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The Multi-Cultural Identity of Medieval Sicily: William II’s Complex at Monreale

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During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Norman kingdom of Sicily sustained a variety of distinct cultures. Remnants of these cultures can be seen, both subtly and overtly, in the art and architecture of its capital city of Palermo, and the nearby city of Monreale. Through an analysis of the architectural and artistic features of the cathedral and cloister of Santa Maria la Nuova in Monreale, this paper discusses the cultural dynamic of Monreale. Particular consideration will be given to the elements of the Norman, Latin, Greek, and Islamic cultures incorporated in the construction of the complex.¹

**Historical Precedents**

During the eleventh century, the Normans engaged in a series of conquering expeditions throughout Europe. Beginning with the conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066, the Norman family d’Hauteville continued southward on the quest of crusade. They defeated the Byzantines in Apulia and Calabria in southern Italy before progressing further south towards Muslim-controlled lands of Sicily. By 1091, Roger I, the Count of Sicily, subverted the control of the Muslims in southern Italy and the island of Sicily and destroyed over 300 mosques in the process. This began a dynasty of Norman rule in Sicily under the flag of Christianity.² Roger made his capital in Palermo, on the northwestern coastline of the island (Map 1).

At the time of the Norman Conquest, the population of the island was a combination of Muslims, Byzantine Greeks, Latins, and Jews. Political and sociological control of the island was held by Muslims, who defeated the Byzantines in 827. The Byzantines remained in Sicily under the Muslim control. Of the Latins living in Sicily, some were refugees or immigrants from

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¹ Other cultures that lent influence are the English, Jewish, and German.

mainland Italy, who had fled the battle-torn area of central Italy. Venetians, expelled from Constantinople under Emperor Manuel I Komenos, and later Emperor Andronikos I Komenos, also often found refuge in the port cities of Norman Sicily.

In 1130, Roger II, son of Roger I, was named king of Sicily. In the pattern set by his father, Roger II continued to exert control. The fluctuating influence of the papacy in Rome and the diminishing power of the Byzantines felt threatened by the headstrong Normans of Sicily, and therefore became the Normans’ challengers in the region. The Norman leaders negotiated, challenged, and competed with these opposing powers in effort to gain the majority in land, resources, and support in the Mediterranean. By taking over the lands of the weakened Byzantine empire, Roger attempted to expand his own world power and prove the strength of his new kingdom.

Roger allowed the Muslims to continue to inhabit a large portion of Sicily without forced conversion to Christianity. This was a benefit to him and to his subjects, because it allowed him to utilize their complex administrative, economic, and social systems without fear of rebellion or

3 Frequent battles between the German Holy Roman Empire, the Byzantines and the Normans occurred as each kingdom fought to expand their domain. This time period also experienced the fluid state of the papacy, with popes and anti-popes each rallying their own troops in effort to take control of Rome and surrounding territories.

4 Bryer, Cultural Relations between East and West in the Twelfth Century, 85.

5 Fletcher, “The Cathedral of Monreale: Paradox Place.”

6 Roger II focused on the nearby Byzantine-controlled lands of Corinth, Thebes, and Corfu.

7 The majority of knowledge about the Arabic populations in Sicily comes from a North African historian, Ibn Jubyar. He chronicled much of his travels in and around the Mediterranean during the eleventh century. In particular, Ibn Jubyar described his observations about the treatment of Muslims under a Christian ruler. The Muslim leaders faced severe criticism by other imams if they remained in Normans-conquered Sicily. Ibn Jubyar claimed being pleasantly surprised at the degree of tolerance and awareness of the Norman rulers. He remained fearful that the goal of Normans, assuming collaboration with the pope in Rome, was to convert the Muslims of Sicily. See Davis-Secord, “Muslims in Norman Sicily,” 50, 61, 81.
upheaval from the populations. This allowed for communication, trading, and commerce to flourish in the metropolitan areas of the time: Greece, Constantinople in Byzantium, and the Arab states of North Africa. Roger propagated a society with the roots of the previous cultures, which not only allowed him to retain the support and respect of the citizenry, but also enabled him to begin to mold a society unique to its time. Roger learned Arabic, Latin and Greek, which enabled him to interact directly with his court and his countrymen. As a result, his court was filled with influences of Greek and of Arab culture. Roger started a trend now known as the Arab-Norman style. It is seen in buildings such as the Cappella Palatina and the cathedral at Cefalù, Palermo. This style utilized and fused the artistic techniques and aesthetic styles of Islamic and Norman artists in their palaces and churches. These foreign influences and Norman adaptations continued to permeate the society of Sicily with each of Roger’s successors. In particular, his grandson William II continued to develop the Arab-Norman style, modeling much of his architecture and art on the same cultural identities.

