

Sicily's architectural melting pot



A multi-cultural imprint on ecclesiastical architecture on the Island

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Outline:

I. Introduction

II. Historical Context

- A. Cultural Convergence
- B. Influence of Foreign Styles on Sicilian Architecture
 - 1. Moorish architectural traits
 - 2. Byzantine architectural traits
 - 3. Norman's architectural traits
- C. Characteristics of Arab-Norman Style

III. Analysis of Arab-Norman Style in Sicilian Architecture

- A. Case studies:
 - 1. Monreale Cathedral and the Benedict Cloister (1172-1267)
 - 2. Church of San Cataldo (1154)
 - 3. Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù (1143-1185, major changes in 1558)

VI. Conclusion

VII. Bibliography

VIII. list of figures

I. Introduction

Subject: Arab-Norman style, Sicily, Palermo, sacral architecture, Monreale Cathedral, Church of San Cataldo, Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù

Research question: *How did the Arab-Norman style in sacred buildings in Sicily (Palermo and adjacent cities) develop within the IX-XII ages, and what was the extent of influence from *Moorish, Norman, and Byzantine architecture during that period?*

*The words Moorish/ Arab are going to be used interchangeably because the Arabs were once called Moors.

Abstract:

This research paper studies the evolution of the Arab-Norman style in sacred monuments across Sicily, mainly in Palermo and adjacent cities, from the 9th to 12th century. The focus is on three edifices: the Monreale Cathedral, San Cataldo Church and Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù. The premise of the research is to explore the cultural convergence of Byzantine, Moorish and Norman styles, and how it led to the creation of the unique, Arab-Norman style. Through a diverse, interdisciplinary line of action, using historical records, cultural context and previously written academic papers the extent of the influence of the three styles will be explored.

Description:

The objects investigated in the thesis are Monreale Cathedral and the Benedict Cloister (1172-1267), Church of San Cataldo (1154), Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù (1143-1185, major changes in 1558). All three examples are buildings that display elements of the Arab-Norman style, formed in the 9th-12th century. The styles combine innovative elements from the northern part of Europe, for example, accentuated verticality, within Byzantine layouts. The characteristics have not been widely researched yet, thus the research question has been formed. As an answer, regarding the Arab-Norman style in Sicily between the 9th and 12th centuries and the extent of the influence of Arab, Norman, and Byzantine architecture in that period, there are a few interpretive ideas that can be brought to light.

Foremost, an analysis of architectural style in sacred buildings helps to explore the cultural exchanges and interactions between different civilisations in the medieval ages. It includes examining how aesthetic elements and construction techniques evolved, and how they have been imprinted with the craftsmanship of previous rulers and the following cultures. The research focuses on the dynamics of intercultural influences, especially the reciprocal interplay of Muslim, Norman, and Byzantine architectural traditions in Sicily. The analysis of specific design elements, as well as decorative motives and spatial concepts present in those structures helps to define to what extent each cultural heritage contributed to shaping the previously mentioned style.

In addition, the research will first be based on theoretical frames from the history of architecture and the theory of art., to place the development of the style in a broader socio-political and cultural state of affairs.

To pinpoint the research's context, it is important to start by elaborating on a few previous literature works that discussed this topic. The first book (Mendola, L. (2015). *The Kingdom of Sicily 1130-1860*) covers a broad topic of the history of the Kingdom of Sicily across seven centuries. The author covers historical events from the kingdom under the rule of Normans in the 12th century until the baroque monarchy in the 19th century. As the book is broad in history, it may lack some information necessary for the writing of the paper, due to the specificity and complexity of the chosen topic. It will give useful insight into the historical events, that are a necessary part of the paper introduction. However, the book does not contain crucial details regarding the architecture and its shaping under the rule of different kingdoms. It is also the first extended published history of The Kingdom of Sicily, thus based on many older sources of information. The content graphic materials are compiled in one place, therefore making a historical description faster and easier to comprehend. To cope with the lack of detailed information, guidebooks will be also used. (Spadaro, M.A., Troisi, S. (2018) "Itinerario Arabo-Normanno - Il patrimonio dell'UNESCO a Palermo, Monreale e Cefalu" gives a brief overview of monuments that are on the UNESCO list. It provides basic information and context to help further elaboration on the mentioned examples. Not only does it mention the architectural pieces that will be discussed in this paper, but it also gives an inside into many historical buildings located in Palermo, Monreale and Cefalu. The other guide used (Concetta Di Natale, M., Scortino, L.) "Monreale The Cathedral and the Benedictine Cloister – guide" provides an in-depth analysis of all of the ornamental elements in one of the analyzed subjects. Even though it will not be the only source, it will help with verifying the information and broadening the lacking details in some other works.

The next piece of literature is an academic text by Duncan-Flowers, M. J. (1994). *The mosaics of Monreale: A study of their monastic and funerary context* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It is a very in-depth analysis of ornamentation, with a focus on mosaics, in the Sacra building. The analysis that the author conducted is complete. It is constructed only on one example, but based on this piece of academic literature it is possible to support the investigation of mosaics in the other examples of the research that has been done by this author. Among shorter pieces of literature, there have also been several articles written on the topic. The article by Hayes, D. M., Hayes, J. (2019) Soprintendenza Beni Culturali e Ambientali di Palermo, *The Norman Sicily Project: A Digital Portal to Sicily's Norman Past* is a proper supplement because the extensive photographic documentation will be one of the most crucial sources while analysing Norman elements of architecture. Because of the article's focus on that one, particular architectural style, it has been very well described. The structure of the article is clear and easy to comprehend with a well-described premise.

In acknowledgement of the invaluable contributions of the existing literature, an optimal research approach was facilitated. The research will be conducted by studying academic works about the mentioned style in Sicily. By collecting a wide variety of literature connected with history and style converges in Sicily, the database will provide enough data for sufficient analysis that will lead to a well-thought-through conclusion. The author also is in the position of photographs in their private collection that can be used in the thesis. Some information has been gathered from spoken word overheard during trips in Italy, from people that live there.

When it comes to the structure of the paper, for easier comprehension it starts with general information and ends with specifics. First, the topic will be explored on a broader, less architectural level. After getting acknowledged with the cultural convergence of Sicily, the forthcoming thesis will delve into more granular subject matters, centring its attention on distinct architectural aspects. After describing and analysing historical style and the styles that contributed to its formation, the focus will be brought to case studies. In the end, the assessment of the most distinguishable elements of the Arab-Norman style will be conducted.

II. Historical Context

This chapter will give an overview of Sicily’s complex historical background. Its ruling goes beyond Italy and adjacent cultures, being once occupied by, amongst others, The Swabians or Habsburgs. This work focuses on the period between 535 and 1194 AD, the period from Byzantine to Norman rule in Sicily.

The chapter's latter part focuses on architectural elements found in Sicily and from an analysis of each of the particular influences to a synthesis, expressed in the Arab-Norman style.

