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Roger II, King of Heaven and Earth: An Iconological and Architectural Analysis of the Cappella Palatina in the Context of Medieval Sicily

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Roger II, King of Heaven and Earth:

An Iconological and Architectural Analysis of the
Cappella Palatina in the Context of Medieval Sicily

A Senior Thesis Presented by
Mathilde Sauquet

To the Art History Department
In Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors in Art History
Advisor: Professor Kristin Triff

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Introduction

“This violence of landscape, this cruelty of climate, this continual tension in everything, and even these monuments of the past, magnificent yet incomprehensible because not built by us and yet standing round us like lovely mute ghosts; all those rulers who landed by main force from every direction who were at once obeyed, soon detested, and always misunderstood, their only expressions works of art we couldn't understand and taxes which we understood only too well and which they spent elsewhere: all these things have formed our character, which is thus conditioned by events outside our control as well as by a terrifying insularity of mind.”

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*

Denis Mack Smith opens his *History of Sicily, Medieval Sicily 800-1713* with the words of Lampedusa's character Prince Fabrizio, a nobleman witnessing the decline of his own class system as Giuseppe Garibaldi's troops invaded Sicily to unify what would become the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The author describes Fabrizio's attitude towards this historical event as “the resigned disillusionment of a Sicilian when faced with yet another invasion of his country.” By the nineteenth century, Sicily had been home to Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, French, Swabians, Spanish, and English. Linked to Europe, North Africa or the Levant depending on the invader, the island at times acted as the center of the civilized world, but also as an intermediary battlefield with belligerent outsiders. The successive presence of foreign powers left considerable marks on Sicily's culture in the realms of art, architecture, law, religion, language and many others. For this reason, Mack Smith focuses his introduction on the divisive character of the Sicilian population and stresses the importance of “the foreign conquerors who provided most of the drama in the foreground of Sicilian history.”

In this research, we will turn our attention to Roger II, a foreign conqueror who embraced the island's cultural diversity and exploited it to shape a unique Sicilian identity. Our main focus will be the art and architecture produced during his reign (1105 to 1154), forming what is today referred to as Norman-Arab-Byzantine culture. In order to establish the origins of such a plurality and fluidity of artistic currents, we will examine the circumstances prior to his ascension to power, namely the Arab occupation and the Norman conquest led by his father, Roger I. We will show how the island's enduring legacy of cultural cohabitation based on tolerance, respect, and cooperation between Latin Christian, Orthodox Byzantine and Arab Muslim communities created a propitious environment for the assimilation of many of their respective features into Norman art. How did Roger's personal preferences and interests influence artistic and architectural production? How did they serve his very ambitious political agenda? What particular imagery and symbolism did he hope to emulate by borrowing specific features instead of others? A thorough analysis of the Cappella Palatina, commissioned by Roger for his palace in Palermo in 1132 will reveal which aspects of Muslim and Byzantine art were adopted at the Norman court and the reasons for their adoption. This will hopefully shed some light on the "monuments of the past" which Don Fabrizio deemed "magnificent yet incomprehensible."

Chapter 1

A) The Arab Occupation

The Norman conquest of Sicily, as we will see later in this chapter, can be considered as a swift one, taking a mere three decades to be completed. The earlier and much lengthier invasion and subsequent occupation of the island by the Arabs, however, will be our starting point in this study. The context of Muslim Sicily being the very environment in which Norman society would develop, it is important to establish a thorough understanding of Sicilian culture prior to Roger II's reign.

Historian Aziz Ahmad gives a detailed account of the painfully slow and complicated Arab conquest of Sicily.¹ Their first attempt to raid the island is attributed to Mu'awiya b. Khudayj, who led a small naval force in 652. At the time, Sicily was in Byzantine hands, namely under emperor Constans II who resided in Constantinople. Despite the failure of this initial venture, and of the others that followed quickly afterwards, the Arab threat was enough for the emperor to come west, mostly concerned about losing the Greek mainland. The ongoing full-fledged Muslim conquests had already secured Damascus, Jerusalem, and most of North Africa, including Alexandria, by the time Constans died in Syracuse in 668, murdered by his own troops. Rapidly gaining ground in the west, the Arabs swept into Spain and Gaul until being stopped by Charles Martel in Poitiers in 732. The Arabs also applied pressure in the East, on Constantinople herself. In 740, the governor of Ifriqiyya (Africa) 'Ubayd-Allah b. Habhab was the first Arab official to organize a conquest of Sicily, but his enterprise was cut short by the Berber uprising which emerged in North Africa,

¹Aziz Ahmad, *A History of Islamic Sicily*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975, 1-40.

rerouting the fleet back to the continent.² This major setback and a powerful Byzantine naval armada kept Sicily safe from Arab threats for over fifty years. The turn of the ninth century offered a hopeful resolution for Arab-Byzantine relations. In order to secure the safe passage of Arab trading ships in the Mediterranean, the North African Emir Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab agreed to a ten-year peace treaty with Constantine, the Byzantine Patrician in Sicily. Although the subsequent Aghlabid dynasty named after him ruled in the region for over a century, and despite the renewal of the peace treaty in 813, a gradual escalation of hostilities between the two parties was inevitable.

The most decisive blow leading to the downfall of the Byzantine control of the island was to come from within. In 826, Byzantine emperor Michael II appointed Constantine as general or “strategus” of Sicily.³ An infamous conflict ensued between him and Euphemius, the Commander of the Byzantine fleet in Sicily. The latter had fallen in love with a nun and married her against her will. Michael II ordered Constantine to have him executed, but Euphemius rebelled, defeated the general and declared himself emperor. In turn, another Sicilian officer rose against him, causing Euphemius to flee to North Africa where he promised Sicily to emir Ziyadat-Allah in exchange for the title of governor of the island. Although many prominent Arab figures spoke out against breaking the existing peace treaty, the decision was made to invade once again in 827, advocating for *jihad*. This time, interestingly, the troops were composed of “several ethnic elements including Arabs, Berbers, Spanish Muslims from Crete and possibly some Persians” as well Byzantine forces which had remained loyal to Euphemius. For the next few years, the Aghlabid coalition

²Ahmad, 4.

³Ahmad, 6.

marched on Sicily, besieging city after city, such as Syracuse, Castrogiovanni, and Mineo with more or less success. Their conquest was slowed down in parts by powerful offensives sent by emperor Michael II and his Venetian allies, but also by deadly epidemics and internal conflicts (Euphemius, who drowned in his thirst for power, betrayed the Arabs and was in turn deceived and assassinated by the Byzantines).⁴ After a year-long siege, the city of Palermo and the Byzantine governor surrendered in 831, strengthening the Arab foothold considerably.⁵ It took another seventy years for the Arabs to be considered in control of the island, two hundred and fifty years after their first raid.

The span of time from 831 to 909, marking the fall of the Aghlabid dynasty, will be of great importance in the future religious distribution of the Sicilian population - and therefore of great importance to us. Having permanently secured their presence, the Arabs launched the second phase of their conquest: the dissemination of Islamic culture. First, they focused their energy on the Val di Mazara, in the West, where they “founded their first colonies and transplanted slaves [prisoners captured throughout their conquest of Sicily] who worked on their agricultural holdings.”⁶ (Fig. 1) Islam therefore became the most practiced religion in this part of the island. Similar attempts were made in the two other regions of Sicily, Val di Noto in the North and Val Demone in the East, but they were successful only moderately in the former and completely failed in the latter - the East retained a majority of practicing Christians.