The Cathedral and Monastery at Monreale

William was a young ruler, officially coming to the throne at the age of 18. Before then, the young William relied on his council, *Familiaris Regis*, which included two very important men: Walter of the Mill and Matthew Ajello. Walter was William’s former tutor and also the Bishop of Palermo; therefore, he was one of the most powerful religious figures in Sicily, under the

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9 Davis-Secord, “Muslims in Norman Sicily,” 2.
10 Ibid, 12.
11 Ibid, 11.
jurisdiction of the cardinals in Rome. Matthew Ajello was his ambassador and an influential voice in the court.

Two years into his reign, William conversed with Pope Alexander III about plans for his new major complex. William planned to build this massive cathedral and monastery right outside the capital, in the little town of Monreale (Fig. 1). The site for the complex at Monreale supplanted the former church of Hagia Kyriaka, which had been the official see of the Greek Christians when the Arabs ruled over the Byzantines. Like his grandfather’s cathedral of Cefalù in Palermo, William’s complex at Monreale was intended to display the magnitude of wealth, piety, and artistic talent of the Norman kingdom of Sicily (Fig. 2).

Most scholars believe that the purpose of the cathedral complex was more elaborate than merely a young king’s attempt to outshine his ancestors. Instead, the new cathedral became the excuse to realign control of the lands and resources, balance the majority of political power, and create an alliance with the newly established pope. This initiative is partially due to the influence of Matthew Ajello. Matthew and Walter held contrary views of nearly everything political, religious or otherwise and competed for control through the king. Supposedly, Matthew convinced the king that Walter’s power, as the Bishop of Palermo, needed to be limited, explaining that “if allowed to develop unchecked, [Walter’s will] boded ill for Kingdom.” Matthew’s wariness prompted William to see the benefits of making his complex not only a magnificent new cathedral, but also the host for a new bishop, creating a check for Walter’s

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16 Ibid, 314.
power. By building the cathedral of Monreale, William established a new bishopric and redistributed much of the land that once belonged to Palermo’s bishopric.\textsuperscript{17} The transfer of such a great portion of land from Palermo’s bishopric to the new bishopric of Monreale impacted the church leaders and governing bodies, and resulted in new taxes and ruling structures for the populations in those areas.\textsuperscript{18}

The logistical process to create a new cathedral and bishopric typically involved numerous steps and multiple years to complete. This process seems to have been hastened for the complex at Monreale. In 1174, only two years into his reign, William received papal approval for the new cathedral and the resulting bishopric.\textsuperscript{19} Compromises were made with Norman-friendly Pope Alexander III, who in exchange for his approval and support of the complex required the new bishopric and incorporated monastery to be governed by a group of Benedictines. The Normans pledged their royal allegiance to the papacy, payment of 100 gold tari every year, and enlist a Benedictine to become the new bishop and serve as abbot for the monastery.\textsuperscript{20} In return, Pope Alexander III supplied religious vestments (abbatial insignia, mitre, gloves, sandals, and a pastoral staff) to the bishop, offered papal protection of the monastery, and allowed for complete

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The bishopric gained its wealth and power from the feudal system, which included the people and resources that the lands contained. The fiefs or laypeople worked under the clerics or monks who were led by their bishop. The bishop answered to the archbishops, the cardinals, and the pope in Rome.
\item Demus, \textit{Mosaics of Norman Sicily}, 92.
\item Matthew, \textit{The Norman Kingdom Sicily}, 203.
\item Demus, \textit{Mosaics of Norman Sicily}, 92.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
separation from the bishop of Palermo. He also provided extra freedoms to the bishop of Monreale concerning acts and extent of governance.

William ultimately chose the Benedictine Abbot Theobaldus from the nearby monastery of La Cava to bring 100 monks to inhabit the new monastery at Monreale. While William was given permission and assistance by the pope to build the cathedral, he did not have to ascribe to all of the pope’s preferences. Alexander was an avid admirer of the Benedictine, Bernard of Clairveux. Bernard was a Cistercian, and a strong advocate against the materiality of the world and the temptations of worldly goods and pleasure. The Romanesque churches he built and served reflected his determination for simplicity.

The cathedral at Monreale, while conforming to the traditions of a Benedictine monastery, was actually Cluniac in nature. William was influenced more so by the Cluniac order than the Cistercian, which had become the preferred sect in England and parts of France. The Cluniac order did not condemn William’s desire for lavishness and wealth to be apparent in his cathedral, whereas the Cistercians would have opposed the gold and mosaic influence from the Eastern Orthodox Churches of Byzantium.

The cathedral served a variety of purposes besides the ability to facilitate the spiritual needs of the laypeople. The cathedral was used primarily by members of the monastery, the


22 The new archbishop was exempt from the jurisdiction of the rest of the Sicilian clergy. He had a direct connection with the pope in Rome, allowing direct intercourse between him in Monreale (and King William II) and the papacy in Rome.