A. Sicily's Cultural Convergence – with an emphasis on Palermo

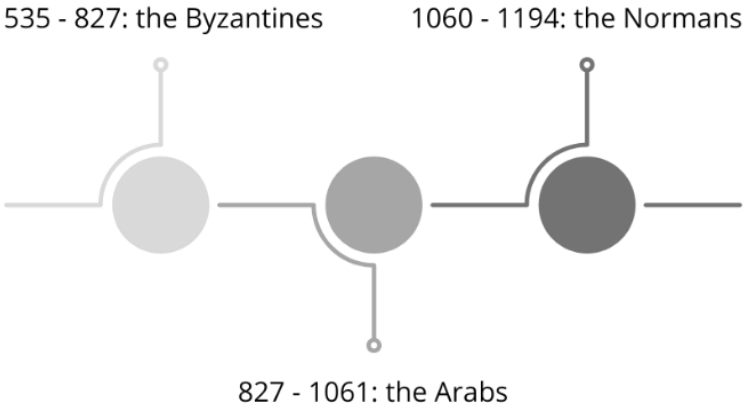


Fig. 1 – the timeline of ruling in Sicily from VI to XII century

Looking at the general historical overview of Sicily's history, it is easily understood why the medieval history of Palermo has often been described as a sequence of adjacent historical periods under different dominations, giving Sicily its historical richness and cultural differentiation compared to the continental part of Italy. The five first centuries of Sicily's history (6th-mid-11th century) are often neglected in historical works. (Nef & Thom, 2013)

The Byzantines conquered Sicily in 535, thus making Palermo, among other cities, a part of their empire. The Byzantine emperor, Belisarius met no hardship while defeating the previously ruling Ostrogoths, due to the absence of Germanic armed forces – the province was considered outlying. After being conquered, the city of Palermo started falling into ingloriousness. After disappearing from the sources it reappeared in the moment of crisis- which directly led to it being attacked by the Muslim armies. (Nef & Thom, 2013)

The overpowering of all Sicily has started in the city of Mazara, from West to East, to the Syracuse. (Bouchard & Lollini, 2007) It is known, that the overrunning of the land began along a civil war started by the emperor Michael III, who wished to dispose of his erstwhile advocates, the tourmach Euphemios. (Nef & Thom, 2013)

The Arabo-Muslims laid out their bridgehead by the city of Palermo, after their unfortunate turn of events before Syracuse. Palermo was seen as a key element in controlling the islands and due to the development of the balance division, particularly weakened. The city capitulated in 831. (Nef & Thom, 2013) After finding Sicily in a bad state, the Muslims were able to rebuild the land, using its rich resources. Under their rule agriculture was taken care of and prospering, thanks to the new irrigation and agricultural techniques. The new society was also focused on the spirit of inclusivity and tolerance. It combined people from different backgrounds, cultures, and religions. This mindset was to be endowed by the Normans. (Bouchard & Lollini, 2007)

The Normans made their way to southern Italy due to the overpopulation of Normandy (modern-day northern France) and religious pilgrimages. The very beginning of their overtaking of the south of Italy starts with them being mercenaries. They worked for hire, for anyone who could pay the higher price, and with that, there were winning sieges (e.g. against Capua in 1024 and Naples in 1027). After having done that, the Normans started switching from mercenaries to conquerors and started overtaking the South due to their advanced modular battling techniques. In the year 1072 Palermo was conquered by Roger and his forces. The Muslims were forced to yield, under the condition of being able to practice their religion without interference. (Rodriguez, 2015) Norman rule in Sicily came to an end after the death of their last king, William II. Following his loss of life, the land was divided, which strongly debilitated its position. After the Norman the Hohenstaufen came, who were the rulers of Sicily for the next 70 years. ('History of Sicily - Guide to Sicily', 2022)

B. Influence of Foreign Styles on Sicilian Architecture

	Byzantine	Moorish	Norman	Arab-Norman
Architectural traits	Rich ornamentation	Eschewing from depicting humans and animals	Accentuated verticality	Mosaics on ceilings, walls and floors, richly ornamented
	Domes	Geometric patterns	Use of towers at the sides of facades	Domes
	Floorplan in the shape of a Greek cross	Arched domes	Long church plans, big scale	Cloisters with colonnades
				Richly ornamented columns
				Openwork partitions
				Wooden entablatures on the vault
				Walls lined with marble to a certain height
				Decorative columns adjacent to the wall

Fig. 2 A table of style characteristics

1. Byzantine architectural traits

- a) Rich ornamentation – with an emphasis on mosaics and iconography. The pieces of art were created from pieces of glass, just like those made by early Christians. As an additional material, stones and ceramics were used. As the style was evolving, they started implementing precious stones, as well as gold to the mosaics. (Hepler, 2023) (Cosentino & Aricifa, 2021)



Fig. 3 Mosaic in Ravenna, San Vitale, source: <https://www.walksofitaly.com/blog/art-culture/byzantine-mosaic-art-in-ravenna-and-italy>

- b) Domes – the majority of Byzantine buildings contain domes, usually one large one or a combination of one dominant with a few, smaller ones. Due to that, the buildings are often rich in decorative and construction elements, such as pendentives, vaults and columns. (Augustyn, n.d.) (Cosentino & Aricifa, 2021)



Fig. 4 Chora church in Istanbul with byzantine domes, source: <https://www.getyourguide.pl/kosciol-sw-zbawiciela-na-chorze-l5083/>

- c) Floorplan in the shape of a Greek cross – often connected to the previously mentioned feature. It was symmetrical, usually with a large dome in a central part of the building. This was because the architects kept their heritage in orthodox Christianity. (MasterClass, 2022)

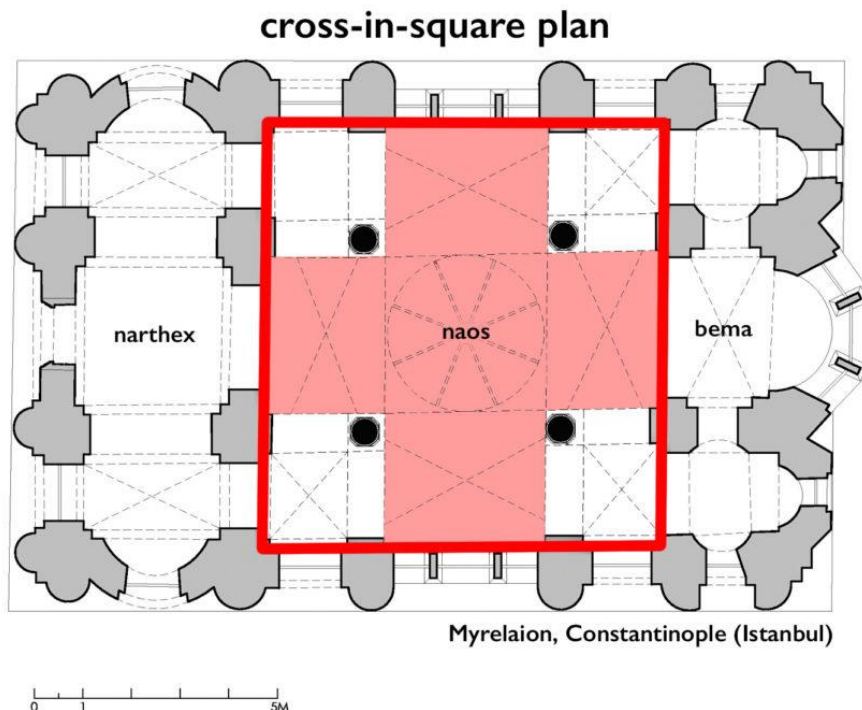


Fig. 5 Cross-in-square plan, the Myrelaion church (Bodrum Mosque), c. 920, Constantinople (Istanbul) (adapted from plan © Vasileios Marinis) source: <https://smarthistory.org/a-beginners-guide-to-byzantine-art/>