⁴Ahmad, 6-9.

⁵Denis Mack Smith and Moses I. Finley, *A History of Sicily: 800 - 1713*. New York: Viking Press, 1968, 4.

⁶Ahmad, 17.

According to Aziz Ahmad, a prominent scholar of Islamic history, "Sicily under the Aghlabids was inhabited by a mixture of many different peoples, races and religious persuasions, Sicilians, Christian and Muslim, Greeks, Lombards, Jews, Arabs, Berbers, and even some Persians and Negroes."⁷ As expected, the ruling élite was Arab, and just beneath them were the Berbers, whose military contribution had been considerable in the invasion of the island. The situation of Christians, who still formed the majority of the population, is extremely interesting as it might help us understand the later development of religious and artistic interactions under the Normans. Four types of Christians can be identified: those who had treaties with the Arabs and paid tribute (*jizya* or *kharaj*), those who were vassals living on Muslim land (considered *dhimmi*s, protected communities), those who were slaves, and finally those who inhabited the few areas not yet conquered and who recognized Byzantine sovereignty while it lasted.⁸ Apart from the slaves, all Christians enjoyed security of property and freedom of religion, as long as they did not act disrespectfully towards Islam or Muslims. Interestingly, they were better treated than Christians who lived on the mainland under the Lombards or the Franks.⁹

In 909, the Fatimids, stemming from the shiite branch of Islam which claims descendance from the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, secured an alliance with the Berbers to take over the Aghlabids in North Africa. Within a year, a pro-Fatimid faction emerged in Sicily and defeated the Aghlabids there as well. For over a hundred and fifty years the Fatimid dynasty ruled, mostly led by the Kelbite family. This period can be characterized as an endless succession of conflicts and uprisings sparked by political, religious, and familial

⁷Ahmad, 21.

⁸Ahmad 22.

⁹Ahmad, 22.

reasons. Although it is referred as the 'Arab' occupation of Sicily, the main source of trouble for Arabs were other Arabs. In addition to the recurring strife between Arabs and Berbers, Muslims fought among themselves, as Sunnis, Shiites, Sicilian Fatimids, Spanish Umayyads, and Kelbites. Only a decade before the Norman invasion, Ahmad describes the state of Sicily in 1050 as "confused and anarchic."¹⁰

There were a few important advancements despite the perpetual hostilities. Agriculture and mining were widely developed around the island; cotton was cultivated and citrus fruits were grown thanks to an impressive irrigation system, gold and silver were mine and timber was collected in great quantity.¹¹ During that time, therefore, the island acquired great wealth from international trade with Africa, Egypt, and Italy. The religious partition between the three Vals remained the same as before, despite Kalbite policies destined to spread Islam in the Christian East. There was an increase in the Muslim population, however, but solely due to the important influx of Muslim migrants coming from North Africa. Some of these newcomers were prominent scholars who joined an already growing circle of intellectuals, bringing their knowledge of religion and laws, their literature, poetry, arts and sciences, making Sicily "part of a splendid African civilisation at the same time as a meeting point between Arabic, east European and Latin culture."¹²

As will be discussed later on in this study, it is important to note the development of Palermo as the major city in western Sicily, counting about 300,000 inhabitants in 973, as reported by geographer Ibn-Hawqal who also commented that there were more mosques

¹⁰Ahmad, 36.

¹¹Ahmad, 39.

¹²Mack Smith, 11.

in Palermo than in any other Muslim city he had visited.¹³ He also mentions the existence of a Jewish quarter.¹⁴ Despite the large Arab majority, Palermo remained home to Berbers, Greeks, Lombards, Jews, Slavs, Persians, Turks and Negroes.¹⁵

B) The Norman Conquest

Eleventh-century Sicily was therefore a land of great wealth as well as disruptive internal conflicts. It is in this context that the Normans, our protagonists from this point onward, came into play. The Normans, who would give their name to the Normandy region of France, were descendants of a Viking people in northern Europe that had moved to France in the tenth century after a political alliance with a Carolingian King. The Normans were never a united coalition but rather divided, mobile groups of mercenaries offering their services to the highest bidder. Although they progressively Christianized, these infamously ruthless warriors never hesitated to raid the Papal States or even take the Pope hostage for a large enough ransom.¹⁶ In 1059, however, Pope Nicholas II offered South Italy, namely Calabria and Apulia, to a group of Normans if they agreed in return not to recognize Constantinople as the religious authority.¹⁷ This faction was led by Robert Guiscard and his younger brother Roger, sons of Tancred de Hauteville. Quickly, the brothers recognized the potential treasure taunting them just across the strait from their newly acquired territory: the island of Sicily.

¹³Ahmad, 40.

¹⁴Ahmad, 40.

¹⁵Ahmad, 40.

¹⁶Mack Smith, 13.

¹⁷Mack Smith, 13.

It was decided that Roger I would lead the conquest with a numerically limited yet ambitious and skilled military. Their arrival was facilitated by the political situation on and off the island: Fatimid control was crumbling from within due to the constant bickering of the Kalbite family and the Byzantines, who had been hoping to finally take back their land, were too distracted by the direct threat posed by the Seljuk Turks.¹⁸ By the early 1070s, the Normans had strengthened their fleet and led a successful and swift siege of Palermo where the inhabitants were given religious freedom in exchange for the recognition of their new rulers. Other areas of the island were not as graciously treated; many people were killed or sold as slaves and entire towns were destroyed in the most brutal manner. The Normans' ruthlessness convinced many to pay allegiance - including Muslim soldiers who were allowed to retain their faith - and so quickly their armed forces grew. Roger acquired the title of Count of Sicily and set out to develop an administration and a government. A perceptive strategist, he realized the benefits of employing "Moslem civil servants and accountants who understood the existing administrative machinery" by means of generous settlements.¹⁹ While the Arab conquest had been boosted by a massive invading population, this was not the case for the Normans, who had to secure the fealty of an existing society.

What Normans lacked in numbers, they made up in political strategy and adaptability: "Recognizing that Sicilians possessed a superior culture and administrative system, they adopted both, and added an efficiency and sense of direction hitherto

¹⁸Mack Smith, 14.

¹⁹Mack Smith, 15.

lacking.”²⁰ Because of this program, many official and unofficial practices of the Arabs were perpetuated, such as the division and business management of the land, the Muslim inscription citing Muhammad on coins, and even the title of emir, assumed by Palermo’s first Norman governor, whose name remains unknown. Arabs and Jews had to pay a tax, but were granted religious freedom and the right to be judged according to their own law.²¹ In less than half a century the roles had been reversed. Roger I’s political enterprise went even further as he worked to combine the northern concept of feudalism with the eastern idea of a divine ruler. His authority was therefore reinforced by his total control over the allocation and confiscation of land. When it came to religion, Roger I demonstrated a very diplomatic, and of course extremely strategic approach. On one hand, he appointed a ‘Latin’ ruling class:

“None of the chief landowners, none of the bishops or leading abbots, seem to have been natives of the island; to fill the main positions of responsibility he at first preferred trans-alpine Normans and Frenchmen, and then increasingly Italians. In return for military service they were given land, and sometimes they preferred to bring with them colonists from their home territories.”²²

This was due to the fact that the pre-existing local population could not become part of the new aristocracy. Consisting of Greek and Muslim subjects, they were not a warrior people who could be granted land in exchange for military help like the foreign Latin conquerors mentioned above.