23 Shortly after his death, Bernard was canonized by Pope Alexander III in 1174.

24 In the process of building the cathedral, in 1177 William married Joanna, the sister of Richard the Lionhearted of England. The Norman-Sicilian ambassadors met Joanna at Winchester in 1176 in order to arrange the marriage. Joanna’s mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine held one of her English courts at Winchester. A contemporary cathedral and benedictine abbey is located there. (Abulafia, “Joanna.”)
Benedictines, for their daily practices of Benedict’s “Hours” as well as for the weekly public Mass and for holy days and festivals.\(^{25}\) It also served as the home of the new bishopric and a center of learning and teaching. As the seat of the new bishopric, it could be used as a center for conversation between the bishop and the king, the monks, foreign ambassadors and others.

William was able to utilize the trade systems available within his kingdom (the ones established by the Muslims and adopted by his ancestors) to recruit draftsmen, artists, craftsmen and laborers from Byzantium and the greater Muslim world. The trade routes enabled William to acquire the necessary resources for the complex: gold, precious stones, and other building materials. Payment for materials, labor, and supplies came mainly from the wealth of the d’Hauteville family.\(^{26}\) With access to materials and skilled laborers, William was able to create a complex that unified facets of the Norman, Latin, Islamic, and Byzantine cultures.

**The Exterior and Apses**

The cathedral’s triapsidal eastern side encroached upon the edge of the hillside and acted as an imposing feature of the landscape (Fig. 3). The cathedral, visible from across the valley, was constructed in the Romanesque style by Latin stonemasons.\(^{27}\) The building also stood as a physical reminder of the strength and power of the leaders of Monreale and greater Sicily. William might have foreseen the potential difficulties of ruling over a multi-cultural society and

\(^{25}\) Benedict’s Eight Hours coincided with times of the day, “beginning in the darkness before dawn and concluding in the evening before bedtime, the monastic community is to meet in church for a liturgy called the Divine Office, drawn primarily from the Psalter, the collection of poetic songs traditionally ascribed to the biblical King David.”

\(^{26}\) The conquering Normans under William I, defeated an affront by Pope Hadrian IV and his allies from Byzantium in 1156 which resulted in a lucrative treaty signed at Benevento, Italy.

acknowledged that his young kingdom would be a tempting target. The cathedral was constructed like a fortress, positioned high above the valley and with thick walls, ramparts and small windows.\textsuperscript{28}

The traditions of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church impacted the arrangement, structure, and use of the liturgical spaces in the cathedral at Monreale. Considering only the structure and layout of the cathedral specifically, the initial perspective is that the building takes the form of a Latin basilica, which was the plan typically used for Romanesque churches. However, upon further inspection, it can be concluded that this form is separate from both the Latin basilica plan and the Greek cross-in-square churches. Instead, the cathedral shows a combination of both, enabling it to accommodate the multicultural nature of the populations. (Fig. 4). The Normans preferred a Roman Catholic style of liturgy, but the majority of the Christians on the island were Greeks who would have practiced Orthodox Christianity.\textsuperscript{29}

While the cathedral is predominantly Romanesque, it contains some elements that reflect the Orthodox traditions. Desiring a similar eminence to that of the Byzantine empire, The Norman rulers developed Byzantinism, a style of art and architecture that reflected the magnificence of a long-substantiated tradition.\textsuperscript{30} It is clear that the space inside the cathedral is constructed similarly to the basilica plan, with a main centralized nave and two aisles concluding

\textsuperscript{28} Perhaps intentionally done, this helped the monks and bishop when the rebelling Muslim forces attacked during the time of the Hohenstaufens after the death of William II. See Schiro, \textit{Monreale: City of the Golden Temple}, 6.

\textsuperscript{29} Matthew, \textit{The Norman Kingdom Sicily}, 106.

\textsuperscript{30} Bryer, \textit{Cultural Relations between East and West in the Twelfth Century}, 78, 85.
in the apse with the altar. The nave is extended to over twice the length of the transept, a very recognizable attribute of a Romanesque church.

The transept in a basilica-plan cathedral extends further along the perpendicular axis of the nave. The center of the transept and the nave is supported with four columns, and the transept only extends to the degree of the apses on either side of the central apse (much like that of the Greek cross-in-square). Paired with the cathedral’s eastern triapsidal structure create the structure of a condensed cross-in-square layout. However, without the dome and vaulted ceilings, the plan continues to appear Romanesque.

