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# FROM CREATION TO COMMUNICATION

## REVIEWING ART IN NORMAN SICILY





## Abstract

*Im Kontext der normannischen Expansion stellen die Vorgänge im südlichen Italien einen Sonderfall dar, der sich durch die Schaffung einer neuen kulturellen Identität auszeichnete.*

*Wie das neue Königreich England war das normannische Königreich Sizilien, das 1130 von Roger II. von Hauteville begründet wurde, ein Projekt, das mit der Schaffung einer neuen politischen Entität einherging. In Sizilien sahen sich die Normannen mit einem multikulturellen und multireligiösen Umfeld konfrontiert und bedienten sich Strategien kultureller Vermittlung, die einzigartig im Mittelmeerraum und in Europa waren. Solche Strategien fanden ihren Ausdruck in den Künsten und einer ästhetischen Sprache, die von multikulturellen Elementen geprägt waren, die der byzantinischen, lateinischen und islamischen Welt entstammten.*

*Die Kunst und Architektur des normannischen Siziliens, in denen ein normannisch-sicilischer Synkretismus zu erkennen ist, haben demnach eine identitätsstiftende Rolle in der Geschichte Siziliens seit dem 12. Jahrhundert gespielt und im 19. Jahrhundert eine Nachahmung erfahren. Die Aufwertung und Anerkennung dieses kulturellen Erbes erreichte kürzlich mit der Aufnahme des arabisch-normannischen Palermo und der Kathedralen von Cefalù und Monreale in die Welterbeliste der UNESCO einen Höhepunkt.*

*Unter Berücksichtigung der neuesten Forschungsergebnisse analysiert der Beitrag das künstlerische Phänomen anhand ausgewählter Beispiele, um den ästhetischen Synkretis-*

*mus normannisch-sicilischer Ausprägung nachzuvollziehen. Darüber hinaus werden einige entscheidende Etappen der lokalen Wiederbelebung dieses Erbes nachgezeichnet, welche von Zeit zu Zeit die Ausdrucksstärke und Kommunikationsfähigkeit der arabisch-normannischen Kunst bekräftigten.*

## Introduction

The Normans, with their thirst for adventure and conquest, contributed to shaping the face of Europe in the Middle Ages. Their widespread expansion created bridges between central and Northern Europe and the shores of the Mediterranean.

In this context, the Norman Kingdom of Sicily represents such a peculiar example of cultural interaction that the site “Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale” was recognized in 2015 as part of the World Heritage List.<sup>1</sup> It is not a coincidence that the organization of the United Nations, aimed at promoting world peace and international cooperation as well as preserving the cultural heritage through education, science, and culture, chose for its World Heritage List this site, characterized by the coexistence of different cultures in the same territory.<sup>2</sup>

The European dimension of Norman history was the focus of an international exhibition organised in 1994, with the evocative title that translates into “Normans: People

*The introduction and the conclusion have been written by both authors together, while the sections headed “Syncretic perceptions. Opus sectile lions, blossom/leaves, marble and glass”, “Palermo Cathedral. Norman revival between creation and communication” and “Approaching Norman Palermo today. Recent researches on the Royal Palace” have been authored by Ruggero Longo and the section headed “Islamicate Norman Sicily: the Cappella Palatina painted muqarnas wooden ceiling” by Francesca Anzelmo.*

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1487/> [last consulted 26.08.2021].

<sup>2</sup> On the nomination process and the outstanding universal value of the site, see: Ruggero, Longo, Palermo arabo-normanna. Presente, passato e futuro di un patrimonio universale, in: Per salvare Palermo: giornale della Fondazione Salvare Palermo onlus 43, 2015, pp. 9–13.



of Europe”.<sup>3</sup> If we consider that Europe in the 1990s was still in the process of construction and developing its cultural roots, the exhibition can be considered a pioneering contribution to studies in the understanding of medieval Europe, albeit one more focused on a distinctly Eurocentric Norman people than on the Mediterranean dimension. Only in the last quarter of the twentieth century did scholars begin to look at the medieval Mediterranean no longer as a periphery of Europe, but as a place of productive interaction between different cultures and religions.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, art historians began to look beyond the boundaries imposed by nationalistic approaches,<sup>5</sup> and re-evaluated in a positive sense the category of ‘hybridity’, previously considered as a departure from the norm, and therefore a marker of incompleteness, imperfection, or marginality.<sup>6</sup>

Before turning to consider how interactions and interchanges emerged in and shaped the arts of Norman Sicily, it is important to clarify why the category of ‘cultural syncretism’ in reference to the art and architecture of the island should be preferred, and why this syncretism can be considered as something which can be distinguished from other hermeneutical categories of multicultural phenomena.

The term syncretism relates to the aptitude of joining together features of different origins for a common pur-

pose.<sup>7</sup> Formerly adopted by anthropologists and historians of religion, then by linguists, over time the use of the term has declined because of its major theoretical implications such as the questionable search for a lost ‘pure’ tradition. At present, it has been rehabilitated by anthropologists and sociologists who are using it in the renewed field of research on human culture, specifically in relation to the peculiar processes of the development of novel cultural expressions.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the multiculturalism of Norman Sicily can be observed from two points of view. The first involves the relations between the different cultural communities that coexisted on the island; the second addresses the genesis of new aesthetic expressions that arose from the instrumental use of the arts from different cultural traditions – Islamic, Greek and Latin – by the Norman kings.

If the former mode of multiculturalism is the field of historians, the latter concerns art historians and it is in this latter field where we may identify syncretism. ‘Stylistic syncretism’ in relation to art and architecture in Norman Sicily was first adopted by Guido di Stefano in 1955.<sup>9</sup> Within this artistic syncretism, it is possible to distinguish two layers: a political foundation, and an aesthetic dimension.<sup>10</sup>

The cultural syncretism of Norman Sicily began with the rule of Roger II: a Norman of the Hauteville fam-

3 I Normanni: popolo d’Europa 1030–1200 (catalogo della mostra, Roma 28 gennaio–30 aprile 1994), ed. by Mario D’Onofrio, Venezia 1994.

4 See for instance the 1981 exhibition: *The meeting of two worlds: the crusades and the Mediterranean context*, The University of Michigan Museum of Art, May 9–September 27, 1981, ed. by Christine Verzár Bornstein [a.o.], Kalamazoo 1984.

5 On the nationalistic approaches affecting the discipline of art history, see: Bowes, Kim/Tronzo, William, *National Narratives and the Medieval Mediterranean* (Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome 62), Rome 2018.

6 On the reassessment of hybridity, especially with regards to Norman Sicily, see: Tronzo, William, *Restoring Agency to the Discourse on Hybridity: the Cappella Palatina from a Different Point of View*, in: *Die Cappella Palatina in Palermo – Geschichte, Kunst, Funktionen*, ed. by Thomas Dittelbach, Künzelsau 2011, pp. 579–585.

7 See: “sincretismo” in: *Enciclopedia online Treccani*: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sincretismo/> [last consulted 26.08.2021].

8 On the latter use of the term, see: Canevacci, Massimo R., *Concetto di sincretismo*, in *Rivista di Scienze Sociali*, online: <https://www.rivistadisocietadiscienzeonline.it/concetto-di-sincretismo/> [last consulted 26.08.2021].

See also Stewart, Charles, *Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture*, in: *Diacritics* 29/3, 1999, pp. 40–62; on the same issue related to the visual cultures, see: Canepa, Matthew P., *Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction Among Ancient and Early Medieval Visual Cultures*, in: *Ars Orientalis* 38, 2008, pp. 7–30.

9 Di Stefano, Guido, *Monumenti della Sicilia Normanna*, Palermo 1955, pp. XXIV–XXV (also 2nd edition: Krönig, Wolfgang, Palermo 1979, p. XXX). Albeit without adopting the term, the concept was already introduced by Calandra, Enrico, *Breve storia dell’architettura in Sicilia I*, Bari 1938, pp. 32–33.

10 In this paper we will deal with the aesthetic dimension of syncretism. For its political foundation, see: Bongianino, Umberto, *Al-Ḥaḍra ar-Ruġġariyya. Arabismo e propaganda politica alla corte di Ruggero II di Sicilia*, in: *Arte Medievale* 4/2, 2012, pp. 95–120; Nef, Annliese, *La Sicile de Charybde en Scylla? Du tout culturel au transculturel*, in: *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome – Moyen Âge*, 128/2, 2016, pp. 603–616.





ily, born in Southern Italy and brought-up in Sicily, he founded the new kingdom of Sicily in 1130.<sup>11</sup> In collaboration with his most important minister, George of Antioch, Roger developed a refined political and aesthetic plan that combined elements of the Latin West, the Islamic world, and the Byzantine Empire. These three components were carefully chosen and used in very specific ways in order to construct the identity and the image of the new Sicilian kingdom and to affirm the power of its ruler. Art and architecture translated the grand claims into tangible reality. The resulting artistic output, distinctive among other modes of artistic expression current in Europe or the Mediterranean, became the hallmark of the kingdom under Norman rule.

However, the art of Norman Sicily was not a spontaneous expression of 'coexistence' promoted by the rulers. Indeed, even if the Muslim, Jewish, Greek Christian, and Latin Christian inhabitants of Sicily were allowed to retain not only their customs and languages but even their own religions, this permissiveness was not inspired by an attitude of tolerance in the modern sense of the term. Rather, it was a convenient compromise made for diplomatic purposes and for the construction of a solid and autonomous kingdom. Indeed, the arts were the instrument and direct outcome of a political program propagated through a sophisticated strategy of communication. At the same time, the artistic output of the Kingdom of Sicily was not the result of the continuity of pre-Norman traditions: Roger II used specialized workers brought from outside of his kingdom, thereby opening the doors to a new and real transfer of visual languages and technical knowledge from around the Mediterranean into Norman Sicily. We will now turn to explore what the agency of King Roger accomplished

in terms of visual languages, and especially consider the consequences for the dynamics of artistic creation. In this paper, we will argue that syncretism was something active and creative, generating its hybrid forms through a voluntary mixture of languages effected by artists who, once active in the kingdom, were free to experiment. They were able to welcome and offer new elements, in line with, and at the same time beyond, the demands and the 'official programs' of their patrons.

### Syncretic perceptions. *Opus sectile* lions, blossom/leaves, marble and glass

The Cappella Palatina can undoubtedly be considered the pinnacle of Siculo-Norman syncretism (fig. 1).<sup>12</sup> As the first and the most important among the foundations commissioned by Roger II after his coronation in 1130, the Cappella Palatina was specifically intended as a representation or manifestation of power. In this sense, the Cappella Palatina workshops represented a privileged place for multiculturalism and syncretism, a space intended as the pivotal point of a centripetal and centrifugal movement. However, we will not discuss the Cappella Palatina as a whole here. Instead, we will focus on three pieces of evidence which are extremely revealing in terms of the aesthetics and the dynamics of syncretism in the visual arts of Norman Sicily.

The first are two lions in *opus sectile*, located in the pavement at the entrance to the Sanctuary (fig. 2a). The *opus sectile* pavement offers an outstanding example of aesthetic syncretism, for which, by using a traditional Byzantine technique, typical Islamic ornamental patterns were created, or, vice versa: Byzantine and Roman traditions embraced Islamic ornamental principles (fig. 3).<sup>13</sup>

11 On Roger II, first king of Sicily, see: Houben, Hubert, *Ruggero II di Sicilia: un sovrano tra oriente e occidente*, Roma/Bari 1999.

12 The bibliography on the Cappella Palatina is countless. Worth mentioning are: Demus, Otto, *The mosaics of Norman Sicily*, London 1949, pp. 25–72, passim; Kitzinger, Ernst, *The mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: an essay on the choice and arrangement of subjects*, in: *The Art Bulletin* 31/4, 1949, pp. 269–292; Kitzinger, Ernst, *I mosaici del periodo normanno in Sicilia. I. La Cappella Palatina di Palermo. I Mosaici del Presbiterio*, Palermo 1992; Kitzinger, Ernst, *I mosaici del periodo normanno in Sicilia. II. La Cappella Palatina di Palermo. I Mosaici delle Navate*, Palermo 1993; Tronzo, William, *The cultures of his kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella*

*Palatina in Palermo*, Princeton 1997; *La Cappella Palatina a Palermo – The Cappella Palatina in Palermo (Mirabilia Italiae 17)*, 4 volumes, ed. by Beat Brenk, Modena 2010; *Die Cappella Palatina in Palermo – Geschichte, Kunst, Funktionen* (see note 7).