On the other hand, Roger I was well aware that the existing Christian population was mainly Greek Orthodox and understood the importance of securing their loyalty in the

²⁰Mack Smith, 16.

²¹Mack Smith, 18.

²²Mack Smith, 18.

process of conquering the island.²³ He therefore launched a building program in order to revive Orthodox foundations and endowed Greek monasteries more than Latin ones.²⁴ Mack Smith mentions that even during the Arab occupation, "A number of impoverished Greek monasteries still existed in the north-east and at least one in the west, while at Palermo there was a last surviving bishop, Nicodemus," although his cathedral had been turned into a mosque.²⁵ This statement is proof that religious cohabitation was already taking place to some degree before the arrival of the Normans. We will discuss further in the following chapter the location and architecture of these monasteries and their evolution from Byzantine to Norman times.

Roger I's most ambitious goal was to secure the same degree of religious authority as held by an Eastern emperor. When Pope Urban II visited Sicily and defied him, he was imprisoned. Shortly after his release, in 1098, "a papal bull conceded to Roger I and his successors the exclusive powers of an Apostolic Legate in Sicily and Calabria as authorized representatives of the Holy See."²⁶ With this bill, he succeeded in fusing civil and religious power. Thanks to his tactful handling of a very diverse society and an intelligent assimilation of pre-existing administrative systems, Roger I secured peace among the people and safety from outsiders until his death in 1101.

²³Mack Smith, 20.

²⁴Charles E. Nicklies, "Builders, Patrons, and Identity: The Domed Basilicas of Sicily and Calabria." *Gesta* 43, no. 2 (2004): 99-114. doi:10.2307/25067098, 109.

²⁵Mack Smith, 16.

²⁶Mack Smith, 21.

Chapter 2

The purpose of this chapter will not be to delve into the detailed history and description of Byzantine and Islamic art respectively, but rather to offer the necessary background knowledge and analytical tools to comprehend their presence and role in medieval Sicily. Indeed, it would be too challenging of a task to cover 1,400 years of history and a territory stretching from Spain to India. We will instead focus on the artistic and architectural themes and techniques which are most relevant to our topic in terms of spatio-temporal contexts, the 11th and 12th centuries in the Mediterranean region. This analysis will hopefully help us understand the art and architecture of Roger II as they will be the focus of future chapters.

A) Byzantine Art and Architecture

Important artistic currents influencing Norman Sicily came from the Byzantine empire. While some techniques and styles were imported from Greek lands, we must also take into account the presence of Byzantine art and architecture in the Sicilian landscape, dating back to before the Normans and the Arabs. When the Byzantines arrived, sent by Eastern Emperor Justinian I, there were already many existing Roman, Greek, and Punic structures, mostly fortified walls. Cities which had been founded during Ancient Greece, such as Enna, Taormina, Messina and Cefalù for example, were reported to have conserved “in qualche modo in efficienza le vecchie cinte murarie greche, puniche, romane che consentono loro di svolgere anche il ruolo di piazzeforti militari.”²⁷ In the first half of the

²⁷Ferdinando Maurici, *Castelli Medievali in Sicilia: Dai Bizantini Ai Normanni*. Palermo: Sellerio, 1992, 14.

8th century, the impending Muslim threat grew larger and closer, reaching North Africa. Luckily for Sicily, however, the Arab conquest was stalled by Berber revolts. During this time, the Byzantines set out on an important program to fortify already existing structures as part of a strategico-political plan to resist future invaders.²⁸ Many of the *civitates* of ancient Sicily were therefore turned into Byzantine *kastra*, or fortified castles.²⁹ Ferdinando Maurici refers to the fortification agenda as a “veicolo efficacissimo di profonda unificazione culturale dell’isola.”³⁰ We know then that in terms of secular architecture, there was some kind of a consistent Byzantine landscape throughout Sicily, both on the coasts and inside the land.

In the case of Palermo, which will be important in our future analysis, there exists a precise description of the city before the Arabs and the Normans: “La Palermo conquistata dai musulmani nell’831 rientrava ancora pienamente nei confini della città punica e romana [...] Il circuito murario della città antica si adattava alle particolarità topografiche della collina [...] All’interno della cinta, la città bizantina era ancora divisa in due parti da una muraglia che isolava la zona più elevata (oggi è l’area occupata da Palazzo Reale).”³¹ (Fig. 2) Palermo was therefore, in the mid-9th century, a walled city placed atop a hill and divided into two by another wall. The part of the city situated on the highest point of the hill is today the location of the Royal Palace. It will be interesting to see how much the layout of the city would be conserved throughout the centuries under different powers.

²⁸Maurici, 18.

²⁹Maurici, 42.

³⁰Maurici, 47.

³¹Maurici, 24-26.

Although the Arabs would eventually capture the island in the early 10th century, the Byzantines continued to control a large area of the Mediterranean. Oleg Grabar actually describes the 10th and 11th centuries as the “climax of Byzantine civilization” during which the arts were centered around a revival of Greek tradition throughout the Empire.³² It is no surprise then that this style spread throughout the land, even in places which politically, ethnically, and religiously did not align with the empire. In our case, although the Norman kingdom represented the church of Rome, the Norman princes actually turned to Constantinople in the East to import Byzantine techniques and craftsmen. Since there never existed a ‘colonial’ form of Byzantine art, “i.e., an art form designed for export to conquered territories,” the wealthy Normans were able to spend great amounts of money on high quality art.³³ The most imitated form was mosaic decoration, of which superbly preserved examples can be seen in Sicily. Interestingly, the best examples of Byzantine mosaics between 1080 and 1200 are found outside the empire’s borders.³⁴

The trademark of Byzantine mosaics is a distinguishable golden background, most often used as a sublime, celestial abstract setting for Christian imagery. In Antiquity, mosaics were usually reserved for floors, and thus made of durable stones. In the Byzantine era, however, they were moved up to the walls and therefore allowed for the use of more precious materials. Grabar writes that the great aesthetic value they acquired “corresponds both to an ideal of beauty and to a no less ideal form of religious thought: a harmonious balance on the one hand, a symbol of the Kingdom of God on the other.”³⁵ It is this

³²Oleg Grabar, *Studies in Medieval Islamic Art*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1976, 94.

³³Grabar, 140.

³⁴Grabar, 129.

³⁵Grabar, 129.

combination of aesthetics and symbolism which attracted the Normans' attention, because although they waged a number of wars against the Byzantines in the 11th and 12th centuries, they recognized the potential of Byzantine art in terms of propaganda:

It was in order to emulate the Byzantine emperors that they founded and richly endowed a great number of sanctuaries, some within their palace at Palermo (the Palatine Chapel) and others close to their residence (Monreale). [...] These fine monuments owe their origin to the Norman kings who [...] imitated the basileis of Constantinople in everything connected with the visible signs of power: insignia, ceremonies and the luxury arts.³⁶

But despite the Normans' best intentions and virtually unlimited financial resources, the imitation of Byzantine mosaics and architecture in Sicily would inevitably be affected by the presence of Islamic influences.