While most other Romanesque churches of this period feature a single eastern apse with or without a series of radiating chapels from that singular apse — seen at, Santiago di Compostela in Spain, or Ely Cathedral in England — Monreale was built with three parallel semi-circular apses. This was a common feature in Orthodox churches after the time of Emperor Justinian I (sixth century). These three apses are named the *prothesis*, the central apse, and the *diaconicon*, and they are aligned on an eastern side of the church behind the iconostasis. The *prothesis* is the apse or other chamber on the northern side of the church, where “The Table of Oblation” is kept to hold the elements of the Eucharist before the Divine Liturgy. The *diaconicon* is the apse or other chamber opposite the *prothesis*, where the holy books, vestments,

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31 The cathedral also originally included an atrium, another element adopted from the basilica-plan, which would have also been attached to the western side of the cathedral. It no longer exists, but was replaced by the Piazza Guglielmo II (aptly named for the Norman King William II).

32 Specifically it measures, 335 ft long, 131 ft wide, 115 ft high.

33 One such cathedral that is strikingly similar in plan is the cathedral of Modena in Italy, consecrated in 1184. It contains the triapsidal eastern side and an adjacent tower on the eastern facade, and a rectangular interior. However, Modena, being a northern Italian city, did not have direct interactions with Arabic or Byzantine cultures, that existed in Sicily.

34 “The Table of Oblation” is the table where the elements for the eucharist are prepared for communion. It is a supplementary table to the altar table in Orthodox liturgies.
vessels and other holy objects are kept. In Roman Catholic liturgies, the interior spaces of apses could also be used for storage of the eucharistic elements and liturgical vestments, but were more commonly used as prayer or choir chapels. In both liturgies, the central apse contains the high altar.

The cathedral at Monreale also has a narthex, a gathering place at the western entrance, which was used by the congregation before entering the nave of the cathedral. It was the area where the catechumen stood for services. The narthex is a feature found in both Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

The exterior decoration of the apses is an unusual feature of the cathedral. The inlaid stonework on the apses create repeating ogival arches and medallions (Fig. 5). These features reference Byzantine and Islamic motifs. There are no explicit examples of the exact shape or patterns, but comparable motifs are present in the textiles from early Byzantium. The fifth century Byzantine textile fragment from North Africa exemplifies a potential influence for the decoration of the exterior apses’ blind arches (Fig. 6). In both examples, there is a rounded arch above a patterned medallion and a lower linear register, also patterned. Despite a nearly 500-year difference in time, the examples suggest a potential overlap. The Byzantines who ruled Sicily also had ruled North Africa. They were supplanted by the Arabs. Well after the Normans conquered the Arabs, Sicily remained as a major link in the economic progression of the Mediterranean, and the people of Sicily, regardless of ethnicity, continued to maintain a direct connection with those in North Africa. It is because of this that textiles or other modes of artistic influence could have continued to flow through Sicily.

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Catechumen were people preparing to enter the church officially as converted Christians, but who had not been baptized.
**The Doors**

The best examples of bronze doors from the eleventh and twelfth centuries came from Constantinople in Byzantium. However, with the aid of the trade routes between Italy and Constantinople, Italian artists re-adopted and continued to develop this art form. Bronze doors had once been an ancient art form in Italy. The Pantheon and the Senate House both incorporated impressive bronze doors which could have been inspirations for the revival of the art form. Soon, bronze doors began appearing once again throughout the Italian mainland in Venice, Tuscany, and Puglia. Two sets of bronze doors, one on the north side and one on the west side of the cathedral, were created by the Italian artists, Barisano di Trani and Bonanno Pisano, respectively.

The doors by Barisano of Trani are framed with a border of inlaid stonework. The stonework consists of an Islamic pattern of repeating geometrics and eight-pointed stars. This Islamic motif is repeated elsewhere in the complex: in the flooring of the cathedral and the columns of the arcade in the cloister (Fig. 7a). The doors are composed of twenty-eight square panels each containing figures, of interest since twenty-eight is also the number of days in the Islamic calendar. The majority of figures are Biblical, but only a few explicitly describe events from the Bible (Fig. 7b). Four rows of the doors feature figures in a philosopher pose, perhaps referencing the Four Evangelists, others may references the major prophets or patriarchs of the Old Testament. Some of the figures are soldiers either on foot or on horseback. These could reference either warrior saints or the Normans themselves, as conquerors in the name of

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36 The doors of the ancient Senate House were moved to the Basilica of St. John of the Lateran in the seventeenth century.

37 The philosopher pose is characterized by a figure sitting on a chair, wearing drapery and holding a book.
Christianity. Finally, there are four lion heads. The lion is a symbol of regality in Roman, Christian, and Byzantine art. Two heads appear as panels in the bottom corners of the doors and the other two lion heads adorn the door handles. This motif is seen in other areas, like those of the doors in San Marco, Venice.