2. Moorish architectural traits

- a) Eschewing from depicting humans and animals – for religious reasons, the Arabs were never allowed to depict human or animal figures, due to the God being the sole creator. (Jama, 2020)
- b) Geometric patterns – In addition, they have adapted the subject matter and design to their religious principles, so there are no human figures and no animals. If there are they are heavily stylised. Even though they were very systematic and geometrical, they were often also inspired by nature and plants. The patterns were used to cover all of the parts of the interior, as well as the exterior. They were meant to grant a sense of unity. (Mathur, 2023)



Fig. 6 Moorish mosaics found in Alhambra, Spain, source: <https://mymoroccantile.com/en-nl/products/alhambra-mosaic-tile-16-1-1>

- c) Arched domes – these elements, often seen in Arabic architecture are meant to create dramatic, gripping areas that are supposed to inspire wonders. They are usually decorated with the previously mentioned geometric, rich ornamentation. (Mathur, 2023) The specific type of Arab arch is the iconic horseshoe arch. (Hassanen, n.d.) It is important to mention, that the Arabic style developed in a desert, where the climate is dry and hot. For this reason, domes are characteristic. This type of roof in hot climates lowers the interior temperature, which has been scientifically proven. There is a similar building style in the Greek Cyclades, for example.

3. Norman architectural traits

- a) Accentuated verticality – the two previous influences focused on the horizontality of architecture. The layouts were more or less proportionate,

without any outstanding proportion. The Norman influence brought more height to the pieces of architecture. (Nicolini & Milazzo, 2021)

- b) Use of towers at the sides of facades – adjacent to the previous characteristic, bringing verticality to the architecture. (Nicolini & Milazzo, 2021)



Fig. 7 Front towers façade of The Abbey church of Saint Étienne, Caen, source: <https://homepages.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/caen/hommes.html>

- c) Long church plans, big scale – the Normans did not base their floorplans on the Greek cross. The churches usually were larger, longer, and generally speaking, massive in scale. The structure was also encrusted in masonry, with shallow, geometric ornamentation. (Brittanica, 2021)

C. Characteristics of Arab-Norman Style

- 1. Mosaics on ceilings, walls and floors, richly ornamented

The Sicilian architecture is widely recognisable for its beautifully ornamented mosaics. They are characterised by their rich colour, mixed in with golden elements. Very typical ones can be found in Villa Romana del Casale. On the premises, every room is decorated with mosaics depicting the functions of the room. It is also worth noting, that although the art looks mostly Arabic, their cultural beliefs did not allow displaying humans and animals in art, due to them being ungodly. (Guides, personal communication, 2024) (Flowers & Janet, 1994)

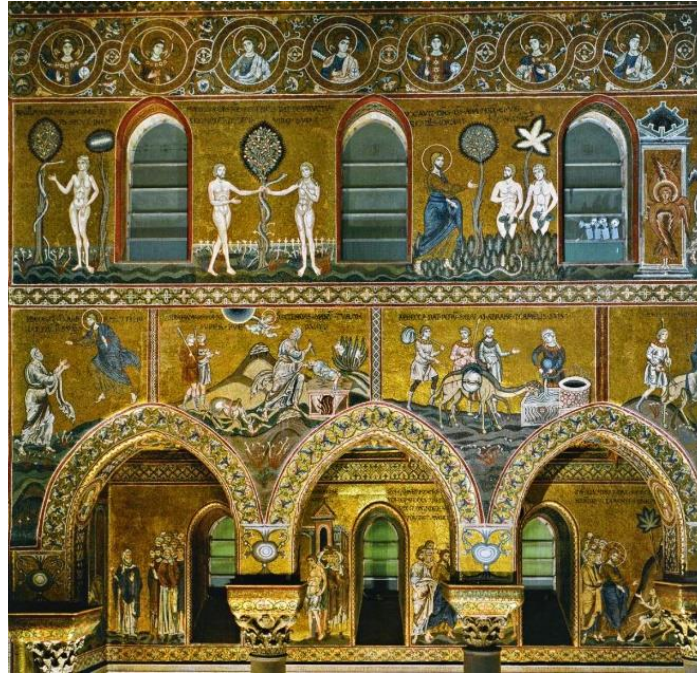


Fig. 8 The mosaics at Monreale Cathedral, source: <https://01varvara.wordpress.com/2011/08/25/another-installment-in-the-series-of-12th-century-new-roman-mosaics-of-the-basilica-cattedrale-di-santa-maria-nuova-di-monreale-in-sicily-12th-century/01-anonymous-north-wall-of-the-nave-2-duomo-di-monreale-monreale-sicily-it/>

2. Richly ornamented columns

This trait can be particularly observed in The Monreale Cathedral. The column capitals were richly decorated. Not only abstract and floral motifs could be observed, but also numerous depictions of human figures telling stories. The shaft of the column, unlike those representing the 3 basic orders (Doric, Corinthian, and Ionic), did not have fluting. Today we can observe the remains of the abstract mosaics, which were largely vandalised during the Spanish rule in Sicily. The mosaics had a variety of patterns, often geometric compositions. The column shafts were generally stepped. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)

3. Cloisters with colonnades

The colonnades were usually surrounding an inside garden, with a fountain located in the middle of it. The distinctive grooves on the columns are an imitation of the palm tree. Palm trees were part of the Arab landscape and their trunks were used as a mast in the tent. In the influences of earlier cultures in Sicily, they were not created. It is noteworthy that the arches connecting them were three-pointed. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)



Fig. 9 cloister with a colonnade, Franciscan Monastery in Dubrovnik, source: <https://www.dubrovnik-travel.net/cloisters-colonnade-in-franciscan-monastery/>

4. Domes

The red domes of Sicily can be observed in a few buildings. Although the typical, Arabic architecture is rich in domes, they are not seen in Western architecture. The Arabic buildings usually have one big dome, or one dome dominating in size over the others. Their colours are usually white or gold, and their tops are pointy. The ones located in Sicily all have the same size, and bright colour and were not designated in the way the Arabs spread their domes on the plan of the building. On the verge of style, the red domes were invented, giving the architectural pieces of art a unique look, that can not be seen anywhere else. (Spadaro & Troisi, 2018)

5. Openwork partitions

The partitions that are spread throughout the sacred buildings are very prominent. Their main role was most likely to divide sacrum and profanum, and/ or women and men during prayers. (Guides, personal communication, 2024)

6. Wooden entablatures on the vault

Wooden flat vaults with a wooden colonnade arranged perpendicular to the walls of the main nave of the church are extremely characteristic of this style. They enrich the variety of building materials as well as create an unusual contrast. Wood gives the richly decorated colonnades room to shine. Cross vaults and other vaulting derivatives were

the predominant type of vaulting in medieval sacred buildings in continental Europe. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)