13 On the *opus sectile* pavement of the Cappella Palatina, see: Tronzo, *The cultures of his kingdom* (see note 13), pp. 29–37; Longo, Ruggero, *L'opus sectile nei cantieri normanni: una squadra di marmorari tra Salerno e Palermo*, in: *Medioevo: I cantieri*, ed. by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, Milano 2010, pp. 179–189; Longo, Ruggero, *The opus sectile Work of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo. New Material for New Studies*, in: *Die Cappella Palatina in Palermo – Geschichte, Kunst, Funktionen* (see note 7), pp. 491–498; Bloom, Jonathan, *The*









a



b



c



d

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a Presbytery pavement, *opus sectile* panel with lions, 1143 ca. (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

b Fatimid luster painted dish (Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art)

c Painted wooden ceiling, detail with lion, 1143 ca. (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

d Norman Stanza, east wall, mosaic with lions (Palermo, Palazzo Reale)

Islamic Sources of the Cappella Palatina Pavement, in: Die Cappella Palatina in Palermo – Geschichte, Kunst, Funktionen (see note 7), pp. 551–569; Longo, Ruggero, *Opus sectile* a Palermo nel secolo XII. Sinergie e mutazioni nei cantieri di Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio e

della Cappella Palatina, in: Byzantino – Sicula VI. La Sicilia e Bisanzio nei secoli XI e XII, ed. by Renata Lavagnini/Cristina Rognoni, Palermo 2014, pp. 29–341, esp. pp. 328–333.





3 *Opus sectile* pavement of the nave, detail (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

The lions perfectly summarize and further support this assumption. In comparison to other contemporary examples present in Christian monuments,<sup>14</sup> their iconographic design is clearly derived from Islamic models; a Fatimid prototype can be found in an eleventh-century lus-

tre-painted ceramic bowl from Egypt (fig. 2b).<sup>15</sup> The same kind of lion is represented on Roger's famous mantle, decorated by Muslim embroiderers in 1133/34, and it appears on the Cappella Palatina's wooden ceilings' Islamic paintings (fig. 2c).<sup>16</sup> Finally, the same lion iconography also appears in the Norman Stanza, a quite well-preserved space located not far from the Cappella Palatina in the Royal Palace in Palermo. It dates back to the Norman period, and is decorated with secular mosaics depicting hunting scenes and gardens (fig. 2d).<sup>17</sup> More than any other object, the *opus sectile* and mosaic lions demonstrate the circulation of patterns, the sharing of ideas, and the interaction and interchanges among craftsmen. In general, the Palace's Byzantine mosaics embrace Islamic structures and patterns, thus representing the intellectual porousness that created syncretism through hybridity.

The second visual evidence pertains to some specific ornamental features of the Cappella Palatina's mosaics. On the intrados of the triumphal arch, can be observed vine scrolls with vegetal motifs characterized by leaves or flowers in the shape of buds, the edges of which are curling and curving around the stem (fig. 4a). Otto Demus identified this motif as a 'Sasanian palmette'.<sup>18</sup> Following Demus, David Knipp identified possible Byzantine specimens in the eleventh-century Byzantine mosaics of Hosios Lukas, Dafni and Chios.<sup>19</sup> This kind of Sasanian palmette, or blossom/leaf, spread widely under the Abbasids;

- 14 See for instance the *opus sectile* lions in the pavement of the church of Sant'Adriano in San Demetrio Corone (Cosenza, Italy, early twelfth century), or the same subject in the Varnakova Monastery church (Greece, mid-twelfth century). On Sant'Adriano see: Orsi, Paolo, *Le chiese Basiliane della Calabria*, Firenze 1929, pp. 160–170; Longo, Ruggero, *L'opus sectile in Sicilia e nel meridione normanno*, Viterbo 2009, pp. 166–173, bibliographical references included; on Varnakova: Pesci, Stefania, *Indagine preliminare sui pavimenti medio-bizantini della Grecia: l'esempio di Sagmata e Varnakova*, in: *Atti del VI Congresso nazionale dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini*, Catania-Messina, 2–5 ottobre 2000 (*Siculorum Gymnasium* 57), ed. by Tiziana Creazzo/Gioacchino Strano, Catania 2004, pp. 691–723, esp. pp. 705–713, fig. 12.
- 15 See: Grube, Ernst J./Johns, Jeremy, *The painted ceilings of the Cappella Palatina* (*Islamic art. Supplement* 1), London 2005, pp. 192–197, fig. 59.6.
- 16 On the mantle see Tronzo, William, *Il manto di Ruggero II: le parti e il tutto*, in: *Nobiles Officinae, Perle, filigrane e trame di seta dal Palazzo Reale di Palermo* (catalogue of the exhibition, Palermo, 17 December 2003–10 March 2004) ed. by Maria Andaloro, 2 volumes,

Catania 2006, Vol. 2 (Saggi), pp. 256–263, English version: pp. 443–446, with bibliographical references included. See also the entries in *Nobiles Officinae*, Vol. 1 (Catalogo), pp. 45–49, 576–579. On the Cappella Palatina wooden ceilings, see the paragraph by Francesca Manuela Anzelmo further in this article. For the images of the lion on the wooden ceilings, see: *La Cappella Palatina a Palermo* (see note 13), Vol 1 (*Atlante* 1), figs. 188, 189, 374, 376; Vol 2 (*Atlante* 2) figs. 588, 605, 607, 666, 762, 764, 839, 891, 892, 978.

- 17 On the Norman Stanza: Kitzinger, Ernst, *I mosaici del periodo normanno in Sicilia. VI. La cattedrale di Cefalù, la cattedrale di Palermo e il Museo diocesano. Mosaici profani*, Palermo 2000, pp. 16–19; Knipp, David, *Some aspects of style and heritage in the Norman stanza*, in: *Art and Form in Norman Sicily*, ed. by David Knipp, *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 35, 2003/04, 2005, München 2005, pp. 173–207; Knipp, David, *The Mosaics of the Norman Stanza in Palermo. A Study of Byzantine and Medieval Islamic Palace Decoration*, Leuven/Paris/Bristol 2017.
- 18 Demus, *The mosaics* (see note 13), pp. 16, 47–48, 83–84, 182.
- 19 Knipp, *Some aspect of style* (see note 18), pp. 192–195; Knipp, *The Mosaics* (see note 18), pp. 107–108.





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a Western arch beneath the dome, detail (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)  
b Wooden *mihrab* from the mausoleum of Sayyida Ruqayya, detail, 1154 (Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art)  
c Nave ceiling with painted *muqarnas*, detail, 1143 ca. (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

some textiles of Tulinid period (868–905), presumably from Iraq, also attest to the spreading of this kind of motif in Egypt.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it can be found in Byzan-

tine media, such as on the tenth-century capitals in the Monastery of Constantino Lips.<sup>21</sup> A peculiar variant can be observed in Fatimid Ifriqiya and Egypt: the super-elon-

20 See Egyptian Textiles Museum, ed. by Supreme Council of Antiquities, Cairo 2007, pp. 130–142, 174, 179, 186.

21 See Mango, Cyril, *Architettura Bizantina*, Milano 1974, pp. 110–111.





gation of the blossom/leaf ends curving around the stem.<sup>22</sup> There is nothing similar in the Byzantine version of the motif, while it becomes frequent in twelfth-century Egypt and persists into the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras. One of the best examples is found on the wooden *mihrab* of Sayyida Ruqqayya, made in Cairo around 1154 (fig. 4b).<sup>23</sup> The same type appears in the earliest mosaics of the Cappella Palatina, and is pervasively scattered on wooden ceilings (fig. 4c). If we look closely at the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina, we can distinguish between the Sasanian Palmettes originating from the Byzantine tradition and the buds rendered in the Islamic fashion. This latter becomes a distinctive motif in Norman mosaics, from Cefalù to the Norman Stanza in the Royal Palace, from La Zisa Palace to Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio and Monreale.<sup>24</sup>

A third piece of evidence concerns technical knowledge as well as skills and the very materials employed for creating works of art, especially stone and glass. In this context, we refer to the presence of coloured glass *tesserae* on the *opus sectile* marble revetments (fig. 5), a circumstance which was definitely unusual until the second quarter of the twelfth century. Just as Byzantine artisans welcomed Islamic patterns, here we find marble decorations

with the integration of glass. The presence of red, blue, light-blue, black, and even golden glass *tesserae*, combined with precious marble and porphyry stones, enhanced the chromatic range and the preciousness of these decorations. Studies have revealed that until the late twelfth century, the raw glass needed to produce mosaic *tesserae* in the medieval Mediterranean was usually imported from production centres in the Near-East, especially in Egypt and in Syria.<sup>25</sup> Being at a considerable distance from these production centres, there was the alternative to re-employ old glass, including mosaic *tesserae*, which was remelted, coloured as needed, and finally cut into the shape of small *tesserae*.<sup>26</sup> Ongoing research seems to demonstrate that this was not the case in Norman Sicily; instead, the raw glass used to craft the *tesserae* for Norman mosaics was probably produced in mid-twelfth-century by Byzantine artisans working in Sicily.<sup>27</sup> The presence of such highly developed technical skill in the kingdom was an effective statement of the power. King Roger had not only prized Byzantine artisans at his command, but also skilled craftsmen-chemists who were able to produce glass from scratch. As a consequence, glass *tesserae* usually employed for Byzantine mosaics were introduced as an innovation

- 22 A large group of eleventh century Fatimid lustre-painted ceramics from Fustat show these kind of blossoms/leaves that are frequently associated with spiral-shaped tendrils and scrolls, in the middle of which there are one single leaf or two confronted leaves in opposite position. Among the most remarkable examples is the Fatimid lustre-painted dish preserved in the Museum für Islamische Kunst (Berlin), inv. n. I.36/64. See Ettlinghausen, Richard/Grabar, Oleg, *The art and architecture of Islam*, Harmondsworth/Middlesex 1987, fig. 172.
- 23 O'Kane, Bernard, *The treasures of Islamic art in the museums of Cairo*, Cairo/New York 2006, p. 59, fig. 45.d; Bloom, Jonathan, *Arts of the City Victorious*, New Haven/London 2007, pp. 162–167.
- 24 For the same argument see Longo, *Opus sectile a Palermo* (see note 14), pp. 333–335.
- 25 Studies on raw glass manufacture and on primary and secondary production centres in the Mediterranean significantly increased in this last century. See among the most recent studies: Schibille, Nadine [a.o.], *Chronology of early Islamic glass compositions from Egypt*, in: *Journal of Archaeological Science* 104, 2019, pp. 10–18; Angelini, Ivana/Gratuze, Bernard/Artioli, Gilberto, *Glasses and other vitreous materials through history*, in: *European Mineralogical Union 20. The Contribution of Mineralogy to Cultural Heritage*, ed. by G. Artioli/R. Oberti, London 2019, pp. 87–150.
- 26 This was the case in medieval Rome. See: Verità, Marco, *Le tessere vitree dei mosaici medievali a Roma. Tecnologia e degrado*, in: Mo-

saici medievali a Roma attraverso i restauri dell'ICR 1991–2004, ed. by Maria Andaloro/Carla D'Angelo, Roma 2017, pp. 437–477.

- 27 The first study in favour of this assumption is Verità, Marco/Rapisarda, Santa, *Studio analitico di materiali musivi vitrei del XII–XIII secolo della Basilica di Monreale a Palermo* in: *Rivista della Stazione Sperimentale del Vetro* 2, 2008, pp. 15–29. Other studies, still in progress, have been carried out during the research project “Valorizzazione e fruizione turistica del Palazzo Reale di Palermo” (PO-FESR 2007-13, CIG: 4397878889). The analyses have been performed *in situ* by means of a portable XRF instrument and carried out on 144 samples (68 in the Cappella Palatina; 76 in the Norman stanza). The outcomes of these studies are in the course of publication: Alberghina, Francesca [a.o.], *Indagini archeometriche per la caratterizzazione chimica delle decorazioni a mosaico del Palazzo Reale di Palermo*, in: *The Palace Unveiled, The Royal Palace in Palermo and other centers of power in the medieval Mediterranean*, Proceedings of the conference, ed. by Maria Andaloro/Ruggero Longo, Palermo 26–29 giugno 2018 [forthcoming]. Analyses supporting the same assumption have been performed on some *tesserae* from the Monreale Cathedral portal: Alberghina, Francesca [a.o.], *A multi-analytical approach to address a sustainable conservation of the main marble portal of the Monreale cathedral*, in: *International Journal of Conservation Science* 11/1, 2020, pp. 353–362, esp. pp. 360–361.