The doors by Bonanno of Pisa are framed with a set of sculptural ogival arches that mimic the pattern of exterior. The ogival arches references Islamic architecture, but the patterning references northern European Romanesque portal frames (Fig. 8a). The doors are composed of forty panels chronicling biblical history from the Creation of Adam and Eve to the Ascension (Fig. 8b).

Both artists utilized the techniques from Byzantium concerning bronze and bas-relief. With the fall of Constantinople and the increased Italian interest in bronze and gold metallurgy, the artists of the approaching Italian Renaissance developed the technique of creating bronze doors, taking it to the next level of sophistication.

**The Ceiling**

The ceiling in the cathedral takes on four different forms throughout, three of which exhibit Islamic characteristics. Ceiling design differed in medieval churches to reflect the magnitude and importance of the elements of the structure. The area above the altar, therefore had the most elaborate decoration, symbolizing the most significant area of the structure. The main nave has a wooden-trussed roof much like those seen in other Romanesque buildings of the

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38 Norwich, *The Kingdom in the Sun*, 316.

39 Fletcher, “The Cathedral of Monreale: Paradox Place.”

north (Fig. 9). This portion of the ceiling is the simplest of the three portions. It is carved and painted, but the details of the painted ceiling get lost in the darkness of the nave. The gold ornamentations help reflect the minuscule amount of light down from the clerestory windows.

The second ceiling variety appears in two different manners in the transept and in the central apse (Fig. 10). Both are composed of carved and painted wood. This form of decoration is called *alfarje*. *Alfarje* decoration is prominent in Islamic buildings, particularly in the cities of Leon, Castile, Aragon and Toledo in Spain (Fig. 11). *Alfarje* is the translation of the word “ceiling” in Arabic, but it has come to mean more than merely “ceiling.” It contains the elements of carving and inlaid ornamentation and was used primarily in the Mudéjar architecture of Spain. The Mudéjar style was created by Muslim craftsmen living in Christian-controlled lands, and incorporated the elements of Romanesque, Gothic, and Islamic motifs. The primary materials for this type of architecture included brick and wood. The ornamentation of these portions of the ceiling is strikingly similar to the ceiling design of Roger’s Cappella Palatina (Fig. 12). According to the scholar, William Tronso, “The conclusion has been drawn that the ceiling [of the Cappella Palatina] was largely the work of an atelier of artists imported from Fatimid Egypt.” Similar craftsmen could have been brought to complete the ceilings of the cathedral at Monreale.

**The Mosaics**

The most distinguishable Byzantine feature of the cathedral is the wall-to-wall shimmering mosaics. Much like the grand churches of Constantinople, Thessaloniki, or Venice, 

41 *Mudéjar* is the term for the style that existed primarily in societies of Muslims and Christians and developed differently depending upon the use of the buildings. ("The Normans in Sicily")

42 Miller, “Rethinking the Petrucci Pavement”, 110.
the walls radiate with the splendor of golden tesserae. The narrative program of the mosaics fits
the iconographic schemes for biblical figures used in Byzantium. Some examples are the motifs of
the Pantokrator, the Panagia (Virgin Mary), and the Philosopher pose of St. Paul (Figures 13-15, respectively).

According to Otto Demus, the construction of the cathedral’s mosaic program was
influenced by a number of factors, but ultimately, it was the genius invention of one master
mosaicist and executed by multiple artisans. With over 68,000 sq. feet of wall space to cover, the
project required skill, efficiency, and a well-defined structure. There is a consistency in the
underlying composition for each scene that suggests the hand of a single artist, likely to have been
an expatriate from Constantinople or a hired artist from one of the provinces. Demus found
parallels in style in areas north of Constantinople, but also with iconographic motifs fitting those
found in Constantinople. Unfortunately, there is not much evidence of similar work outside of
Constantinople, since most of the examples of provincial mosaic work from this time period have
been destroyed or repurposed. Some of the closest similarities that still survive can be found in
the mosaics of San Marco in Venice.

The mosaic program in the nave is broken into registers that depict Old Testament
narratives and the life and passion of Christ. The nave’s extensive mosaic program culminates in
the Pantokrator in the central apse above the altar. The spaces not filled with the narrative scenes,
contain various saints, church leaders, and holy men and women as supplements. These are

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44 “Il Duomo.”
45 Most obviously is the Pantokrator, the creation of the world, and the Anastasis.
46 This was most likely due to the fall of Constantinople in 1204 or other kingdoms’ conquests of the
outer regions of the late Byzantine Empire.
labeled with their names in Latin and are portrayed according to iconographical schemes of
Byzantium.\(^{47}\)

Some scholars speculate that the saints depicted are a reflection of William’s choices
rather than that of the primary mosaicist. By choosing a variety of saints from throughout
Christendom, William built a liturgical spectrum for his kingdom that reflected and served to
benefit the variety of cultures in his kingdom.\(^{48}\)