Fig. 10 Monreale Cathedral ceiling, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monreale_ceiling_mosaic.JPG

7. Walls lined with marble to a certain height

Marble used to be a luxury, expensive material. Because the Arabs did not accept any human-like figures, the material was supposed to be a simple decorative piece, that did not take away the attention of people from god during the prayer. It also kept the walls clean, and it was fairly easy to maintain. (Guides, personal communication, 2024)

8. Decorative columns adjacent to the wall

This is a typical element sourced from Arab influences. It was most often located at the nave. The columns had no structural function, only decorative. (Guides, personal communication, 2024)

III. Analysis of Arab-Norman Style in Sicilian Architecture

In this chapter, the focus will be put on finding the previously mentioned characteristics and more in selected case studies. The three churches: San Cataldo, Basilica of Cefalu and Monreale Cathedral were chosen for their unusual decorative elements and architectural forms. All of the buildings began being constructed in the second part of the XII century. It is important to note, that the first and the second part of the century were characterised by very different divisions of power in the secular and ecclesiastical arenas. In the first half of the century, the Norman kingdom of Sicily was created under the rule of King Roger II. That caused political anger in the East and West and papal opposition to his royal ambitions and the ruling of the Sicilian Church. During the second part of the century, the Norman monarch from the south took over an important role in

the European political scene. They also became allies of the catholic church, but the political situation inside the country seriously endangered the stability of the royal reign. (Flowers & Janet, 1994)

The descriptions will focus on parts built within the previously mentioned timeframe (IX-XII century). Any later additions or major changes will be either briefly discussed or not considered as a part of the analysis.

A. Case studies:

1. Monreale Cathedral and the Benedict Cloister (1172-1267)

This extraordinary Norman palace was built by William II as a part of one of the most crucial monastic foundations during the Middle Ages. The legend says, that the young king, whilst hunting wanted to take some rest under a tree. The Virgin Mary was supposed to appear in his dream and tell him about a hidden treasure. The moved king decided to erect a temple in that place, dedicated to Virgin Mary. From the story, we can assume that William II found the place to be graceful enough, to have this astonishing building be constructed there. One of the supporting facts of that statement is the original name: “Montereale” which means “Mountain of the king”. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019) The Monreale was constructed as a fortified monastery. The king after having the monastic cathedral be built, chose the palace to be a designated dynastic mausoleum. Therefore, he established a palace, adjacent to the basilica, with the monastic complex. (Katz, 2016) (Nef & Tom, 2013)

The body of the monastic complex originally consisted of walls inset with twelve square towers, presumably they were supposed to be a part of a defence system. Few of the towers are preserved today. (Katz, 2016)



Fig. 11 Location of the Monreale Cathedral, source: <https://www.google.com/maps>, access: 20.03.2024

The building can be accessed from three sides: the main façade, the apsidal part and the northern flank, due to the southern part being occupied by the cloister part. The building is a mixture of Norman floorplan and different additions that altered its shape and layout throughout the time – it is especially often seen in old, sacred buildings. (Flowers & Janet, 1994)

The original façade was decorated with intersecting pointed arches. Nowadays it's only partially visible (see fig. ...) due to the later façade additions. Despite the additions, we can still observe the intersecting arch decoration, which can also be observed from the apse side of the church. The façade is flanked by two square towers. The towers are a characteristic of the fortress-church type of buildings, that were a persistent feature up until the XII century in various religious buildings of Western architecture. As can be observed, the towers are not the same, making the front view asymmetric. The one on the right closely resembles what the original might have looked like. The base of the tower is the widest, becoming slimmer at the top, it also contains large window-like openings. This operation was meant to make the building visually lighter as the eyes made their way upwards. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)



Fig. 12 View of the façade from Piazza Guglielmo II, source: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dom_van_Monreale

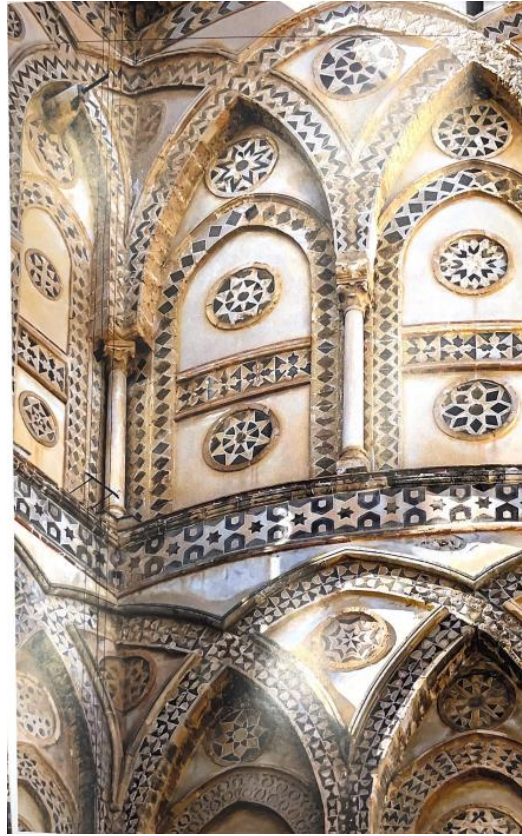


Fig. 13 A detailed photo of the partly hidden original façade. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)

The next part of the façade, relevant to the discussed period is the one, where the apses are located. They are covered with decorative ensembles. The apses are symmetrical, with a dominant one, ending with a window, located in the middle. The apses are faced eastward, as the oldest tradition of situating Christian basilicas indicates. (Nef & Thom, 2013)

The ornamentation of the Apes is based on two or three large partitions, implying the input of Arabic craftsmanship. The used materials are natural (limestone, lava stone with plaster fillers). The pointed, intersecting arches provide the presiding motif. The patterns, that go upwards, are enriched by complex ornamentation. The details conclude of corbels, tondi (a circular painting, relief carving, plaque, or mural design. (Pallardy, 2022)) in relief and columns, corbels and lateral bands.(Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)

The last part of the exterior is a direct example of the Arab-Norman style that is being analysed is the entrance door. Its original name, “Porta del Paradiso” (Portal to Paradise), is self-explanatory of its beauty. The doors are made of bronze, crowned by four responds that take the shape of pilasters. On both sides, they are ornamented with pilasters in Corinthian-like style. The columns extend, to become a pediment with pointed arches. The doors are ornamented with geometrical motifs of Arabian derivation, intertwined with Roman-inspired ones. One of the outstanding ornamental elements is acanthus leaves, which reference the columns located inside the church, exposing the same motif. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)