5 *Opus sectile* and *opus tessellatum* mosaics with colored glass tesserae. Left: *opus sectile* marble slab of the chancel barrier, detail, 1143 ca. – ante 1154; top right: mosaic with the Ascension scene on the north wing of the transept, west wall, pomegranate tree, detail, 1143 ca. – ante 1154; bottom right: royal throne platform, west wall, *opus sectile* decoration with colored glass tesserae; detail, 1143 ca. – ante 1154 (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

into the Romanesque art of inlaid marble and *opus sectile* decorations.<sup>28</sup> A new trend was born, as this technique during the second half of the twelfth century travelled from Sicily up Southern Italy, eventually reaching Rome in the thirteenth century.<sup>29</sup> This is an example for the long-range effects and the success of the new-born Norman Sicilian syncretism.

28 This innovation, implemented in mid-twelfth-century Norman Sicilian *opus sectile* decorations, is one of the focuses of my recent article: Longo, Ruggero, Per una filologia dei materiali e delle tecniche dell'arredo liturgico tra Roma e il Sud Italia (XI–XIII sec.). I veltri di Montecassino e altri frammenti in *opus sectile* e *tessellatum*, in: Hortus Artium Medievalium 27, 2021 [forthcoming].

At this point, it should be clear that the Norman aesthetic of syncretism was neither an eclectic combination of different visual languages, nor an inordinate and incoherent juxtaposition of different forms. It affected every level of artistic creation, fostering a courageous and enterprising fusion of forms and techniques. Mentioning the efficient formula conceived by Maria Andaloro, we might

29 See: Gianandrea, Manuela, Un crosscultural system per la scultura e gli arredi liturgici di Roma: materiali e tecniche nelle dinamiche di interazione culturale con il Meridione (XI–XIII secolo), in: Hortus Artium Medievalium 27, 2021 [forthcoming].





even describe the aesthetic syncretism of Norman Sicily as a kind of ‘genetic syncretism’ that was not just an inherited or native attitude of Norman Sicily, but rather “an active principle, which was working also for the conception and the creation process of a single work of art”<sup>30</sup>, a congenital attitude able to give birth to robust hybrids and in the process to create new aesthetic languages and identities.

### Islamicate Norman Sicily: the Cappella Palatina painted *muqarnas* wooden ceiling

Another highly refined representative example of the cultural syncretism of Sicily is the ceiling of the nave of the Cappella Palatina, which represents another level of King Roger’s multicultural visual strategies.

The ceiling is an imposing wooden structure that one definitely would not expect to find inside the palace chapel of a Christian ruler. It dates from the 1140s and belongs to

the original foundation of the building by King Roger II.<sup>31</sup> The structure is characterized by a perimetral cornice made up of a complex series of niches arranged on several levels. These features, known as *muqarnas*, belong to the Islamic artistic and architectural tradition.<sup>32</sup> The ceiling is an impressive work of skilful carpentry.<sup>33</sup> The effect is that of a large starry vault suspended over the nave. Every single surface of the multi-faceted structure is painted in tempera colours on gesso primer with figurative subjects, ornamental motifs, and Arabic inscriptions (fig. 6).<sup>34</sup>

This ceiling represents an unequalled luxury product, which remains very impressive to this day. The masters who created it were craftsmen and artists of Islamic culture with very high technical skills who would have been accustomed to working for sovereigns and princes. They came to Sicily from somewhere in the Islamic world at the request of Roger II, but to date we lack information as to their exact place of origin.<sup>35</sup>

30 “principio attivo anche per l’ideazione e il processo di realizzazione di singole opere” (translation by the author). See: Andaloro, Maria, *‘Baciane l’angolo...e contempla le bellezze che contiene’*. Ruggero II e l’antico visitatore della reggia di Palermo, in: *Medioevo: la Chiesa e il Palazzo*, ed. by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, Milano 2007, pp. 504–519, esp. p. 508.

31 Johns, Jeremy, The date of the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, in: *The Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina* (see note 16), pp. 1–14.

32 On the structure of the *muqarnas* ceiling in the nave of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo and its Western or Eastern Islamic affinities see Bloom, Jonathan M., *Almoravid Geometric Designs in the Pavement of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*, in: *The Iconography of Islamic Art: Studies in Honour of Robert Hillenbrand*, ed. by Bernard O’Kane, Edinburgh, 2005, pp. 61–80, esp. pp. 74–78; Knipp, David, *Almoravid Sources for the Wooden Ceiling in the Nave of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*, in: *Die Cappella Palatina in Palermo – Geschichte, Kunst, Funktionen* (see note 7), pp. 571–578; Kapitakin, Lev Arie, *The Daughter of al-Andalus: Interrelations between Norman Sicily and the Muslim West*, in: *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 25/1, 2013, pp. 113–134.

33 It is not carved but composed by several thin wooden panels of different shape and size. Structure measurements: 18,25 x 5 m. The *muqarnas*-cornice is 2,20 m high. See Agnello, Fabrizio, *Rilievo e rappresentazione del soffitto della navata centrale della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), Vol. I (Testi: Saggi), pp. 295–352; Agnello, Fabrizio, *The Painted Ceiling of the Nave of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Essay on its Geometric and Constructive Features*, in: *Muqarnas* 27, 2010, pp. 407–448; Zorić, Vladimir, *Sulle tecniche costruttive islamiche in Sicilia: il soffitto della Cappella Palatina di Palermo*, in: *Scritti in Onore di Giovanni*

M. D’Erme (Università degli Studi di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, Series Minor LXVIII), ed. by Michele Bernardini/ Natalia L. Tornesello, vol. III, Naples 2005, pp. 1281–1349. Romagnoli, Manuela [a.o], *Wood Identification in the Cappella Palatina Ceiling (twelfth century) in Palermo (Sicily, Italy)*, in: *IAWA Journal* 28/2, 2007, pp. 109–123.

34 On the ceilings of the Cappella Palatina and their paintings, see Johns, Jeremy, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 1, figs. 158–194, pp. 133–147, figs. 369–384, pp. 286–303; vol. 2, figs. 473–1220, pp. 384–823; vol. 3, pp. 353–407; vol. 4, pp. 429–456, 487–510, 540–665; Kapitakin, Lev Arie, *Paintings of the Ceiling of the Cappella Palatina*, Palermo, 2 volumes (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford 2011); Grube, Ernst J., *The painted ceilings of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo and their relation to the artistic traditions of the Muslim world and the Middle Ages*, in: *The Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina* (see note 16), pp. 15–34. Likewise, the side aisles are covered by painted wooden ceilings of Islamic-style whose date is disputed (1140s/1150s or 1180s?) but they have a simpler flat structure. For the ceilings in the aisles see: Kapitakin, Lev Arie, *The Paintings of the Aisle-Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina*, Palermo, in: *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 35, 2003/2004, pp. 115–148; Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 387–397; Anzelmo, Francesca M., *I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina di Palermo e l’Orizzonte Mediterraneo*, 2 volumes (unpublished DPhil thesis, Università degli Studi della Tuscia, Viterbo, 2013), pp. 27–28, 32–35; Brenk, Beat, *Il concetto del soffitto arabo della Cappella Palatina nel Palazzo dei Normanni di Palermo*, in: *Narrazione, Exempla, Retorica: studi sull’iconografia dei soffitti dipinti nel Medioevo Mediterraneo*, ed. by Licia Buttà, Palermo 2013, pp. 9–40.





6 Nave wooden ceiling, *muqarnas* cornice (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

35 The main attributions to Muslim painters argue a provenance from Fatimid Egypt, North Africa or Iran. See Jones, Dalu, *Romanesque East and West?*, in: *The Connoisseur* 191/770, 1976, pp. 280–285; D’Erme, Giovanni M., *Contesto architettonico e aspetti culturali dei dipinti del soffitto della Cappella Palatina di Palermo*, in: *Bollettino d’Arte* 80, 1995, pp. 1–32; Grube, *The painted ceilings of the Cappella Palatina* (see note 35), pp. 15–34. Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 394–395; Kapitaikin, *Paintings of the Ceiling* (see note 35), pp. 507–517. For an attribution to Christian artists from the eastern territories of the Norman Principality of Antioch see Knipp, David, *Image, Presence, and Ambivalence. The Byzantine Tradition of the*

*Painted Ceiling in the Cappella Palatina, Palermo*, in: *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft – Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen: Gestalt und Zeremoniell*, Internationales Kolloquium 3./4. Juni 2004 in Istanbul, ed. by Franz A. Bauer (Byzas 5), Istanbul 2006, pp. 283–328; for a new suggestion that considers the impact of Coptic Egypt on the Cappella Palatina paintings, see Kapitaikin, *Paintings of the Ceiling* (see note 35), pp. 507–517. An attribution to painters working in a local Sicilian tradition, nowadays otherwise unrepresented, is examined by Jones, Dalu, *The Cappella Palatina in Palermo: Problems of Attribution*, in: *Art and Archaeology research papers* 2, 1972, pp. 41–57.





Decades of studies have outlined the complexity of the ceiling and the meaning of the representations. From a general point of view, the *muqarnas* vault with its paintings is a majestic witness to the Islamic component of Norman art. However, in closer analysis, the ceiling reveals a more articulated nature. At the core of the paintings are themes and iconographies of the so-called Islamic royal programme, aimed at celebrating the ruler. In the Cappella Palatina, the subjects include: the ruler flanked by bodyguards, the boon-companions/drinkers, musicians and dancers that entertain the royal *majilis* (symposium).<sup>36</sup> Alongside these subjects, there are scenes of battle and hunting, scenes evoking popular tales, mythological subjects, real and fantastic animals, Islamic ornaments and Arabic inscriptions of blessings. Yet, in the Norman chapel, these more common subjects were accompanied and enriched by other features alien to an Islamic cultural horizon, deriving instead from Christian, possibly Romanesque, Middle-Byzantine and Coptic traditions.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, a deeper investigation of the painted ceiling reveals the existence of different levels of expression and communication. On the one hand, we can see the direct impact of the patron's will: with the help of advisors and workshops' supervisors, King Roger II 'encouraged' Muslim artists to adapt models from different cultural tradi-

tions to create something new, suitable for his purposes and at the same time quite impressive. In the creation and decoration of the ceiling, Islamic models were adapted to suit the rhetorical context of the chapel, which in turn suited the political needs of the sovereign.<sup>38</sup> This is evident for example, in the painted subjects unrelated to the Islamic royal cycle as well as in the connections existing between paintings, mosaics, physical spaces and different functions of the Cappella, which some scholars have already pointed out.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, as already highlighted for the *opus sectile* decoration, there are aspects of the paintings in which the free creative action of the artists seems to be discernible. In this regard, it has been pointed out how the ornamental motifs may have circulated between the *opus sectile* decorations, the textiles produced in the royal workshops, and the painted ornaments of the dresses in the ceiling (fig. 7).<sup>40</sup> Free from rigid schemes to follow, the painters of the ceiling also had the chance to take inspiration from the stimulating multicultural context of the palace workshops.<sup>41</sup>

In the light of the considerations outlined above, the ceiling of the nave of the Cappella Palatina may be considered a new creation. Scholars have investigated many aspects of this ceiling and have attempted to answer a series of questions, such as: did a programme for the paint-

36 See Scerrato, Umberto, *La pittura*, in: *Gli Arabi in Italia: cultura, contatti e tradizioni*, ed. Francesco Gabrieli/Umberto Scerrato (Antica madre 2), Milano, 1979, pp. 359–398; Grube, Ernst J., *The painted ceilings of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo and their relation to the artistic traditions of the Muslim world and the Middle Ages*, in: *The Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina* (see note 16), pp. 15–34; Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 397–407; Kapitaikin, *Paintings of the Ceiling* (see note 35), pp. 138–146; pp. 214–219.

37 See Cruikshank-Dodd, Erica, *Christian Arab Sources for the Ceiling of the Palatine Chapel, Palermo*, in: *Arte d'Occidente: Temi e metodi*, Studi in onore di Angiola Maria Romanini, ed. by Antonio Cadei [a.o.], 3 volumes, Rome 1999, vol. 2, pp. 823–831; Knipp, *Image, Presence, and Ambivalence* (see note 36), pp. 283–328; Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 400–402; Johns, Jeremy, *Muslim Artists and Christian Models in the Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina*, in: *Romanesque and the Eastern Mediterranean*, British Archaeological Association, International Romanesque Conference, ed. by Rosa Bacile/John McNeill, Palermo, 16–18 April 2012, London 2015, pp. 59–89; Kapitaikin, *Paintings of the Ceiling* (see note 35), pp. 507–517.