While the majority of figures are Biblical, the other saints and holy men and women are
those who served religious roles throughout history and around the known world. Saint Agatha, a
martyr saint from Sicily during the third century, is depicted next to Saint Anthony, the father of
monasticism from the fourth century Egypt. Across the presbytery, three very different saints are
featured: Saint Marie Magdalen, from the time of Christ; Saint Benedict, the founder of the
Benedictine rule in the fifth century; and Saint Hilarius, the pope during the fifth century. Two
specifically Northern European saints are depicted in the mosaic program of the cathedral:
Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury until his untimely death in 1170; and Saint
Martin of Tours, an early bishop in France, whose life consisted of traversing the European
continent from Hungary to Italy to France.\(^{49}\)

Two mosaics in the program help to date and add historical depth to the cathedral itself.
Above the chair of the bishop is the mosaic of the dedication of the church to the Virgin Mary
by the king, William (Fig. 16). The dedication panel is a common motif in Byzantine and Latin

\(^{47}\) Bishops and monks wear particular clothing and the execution of the poses of the saints and apostles is flat.


\(^{49}\) Like Bernard of Clairveux, Becket was canonized soon after his death by Pope Alexander III.
churches alike. Examples of this motif are found in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, featuring the early Byzantine emperor Justinian I (Fig. 17).

Across the nave is the chair of the king and above it is the mosaic of the coronation of the king by Christ (Fig. 18). In both panels, William wears clothes reminiscent of a Byzantine Komnenoi emperor, rather than of a Holy Roman emperor. William’s choice in attire reflected his desire to emulate the notorious beauty and wealth of the Byzantine Empire. The crown that William wears in his dedication panel is similar to the crown worn by John II Komnenos in his dedication panel for the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Fig. 19). It is rounded with gold and jewels and strands of pearls hanging down by the ears. The ornate checkered pattern of William’s loros, a toga-like, draped article of clothing, resembles the example in John’s panel as well.

Most of the inscriptions and captions for the mosaics are in Latin. The exception is the Word of God, which is the Gospel Book held by Christ the Pantokrator in the central apse. Significantly, the script on the book is in both Latin and Greek (Fig. 20). This is a striking difference than the Pantokrator found in Roger II’s cathedral of Cefalù (Fig. 21). The majority of Christians in Monreale were Greeks but there was a significant population that spoke Latin. This explains the desire for both languages. It suggests that the Word of God, Christ, is the most significant element of the mosaic program, and of Christianity. If nothing else, that element alone should be understood fully by all people of the congregation.

50 During the reign of William II, the Normans were cousins to the Germans, whose king was Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor. He was the primary challenger for the lands of Italy against the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I, Pope Alexander III, and the Norman king. Frederick’s son, Henry VI married William II’s aunt, Constance, and therefore successfully gained rule of Sicily after William II’s death.

51 The Komnenoi ruled the Byzantine empire from the early eleventh century till the end of the twelfth century.
There are many parallels in the stylization of the mosaics in Monreale and the mosaics in the church of San Marco in Venice. Venice was also a multi-cultural center of trade during this time. The majority of mosaics in central area of the church are from the twelfth century are thought to be from the hand of Greek artists.\(^{52}\) It is from these mosaics that the most parallels can be made with those at Monreale. The mosaics in the nave and supports for the central apse, particularly the modeling of the clothing, the wings of the angels, and some of the faces of the saints, can easily be compared to the figures in the Dome of the Ascension in San Marco (Fig. 22).

Some scholars have also examined the possibility of a link between the artists of the Winchester Bible, of Winchester Cathedral in England, and the mosaicists of the cathedral in Monreale.\(^{53}\) Both cathedrals had integrated Benedictine monasteries with commitments to scholarship and illuminated manuscript creation.\(^{54}\) The Winchester Bible was illuminated by six artists, all considered to be of foreign origin.\(^{55}\) In comparing the illuminations of the Bible to the narrative scenes in the nave, parallels can be found (Fig. 23). The scene of the creation of Eve from the Genesis page, vol. 5 and in the cathedral feature a bearded God, on the left side, blessing the sleeping Adam (Fig. 24). While this is just one example, without a further study of the entirety of the manuscript, the stylistic similarities cannot be considered substantial enough to claim much more than similar influences.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{52}\) San Marco was renovated after a fire in the first quarter of the twelfth century, which resulted in the new program of mosaics.


\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) “The Winchester Bible.”