The domed church, architectural symbol of the Byzantine empire, became the preferred type of religious building under the Normans, starting with Roger I especially in the region of Val Demone. (Fig. 3) Its overall layout, however, features a basilica plan instead of the popular centralized schemes; as the Normans believed this enlargement offered the appropriate monumentality for their architecture.³⁷ For many other reasons its form is quite different from the domed churches originally built during the Byzantine era. As for the exterior appearance - the decorative brick motifs "such as arched niches, multiple recessed arches framing openings, and dogtooth friezes" - Charles Nicklies brings forward two different hypotheses.³⁸ One claims that these motifs follow the original Byzantine tradition, from before the Normans; the other presents evidence that they are actually inspired by Islamic buildings, such as the Great Mosque at Sfax or the Great

³⁶Grabar, 132.

³⁷Nicklies, 106.

³⁸Nicklies, 106.

Mosque of the Mahdiya, both set in 10th century Tunisia. Nicklies therefore suggests that we must consider these types of exterior decorations as “part of a *koine* - or standard regional dialect - derived from an intermingling of Byzantine and Islamic sources.”³⁹

This fusion is made even more apparent in the overall architecture of Sicilian Orthodox churches. One of its unique characteristics is directly influenced by Byzantine architecture and can be seen from both the inside and outside. There exists indeed a “hierarchical distinction between sanctuary and nave” in which the sanctuary itself is divided into the *bema* (central bay) and the *pastophoria* (flanking bays), imitating the Byzantine model.⁴⁰ Several Islamic elements would be added to this basic structure, however, creating a unique type of building. For example, there is a clear parallel between the placement of the dome directly in front of the eastern wall in these basilicas and the placement of the domes in front of the mihrab wall “commonly found in the mosques of North Africa and Egypt from the ninth century onward.”⁴¹ Another feature borrowed from Islamic architecture concerns the vaulting technique. In many Sicilian basilicas, the cupola covering the bema is supported at four points, as were the domes in Islamic buildings, while Middle Byzantine churches were systematically supported at eight.⁴² Although it is tempting to attribute this assimilation process to Roger I’s building program, we must instead credit the creativity of local workshops. Living under Muslim rule for a century and a half, artisans had “translated these Byzantine elements into the language of Islamic

³⁹Nicklies, 107.

⁴⁰Nicklies, 102.

⁴¹Nicklies, 107.

⁴²Nicklies, 107.

architecture,” thus forming “an indigenous construction.”⁴³ We will discuss later on how this kind of artistic borrowing would become a very conscious decision under Roger II.

The faithful reproduction of mosaics was not ensured by local artists, but by the hiring of Greek artists and their pupils, guaranteeing a certain level of excellence and expertise. Grabar, however, talks of an eventual “shortage of qualified artisans,” leading to very noticeable diminution in quality.⁴⁴ As a result, it is not uncommon for one single Sicilian mosaic composition to consist of some very high quality pieces as well as much more mediocre ones. Although the scarcity of capable craftsmen was an unpredictable variable, it is the very essence of Arabo-Norman architecture which altered the scheme of Byzantine mosaics the most, as the dimensions of Sicilian basilicas posed a particular problem. Byzantine churches were not as large, and therefore the schemes, “which were too small, had to be completed by additions of varying size.”⁴⁵ The enlargement of the figures and the addition of many scenes to fill up the walls of the aisles created quite an impressive sight. In this way, Grabar argues, “the Norman rulers of Sicily surpassed their models in Constantinople.”⁴⁶

B) Islamic Art and Architecture

Although their conquest was one of violence, the Arabs did far less damage to the Sicilian landscape than they could have. Mack Smith reports that although some areas became deserted, “local institutions were often retained” and “many churches became

⁴³Nicklies, 110.

⁴⁴Grabar, 134.

⁴⁵Grabar, 132.

⁴⁶Grabar, 134.

mosques.”⁴⁷ This shows that in their process of conquering, the Muslim invaders took advantage of the existing infrastructure in the planning of their new society. Maurici explains that there was indeed no systematic destruction during the invasion. The only cases in which cities were physically razed to the ground were the result of long and painful sieges, such as at Castrogiovanni and Syracuse, at the end of which “la rabbia, l’eccitazione e quindi l’esultanza dei vincitori” fueled a need for devastation.⁴⁸ Overall, the Arabs maintained most of the ancient and Byzantine settlements described earlier in this chapter.⁴⁹ It was decided, however, that existing settlements would be the object of another process of fortification. The order came from a Fatimid caliph named Mu’izz, threatened by a Byzantine attempt to recapture their lost territory in 962.⁵⁰ The fortified settlements described by Maurici share common characteristics after the Arab fortification program, such as an elevated position in mountainous regions and dimensions of great size: “si tratta quasi sempre di elevati siti montani che insieme a formidabili difese naturali (fianchi scoscesi, pareti a picco, pochi e difficili accessi) presentano vasti pianori sommitali in grado di ospitare insediamenti anche di grande dimensioni.”⁵¹ The impact of Mu’izz’s program would be tremendous in terms of economy, military strategy, political power, and urbanistic development. There are very few remains of this architecture today, as many of these buildings were destroyed during the civil wars or during the Norman invasion.⁵² Although archaeological findings have been able to answer some of our questions, contemporary reports have been a great source of information.

⁴⁷Mack Smith, 5.

⁴⁸Maurici, 48.

⁴⁹Maurici, 85.

⁵⁰Maurici, 63.

⁵¹Maurici, 75.

⁵²Mack Smith, 7.

One of these sources is Muslim writer and geographer Ibn Hawqal, who traveled across the Arab world in the mid-10th century. He is particularly resourceful in his detailed description of Palermo, which he visited during his visit to Sicily. For example, he reports that there were more than a hundred mosques in the city.⁵³ The layout of Palermo was at the time very similar to its Punic and Roman form, placed on a hill in between two rivers, divided into two parts and encircled by a massive fortified wall (Ibn Hawqal counts nine doors around it).⁵⁴ (Fig. 4) The two different parts were given arabic names: *al-halka* (the belt) and *al-qasr* (the castle). The latter was actually used for the first time by Ibn Hawqal to refer to the city as a whole, although it is not known if there ever was an actual castle.⁵⁵ Maurici suggests that there was probably one in the *halka*, the highest point of the city, despite the fact that the future royal palace of the Normans would stand in the *qasr*. Ibn Hawqal mentions the existence of the principal mosque of the city in the *qasr*, although we know that the life of the city was concentrated in the *halka* under the Fatimid regime.⁵⁶ Even before the Normans' arrival, it is clear that Palermo had already been the subject of important urban developments throughout the centuries and would provide a valuable stronghold for their future endeavors.

Before we have a closer look at the art of the Fatimid dynasty (909-1171) specifically, there are some artistic traditions which do characterize Islamic art throughout time and across borders. Easily recognizable even to the untrained eye, these characteristics can be distinguished as follows: the use of the arabic script, geometric

⁵³Mack Smith, 7.