38 See Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 397–407; Johns, Jeremy, *The Bible, the Qur'an and the Royal Eunuchs in the Cappella Palatina*, in: *Die Cappella Palatina in Palermo – Geschichte, Kunst, Funktionen* (see note 8), pp. 560–570; Kapitaikin, *Paintings of the Ceiling* (see note 35).

39 See Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 403–407; Kapitaikin, *Paintings of the Ceiling* (see note 35), pp. 259–283; Kapitaikin, Lev Arie, *David's dancers in Palermo: Islamic dance imagery and its Christian recontextualization in the ceilings of the Cappella Palatina*, in: *Early Music* 47/1, February 2019, pp. 3–23.

40 See Longo, *The opus sectile Work of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (see note 14), p. 345, 492, figs 6–7; Anzelmo, *I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina* (see note 35), pp. 232–246, esp. 244–245, 252–259; Anzelmo, Francesca M., *Dress and textiles in the twelfth-century painted ceilings of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*, in: *Romanesque and the Eastern Mediterranean* (see note 38), pp. 106–119, esp. pp. 117–119.

41 On this topic see Tronzo, *Restoring Agency* (see note 8), pp. 579–585; Johns, *The bible, the Qur'an and the Royal Eunuchs* (see note 39), pp. 560–570.



7 Painted wooden ceiling, details, with drawings of ornamental patterns and their correspondence with the *opus sectile* micro patterns (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

ings exist? What message was the ceiling intended to communicate and to whom? What other meanings could be conveyed to visitors from different cultures? How was the painted ceiling perceived by people who were allowed to see it in the Norman period? Studies investigating these questions have resulted in interesting contributions and more are expected in the future.

By and large, it seems that the ceiling was meant to con-

vey the image of the wealthy, flourishing and pacified kingdom of Roger II. Although the paintings do include subjects that have a more or less explicit religious content, a secular function of the ceiling, linked with an ambitious aesthetic program of King Roger II, cannot be denied. Indeed, this ceiling is a scenic machine that creates an ideal stage for the propaganda strategies of the ruler, suspended above the audience hall where the royal throne was located.<sup>42</sup>

42 See Tronzo, *The cultures of his kingdom* (see note 14); Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 403–407; Johns, Jeremy, *La Bibbia, il Corano e gli eunuchi di corte nella Cappella Palatina*, in: *Die Cappella Palatina in*

*Palermo – Geschichte, Kunst, Funktionen* (see note 7), pp. 417–418; Brenk, Beat, *La parete occidentale della Cappella Palatina*, in: *Arte medievale* 2/4, 1990, pp. 135–150.





**8a+b** Nave wooden ceiling, *muqarnas* cornice, Sovereign with attendants (Palermo, Cappella Palatina)

There are two paintings that might provide a reference to the figure of Roger II himself: two depictions on the *muqarnas* ceiling that Jeremy Johns has skilfully oriented us to see as pseudo-portraits of Roger II (figs. 8a, 8b).<sup>43</sup> If they are indeed of King Roger, the sovereign is represented as an Islamic prince among his attendants. He wears a rich robe that is reminiscent of Islamic costume, not least because of the so-called *tiraz* bands embroidered on the sleeves. On the other hand, the identity of the sovereign depicted in the mosaic panel in Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio is certain. Here Roger II is identified by the inscription and is represented in the guise of a Byzantine emperor (*basileus*).<sup>44</sup> It is well known that the production of luxury fabrics and robes played a central role in the con-

struction of the official image of the Norman monarchy. Evidence of this are the precious fabrics embroidered with gold threads produced in the royal workshops of the Norman sovereigns in Palermo, the *Nobiles Officinae*.<sup>45</sup> None of the royal vestments that have survived from Norman times are derived *tout court* from models of the Byzantine or Islamic rulers of the time. Moreover, to the present state of our knowledge, it remains unclear whether Roger II and the other Norman kings used clothes of Arab-Islamic costume, although some sources from twelfth-century Arab authors give us hints about this.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, it seems more than plausible to think that the clothes and textiles painted on the ceiling, richly decorated with a wide range of refined ornamental motifs, are not simply

<sup>43</sup> Johns, Jeremy, *Re Normanni e Califfi fatimidi: Nuove prospettive su vecchi materiali*, in: *Giornata di Studio della Fondazione Leone Caetani*, Roma 3 maggio 1993, ed. by Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, Roma 1995, pp. 9–50; Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 403–407; Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 4, pp. 626–628.

<sup>44</sup> See Kitzinger, Ernst, *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*, Washington D.C. 1990, pp. 189–197, 206–210, 313–316, n. 71, figs. 190–191, tavv. XXIII, XXV.

<sup>45</sup> See *Nobiles Officinae* (see note 17), esp. Vol. I, pp. 51–53, 55–59.

<sup>46</sup> Johns, Jeremy, *Re Normanni e Califfi fatimidi: Nuove prospettive su vecchi materiali*, in: *Giornata di Studio della Fondazione Leone Caetani* (see note 44), pp. 40–46; Johns, *Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina*, in: *La Cappella Palatina* (see note 13), vol. 3, p. 406; Anzelmo, *I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina* (see note 35), pp. 188–195; Anzelmo, *Dress and textiles* (see note 41), pp. 96–99.



in keeping with the representation of the rich and luxurious royal symposium that constitutes the central theme of the paintings. They serve to recall the pomp and wealth of the court and the kingdom of Roger II.<sup>47</sup>

The contribution of the ceiling to the strategic needs of the ruler can be traced not only in the paintings but also in the choice of the structural type. It is important to point out that Roger II did not adopt a wooden covering of Western tradition for his Royal *Aula*. Rather, he chose a monumental structure from the Islamic tradition, the *muqarnas* decorated with subjects from the Islamic

royal programme, that between the eleventh and twelfth century was part of an Islamic courtly culture present in palatial decorations of the Mediterranean, of which have survived only a few fragments to the present day.<sup>48</sup>

As far as can be traced back, the Byzantine emperor also adopted a painted *muqarnas* vault with the same architectural and decorative formula for his imperial palace in Constantinople. This ceiling, only documented by a written source,<sup>49</sup> is dated to a later period than the Sicilian experiment, and thus might be seen as an outcome of Roger's innovations.<sup>50</sup>

47 Anzelmo, I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina (see note 35), pp. 251–259, also 232–246; Anzelmo, Dress and textiles (see note 41), pp. 106–119.

48 Namely, the known fragments of painted *muqarnas* from Nishapur in Iran, Fustat in Egypt, the Qal'a of the Banu Hammad (today Western Algeria), and Murcia in Spain. See Wilkinson, Charles K., Nishapur. Some Early Islamic Buildings and their Decorations, New York, 1986, pp. 251–258; Ibrahim, Laila Ali/Yasin, Adil, A Tulunid Hammam in Old Cairo, in: Islamic Archaeological Studies 3, 1988, pp. 42–46, figs 22–24; Zick-Nissen, Johanna, “Zierfriese”, in: Die Kunst des Islam (Propyläen Kunstgeschichte 4), ed. by Janine Sourdel-Thomine and Bertold Spuler, Berlin 1973, pp. 262–263; Grube, Ernst J., A Drawing of Wrestlers in the Cairo Museum of Islamic Art, in: Studies in Islamic Painting, ed. by Ernst J. Grube, London 1995, pp. 63–125, esp. pp. 67–70, 517–518 (published before in: Quaderni di Studi Arabi 3, 1985, pp. 89–106); O’Kane, Bernard, The Treasures of Islamic Art (see note 24), pp. 64–65, no. 51; Bloom, Arts of the City Victorious (see note 24), pp. 171–173, fig. 142; Golvin, Lucien, Recherches archéologiques à la Qal'a des Banū Ḥammād, Paris 1965, pp. 123–127, fig. 41, Pl. XLI; Golvin, Lucien, Les plafonds à muqarnas de la Qal'a des Banū Ḥammād et leur influence possible sur l'art de la Sicilie à la période normande, in: Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée 17, 1974, pp. 63–69; Dahmani, Fatma, Remarques sur quelques fragments de peinture murale trouvés à Murcie, accessible through: Dialnet, Revista del Museo de Santa Clara, Murcia 2008, pp. 159–171, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/revista?codigo=13217> [last consulted 09.09.2021]. As highlighted elsewhere, these examples of *muqarnas* dated to the twelfth century seem to suggest an Islamic courtly trend in the Mediterranean distinguished for its figural and ornamental decoration that was painted and not carved. The *muqarnas* nave ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo is the only example of this typology well preserved, dating so early and made of wood (the other ones mentioned above are mostly made of plaster). See Anzelmo, I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina (see note 35), pp. 67–80.

49 The literary source referred to here is by Nikolaos Mesarites, a Byzantine courtier, who around 1203 wrote about the attempt of usurpation of the throne on July 31st 1200, organized against the Byzantine Emperor Alexios III Angelos (1195–1203). See Die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos, ed. by A.E.K. Heisen-

berg, Würzburg 1907, pp. 19–20, 24–25, 27–28, 42–46; Nikolaos Mesarites, Die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos, ed. and transl. by Franz Grabler, in: Die Kreuzfahrer erobern Konstantinopel. Die Regierungszeit der Kaiser Alexios Angelos, Isaak Angelos und Alexios Dukas, die Schicksale der Stadt nach der Einnahme, ed. by Franz Grabler, Graz 1958, pp. 272, 274, 279–282, 305–313. For an English translation of the passage describing the *Mouchroutas* see Mango, Cyril, The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1455: Sources and Documents, New Jersey 1972, pp. 228–229; Walker, Alicia, Middle Byzantine Aesthetics of Power and the Incomparability of Islamic Art: The Architectural Ekphraseis of Nikolaos Mesarites, in: *Muqarnas* 27, 2010, pp.79–101. See this latter contribution for a discussion both on the written sources and the *Mouchroutas* hall.

50 In 2002, Maria Vittoria Fontana, in her book on Islamic Painting, has argued the existence of a shared Mediterranean culture for the eleventh and twelfth centuries, characterized by the use of *muqarnas* painted with themes and subjects drawn primarily from the Islamic royal repertoire, *en vogue* at Muslim and Christian courts in the Mediterranean at that time. See Fontana, Maria Vittoria, La pittura islamica: dalle origini alla fine del Trecento, Roma 2002, pp. 109–110. The use of painted *muqarnas* vaults at the Islamic and Christian courts of the medieval Mediterranean was investigated in the doctoral research thesis of Francesca M. Anzelmo, where also the peculiar aspects that distinguish the painted *muqarnas* of the King Roger's royal hall are highlighted (Anzelmo, I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina (see note 35), pp. 67–80). For the *muqarnas* decoration with paintings and the shared culture across the Mediterranean see also Carrillo-Calderero, Alicia, The beauty of the Power: *Muqarnas*, Sharing Art and Culture across the Mediterranean, in: International Journal of History and Cultural Studies (IJHCS) 3/2, 2017, pp. 1–18. Jeremy Johns and Lev Kapitaikin agreed with the idea of the existence of painted ceilings widespread in the palatial culture of the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages, which today has almost disappeared. See Johns, Le pitture del soffitto della Cappella Palatina, in: La Cappella Palatina (see note 13), vol. 3, pp. 395–400; Kapitaikin, Paintings of the Ceiling (see note 35), pp. 38–47. Furthermore, Jeremy Johns has recently presented the intriguing hypothesis that the painted wooden *muqarnas* of the Cappella Palatina may have provided not only a model but possibly also the carpenters and painters for the construction of the disappeared *muqarnas* ceil-





Besides the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, no other painted wooden *muqarnas* ceilings are known in both the Islamic and the Christian Mediterranean for a time before the twelfth century. Even in Norman Sicily, where *muqarnas* in stone or stucco were used both in palaces and in religious buildings such as chapels and churches, the painted *muqarnas* wooden structure was not employed in other buildings, probably because of its complex structure and decoration but also because of its close relation with the royal programme of the Cappella Palatina.<sup>51</sup> And yet, the naves of some churches of the Norman period do present more traditional wooden ceilings with 'Islamicate' decorations and paintings. We can thus conclude that the painted wooden ceiling of the Cappella Palatina initiated a practice that became distinctive of buildings in Norman Sicily that were commissioned by the royal court or persons close to it.<sup>52</sup>

The use of painted wooden ceilings with Islamic decorative elements persisted in Sicily even beyond the Norman period, although with completely different ways and intentions. It accompanied various historical moments and cultural contexts.<sup>53</sup>

ing of the *Mouchroutas* in Constantinople. See Johns, Jeremy, A tale of two ceilings: the Cappella Palatina in Palermo and the *Mouchroutas* in Constantinople, in: *Art, Trade, and Culture in the Near East and India: From the Fatimids to the Mughals*, ed. by Alison Ohta/Michael Rogers/Rosalind Wade Haddon, London 2016, pp. 58–73.