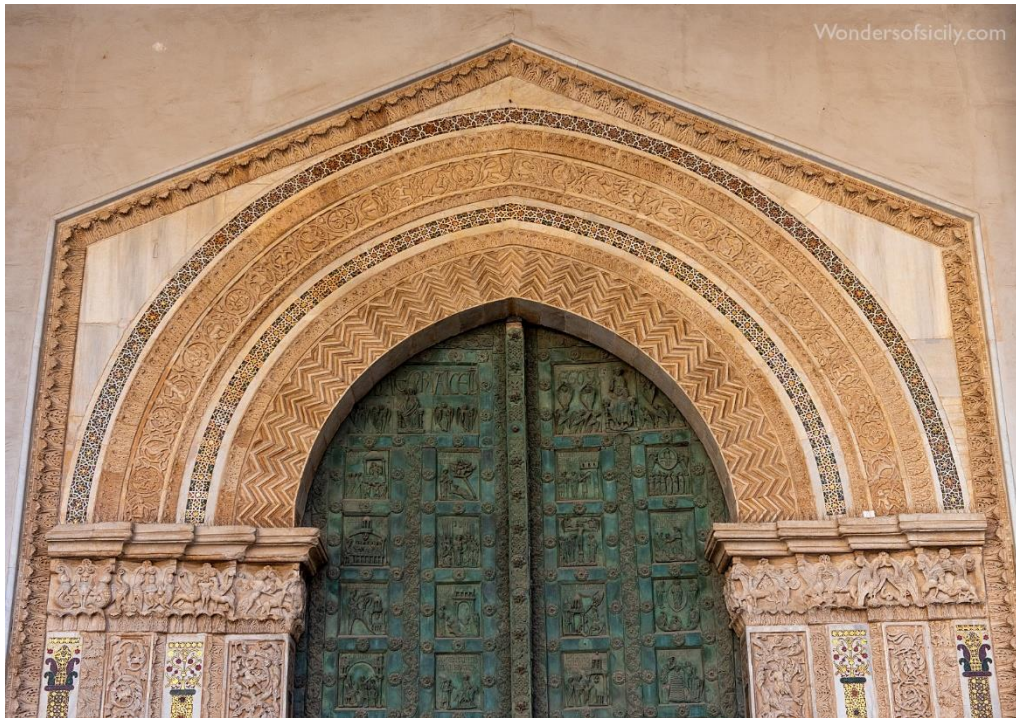


Fig. 14 crowning of the door “Porta del Paradiso”, source: <https://www.wondersofsicily.com/palermo-monreale-cathedral.htm>

While entering the cathedral the visitors are met with the outstanding scale of the building. The whole interior is splendidly ornamented with colourful mosaics, from floor to ceiling. The cathedral contains, being 103 meters long and 40 meters high, with around 6400 sqm of mosaics. (Katz, 2016) The church consists of the main nave and two aisles, with the nave being almost twice as wide as the adjacent parts. On each part, the compartments are separated by nine columns and eight-pointed arches. (Nef & Thom, 2013)

The main decorative element that catches the attention of the viewer is a large mosaic depicting Jesus, located in the main apse. It is important to note, that every mosaic is accompanied by an inscription consisting of one or more bible verses. That detail was supposed to indicate the presence of monks or priests capable of proposing the specific biblical script to the worshippers. (Vagnoni, 2017) The theme being visible through the whole decoration is a story of salvation, recounting the life of Christ. A few different religious cycles were distinguished for people of faith: some scenes from the Old Testament, mainly in the central nave, as well as the life of saints, for example of St Peter in the diakonikon. (Bacile, 2004) The mosaics are also found on the floors. They are not as rich in content, in terms of the story-telling, but they are rich in craftsmanship. They show simpler, geometrical shapes that are star-like, showing the touch of Moorish influences.



Fig. 15 The depiction of Jesus in the main apse (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)

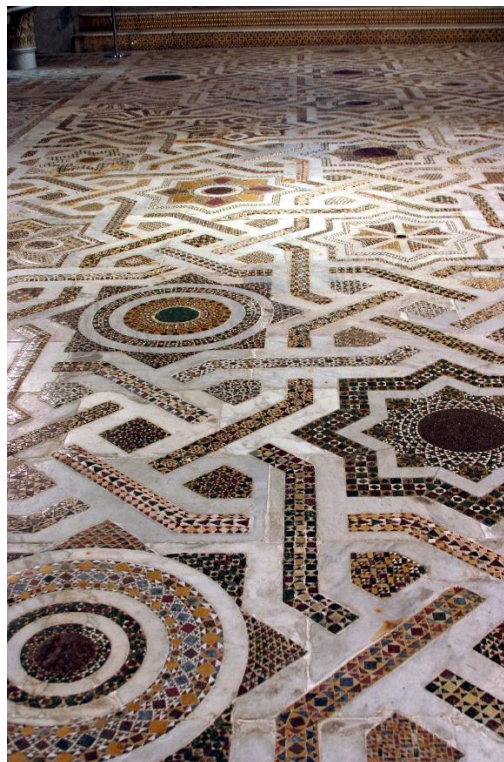


Fig. 16 The detail of the mosaic on the floor, source: <https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/365495325995186606/>

Another eye-catching element is the columns that separate the naves from each other. They have acanthus motifs, inspired by the Corinthian order. However, they are not exactly like that; along with the floral elements, we can also see elements representing human faces. The head of the element itself, above the plant motifs, is richly decorated

with a floral, colourful, geometric pattern, in which one can recognise the craftsmanship of the Arab workers who helped build this monument.



Fig. 17 the detail of the column, source: <https://www.romeartlover.it/Monreale2.html>

One of the most relevant elements of sacred buildings in Sicily from the XIIth is the construction of the roof. The high ceiling is finished with a beam perpendicular to the nave. The roof structure is triangular, and from inside it looks as if it has a ridge. The elements at the angle are connected by beams. In Monreale, they are decorated with geometric floral motifs, while gold stars on a blue background have been placed between them to symbolise the sky.

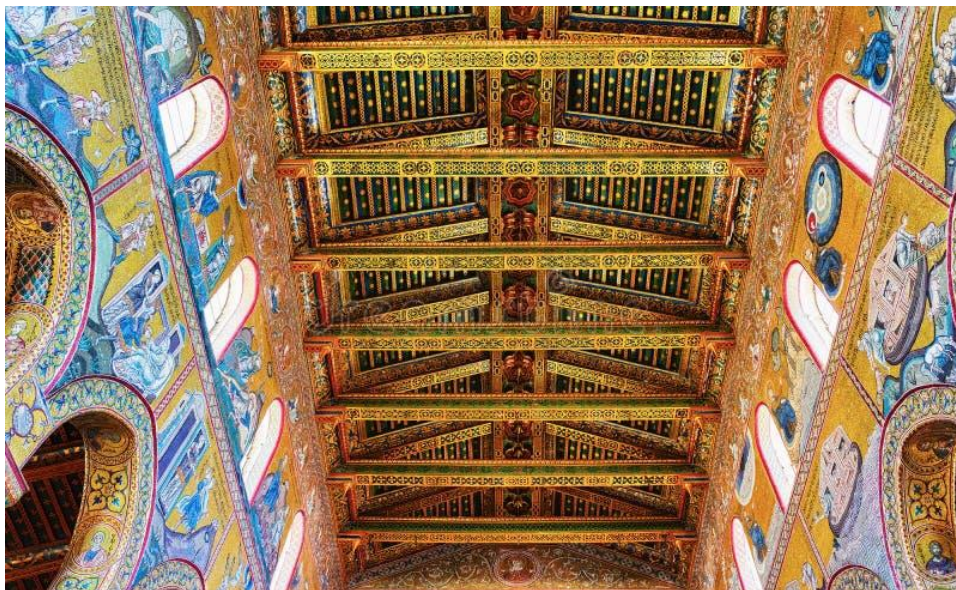


Fig. 18 The construction and ornamentation of vaults, source: <https://www.dreamstime.com/ceiling-monreale-cathedral-sicily-italy-september-image111851628>