⁵⁴Maurici, 56.

⁵⁵Maurici, 55.

⁵⁶Maurici, 56, 58.

designs, and the arabesque. As the language of the Qur'an, Arabic became a staple of Islamic civilization very early on. Beyond its religious and symbolic quality, its alphabet also allowed for more artistic freedom: "Because of the flexibility of Arabic letter-forms [...] the decorative properties of the Arabic script were appreciated and exploited from the beginning of the Islamic era onwards."⁵⁷ Different calligraphies therefore emerged to respond to specific needs, from quick note-taking to manuscripts and official documents. One style which has survived since the advent of Islam in the 7th century and which can be seen on many buildings, books (particularly early Qur'ans), and objects is called 'kufic,' and consists of simplified, stylized, square-shaped letter⁵⁸ (Fig. 5) Many other styles developed later on, especially under the Ottomans, but kufic will be of particular importance in our analysis of Arabo-Sicilian art.

It is not entirely known why geometry came to be one of the dominant elements of Islamic art, but its presence in Late Antique and Byzantine art in the Eastern Mediterranean can certainly serve as a plausible explanation. What differentiates the geometry of Islamic art from earlier examples, however, is "both its emphasis and its great formal variety."⁵⁹ The original geometric friezes of the Greeks were adapted, transformed, and combined with other forms of decoration such as vegetal and zoomorphic elements. Non-figural ornamentations consist of basic shapes such as circles, triangles, quadrilaterals, and polygons, but also of more complex forms such as 8-pointed stars transforming into octagons. (Fig. 6) The widespread use and constant development of geometry must also be

⁵⁷Sheila R. Canby, *Islamic Art in Detail*. Harvard University Press., 2005, 8.

⁵⁸Canby, 10.

⁵⁹Canby, 20.

understood in the context of muslim intellectual circles in which its concept were particularly applied to mathematics.⁶⁰

The arabesque, the third and last recurrent characteristic of Islamic art we will discuss, is by far the most interesting and complex. Once again borrowed from the Late Antique in the forms of acanthus and vine scrolls, the arabesque has evolved in many different ways throughout the centuries. Geometric and natural, symmetrical and asymmetrical, figurative and non-figurative, a filler or the main focus, it is really its versatile quality in terms of form and function that has “contributed to its longevity in Islamic art.”⁶¹ (Fig. 7) The simplest form of it consists of a stem which splits into leaves, but its association to writing in the 10th century provided artists with unlimited new possibilities. By springing from the letters directly, the stems not only provided a dynamic background, but also a certain rhythm for the calligraphy.⁶²

C) Fatimid Art

As laid out in the previous chapter, the shiite caliphate of the Fatimids took root in North Africa in the beginning of the 10th century. Quickly establishing their dominance along the southern shores of the Mediterranean basin, they conquered Egypt in 969 and subsequently settled their new capital in al-Kahira, or Cairo. Under the Fatimids, the city became a hub for culture and art. Production was influenced by both the Spanish-Moorish art of the Umayyads in the West and the art of the Persians in the East.⁶³ Based on a citation

⁶⁰Canby, 21.

⁶¹Canby, 26.

⁶²Canby, 27.

⁶³Ernst Kühnel, *Islamic art & architecture. (Translated by Katherine Watson.)* Cornell University Press, 1967, 65.

of the Hadith (the written word of the Prophet) but never stated in the Qur'an, the prohibition of figurative representation was widely accepted in Islamic culture. Figurative art, however, flourished in Fatimid Egypt, thanks to a "freer interpretation of the ban on representing living creatures."⁶⁴ The overall quality of artworks from this period was extraordinary, as local and foreign craftsmen reached levels of creativity previously unattained. The field which benefited most from this momentum was the decorative arts, which experienced a true "renaissance" at the Fatimid court, and made Cairo "the most important cultural center in the Islamic world."⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, these developments reached Fatimid territories outside of Egypt. With the help of Ernst Kühnel and his *Islamic Art and Architecture*, we will identify several elements of Fatimid art from Sicily.

The great Fatimid palaces of Egypt, such as al-Fustat and al-Mahdiya, are unfortunately long gone. But thanks to archaeological evidence and the written descriptions that have survived, we can assume that the palaces of the Normans can help us grasp a better understanding of secular architecture from that period.⁶⁶ Originally part of greater royal precincts, the now freestanding Cuba and Zisa pavilions were completed by Roger II's grandson William II in 1180. (Fig. 8) These structures were themselves inspired by Roger's earlier suburban palace of Fawara, now in ruins. The most important element that links all of these buildings together is the *muqarnas*. From Iran to Spain, it was "among the most characteristic features of medieval Islamic architecture."⁶⁷

⁶⁴Kühnel, 65.

⁶⁵Suzan Yalman, "The Art of the Fatimid Period (909–1171)." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/fati/hd_fati.htm (October 2001)

⁶⁶Kühnel, 67.

⁶⁷Yasser Tabbaa, "The Muqarnas Dome: Its Origin and Meaning." *Muqarnas* 3 (1985): 61-74. doi:10.2307/1523084, 61.

Muqarnas refers to “A conglomeration of small niches or segments of niches, often used in the zone of transition from chamber to dome, also known as honeycomb or stalactite vaulting or decoration,” a technique which “had been invented in the Muslim world only a century or so earlier.”⁶⁸ ⁶⁹ (Fig. 9) This so-called stalactite motif can be identified in both the Cuba and the Zisa pavilions to different degrees. The Cuba’s name itself refers to the arabic word *qubba*, meaning dome, although only traces of the presence of a muqarnas remains to this day. The Zisa is a great example of a surviving muqarnas, where is it used “to great architectonic effect, filling the vaulting of the alcoves with corbelled, or over-hanging, rings of cells.”⁷⁰ (Fig. 10) An interesting point brought forward by Giovanna Karagoz, is that beyond the obvious architectural assimilation of the muqarnas, the Cuba and the Zisa pavilions reflect the adoption of a certain Islamic lifestyle. These buildings, and the original landscapes they were part of “were indebted to the garden culture of Islam” that developed in Spain, North Africa and the Middle East.⁷¹ This makes no doubt that Muslim architects and artists were employed by the Normans even after the fall of the Fatimids in Sicily. A thorough analysis of the Cappella Palatina and its own muqarnas will be carried out later on.

As mentioned previously, decorative arts lay at the heart of Fatimid artistic production. We will particularly focus on the advancements made in the fields of woodworking, ivory carving, and textiles, as these had tangible repercussions in Sicilian art

⁶⁸Barbara Brend, *Islamic Art*. London: British Museum Press, 2007, 236.

⁶⁹William Tronzo, *The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, 10.

⁷⁰Kühnel, 67.