- 51 See e.g. Di Stefano, Monumenti (see note 10); Bellafiore, Giuseppe, *Architettura in Sicilia nelle età islamica e normanna (827–1194)*, Milano 1990; Staacke, Ursula, *Un palazzo normanno a Palermo. La Zisa. La cultura musulmana negli edifici del re*, Palermo 1991; Agnello, Rilievo e rappresentazione (see note 34), pp. 295–352; Agnello, *The Painted Ceiling* (see note 34), pp. 407–448.
- 52 See Andaloro, Maria, *La Cattedrale della memoria*, in: *La Cattedrale di Palermo: studi per l'ottavo centenario dalla fondazione*, ed. by Leonardo Urbani, Palermo, Sellerio 1993, pp. 55–66; Andaloro, Maria, *Strutture, tecniche, materiali negli "ateliers" della Palermo normanna*, in: *Federico e le Scienze*, ed. by Pierre Toubert and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Palermo/Sellerio 1994, pp. 290–305; Anzelmo, I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina (see note 35), pp. 81–98; Anzelmo, Francesca M., *I soffitti della cappella Palatina di Palermo e le coperture lignee "islamiche" della Sicilia normanna*, in: *Memoria e materia dell'opera d'arte*, ed. by Elisa Anzellotti [a.o.], Roma 2014, pp. 13–26.
- 53 See Lanza, Vittorio, *Saggio sui soffitti Siciliani dal sec. XII al XVI*, in: *Atti della Reale Accademia di Scienze, Lettere e Arti di Palermo 4/1*, 1941, pp. 177–224; Bologna, Ferdinando, *Il soffitto della Sala Magna dello Steri di Palermo e la cultura feudale siciliana nell'autunno del*

Something interesting happened in the nineteenth century, when Sicily and in particular Palermo choose to bring to light the so-called Arabo-Norman branch of its complex DNA. Since then, a considerable number of studies have shed new light on the cultural and political background of that period.<sup>54</sup> In the wake of the Italian unification of 1861, the Norman age came to be acknowledged as the apogee of an independent Sicily, capable of producing a sophisticated and distinctive culture. The art and architecture of the Norman kingdom became a symbol of Sicilian national pride, and the Islamic aspect of that tradition came to be a particularly significant element of Sicilian identity.<sup>55</sup> What is important to underline here, is that this interest had little to do with a feeling of exoticism, as it was common in the orientalist trend of the nineteenth century. Rather, the specific perception of the Islamic component of the Norman art favoured a very prolific season of studies and researches on, and the restoration of, Norman architecture and artistic heritage, and led to a recovery and analysis of documents as well as epigraphy connected to Sicily.<sup>56</sup>

In that period, specific studies began to address the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina. The year 1889 brought

Medioevo, Palermo 1975; Aurigemma, Maria G., *Soffitti lignei dipinti*, in: *Abruzzo un laboratorio di ricerca sulla scultura lignea*, ed. by Gaetano Curzi/Alessandro Tomei, Chieti 2011, pp. 337–361.

- 54 See Tomaselli, Franco, *Il ritorno dei Normanni: protagonisti ed interpreti del restauro dei monumenti a Palermo nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento*, Roma 1994; Maniaci, Alessandra, *Palermo capitale normanna. Il restauro tra memoria e nostalgia. Dall'ottocento al Piano Particolareggiato Esecutivo*, Palermo 1994; Bruno, Ivana, *1781–1801 dall'apertura dei sarcofagi reali alla loro ricollocazione nella cattedrale rinnovata. Cronache e cronisti*, in: *Il sarcofago dell'Imperatore. Studi, ricerche e indagini sulla tomba di Federico II nella Cattedrale di Palermo 1994–1999*, ed. by Maria Andaloro, Palermo 2002, pp. 173–211; Palazzotto, Pierfrancesco, *Teoria e prassi dell'architettura neogotica a Palermo nella prima metà del XIX secolo*, in: *Gioacchino Di Marzo e la Critica d'Arte nell'Ottocento in Italia, Proceedings of the conference*, Palermo, April 15–17, 2003, ed. by Simonetta La Barbera, Bagheria 2004, pp. 225–237.
- 55 See Armando, Silvia, *The role and perception of Islamic Art and History in the construction of shared identity in Sicily (ca. 1780–1900)*, in: *National Narratives and the Medieval Mediterranean* (see note 6), pp. 5–40; Longo, Ruggero, *Idealizing the Medieval Mediterranean? Creation, Recreation, and representation of Siculo-Norman Architecture*, in: *National Narratives and the Medieval Mediterranean* (see note 56), pp. 135–170.
- 56 See Tomaselli, Franco, *Scoperta, ricerca, restauro e fortuna iconografica dei monumenti medievali e moderni nella Sicilia*



the first accurate geometrical survey of the central ceiling structure and the first documentation of the paintings and inscriptions. This documentation is still praised today for its high accuracy.<sup>57</sup> It was in this cultural climate that the Islamic *muqarnas* ceiling began to be perceived both as an intrinsic feature of the Cappella Palatina and as a significant component for local Sicilian identity. Evidence of this is the 1:1 scale, wood and plaster model of a portion of the painted *muqarnas* ceiling of the Cappella Palatina specifically crafted for the “National Exhibition” held in Palermo between 1891 and 1892 (fig. 9).<sup>58</sup> The model was exhibited in the Pavilion of Fine Arts together with other reconstructions of monumental works of ancient and medieval Sicily, all aimed to present the Sicilian artistic tradition to the new-born Italian nation. The *muqarnas* ceiling of the Cappella Palatina was chosen, together with a selection of other coeval monuments, as a valuable representative of the celebrated Norman period.<sup>59</sup> The model was conceived as a document extracted from the ceiling, and recent studies have demonstrated the model’s fidelity to the original structure and paintings.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond the ideological aspects, this example reveals how, at that time, scientific documentation was combined with the aim of cultural promotion to a wider Italian audience.

### Palermo Cathedral. Norman revival between creation and communication

The emphasis on the Arabo-Norman period as a paradigm of Sicilian identity has its roots in early-nineteenth-century Bourbon Sicily. In order to follow this narrative, it might be useful to take into account the transformations of the Palermo cathedral across the nineteenth century.<sup>61</sup> This majestic cathedral has an irregular architectural outline with two stair towers flanking the south side (fig. 10).



9 *Muqarnas* plaster model, 1:1 copy of a part of the Cappella Palatina’s ceiling (Palermo, Accademia di Belle Arti, Palazzo Santa Rosalia, plaster copy made by Giuseppe Tambuscio)

The cathedral towers are located at the four corners of the building and are characterized by fourteenth-century Gothic pinnacles. The presence of a large neoclassical dome is evidence of different architectural styles, sug-

dell’Ottocento, in: *Il monumento nel paesaggio siciliano dell’Ottocento*, ed. by Gabriella Costantino, Palermo 2005, pp. 35–59.

57 Terzi, Andrea, [a.o.], *La cappella di S. Pietro nella reggia di Palermo*. Dipinta e cromolitografata da Andrea Terzi ed illustrata dai Professori Michele Amari, Saverio Cavallari, Luigi Boglino ed Isidoro Carini, Palermo 1889.

58 See Ganci, M./Giuffrè, Maria, *Dall’artigianato all’industria: l’Esposizione nazionale di Palermo del 1891–1892*, Palermo 1994; Agnello, Fabrizio/Licari, Mariangela, *La ricostruzione della città perduta: l’Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo (1891–1892)*, in: *La ricostru-*

zione congetturale dell’architettura: storia, metodi, esperienze applicative, ed. by Marsiglia Nunzio, Palermo 2013, pp. 145–164.

59 Armando, *The role and perception of Islamic Art and History* (see note 56), in: *Memoirs of the American Academy* (see note 56), pp. 5–40, esp. pp. 5–9.

60 Agnello, *Rilievo e rappresentazione* (see note 34), pp. 295–352, esp. pp. 304–308; Anzelmo, *I soffitti dipinti della Cappella Palatina* (see note 35), pp. 36–41, 101–114.

61 The history of the Cathedral of Palermo is quite complex and the related bibliography abundant. Important references are: Bellafiore,





10 Southern façade of Palermo Cathedral

gesting a significant intervention to the medieval church in the modern period. At the same time, a series of ogival windows and blind niches along the nave, framed by inlaid decorations, lay claim to their twelfth-century Siculo-Norman origins. Indeed, the cathedral, surely re-founded on a previous church, and probably also re-constructed by

Robert Guiscard after the conquest of Palermo in 1072, was rebuilt by Archbishop Gualterius in the 1180s.<sup>62</sup> In 1781, a massive reconfiguration of the building was initiated by the royal architect Ferdinando Fuga. The cathedral today is the result of this last transformation, completed in 1801.<sup>63</sup>

Giuseppe, *La Cattedrale di Palermo*, Palermo 1976; *La Cattedrale di Palermo* (see note 53); Romanini, Angiola Maria/Cadei, Antonio, *L'architettura medievale in Sicilia: la cattedrale di Palermo*, Firenze 1994. On the vicissitudes of the cathedral across the nineteenth century, with a brief account of its medieval and early modern history, see: Longo, *Idealizing the medieval Mediterranean?* (see note 56) pp. 135–170.

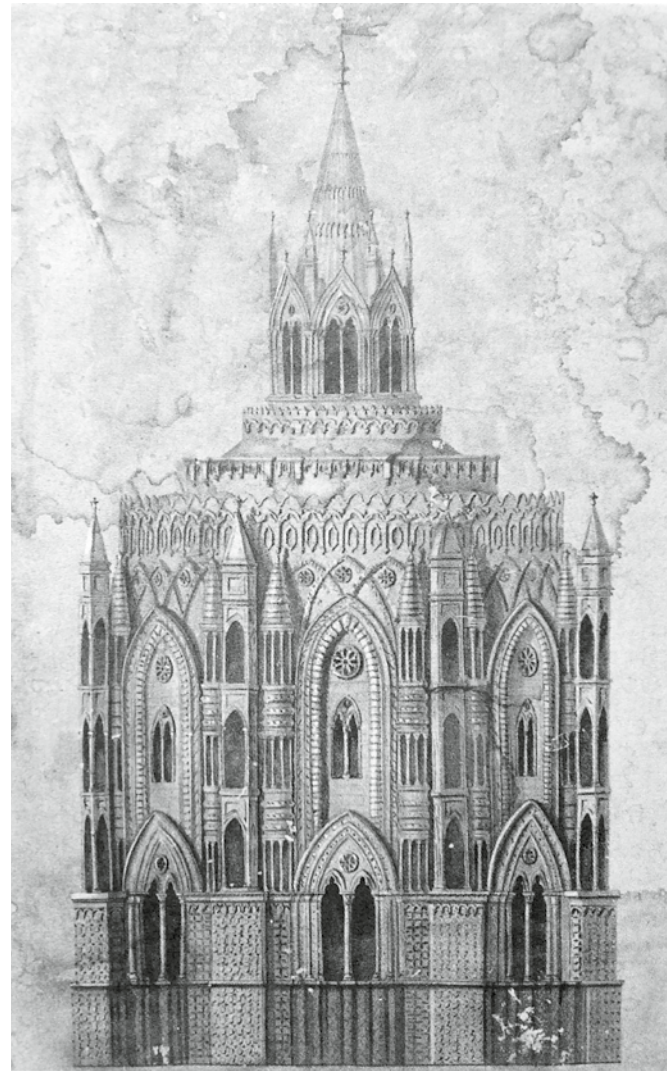
62 On the Norman reconstruction of the Cathedral, see: Longo, Rug-

gero, *The first Norman cathedral in Palermo: Robert Guiscard's church of the Most Holy Mother of God*, with an addendum by Jeremy Johns, in: *Convivium* 5/1, 2018, pp. 16–35.