2. Church of San Cataldo (1154)

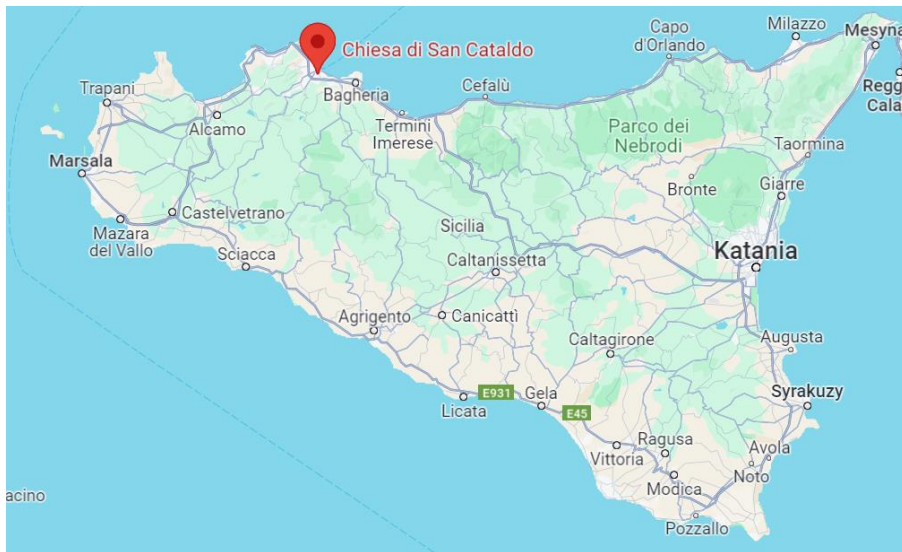


Fig. 19 Location of the Church of San Cataldo, source: <https://www.google.com/maps>, access: 20.03.2024

This example of Arab-Norman style is the most modest, out of all analyzed in this paper. The church was built in 1154 and is located in the very centre of Palermo. The person who commissioned the building was a great admiral of William I. It is one of two well-known examples of structures in Sicily that have the red domes implemented, the other one being The church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti. The church despite its small size is inscribed on the UNESCO heritage list. (Spadaro & Troisi, 2018)

While observing the building from the outside, the one, most gripping characteristic takes the first plan. They are the 3 symmetrical, red domes. They are put on the middle, main nave of the church and they are capped with pointed cones, creating a distinguished silhouette. The church, most likely to be built of sandstone has a layout in the shape of a square. The symmetrical nature of the building means that all its facades are the same. Each is divided into three sections with windows ending in a sharp arch with stained glass windows of geometric patterns. Each window is surrounded by fluted stucco, most likely of Moorish influence, accentuating the rhythm of the division of the outer walls. Their gable is topped with a decorative, regular structure resembling a lace of floral motifs. The characteristic domes are also decorated with stained glass.



Fig. 20 View of the San Cataldo domes, source: <https://www.theworldofsicily.com/en/sights/sights-of-palermo/church-of-san-cataldo-palermo/>

The most Norman feature of the church is its layout. The small structure is laid out on a rectangular, almost square floorplan, that is divided into three apses and a nave, by four columns. (Protani, 2024) The main, central nave isn't distinguishably wider than the side alleys and the middle apse is slightly ejected from the façade.

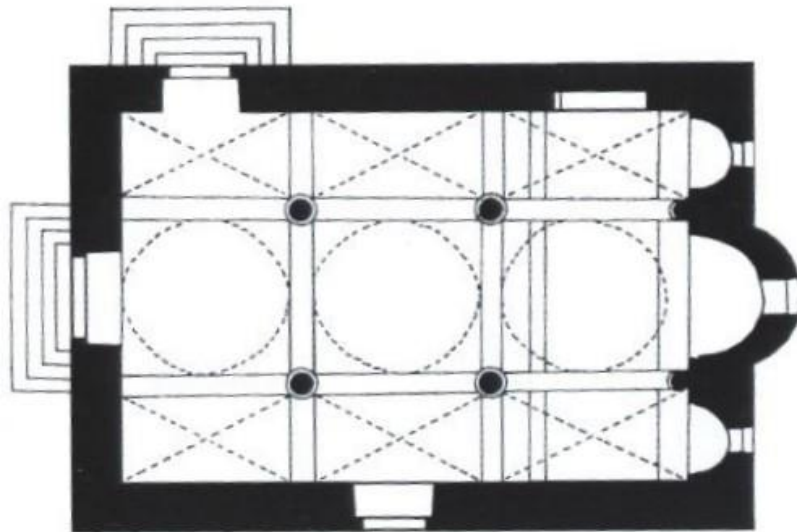


Fig. 21 Layout of the San Cataldo church, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_Cataldo_-_plan.jpg

The interior of the church is not richly ornamented. The walls are of rough, bare stone bricks. The three domes are supported by a jagged vault, stretching the length of the nave. The openness inside is added by numerous arches, reminiscent of Arab architecture, making the building inside appear larger. Each of the six columns

supporting the vault has a head decorated in a different style. There is one representing the Corinthian order, as well as others that do not fit into any clearly defined order. Several have ornaments imitating plants or even something resembling snakes, and we can also observe caricatured faces on one. It is not clear why the architects decided on such a treatment, but it is certainly not a representation of the architectural style prevalent in Northern Europe.



Fig. 22 The interior of the church with a view on the main nave and the capitals of columns, source: <https://www.wondersofsicily.com/palermo-san-cataldo.htm>

The most ornate element located in the building is its floor. The delicate, intricately laid mosaic represents geometric patterns that take their inspiration from Moorish architecture. One can find interlacing reminiscent of tree vines or roots. According to Arab beliefs, there are no depictions of human-like figures or animals in the mosaics. The very elaborate capitals embellish the interior with the magnificent pavement with marquetry with polychrome inlays of precious marble. (Spadaro & Troisi, 2018)

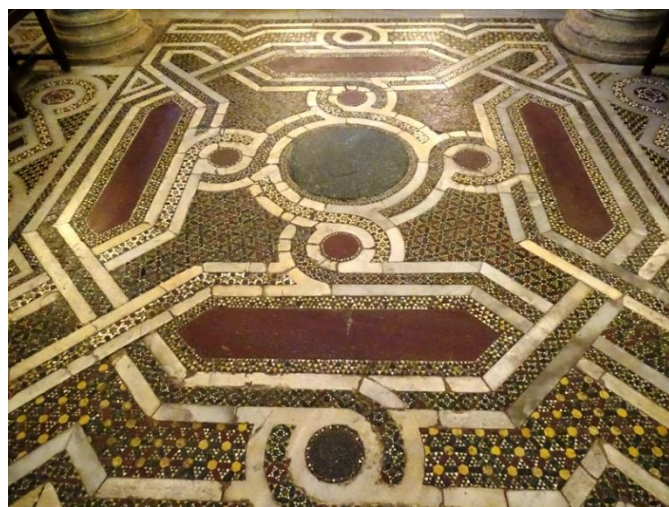


Fig. 23 The detail of the intricate floor mosaic in the San Cataldo church, source: <https://corvinus.nl/2024/01/23/palermo-san-cataldo-2/>

3. Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù (1143-1185, major changes in 1558)

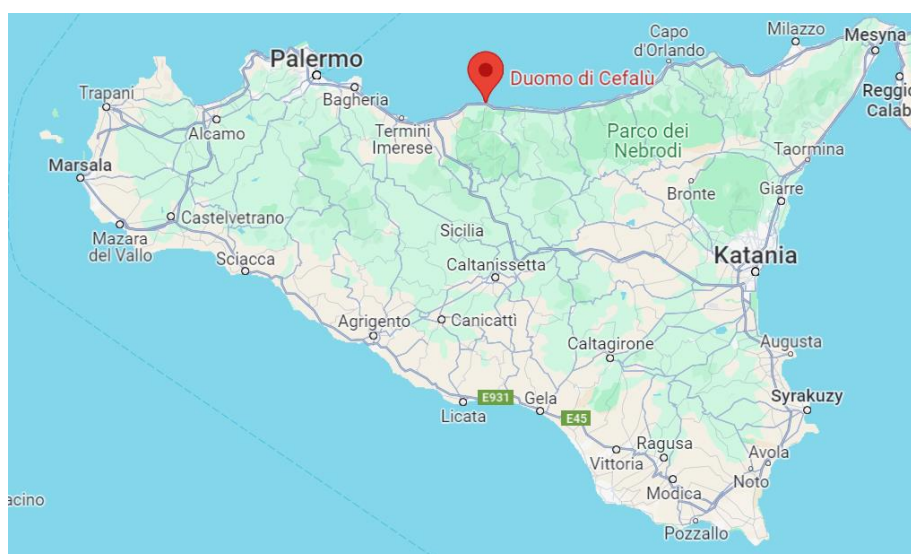


Fig. 24 location of the 3. Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù, source: <https://www.google.com/maps>, access: 20.03.2024

As for many old, extraordinary monuments, there is a legend regarding this structure. According to it, Roger the II Hauteville who was the king of Sicily, Puglia and Calabria had to face a terrible storm during a boat trip from Salerno to Palermo, He prayed to the lord, and in his prayers, he promised that if he and his crew make it across safely, he will erect a church in the place of their arrival. After they made it to Cefalu, he commissioned a church in that area, dedicating it to the Holy Savior and Saints Peter and Paul. Despite the legend, the place must have had some spiritual energy, because recent works revealed, that there was a Byzantine church there, around the sixth century. The construction work was started in the first half of the XII century, in 1131.

The building itself is an outstanding mix of different styles. Of the examples analysed, it least resembles its original form, due to the numerous reconstructions and repairs that took place after the destruction to which the building unfortunately succumbed. Even the state of the building that people in the twelfth century were seeing was not how it was supposed to be. Roger II designed the church as a mausoleum of the royal family, modelling it on the church of Saint-Denis, located in Paris. This occurrence was intended to show the importance of and represent the royal family. After his premature death, some changes were made to the original design, which was the first step to making the outstanding building that can be visited nowadays. (Spadaro & Troisi, 2018)

The building has the most Arabic façade, not having many, colourful decorative elements. The. front façade which forms the setting for the main entrance. The façade has two, symmetrical towers on either side. The entrance door is slightly set back, hidden under a peristyle consisting of three arches, two of which are side arches, alluding to Arabian inspiration. Above the arcade is a slightly inset arched stucco. The two towers are an

example of typical Norman architecture, with their pointed arches in the top part. (Bogniano, 2014)



Fig. 25 front façade with two towers in the Cefalù Cathedral, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cefalu_Cathedral_009_5994.jpg

When it comes to the inside of the building, the dome is built according to Norman rules. It is laid out on a plan in the shape of a Latin cross with three naves, that are divided by columns of Dominic order. Fourteen of them were made from blocks of pink granite, and two of Cipolin marble. (Spadaro & Troisi, 2018) The tripartite presbytery might have been inspired by the Norman cathedrals of Mazara del Vallo (founded 1086/1088), Catania (1086/1090), and Messina (around 1096).

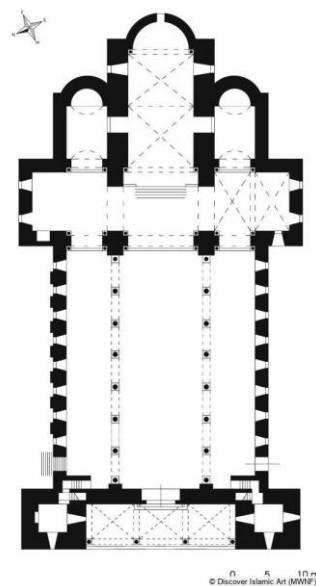


Fig. 26 The layout of Cefalu cathedral in the shape of a Latin cross, source: https://islamicart.museumwnf.org/database_item.php?id=monument;isl:it:mon01:16:en

The most Arabic elements of the interior were multiple engaged columns and high-pointed archways, having a very typical Moorish shape, with double archivolts in the interior. The peak of Arabization of the cathedral is shown in the tempera paintings, that cover the wooden trusses, as well as the star-shaped panels located in the central nave ceiling. This theme featured scenes of bestiary displayed in Capella Palatina and the Islamic palatial cycle.



Fig. 27 Interior of the Cathedral, with the arches and visible division between the ceiling in the presbytery and the rest of the church, source: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/cefalu-cathedral-interior-mosaics.html>



Fig. 28 The tempera paintings on trusses in the Cefalu Cathedral, (Bongianino, 2017)

The paintings present in the building create a clear visual division between the presbytery, where the monks and the choir sang and celebrated Mass, and the nave, where the Arabized Christian society of the town gathered during the liturgy.

The Byzantine ever-present influence can be traced in the astonishing iconography repertoire. It was that, through its wealth, conveyed the ideas of royalty, whose divine right was equalled to that of the papacy, and that of the two Roman emperors. At the

same time, he proclaimed the distinctive features of the Sicilian Church - we see this in the presence of inscriptions in Greek and Latin. (Bongianino, 2017)

Lastly, the one common factor between the Monreale cathedral and this one is the huge, ornamentative mosaic in the presbytery, that displaces the figure of Jesus. This type of art has been hugely influenced by the Byzantine style of mosaic-making. It is the centrepiece of the church, showcasing the importance of the worship of the god.

The vaulted semicircle above the image of Jesus has a pointed end - most likely taken from Arabic culture. Below his likeness, there are representations of archangels, the apostles and angels.