\(^{56}\) The manuscript is contained in four volumes and is on rotating view at the cathedral to aid in its longevity and frequently undergoes conservation and preservation treatments.
**Furnishings and Accoutrements**

Carved holes in the sides of the walls and floors of the apsidal space suggest that the cathedral once contained a built-in screen, such as an iconostasis or pulpitum, which is now lost. The existence of an iconostasis suggests a form of Eastern or Orthodox liturgical service, whereas a pulpitum suggests a Northern/Latin liturgical form of service. In either case, the interior of the central apse, crested with the magnificent Pantokrator mosaic, would be otherwise hidden by the iconostasis or pulpitum to preserve the sanctity of the eucharistic elements and ceremonies. The screen would hide these areas from the view of the laypeople. Only certain church leaders, special members of the church, and the monks of the attached monastery would have had access to the area behind the screen.

The chairs for the bishop and the king are situated closest to this area (Fig. 25). The position of the king’s chair on the north side corresponds with the position of the royal palace, and the position of the chair of the bishop was on the south side, which corresponds with the area that attached to the monastery, via the cloister.

William had the tombs of his ancestors moved from the cathedral at Cefalù to Monreale. His father’s tomb was made of solid porphyry, a valuable material from Egypt often used by the wealthy and particularly the royals (Fig. 26).

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57 An iconostasis is a Christian (more specifically Byzantine) barrier between the sanctuary and the altar, solidly built and covered in icons of saints, Mary, and Christ. A pulpitum is a massive screen used to separate the choir from the nave, which originated in monastic churches.

58 During times of war, pillaging or transition in leadership, this pieces would be dismantled, repurposed, or destroyed completely.


60 To be “born of the purple”, a common title given to the emperors of Byzantium, meant to be born into royalty, and the purplish color of porphyry referenced this status.
William commissioned gospel books for his cathedral similar to those made during the
time of his grandfather. A trilingual psalter was created for the society of Roger with the psalms
translated into the Latin Vulgate, the Greek Septuagint, and an Arabic translation. Based on
the level of ornamentation and skill apparent in the book, it is assumed that the psalter was used
for public liturgical use, perhaps even in the larger cathedrals of Palermo or Monreale. By mid-
twelfth century in Sicily, Arabic had become sufficiently widespread that scripture readings in the
local Greek Orthodox liturgy may have been repeated in Arabic.

The Cloister

Aside from the political structures that the Norman leaders brought with them, they also
brought the traditions of the Benedictine monasticism. St. Benedict’s monastic traditions
acquired a far greater mass of followers in Northern Europe, regardless of the fact that Benedict
himself was Italian. Their monastic enthusiasm included the Cluniac structure, which had
originated in France, but spread also to England in the twelfth century.

Monasteries in Europe adopted Cluniac scheme of building and decoration after 1100.
Typically this scheme included plain or embellished Corinthian capitals for columns; inscribed
and carved lintels and door-frames; and interior decorative schemes, which culminated at the
central apse. Cluniac priories supported artistic embellishment, narrative, symbolism and even
allowed for the use non-Christian symbols, such as the zodiac or creatures from common

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61 “Il Tesoro Della Basilica E La Cappella Mons. Giovanni Roano.”
62 “Psautier Trilingue.”
63 Griffith, The Bible in Arabic, 149.
64 Matthew, The Norman Kingdom Sicily, 107.
65 Golden, “Aedificium: Cluniac Order.”
bestiaries or mythology. All of these attributes are found in the ornamentation of the cloister of Monreale.

The monastery of Monreale has been lost to time, but the cloister attached to the cathedral’s south aisle, survives intact (Fig. 27). The cloister is arranged in a square with a double column arcade and the southwest corner adapted to fit a fountain. The double column arcade of the cloisters is an element of Cluniac architecture. In the corners of the cloister, the capitals were made of quatriloobe forms: i.e. four individual columns composed of one singular block of marble. The capitals of the columns have been the topic of much consideration in the past. Carl Sheppard postulates that the capitals were created by five different “Masters”, each with their own program or specialty, who would have been brought over from the mainland of Italy. He attributes the capitals with blended iconography to the various influences of these Master carvers. Sicily had no sculptural tradition of its own, probably due to the religious restrictions of the previously ruling Muslims, and William would therefore have had to employ sculptors from the mainland or elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The capital decorations are similar in form and subject matter to examples of the Lombardy region of France and similar in depth and technique to examples of the Campania region of Italy. Further influences would have ranged from the mosaic decorations of the cathedral itself, the cathedral of Cefalù, various objects imported from Byzantium, the Italian mainland or North Africa. Some scholars have

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66 The cloister is a 47 sq. meter square.

67 This model is found throughout Northern Europe, but particularly in France. The Moissac Abbey in western France, and the Charlieu Abbey in the Loire region of France, both Benedictine/Cluniac abbeys of the twelfth century, also include a double column arcade. See Evans, The Cluniac Art of the Romanesque Period, Fig 8b.