63 See Cantone, Gaetana, *Il progetto di Ferdinando Fuga*, in: *La Cattedrale di Palermo* (see note 53), pp. 141–156; Giuffrè, Maria, *Il cantiere della cattedrale di Palermo da Ferdinando Fuga a Emanuele Palazzotto*, in: *La Cattedrale di Palermo* (see note 53), pp. 225–264.



**11a** Model for the Gothic revetment of the dome of Palermo cathedral by Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia and Alessandro Emmanuele Marvuglia, ca. 1802, painted wood (Palermo, Museo Diocesano)



**11b** Drawing of the design for the Gothic revetment of the dome of Palermo cathedral by Giuseppe Venanzio and Alessandro Emmanuele Marvuglia, ca. 1802, ink on paper, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, n. inv.: 811

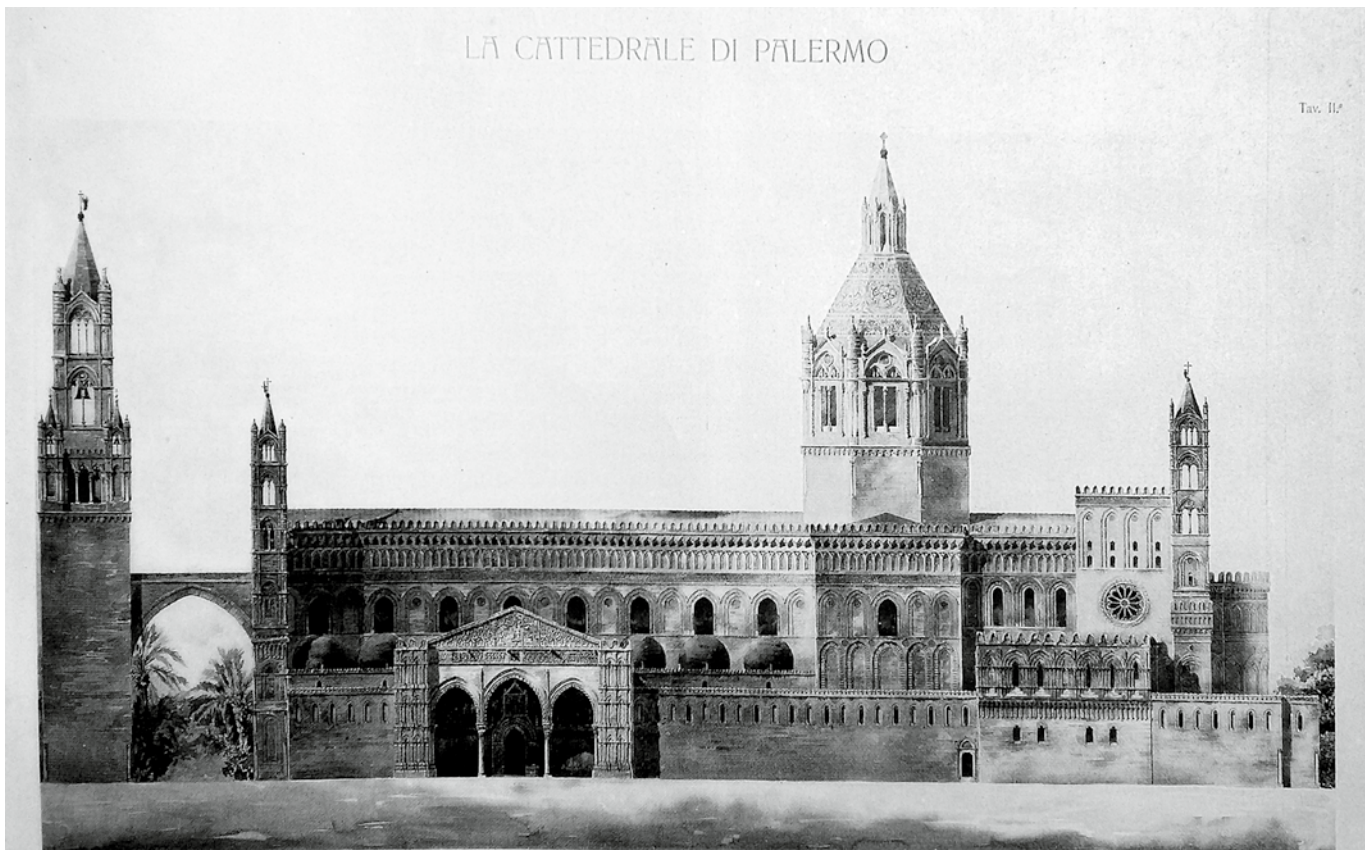
Despite the complete refashioning of the Norman church, it is important to note that this intervention included the relocation of the Norman-Swabian tombs and represented a crucial moment for the recovery of the Arabo-Norman past of Sicily.<sup>64</sup> Arriving in Palermo in 1801, King Ferdinand III Bourbon expressed his disappointment with the neoclassical shape of the cathedral's new dome.

Thus, shortly after the king's visit, the architect Giuseppe Marvuglia and his son Alessandro Emmanuele Marvuglia designed a neo-Gothic covering for the dome (fig. 11a+b).<sup>65</sup> The Marvuglias' 1802 project represents one of the earlier examples of the Gothic revival in Europe. But, in this case, the architectural and ornamental features are not simply Gothic; the project is clearly inspired by the four-

<sup>64</sup> See Bruno, 1781–1801 dall'apertura dei sarcofagi (see note 55), pp. 173–211.

<sup>65</sup> Palazzotto, *Teoria e prassi* (see note 55), pp. 225–237, esp. p. 231.





12 Project of restoration of the cathedral's dome in Palermo by Antonio Zanca. Drawing (design) delivered for the national public competition, 1901

teenth-century towers located at the four corners of the church. These towers, in turn, were created in the context of an Aragon-era revival of Norman architectural traditions, being near-replicas of the Norman bell tower of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio.<sup>66</sup> While the 1802 project was never carried out, a new architectural and artistic taste was born, one that was intended to recover the Norman past as an instrument for legitimizing the Bourbon power. The aristocracy and a highly cultivated elite, in conjunction with architects, were fuelling this trend.

In 1823, an earthquake damaged the baroque bell tower situated on top of the Norman bulwark which in turn was placed upon the archiepiscopal palace beside the cathe-

dral. This was an opportunity for the archbishop Pietro Gravina (1816–1830) to modify the baroque aspect of the tower.<sup>67</sup> The architect Emmanuele Palazzotto, who designed the new bell tower, recovered the genuine Norman identity of the cathedral, inspired once again by the towers at the four corners of the church. Palazzotto's bell tower represents a precocious case of Gothic – or better Arabo-Norman – revival, achieved by a mimetic-philological approach.<sup>68</sup> The revivalist tradition of restoring the image of Norman monuments in Palermo continued into the twentieth century. A national public competition for a project to restore the cathedral, held in 1901, was won by the architect Antonio Zanca with a project proposing to

66 Ibidem; Longo, *Idealizing the medieval Mediterranean?* (see note 56), pp. 143–146.

67 See Boscarino, Salvatore/Giuffrè, Maria, *La torre campanaria del duomo di Palermo*, in: *La parabola del restauro stilistico nella rilettura di sette casi emblematici* (Quaderni del Dipartimento di Con-

servazione e Storia dell'Architettura 7), ed. by Giuseppe Fiengo/Amedeo Bellini/S. Della Torre, Milano 1995, pp. 17–48.

68 Palazzotto, *Teoria e prassi* (see note 55), cit.; Longo, Ruggero, *Idealizing the medieval Mediterranean?* (see note 56), pp. 146–149.



replace the neoclassical dome with an octagonal cusped dome that would meld harmoniously with the medieval towers and Palazzotto's bell tower (fig. 12).<sup>69</sup> This project, however, was never realised. Nevertheless, in 1932/33, Francesco Valenti, head of stylistic restoration school in Palermo, proposed once again the dismantling of Fuga's dome and its replacement with a neo-Norman rounded one.<sup>70</sup> In the end, Fuga's dome survived until today.

### Approaching Norman Palermo today. Recent researches on the Royal Palace

The interest of scholars in Norman Sicily is still alive, especially after the UNESCO's acknowledgement of "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale" and its inscription into the World Heritage List. This is demonstrated by several recently published international studies, investigating the multicultural dimension of Norman Sicily through the use of current anthropological and historical research categories, such as transculturality, material culture and identity.<sup>71</sup> In recent years, archaeological research and on-site studies have increased, offering up to date data for new interpretations and scenarios on the history of Norman Palermo and the vexed question of material and cultural continuity or discontinuity between the Islamic past and the Norman

period. There are, for instance, recent archaeological excavations and studies dedicated to the bath complex of Cefalà Diana, the Palace of Maredolce, the complex of San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi, and the Cuba Soprana.<sup>72</sup>

The Royal Palace in Palermo has been also the focus of recent studies and on-site researches carried out between 2014 and 2015 within the project: "Knowledge, Cultural Promotion and Public Enjoyment of the Royal Palace in Palermo".<sup>73</sup> As the centre of power in Sicily throughout the centuries, the Royal Palace has acquired different and overlapping layers of construction. Since 1947 home to the *Assemblea Regionale Siciliana* (the Sicilian Regional Parliament) the palace is still a living building, subject to changes and adjustments.

The monumental complex of the Royal Palace in Palermo is a significant architectural palimpsest (fig. 13). As a complex, it embraces the entire history of the city, from the Punic-Hellenistic and Roman to the Norman period, from early modern times until today. More than 2,500 years of history have produced a site of incredible archaeological complexity and a constructional stratigraphy which is extremely difficult to investigate. This also means that the physical context of the *Cappella Palatina* has never been properly investigated. The project mentioned above was conceived with a holistic and interdis-

69 Giuffrè, Maria, *Il mito della cupola*, in: *I disegni d'archivio negli studi di storia dell'architettura. Proceedings of the conference, Naples, June 12–14*, ed. by Giancarlo Alisio [a.o.], Napoli 1994, pp. 189–196; *Un archivio di architettura tra Ottocento e Novecento. I disegni di Antonio Zanca (1861–1958)*, ed. by Paola Barbera/ Maria Giuffrè, Cannitello 2005, pp. 123–140.

70 Genovese, Carmen, Francesco Valenti. *Restauro dei monumenti nella Sicilia del primo Novecento*, Palermo 2006, pp. 107–112.