Fig. 29 The mosaic of Jesus and apostles in the presbytery, source: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zgothic/mosaics/3cefalu/index.html

VI. Conclusion

To sum up the style, the previous style dominating in Sicily can be looked at. Before there were Ostrogoths, and then with the shift of ruling, the architectural elements were being slowly added starting with the intricate Byzantine mosaics, through the domes, which are dominant and unusually atypical by European standards of the time, to the long Norman towers located at the façades.

All in all, the exploration of Sicilian architecture brings to light a gripping narrative regarding culture, history and artistic expression, encapsulated amongst architectural pieces of work. With the oldest inspiration being taken from the Byzantine times, the Arab-Norman style has a representation amongst numerous architectural gems in Sicily, that tell a story of cultural convergence, resilience, adaptation, and tolerance.

Three marvellous pieces of Sicilian architecture have been discussed, starting from the most well-known – the Cathedral of Monreale. It is renowned for its astonishing cathedral with cloister and is a masterpiece of Arab-Norman-Byzantine architecture. The elements are drawn from the three sources to produce a harmonious, balanced and unique style. The most outstanding characteristic is the presence and relevance of the mosaics, located in the interior of the building. They cover over 6000 square meters, depicting biblical scenes and Arab-inspired geometrical patterns, and are a testament to the craftsmanship and skills of Sicilian artisans (amongst which many were moors). Simultaneously the adjacent cloister, exposing the delicate columnade surrounding the interior lush gardens, offers a separation from the exterior world.

The second Arab-Norman building mentioned does not share a lot of characteristics with the previous one but adds another depth to the analysis. San Cataldo's domes are like nothing else, not basing the proportion of layout on Moorish floorplans, with the domes being lined in a very atypical way for any architectural style. The simple, yet elegant design is also characterised by interlacing arches and embellished decoration, speaks to the inventiveness of Sicilian artisans.

Lastly, the Cefalu cathedral shares attributes with Monreale. The main, central mosaics display a big figure of Jesus in the same style. Other distinguishable features are the towering bell tower and imposing facade. The fusion of styles, from Romanesque to Arabic reflects the international character of Sicilian society.

There are a few defining features of the style. If it were to be precisely defined, the biggest influence, which may be confounding, was brought from Arab and Moorish culture. Perhaps it has to do with the craftsman of Arabic descent, implementing their culture and motifs into the building, with the architects being respectful and accepting of foreign influences, even embracing them. This led to the creation of the style nowadays of Arab-Norman, which is very unique and can be admired on the Italian island. We should also acknowledge, how big the influence architecture has on society. We would not be able to experience that uniqueness if it weren't for the cultural melting pot, that was Sicily.

All in all, the study of architectural styles invites us to climb aboard on a voyage through space and time, to be able to trace the footsteps of ancient civilisations and gape the beauty of their works. It is significant to focus on preserving cultural heritage, especially as rare as that one. The combination of Arab and Christian influences, coupled with the religious tolerance of King Roger and his successors, led to an extremely original style of architecture that is virtually unparalleled anywhere, perhaps only in the Iberian Peninsula, and which astonishes us to this day with its richness and diversity as well as the incredible perfection of its workmanship, to which the Arab craftsmen mainly contributed.

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VIII. List of Figures

- Fig. 1 – the timeline of ruling in Sicily from VI to XII century
- Fig. 2 A table of style characteristics
- Fig. 3 Mosaic in Ravenna, San Vitale, source: <https://www.walksofitaly.com/blog/art-culture/byzantine-mosaic-art-in-ravenna-and-italy>
- Fig. 4 Chora church in Istanbul with byzantine domes, source: <https://www.getyourguide.pl/kosciol-sw-zbawiciela-na-chorze-l5083/>
- Fig. 5 Cross-in-square plan, the Myrelaion church (Bodrum Mosque), c. 920, Constantinople (Istanbul) (adapted from plan © Vasileios Marinis) source: <https://smarthistory.org/a-beginners-guide-to-byzantine-art/>
- Fig. 6 Moorish mosaics found in Alhambra, Spain, source: <https://mymoroccantile.com/en-nl/products/alhambra-mosaic-tile-16-1-1>
- Fig. 7 Front towers façade of The Abbey church of Saint Étienne, Caen, source: <https://homepages.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/caen/hommes.html>
- Fig. 8 The mosaics at Monreale Cathedral, source: <https://01varvara.wordpress.com/2011/08/25/another-installment-in-the-series-of-12th-century-new-roman-mosaics-of-the-basilica-cattedrale-di-santa-maria-nuova-di-monreale-in-sicily-12th-century/01-anonymous-north-wall-of-the-nave-2-duomo-di-monreale-monreale-sicily-it/>
- Fig. 9 cloister with a colonnade, Franciscan Monastery in Dubrovnik, source: <https://www.dubrovnik-travel.net/cloisters-colonnade-in-franciscan-monastery/>
- Fig. 10 Monreale Cathedral ceiling, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monreale_ceiling_mosaic.JPG

- Fig. 11 Location of the Monreale Cathedral, source: <https://www.google.com/maps>, access: 20.03.2024
- Fig. 12 View of the façade from Piazza Guglielmo II, source: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dom_van_Monreale
- Fig. 13 A detailed photo of the partly hidden original façade. (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)
- Fig. 14 crowning of the door “Porta del Paradiso”, source: <https://www.wondersofsicily.com/palermo-monreale-cathedral.htm>
- Fig. 15 The depiction of Jesus in the main apse (Concetta Di Natale & Scortino, 2019)
- Fig. 16 The detail of the mosaic on the floor, source: <https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/365495325995186606/>
- Fig. 17 the detail of the column, source: <https://www.romeartlover.it/Monreale2.html>
- Fig. 18 The construction and ornamentation of vaults, source: <https://www.dreamstime.com/ceiling-monreale-cathedral-sicily-italy-september-image111851628>
- Fig. 20 View of the San Cataldo domes, source: <https://www.theworldofsicily.com/en/sights/sights-of-palermo/church-of-san-cataldo-palermo/>
- Fig. 21 Layout of the San Cataldo church, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_Cataldo_-_plan.jpg
- Fig. 22 The interior of the church with a view of the main nave and the capitals of columns, source: <https://www.wondersofsicily.com/palermo-san-cataldo.htm>
- Fig. 23 The detail of the intricate floor mosaic in the San Cataldo church, source: <https://corvinus.nl/2024/01/23/palermo-san-cataldo-2/>
- Fig. 24 location of the 3. Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù, source: <https://www.google.com/maps>, access: 20.03.2024
- Fig. 25 front façade with two towers in the Cefalù Cathedral, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cefalu_Cathedral_009_5994.jpg
- Fig. 26 The layout of Cefalu cathedral in the shape of a Latin cross, source: https://islamicart.museumwnf.org/database_item.php?id=monument;isl:it;mon01:16;en
- Fig. 27 Interior of the Cathedral, with the arches and visible division between the ceiling in the presbytery and the rest of the church, source: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/cefalu-cathedral-interior-mosaics.html>
- Fig. 28 The tempera paintings on trusses in the Cefalu Cathedral, (Bongianino, 2017)
- Fig. 29 The mosaic of Jesus and apostles in the presbytery, source: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zgothic/mosaics/3cefalu/index.html