⁷¹Claudia Karagoz, *Sicily and the Mediterranean: Migration, Exchange, Reinvention*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

history. According to Arab authors, “a lively school of painting arises in Cairo” under the Fatimids, contributing to the development of wood carvings and paintings notably on mosque ceilings.⁷² Once again, there are no examples of such woodwork left in Cairo. While some traces remain on the roofing of the Great Mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia, the best surviving example is in the Cappella Palatina, a Christian church built in Roger II between 1132 and 1143 . The existence of this ceiling is a solid proof that some techniques and motifs that flourished under the Normans belonged in the Fatimid tradition.⁷³

In the field of ivory work, the Fatimid style encompasses many elements already mentioned, such as vine scrolls and arabesques, but also figurative motifs such as animals and hunting scenes. This quality of oriental ivories found many admirers in the West, including in southern Italy, where “Saracen-influenced workshops enjoyed lively encouragement throughout the Norman period.”⁷⁴ The influence of oriental ivory work, especially in the form of pyxes, continued in Sicily well into the 13th century.⁷⁵

Taking advantage of the fertile environment of the Nile region, which had always been propitious to linen production, the Fatimids enjoyed an unrivalled reputation in regards to textile manufacture. With the establishment of state factories and the employment of thousands of workers, silk embroidery techniques became extremely refined and embellished. By the 12th century, it covered such a large areas of garments and cloths that “the linen background was scarcely to be seen.”⁷⁶ These practices also made their way across the Mediterranean, as textile factories settled in Sicily, where “state

⁷²Kühnel, 70.

⁷³Kühnel, 66.

⁷⁴Kühnel, 72.

⁷⁵Kühnel, 72.

⁷⁶Kühnel, 74.

manufacture was carried on with monopoly in the production of gold borders, woven ribbons with patterns in silk on a gold ground and vice versa.”⁷⁷ However, because of its geographic location, its history, and its Christian affiliation to the Normans, Sicilian textile production featured more Byzantine motifs than Islamic ones. Despite being made by Muslim craftsmen, these garments would have been produced as religious vestments for the Western church.⁷⁸

A particular example of such garment is the royal mantle of Roger II. (Fig. 11) Although it was almost certainly produced for the Christian king - it bears an inscription stating the date of 1133-4 and the workshop location of Palermo - it displays some motifs specific to the artistic context of Norman Sicily, still influenced by Islamic traditions. Its first particularity is that this inscription, embroidered in gold along the edge, is written entirely in Arabic, Kufic script. Eva Hoffman writes that “the choice of Arabic text and script forges a link beyond the Western Norman domain to the Islamic sphere.”⁷⁹ The second interesting feature of this mantle is the theme: two lions on either side of a palm tree, each overpowering a camel. The stronger animal, the lion, associated with kingship throughout history, subduing the weaker creature, the camel, here associated with Islam, symbolizes the concepts of submission and authority which Roger sought to emulate.⁸⁰ It is interesting that such a piece of textile would clearly display the influence of Islamic culture while advertising the domination of the Normans over the Arabs at the same time.

⁷⁷Kühnel, 74.

⁷⁸Kühnel, 74.

⁷⁹Eva R. Hoffman, "Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century." *Art History* 24, no. 1 (2001): 17-50. doi:10.1111/1467-8365.00248, 22.

⁸⁰Hoffman, 29.

We have established the art historical context in which Roger II came to power in 1112. As diversified as they were, the political and religious contexts of Sicily at the time were certainly reflected in local artistic production. In terms of technique and symbolism, Islamic and Byzantine motifs in the applied arts as in architecture, played an integral part in creating what is today called Arabo-Norman art. We will now analyze the role of Roger II and his conscious assimilation of these motifs, some of them traditionally opposed to the Christian affiliation of his kingdom.

Chapter 3

Our main protagonist has only been mentioned by name until now, but most definitely deserves a proper introduction before continuing any further. Like many pivotal figures in history, Roger II of Sicily was not destined to rule, but took full advantage of his circumstances. His very upbringing exerted a tremendous influence on his political choices, which in turn helped shape the development of Arabo-Norman culture. Roger recognized the value of the multicultural island he inherited and strategically exploited everything it had to offer, especially if it meant magnifying the success of his rule.

A) Upbringing

Only young children at the time of their father's death, neither Roger nor his older brother Simon were expected to rule for at least another decade. Their twenty-six year-old mother Adelaide, of noble Italian descent, thus acted as regent of Sicily.⁸¹ By her side stood an important adviser in the person of Christodoulos, a native Sicilian brought up in the Byzantine tradition who would eventually become *amiratus*, a kind of prime minister, and would be entrusted with Roger's education.⁸² Despite her young age and limited experience, Adelaide is remembered as a powerful, successful ruler. A Greek-Arab charter describes her as "the great female ruler, the malikah (Arabic term for sovereign or queen) of Sicily and Calabria, the protector of Christian faith."⁸³ She put an end to several rebellions in the west of the island with great severity and subsequently transferred the

⁸¹Hubert Houben, *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler between East and West*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 24.

⁸²Houben, 25.

⁸³Houben, 27.

seat of power from Messina to Palermo, a town whose population was mainly Muslim thus became the capital of a Christian kingdom.⁸⁴ Although little is known of Roger's childhood, this establishes important parameters for the purpose of our argument. Growing up in a Muslim city, raised by an Italian mother and taught by a Byzantine Sicilian, the future king had many opportunities to absorb the cultural plurality of his world during his young years. It is important to mention that Palermo was already a place of cultural assimilation, where Christians had adopted Muslim practices and the Arabic language.⁸⁵ After Simon died in 1105, Adelaide continued to rule until Roger came of age in 1112, at roughly sixteen years old.

B) Road to Kingship

Although we have been referring to Roger II as 'king,' he did not originally inherit this title from his father - his status was that of a Count. His first order of business as a ruler was therefore to elevate his position and territory to the respective ranks of king and kingdom. This enterprise greatly antagonized his contemporaries, namely the pope and the Byzantine emperor, who were not favorable to the rise of another all-powerful ruler in the Mediterranean. Roger, however, made a strategic alliance with the new schismatic pope, Anacletus II, who granted him the title king in exchange for an oath of fealty.⁸⁶ His crown was only partially secured as he still needed to convince an entire island and more of his legitimacy. With the help of his advisors, Christodoulos and George of Antioch, a Syrian Christian who had been a financial expert for the Fatimids in North Africa, Roger set out to

⁸⁴Houben, 27.

⁸⁵Karen C. Britt, "Roger II of Sicily: Rex, Basileus, and Khalif? Identity, Politics, and Propaganda in the Cappella Palatina." *Mediterranean Studies* 16 (2007): 21-45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41167003>, 24.

⁸⁶Donald Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*. Cambridge University Press, 1992, 33-67.

restore the concept - or rather the legend, cultivated by Roger himself - of a long-lost Sicilian monarchy. According to Roger's chronicler, Alexander of Teleso, a council was convened to settle the matter and conveniently came to the conclusion: "kings had once resided in Palermo, who had ruled only over Sicily."⁸⁷ The newly confirmed king then launched an active artistic program that would support his newly acquired title.