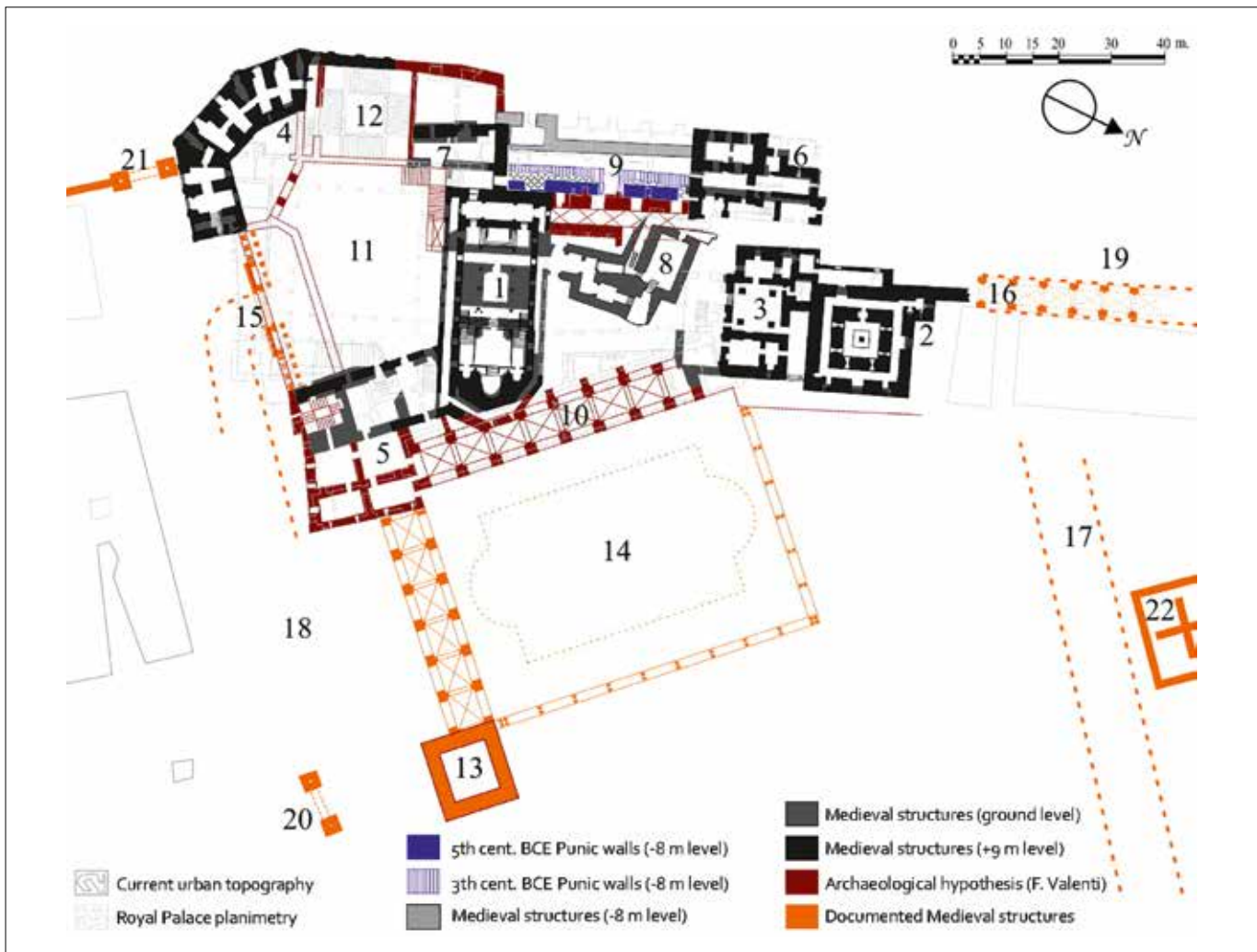
71 See among recent studies: *Journal of Transcultural Medieval Studies* 3–4/1–2, 2016/2017, Special Issue: The Sicilian questions, guest ed. by Giuseppe Mandala; *Urban dynamics and transcultural communication in medieval Sicily*, ed. by Theresa Jäckh/Mona Kirsch, Paderborn 2017; Scirocco, Elisabetta/Wolf, Gerhard, *The Italian South: Transcultural Perspectives 500–1500*, in: *Convivium* 5/1, 2018; *Designing Norman Sicily: Material Culture and Society*, ed. by Emily A. Winkler/Liam Fitzgerald/Andrew Small, Woodbridge 2020; Reilly, Lisa A., *The invention of Norman visual culture: art, politics, and dynastic ambition*, Cambridge 2020; Winkler, Emily A/ Fitzgerald, Liam/Small, Andrew, *The Normans in the Mediterranean (Medieval Identities: Socio-Cultural Spaces 9)*, Turnhout 2021.

72 *Les bains de Cefalà (Xe–XIXe siècle): pratiques thermales d'origine islamique dans la Sicile médiévale/ I bagni di Cefalà (secoli*

X–XIX): pratiche termali d'origine islamica nella Sicilia medievale, ed. by Alessandra Bagnera/Annliese Nef, Roma 2018; Canzoneri, Emanuele/Vassallo, Stefano, *Insediamenti extraurbani a Palermo. Nuovi dati da Maredolce*, in: *Les dynamiques de l'islamisation en Méditerranée centrale et en Sicile. Nouvelle propositions et découvertes récentes*, ed. by Annliese Nef/Fabiola Ardizzone, Roma/Bari 2014, pp. 271–280; Utrero Agudo, María de los Angeles/Mandalà, Giuseppe, *La iglesia de San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi en Palermo: arqueología de la arquitectura normanda en Sicilia*, in: *Informes de Trabajos* 14, 2016, pp. 45–55. The archeological excavations at Cuba Soprana are still in progress. The research project was realized by the Soprintendenza di Palermo in collaboration with the Escuela de Estudios Árabes of Granada (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas spagnolo – Csic) under the scientific direction of Julio Navarro Palazón assisted by the archaeologist Carla Aleo Nero.

73 "Valorizzazione e fruizione turistica del Palazzo Reale di Palermo", P.O.-FESR Sicilia 2007–2013, CIG: 4397878889, sponsored by Comunità Europea – Regione Sicilia, *Assemblea Regionale Siciliana*, ideated by Maria Andaloro, scientific director: William Tronzo, executive coordinator: Ruggero Longo, executive director: Pasquale Riggio.





**13** Map of the Royal Palace, with surviving Medieval structures (grey) and structures hypothesized by F. Valenti or documented by historical sources (orange and red): 1. Cappella Palatina; 2. Torre Pisana; 3. Joharia; 4. South-West Bulwark; 5. Greek tower; 6. Royal apartments; 7. Cappella Palatina treasury; 8. Dungeons (beneath Cortile della Fontana); 9. Punic walls (beneath Sala Montalto); 10. Maqueda wing and modern façade; 11. Maqueda courtyard; 12. Monumental stairs; 13. Red tower; 14. *Aula regia* room; 15. Medieval entrance gate; 16. 'Via cooperta' passageway; 17. *Simat* or *vicus Marmoreus* main street; 18. *Vicus ab aula regia* secondary street; 19. City walls; 20. 'Galka' city gate; 21. *Bāb al-abnā'* o *Porta Palatii* city gate; 22. Santa Maria della Pinta church (Graphic © Ruggero Longo)

ciplinary approach, combining scientific reliability with new strategies and technologies capable of illustrating and communicating history and culture. It comprises two core strands of research: one is technological, the other

encompasses interdisciplinary research. The main technological components of this project are a three-dimensional model of the entire monumental complex and a series of interconnected databases (fig. 14).<sup>74</sup> The project

<sup>74</sup> In 2016, the contents and technologies of the project were delivered to the *Assemblea Regionale Siciliana*, which is responsible for maintenance and public fruition. The most important findings of this project were presented in June 2018 during the international

conference "The Palace Unveiled. The Royal Palace of Palermo and other centres of power in the Medieval Mediterranean", organized by Maria Andaloro, William Tronzo, Jeremy Johns and Ruggero Longo. The proceedings are forthcoming.



**14** Axonometric cross section from the three-dimensional model of the Royal Palace (Graphic: TecnoArt) 1: pre-Norman phases (Segrete); 2: Cappella Palatina (1130); 2.1: lower church, with corridors and *sacellum*; 2.2: upper church; 2.3: southern porticoes and northern buildings; 3: modern phases: 3.1: modern corridor (16th century, last quarter); 3.2: Cortile della Fontana (1571–1619); 4: Cortile Maqueda (1598–1610)

allows for a better understanding of the current configuration of the palace and the development its architecture and decoration have undergone over time. Likewise, the project offered new perspectives and insights that can help clarify the interlaced relationships between the different construction phases of the building and the still uncertain relative chronologies. Below we will present three of the most significant results.

### Finishing the Norman Palace: red painted joints

In 2012, a gap between two of the most relevant buildings of the Royal Palace, the Torre Pisana and the Joharia, was discovered along the so called Rampa San Michele, a passageway leading up to the Cortile della Fontana within the Palace. In this space, which remained hidden since the first half of the eighteenth century, an area of masonry was detected that still preserves portions of a plaster coating.<sup>75</sup>

**75** The investigation of this area was promoted by the “Fabbrica del Palazzo Reale”, an institution created by the Assemblée Regionale Siciliana (i. e. the Sicilian Parliament, the owner and occupant of

the Royal Palace), and coordinated by Professor Maria Andaloro. The rationale of the Fabbrica, suppressed in 2015, was to enhance the knowledge, the preservation and the cultural promotion of the





**15** Space between Torre Pisana and Joharia, external masonry of the Torre Pisana, with engraved and red painted grooves over the joints between the blocks (Palermo, Palazzo Reale)

Engraved and red painted grooves could be seen over the joints between the blocks (fig. 15). The research on and analyses of building materials and masonry mortars continued in the following years, thus proving that this red painted joint treatment was originally extended over the external masonry surfaces of the whole palace.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, petrographic analysis demonstrates that the mortar – engraved and painted in fresco – is the same as the one employed for the bedding of the ashlar masonry. Therefore, the construction process of the masonry involved three steps: the bedding of the ashlar blocks, the immediate engraving along the joints, and finally the finishing with red paint on the fresh mortar. This treatment was hence per-

Royal Palace. The report of this investigation has been delivered to the Assemblée Regionale Siciliana: Longo, Ruggero/Giarrusso, Renato, *Indagini archeometriche relative alle strutture architettoniche rinvenute nell'area della Rampa San Michele*. Palazzo Reale di Palermo. *Relazione interpretativa delle indagini in situ e delle analisi di laboratorio*, Palermo 2013.

- 76** Preliminary results have been presented in the panel: Longo, Ruggero/Giarrusso Renato, *Rifinire il Palazzo: intonaci dipinti*, presented within the poster session related to the International conference “The Palace Unveiled. The Royal Palace in Palermo and other centres of power in the medieval Mediterranean”, organised by Maria Andaloro/Ruggero Longo/Jeremy Johns/William Tronzo, Palermo, June 26th–July 1st, 2018.
- 77** Autenrieth, Hans Peter, *Die Farbfassung in der Architektur des Mittelalters*. *Zum Stand der Forschung*, in: *L'architettura medievale in*

formed during the construction of the building and the erection of the façade walls.

Thus, the investigation led to the discovery of an architectural treatment, characterized by a particular aesthetic value, that otherwise would have been lost in this context, even though it was not unusual and there are a few other examples known in medieval Europe, including Palermo Cathedral.<sup>77</sup> Besides the presence of plaster on the medieval wall vestments, the existence of red-coloured painted bands has also been detected around the *monofora* windows of the Torre Pisana. A new image of the Norman palace emerges.

### Torre Pisana. The Norman palace's most iconic building

The investigations carried out during the research project also led to a deeper understanding of the function and shape of the massive tower known as Torre Pisana in the Norman period (fig. 16a). During the sixteenth century the tower was transformed into a bulwark with heavy artillery on its roof; it was then altered again between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when a new astronomical observatory was added.<sup>78</sup>

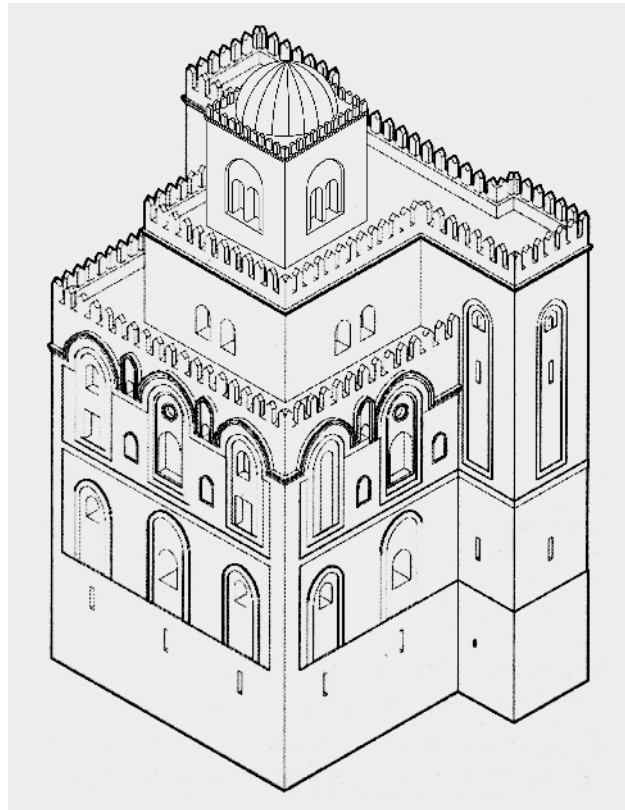
Besides the analysis previously carried out by Vladimir Zoric,<sup>79</sup> the investigation confirmed that the tower was originally characterized by three stories, and conformed to an architectural design derived from minarets and towers found in the Maghreb (fig. 16b). Among a number of Magribī examples, the Aġlabid minaret in Kairouan with its three stories decreasing in size, offers the best model to the original shape of the tower (fig. 16c).<sup>80</sup> From these

Sicilia (see note 62), pp. 205–240.

