiscent of the West Portal, Portail Royal, at the Cathedral of Chartres.<sup>121</sup> Workmen skilled in the Norman, Romanesque styles were imported to Palermo by William II from the Norman domain.<sup>122</sup> Other capitals display Islamic models, using images of animals and beasts.<sup>123</sup> All of the columns and capitals display a clear understanding of classical prototype by the sculptor through the sculpting of the Corinthian capitals in the Roman style.<sup>124</sup> The colorful inlay pattern on the shafts of the columns, similar to those of the pavement and wainscoting in the Cappella Palatina, comes from the Islamic tradition.



Fig 33. Shafts of columns from the Monreale cloister showing Islamic inspired geometric inlay  
Images from

<sup>120</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "Iconography of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 159-169.

<sup>121</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "A Stylistic Analysis of the Cloister of Monreale." *The Art Bulletin*. Vol. 34 (1952), pp. 35-41.

<sup>122</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "A Stylistic Analysis of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 35-41.

<sup>123</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "A Stylistic Analysis of the Cloister of Monreale." pp. 35-41.

<sup>124</sup> Sheppard, Carl D. "A Chronology of Romanesque Sculpture in Campania." *The Art Bulletin*. Vol 32 (1950), pp. 319-326.

These polygonal patters are made from stone and colored glass, and have their counterparts in the architectural decoration of the Islamic world.<sup>125</sup>

The presence of *convivencia*, or coexistence, under Sicily's Norman rule brings the theme of cultural mixing to the forefront. Few societies have achieved tolerant, peaceful integration of cultures and even fewer produced art and architecture that combines such distinctive artistic traditions. The sites of the Cappella Palatina, the Cathedral of Cefalù, the Church of the Martorana, and the Cathedral and Monastery of Monreale demonstrate the diverse nature of Sicily during the Hauteville dynasty. By distinguishing the traditions of each artistic medium we can learn the identity of those involved in the creation of such complex works and in doing so, will better understand the intentions of those who commissioned them and the perceptions of the citizens who interacted with them. The relationship of those involved with the creation of the structures allows us to comprehend the function of the architecture and its decoration. Through studying the four sites in Sicily it is apparent that craftsmen were brought to Sicily from North Africa, Byzantium, Italy, and France, with the intention of enhancing the cosmopolitan image of the kingdom and the worldly, open-minded character of the king. In attempting to understand the tolerant society of Norman Sicily we can utilize the knowledge gained through studying the culturally complex art and architecture to appreciate the society as a whole. understand

Not only do the four sites discussed display the ideology of the Norman rulers, but they also represent larger artistic trends in the medieval world. Since the Norman rulers used up-to-date artistic trends from the varying cultures, the sites preserve various stages of the shifting artistic traditions. Through the Byzantine mosaics we can see the shift from Daphni models to more linear ones, such as in the paintings at the church of Hagia Chrysostomos at Koutsovendis on Cyprus, which indicates a larger trend of Byzantine mosaicists altering the traditional forms.

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<sup>125</sup> Hill, Derek, and Oleg Grabar. *Islamic Architecture and its Decoration*.

We can see the spread of more local artistic traditions, passing through Sicily, and moving throughout other parts of Europe. The use of Byzantine opus sectile in the Cappella Palatina and at Monte Cassino show the spread of the tradition to Italy, which becomes a popular trend in the following century. The spread of Islamic artistic traditions to areas outside of the middle east is evident through their presence in Sicily and Islamic motifs begin to be adopted into western tradition, such as the rectilinear geometric patterns. The use of historiated capitals spread throughout Europe during this time, evident by Vezelay, Moissac, and Monreale. Even the spread of ideology is present through the architectural decoration, such as Roger II being crowned directly from Christ, which comes from the Byzantine tradition. Sicily's architectural sites, from the period of Norman rule, preserve larger artistic trends and shifts present in the medieval world. In studying the artistic trends present in Sicily we are able to piece together the stylistic evidence for cultural expansion and increasing influence of the Latin Christian, Greek Christian, and Muslim cultures.

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