68 Matthew, The Norman Kingdom Sicily, 126.

speculated that some of the capitals, for both the interior of the cathedral and the arcade of the cloister, are elements of *spolia* from the mainland of Italy.

Bearing subject matter that is both religious and secular, figural and ornamental, the decorations of the capitals imply a theme that is not progressive nor hierarchical. The majority are simple adaptations of the Classical Corinthian or depict a progression of birds—typically eagles or peacocks, but also some smaller types (Fig. 28). Between these capitals are scenes of allegorical or Biblical figures, sometimes blended together. One of the capitals contains the symbolic beings of the four evangelists on the corners of the capital. In the between them are the characters (which are not the evangelists themselves) of a siren and a saint, a monk, a bishop, and a philosopher.

Another such example on the south side of the cloister. This quadrilobed capital features Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena holding a double cross between them (Fig. 29a). The opposite side of the same capital features the personifications of Ecclesia (Church) and Synagogue (Fig. 29b). According to Sheppard, this blended composition is not found in any iconographic tradition, but is a new composition specific to Monreale. Sheppard believes that these iconographic symbols reference the history of the expanding and powerful Church and the Church’s goal for conversion of pagans. Constantine was the first Christian Roman Emperor and Helena supposedly discovered the True Cross during her travels to the Holy land. Constantine and Helena are seen as part of the motivating force for Christianity’s spread throughout the areas of the Roman Empire (Italy included). Ecclesia and Synagogue are juxtaposed next each other on the opposite side. Ecclesia stands triumphant with a high-flying banner and a look of determination. Synagogue, on the left, stands with a crooked banner and a softer, submissive

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70 Ibid, 162.
expression. Conceivably, this expresses the powerful Church, propagated by Constantine, supplanting the former religion symbolized by Synagogue. This seems like a bold statement to make considering, the bigger religious threat to the Roman Catholic Church at this time in Sicily was Islam, not Judaism.

Biblical scenes such as the story of Sampson, Noah and his sons, Lazarus, John the Baptist, and the Massacre of the Innocents are also depicted in the capitals. Many of these stories are repeated in the mosaics in the nave of the cathedral, sometimes explicitly in form.

Islamic artistic influence is evident in some of the columns of the cloister. Inlaid mosaic tesserae in geometric patterns, suggests further use of the decorative motifs used in the cathedral’s exterior and the application of skills from Arabic workers. The cloister also features a fountain the southwestern corner. The fountain is a simplified basin with a patterned shaft, topped with parading creatures (Fig. 30). Fountains are significant elements of both European Monastic architecture and Islamic architecture, because they signify ritual cleansing, purity, and sustainability of life.

Assemblage or Synthesis?

After reviewing much of the artistic and material culture of the cathedral and cloister, it is clear that the Norman-Sicilian society exhibited distinct culture-blending. This process began under Roger II with his choice to overtly integrate Islamic motifs in his constructions of Cefalù and the Cappella Palatina. After Roger, the pattern continued with his grandson, William. William’s choices about the complex clearly reference and pay homage to the work of his grandfather, but simultaneously shift to reflect a new kind of society: one that delicately balanced the cultural elements of its population without one particularly dominant culture.
The complex balanced the cultural dynamics and distinctions of William's society by exhibiting a blending of artistic techniques, subject matter, and materials. This reflected how multi-cultural the society had become since the time of Roger II. Whereas Roger hoped to bring some bit of majesty for the Normans out of the societies of the Muslims and Greeks, William created an amalgamation, a synthesis.

The politically-dominant faction, the Roman Catholic Normans, left few overt, artistic references to their own culture. The overwhelming cultural presence in the complex is Byzantine, partially due to the magnitude of Byzantine style mosaics. However, the Roman Catholic foundation of the complex held the Byzantine style in check. This adequately reflects how the society itself functioned: the majority of Christians in Sicily were Byzantine Greeks who were governed by Normans, who had made a pact with the Roman Catholic pope. Similarly, the Islamic motifs of the complex are limited, but fundamentally integrated. The unusual exterior decoration and the Mudéjar ceiling design are hard to ignore and explicitly reference Arab craftsmen living under governance of Christians.

As seen in the complex at Monreale, the society under William was undergoing a transformation, artistically, linguistically, politically, and economically. If it had been allowed to prosper, the culture potentially would have continued to adapt and morph into something new. However with the early death of William and the rebellions and conquests of the Muslims in the Mediterranean, the Norman culture in Sicily dissipated. Sicily did not remain a Norman-controlled land of Muslims and Greeks, but saw its culture readapt in the centuries following the demise of Norman influence.
Fig. 2

Fig. 3
Fig. 27

Fig. 28
Fig. 29a

Fig. 29b
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