- 78** On the Torre Pisana, see Knipp, David, *The Torre Pisana in Palermo. A Magribī concept and its Byzantinization*, in: *Wissen über Grenzen. Arabisches Wissen und lateinisches Mittelalter (Miscellanea mediaevalia 33)*, ed. by Andreas Speer/Lydia Wegener, Berlin/New York 2006, pp. 745–774; Longo, Ruggero, *In loco qui dicitur Galca. New Observations and Hypotheses on the Norman Palace in Palermo*, in: *Journal of Transcultural Medieval Studies* 3/1–2, pp. 225–317, esp., pp. 259–298.
- 79** Zoric, Vladimir, *Torre Pisana, sede di al-malik Rugār a Palermo*, in: *L'officina dello sguardo. Scritti in onore di Maria Andaloro*, 2 volumes, 1: *I luoghi dell'arte*; 2: *Immagine, memoria, materia*, ed. by Giulia Bordi [a.o.], Roma 2014, vol. 1, pp. 97–108.
- 80** On the Kairouan mosque minaret, see Bloom, Jonathan, *The Minaret*, Edinburgh 2013, pp. 117–123.



a



b

16

**a** Torre Pisana  
(Palermo, Palazzo Reale)

**b** Possible original  
configuration of the  
Torre Pisana, axonometric  
view (Graphic: Ruggero  
Longo)



c



d

**c** Kairouan, Congregational  
Mosque (begun 836), minaret.

**d** Constance Hauteville's arrival  
in Palermo, Peter of Eboli, *Liber  
ad honorem Augusti sive de  
rebus Siculis*, Southern Italy,  
ca. 1195–1197 (Bern, Burger-  
bibliothek, Ms. 120, II, fol. 124r)





evidences, we can reconstruct the image of a majestic medieval tower, which would have been the main tower of the palace and which would have included a great throne room decorated with mosaics representing the Norman conquest of Palermo. The lower levels of the tower were used as great entrance hall and royal vestibule to receive embassies. This space was also linked to the so-called ‘via cooperta’, a privileged and sheltered path, which was connecting the palace to the cathedral and was reserved for the use of the king.<sup>81</sup> Combining the information concerning the layout of the tower and the presence of the red joints, the image of the building fits with the picture of the tower included in one of the illuminations within the “Liber ad honorem Augusti”, edited around 1195–1197 by Pietro of Eboli (fig. 16d).<sup>82</sup> This image depicts the arrival in Palermo of Constance of Hauteville, married to the Swabian Emperor Henry VI Hohenstaufen and mother of Frederick II. The illuminated image cannot be considered a faithful representation of the palace. However, it cannot be ruled out that the reputation of the most important tower of the Norman palace spread abroad, and it is intriguing to note that, among several towers pictured throughout the *Liber*, the Palermitan one is the only having three levels. The Torre Pisana remains a unicum among the Siculo-Norman constructions, and probably represents Roger II’s first architectural contribution to the fortress built by his uncle Robert Guiscard in Palermo. It would represent the very first experimentation of architectural and artistic mixture, in line with the process of syncretism firmly adopted by the king.

### The so called Stanza di Ruggero

The most remarkable discoveries made during the research project concern the Norman Stanza or so called Stanza di Ruggero, located within a portion of the palace adjoining the Torre Pisana and known in written sources as the Joharia. According to the “Liber de regno Siciliae” attributed to pseudo-Falcandus, King William I appeared at a window of this Joharia during the uprising of the barons in 1161.<sup>83</sup> Built next to the Torre Pisana, the Joharia was characterized by the presence of an internal courtyard, today called Sala dei Venti (the Hall of Winds), which originally was an open-air space (fig. 17). During the renovation of the Royal Palace commissioned by the viceroy Bernardino de Cardenas, Duke of Maqueda (1598–1601), the southern portion of the Joharia was partially incorporated into the structures of the new façade, and the southeast window in the Norman Stanza was walled up.<sup>84</sup>

The Norman Stanza is one of the most sumptuous apartments, decorated with mosaic.<sup>85</sup> A large niche with corner columns occupies the northern section of the chamber. It is identifiable as an *iwān*, a palace space commonly associated with Islamic architecture, which usually marked a privileged place. The current door in the northern wall is modern and communicates with a small chapel dating back to the seventeenth century. Contrary to previous assumptions,<sup>86</sup> the extensive analysis and the conservation history study of this part of the Royal Palace demonstrated clearly that the space outside the northern wall of the Joharia originally was an open space, which would exclude the presence of a door in that place.<sup>87</sup> In ad-

81 See Longo, *In loco qui dicitur Galca* (see note 79), pp. 283–298. On the ‘via cooperta’ see also Longo, *Ruggero, The Royal Palace of Palermo. The medieval palace*, in: *The Royal Palace of Palermo*, ed. by Maria Andaloro, 2nd. Edition, Modena 2016, pp. 51–117, esp. pp. 79–81, and fig. 7.

82 Peter of Eboli, *Liber ad honorem Augusti sive de rebus Siculis*, Southern Italy, ca. 1195–1197: Constance of Hauteville’s arrival in Palermo, detail (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Ms. 120, II, fol. 124r). See Petrus de Ebulo, *Liber ad honorem Augusti sive de rebus Siculis*. Codex 120 II der Burgerbibliothek Bern. Eine Bilderchronik der Stauferzeit, ed. by Theo Kölzer/Marlis Stähli. Textrevision und Übersetzung von Geron Becht-Jördens, Sigmaringen 1994, esp. p. 151.

83 The Joharia is attested as already existent under the king William I (1154–1166) by Hugo Falcandus, *La Historia o Liber de Regno Siciliae*

e la Epistola ad Petrum Panormitane Ecclesie Thesaurarium (Fonti per la storia d’Italia 22), ed. by Giovanni Battista Siracusa, Roma 1897, pp. 3–165, p. 60; English translation: Loud, Graham A./Wiedmann, Thomas E. J., *The History of the Tyrants of Sicily* by Hugo Falcandus 1154–1169 (Manchester Medieval Sources), Manchester/New York 1998, pp. 55–218, esp. p. 112.

84 Di Fede, Maria Sofia, *Il Palazzo Reale di Palermo in età moderna (XVI–XVII secolo)* (Quaderni di lexicon 1), Palermo 2012, pp. 28–31.

85 On the Norman Stanza see Knipp, *Some aspects of style* (see note 18), pp. 173–207; Knipp, *The Mosaics* (see note 18).

86 Demus, *The mosaics* (see note 13), p. 181; Kitzinger, *I mosaici* (see note 18), p. 17; Knipp, *Some aspects of style* (see note 18), p. 182; Knipp, *The Mosaics* (see note 18), pp. 19–20, 135–136.

87 Longo, *In loco qui dicitur Galca* (see note 79), pp. 287–297.



17 The Joharia, axonometric cross section from the three-dimensional model of the Royal Palace (Graphic: TecnoArt)

dition, the geophysical surveys, infrared observations and georadar prospecting carried out during the investigations have made it possible to recover the existence of three windows instead of a door on the northern side, subsequently closed when the early modern facade of the palace was built. In fact, and contrary to prior assumptions, the Joharia did not communicate with the Torre Pisana, and the three-dimensional surveys have highlighted the incompatibilities in elevation of their floors.

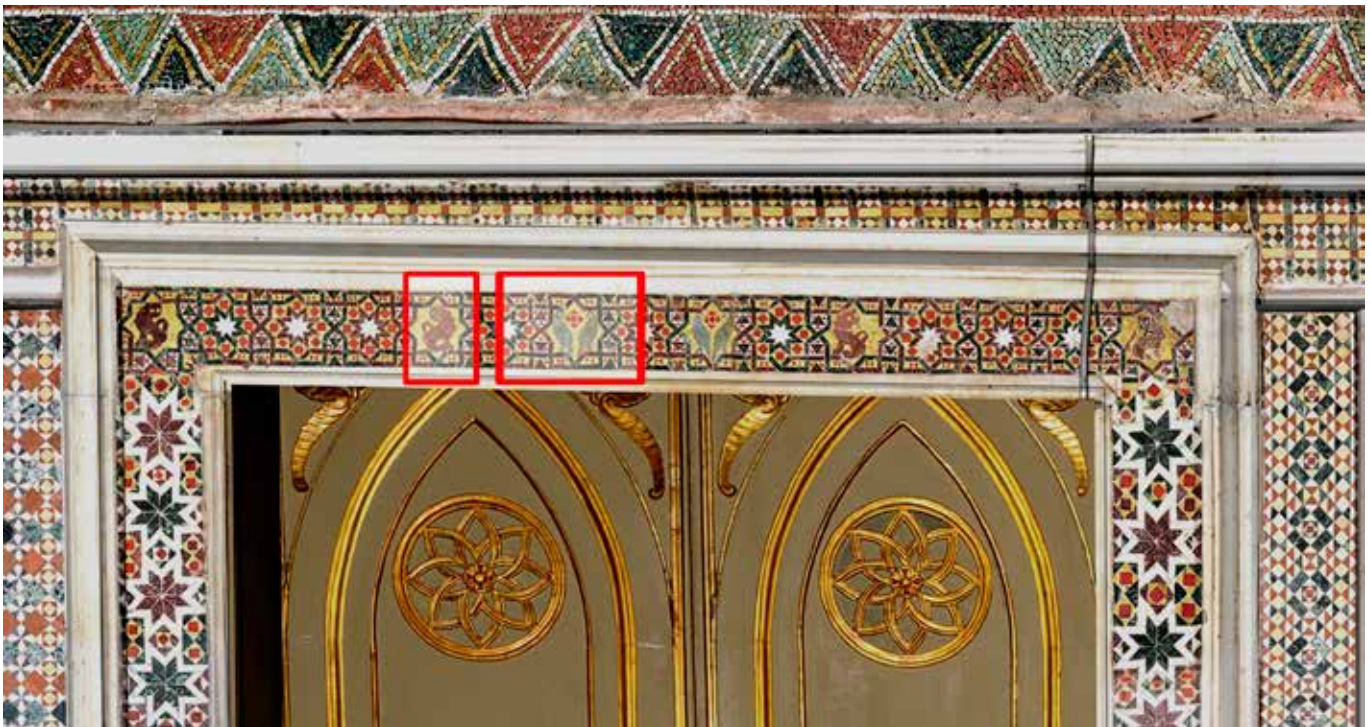
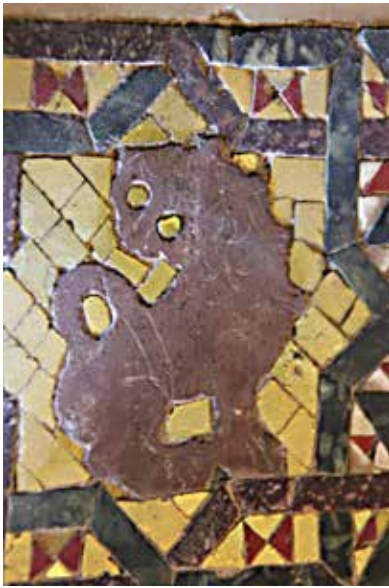
Instead, the investigations and analyses carried out on the structures and especially on the decorations revealed that the door on the southern side, often considered to be a modern element inserted to communicate with the

seventeenth-century wing of the palace, was already there in Norman times, as its *opus sectile* decorations and ornamental motifs demonstrate (fig. 18).

These new observations based on archaeological and archaeometric approaches offer new perspectives on this Norman space, its decorations and its functions.<sup>88</sup>

88 A comprehensive report on this research and studies will be presented in the conference proceedings.





18 Norman Stanza, southern door, details with *opus sectile* decorations (Palermo, Palazzo Reale)



## Conclusion

The whole cultural phenomenon of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily – born of the use of and experimentation with hybridism and syncretism – forged, in the twelfth century, a new, endemic identity, with a multicultural dimension that the UNESCO valorised within a Mediterranean and universal history of art and culture. In a way, the process of nomination of the UNESCO site could be considered as the last Arabo-Norman revival. Again, Arabo-Norman Palermo emerges as privileged identity of the city.

As we have seen, the multiculturalism of Norman Sicily was perceived and exploited in the past, from the period of the Grand Tour up to post-unification nationalism. Furthermore, this revivalistic interest encouraged an intense and continuous dialogue between institutions and scholars, supporting research on and fostering the increase of knowledge of the medieval past. In keeping the distance from biased idealization of this recent past, steeped in na-

tionalistic feelings and purposes, it is our wish that today a fruitful dialogue between political and cultural institutions can be implemented and enhanced.

Today, more than ever before, we all have the responsibility to convey correct information.

As art historians, we agree that compelling hermeneutical proposals can be formulated based on reliable data. While we have remained attentive to the historical-critical interpretation of Norman Sicily and its idealization, and while we have sought to distance our analysis from modern concepts of tolerance and coexistence, the pathway we have proposed here does show that in the politically complex area of Europe and the Mediterranean of the twelfth century, the Norman King Roger II dared to create an image of his kingdom only if based on the strong and expressive potential of cultural diversity. The aesthetic impact of this kingdom persisted over the centuries.