A visual representation of these concepts originally adorned the walls of the co-cathedral of St. Mary of the Admiral, also known as La Martorana, in Palermo, commissioned by George of Antioch in 1143 (Fig. 12). The now detached fragment of mosaic shows Christ placing a crown on a smaller figure which has been identified as Roger II thanks to the Greek inscription above him. Roger, who looks distinctly Christ-like, is dressed in the Byzantine imperial *loros*.⁸⁸ We will see in future chapters how, by borrowing Byzantine mediums and motifs such as the golden mosaic and imperial garments, Roger aimed to imitate the Byzantine emperor himself, Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180). Indeed, "the theoretical framework of the eastern empire, in which the emperor was held to be Christ's representative on earth and responsible only to God, offered independence from papal authority."⁸⁹ Since the current Byzantine emperor was really an extension of the Western Roman church and because Roger was himself born and raised in Sicily, associated at the time more with *Ifriqiya* and Cairo than with Europe, he saw himself as the rightful counterpart to the Latins in the Mediterranean balance of power. As with the artistic program we will go on to analyze, the king embraced his Norman, Western roots as well as his Eastern identity and surroundings: he created, in the words of Hubert Houben, "a

⁸⁷Britt, 23. Citing Alexander of Teleso.

⁸⁸Britt, 26.

⁸⁹Britt, 26.

monarchy which was western in its structure, but in its heart was eastern, that is its court was oriental.”⁹⁰ In the case of La Martorana, the assimilation of Byzantine symbols was very strategic, but we will later look at and contextualize for a very different representation of Roger in an Arabic-style ceiling painting. This image is located inside the Palatine Chapel - without any doubt, the one single endeavour which fully embodies Roger’s kingly or rather imperial goals and encompasses the many artistic influences of his kingdom.

⁹⁰Houben, 4.

Chapter 4

It can be quite challenging at first to visualize the chapel on an architectural level as it is connected on all four sides to the greater palace complex of the Normans, which we will analyze in this chapter. The construction of a royal residence in this precise location was Roger's idea; the construction charter for the chapel itself dates to 1140.⁹¹ Because of the many additions to the complex throughout the centuries, it is challenging to discern its original medieval form. William Tronzo mentions evidence of incorporated parts of a pre-existing Arab structure, which we will attempt to describe, only adding to the complexity of this mental exercise.⁹² Already, we can identify Roger's strategic program on two points: he followed his mother's decision to transfer the capital to Muslim land, where his physical presence would instill authority and dissuade rebellions, and he recognized the benefit of reusing an Arab structure, both in parts and in location. By re-establishing an imposing complex on the highest point of Palermo, Roger perpetuated the symbol of power a previous Muslim fortress would have carried, only this time associated with his Christian, Norman rule.

A) Muslim Foundations

Although their presence is no longer visible, the existence of Muslim foundations underneath the Norman palace has been confirmed by a number of scholars. Ingamaj Beck explains that the Arab Emir's residence stood in the same location, originally occupying a

⁹¹Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 16.

⁹²Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 7.

much greater area than the subsequent palace.⁹³ Maurici explains that despite archaeological excavations, it is still a challenge to grasp a full picture of the building and that we can only hypothesize its shape and form. This *qasr*, arabic name which was latinized into *cassarum* or castle, is described as a “fortezza eccezionale” positioned “alta sulla collina” and “circondata da mura massicce.”⁹⁴ As discussed in Chapter 2, the fortification process set out by Fatimid caliph Mu’izz in the 960s must also have had an impact on Palermo. The recurring building type which spread during this construction program is referred to as *qal’a*, which in Andalusian and Maghrebian areas designates a fortress of great dimensions and particularly inaccessible, built primarily for military purposes.⁹⁵ While there are no examples of these Fatimid fortresses still standing, the ruins of the early Muslim port of modern day Ashdod, Israel, built by the Umayyads but used in the 10th and 11th centuries might give us a better visual for what the Palermo citadel would have looked like. Archaeologist Denys Pringle describes this *Minat al-qal’a* (literally harbor of the fort) as having a “trapezoidal plan (about 35m E-W by 55/57m N-S), with solid rounded corner-turrets on W facing sea and rectangular ones on E; gates in center of E and W walls, set between shallowly projecting rounded turrets; external wall reinforced with rectangular buttresses (1 m broad), spaced 3.5 apart. Vaulted cells within.”⁹⁶ From these different descriptions, we can envision the Muslim castle of Palermo as a massive, almost impenetrable military stronghold, deterring enemies from afar and serving as a

⁹³Ingamaj Beck, "The First Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo." *Byzantion* 40, no. 1 (1970): 119-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44170290>, 156.

⁹⁴Maurici, 55.

⁹⁵Maurici, 66. “Un termine ambiguamente reso tanto in ‘castello’ che ‘cittadella’, e che in ambito andaluso e magrebino designa generalmente una fortezza di sito particolarmente inaccessibile e di grandi dimensioni, a volte una vera e propria città fortificata e dalle preminenti funzioni militari.”

⁹⁶Denys Pringle, *Secular Buildings in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: An Archaeological Gazetteer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 72.

refuge for the city's inhabitants in case of an attack. We will now analyze the evolution of the building under Norman control.

B) From Fortress to Palace

Geographer Ibn Idrisi has left us a poetic observation of the Norman Palace as it was in the 1140s. According to him, this citadel was built on the highest point of the hill by Roger II and was made of large blocks of cut stone covered with mosaics: "Sulla sua parte più elevata sorge una cittadella, costruita de recente per l'esaltato re Ruggero con enormi blocchi di pietra da taglio e rivestita con tesserae di mosaico: le linie sono armoniose, alte le torre, ben salde per le bertesche e le garitte."⁹⁷ No doubt that this citadel made of enormous blocks of stone echoes the outlook of the castle-fortress of the previous regime. We will now look at the palace in detail to understand how the Normans used new and old elements for their seat of power.

Although it has now been incorporated into the currently visible late baroque complex, it is still possible to discern the original layout of the 12th century norman palace. As with many Muslim palaces of the time, it is organized around two courtyards, which can lead us to think that it followed the plan of the existing Muslim construction. (Fig. 13) A beautifully conserved example of this plan is the Alhambra, the greatest illustration of 14th century architecture in the last years of the Moorish occupation in Spain. It is built around two courtyards: the Patio de Comares and the Patio de los Leones. (Fig. 14) The Palace of Palermo as we will see also revolves around two courtyards, but it is very distinctive in that it is composed of three storeys. The first one is arranged around the south courtyard, which

⁹⁷Beck, 156.

was shaped into a square and renamed Cortile Maqueda in 1600, but which originally followed the outlines of the pre-existing Arab building along the south-western corner as discovered in the 1920's restoration of the palace.⁹⁸ (Fig. 15) The entrance to this courtyard is situated between two elements of importance: the crypt of the Palatine Chapel and the Torre Greca. The latter bears its name from the Greek craftsmen who built it, although it has also been known as the Red Tower, because made of red bricks.⁹⁹ The crypt is directly placed underneath the Cappella and its eastern wall is pierced of five windows, which suggests the existence of a staircase from the courtyard up to the chapel.¹⁰⁰ (Fig. 16)

The second floor revolves around the northern courtyard, the Cortile della Fontana, which stands five meters higher than the one to the south, and consists today of the Sicilian Regional Assembly and the Cappella Palatina. (Fig. 17) The Assembly, on the western side of the complex, can be seen as the direct descendant of the Sicilian Parliament, founded by Roger I in 1097, and then convened by Roger II in the palace from 1130 on. To the east of the courtyard can be found the best preserved Norman building that survives, namely Roger's palace or Ioharia, from the arabic *al-Djawhariyya*, "le bijou ou la partie principale où vit le roi." The second story of this wing, however, was not home to the royal residence, but acted rather as a substructure for the third floor and probably housed members of the court such as eunuchs and servants as well as workshops or *tiraz* - including the one which produced Roger's mantle.¹⁰¹ On the south side, around the Cortile Maqueda, on the same

⁹⁸Beck, 157.

⁹⁹Hiroshi Takayama, "Central Power and Multi-Cultural Elements at the Norman Court of Sicily." *Mediterranean Studies* 12 (2003): 1-15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41166948>, 7.

¹⁰⁰Beck. 158. The staircase was reconstructed by architect Francesco Valenti in the 1920s.

¹⁰¹Patrick Boucheron and Jacques Chiffolleau. *Les Palais Dans La Ville: Espaces Urbains Et Lieux De La Puissance Publique Dans La Méditerranée Médiévale*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires De Lyon, 2004, 85.

second level, one can find a freestanding arcade of five pointed stilted arches, one of which larger than the others, outside of the Cappella wall.¹⁰²

The third floor, identified as the *piano nobile*, consisted of the king's apartments, including the Camera di Ruggero, and reception rooms.¹⁰³ (Fig. 18) Its current facade dates from 1616 but its foundations have definitely been confirmed to be Norman.¹⁰⁴ This original facade must have looked similar to the partially restored facade of the Cappella, which "consisted of a solid wall made of regular ashlar blocks and was perforated by small lancet windows."¹⁰⁵ On the same level as this third floor, in the south-eastern corner of the Cortile della Fontana were found "substructions" which suggest the presence of a loggia connecting the Ioharia to the chapel.¹⁰⁶ It is particularly interesting to note that this loggia would have met the Cappella Palatina's northern transept where a royal box is believed to have been located.¹⁰⁷ (Fig. 19) It is absolutely logical for the king to have had his own personal corridor connecting his private apartments to the chapel. We will discuss the importance of this royal box in the symbolism and function of the chapel as a whole in the next chapter.

The courtyard that occupies the space at the center of the Ioharia, the Parliament and the chapel is named Cortile della Fontana, although today deprived of a fountain. This appellation, however, is not coincidental, as contemporary writer Abd 'ar Rahman described the private garden of the king (possibly in this space) and mentioned "I leoni

¹⁰²Slobodan Ćurčić, "Some Palatine Aspects of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987): 125-44. doi:10.2307/1291551, 126.

¹⁰³Beck, 159.

¹⁰⁴Beck, 158.

¹⁰⁵Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 126.

¹⁰⁶Beck, 158.

¹⁰⁷Beck, 158.

della fontana capricciosa, che buttan'dalla bocca acque di Paradiso.”¹⁰⁸ This particular feature creates another strong parallel with the Alhambra, which boasts a recently renovated fountain at the center of its main courtyard, the Court of the Lions. (Fig. 20) The basin, supported by 12 felines, pre-dates the palace by several centuries; built in the 11th century, it belongs to an artistic current closer to the Norman-Sicilian context.¹⁰⁹ It is fed by four water channels, symbolizing the four rivers of Paradise thus directly echoing Abd ‘ar Rahman’s lines about the fountain in Palermo. Because the Norman palace has been modified over the years, it is difficult to single out many of the similarities it probably shared with the Alhambra, such as the courtyards and the fountain. We must however understand that, according to several Arab sources, they were considered equals.¹¹⁰

C) Outside Influences

The evident assimilation of Muslim motifs and architectural designs was undoubtedly due to the presence of Arab craftsmen in Palermo and to Roger’s appreciation for this kind of art. His broader vision for his palace, however, was inspired by the Byzantine empire. The connecting loggia between the piano nobile and the royal balcony is indeed “similar to the solution found in most Byzantine palaces.”¹¹¹ Roger’s desire to emulate the same kind of authority and divinity as its Eastern counterpart naturally led him to look to this side of the Mediterranean for inspiration. Beck writes: “The gaze of king Roger II was turned towards Byzantium in an ever changing mood of hate and fascination,

¹⁰⁸Beck, 159.

¹⁰⁹Robert Irwin, *The Alhambra*. Harvard University Press, 2011, 2.

¹¹⁰Beck, 159.

¹¹¹Beck, 160.

none of which contradicts the never ceasing imitation of Byzantine culture which characterizes the Norman court, its ceremony and art.”¹¹²

One of the inspirations for Roger’s private passageway from the palace to his royal box in the Cappella, for example, is located in Constantinople between the Great Palace and the Hippodrome and dates back to the emperor Constantine, who ruled in the fourth century. In his attempt to shape his city in the image of Rome, he directly borrowed this feature which already existed between the Palatine palace and the Circus Maximus. When Justinian I came to power in the sixth century, it was one of his first commissions to rebuild the existing imperial box, or *kathisma*, to make it “loftier and more impressive.”¹¹³ It is probably this aggrandized, embellished version which inspired the Sicilian king. One problem of the Cappella, however, was that it only offered a limited number of seats, unlike the Hippodrome. For this reason, Roger reused another architectural device of the *kathisma*: the ashlar wall pierced by windows mentioned above, through which the audience outside could follow the ceremonies.¹¹⁴ While it is evident that Roger wished to recreate this ancient tradition of the ruler showing himself to his subjects from a position of power, it is also interesting that he chose a religious structure to be his primary public viewing space.

This particular choice might have been influenced by another existing palace-chapel complex, only this time not in the east, but in the north. Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne commissioned his own palace and Palatine chapel in Aachen at the turn of the eighth century. Charlemagne established two spaces for himself: one public, in the audience room

¹¹²Beck, 161.

¹¹³Evans Stewart and Allan James, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005, 16.

¹¹⁴Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 127.

of the palace, or *Aula Regia*, and one in the chapel, in an elevated space. Although maybe not as private as Roger's, a passageway did connect the two thrones: "Following the royal route from his throne on a dais in the apse of the *Aula Regia* to his then palace chapel, took Charlemagne through the central *porta*, or main gateway to the palace complex, and on to the royal entrance in the north stair tower of the church's westwork. This gave him access to the throne in the first-floor gallery."¹¹⁵ (Figures 21 and 22) In addition to this physical connection between the palace and the chapel, the high placement of a tribune, we can also notice the presence of a crypt underneath the chapel; three elements which directly echo the Cappella Palatina at Palermo. As the Emperor who united western and eastern Europe, Charlemagne was a very suitable model to follow for Roger, who intended to achieve unity among his western and eastern subjects.

¹¹⁵Nicholas Temple, John Shannon Hendrix, Christian Frost, and N. H. Bennett. *Bishop Robert Grosseteste and Lincoln Cathedral: Tracing Relationships between Medieval Concepts of Order and Built Form*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014, 180.

Chapter 5

Jewel of Roger II's reign and legacy, the Cappella Palatina has been the focus of numerous analyses over the years. As we will see, the presence of Roman Medieval, Greek Orthodox and Islamic influences is undeniable. In its architecture and decoration, the chapel can easily be seen as a simple patchwork of different elements sewn together. We will, however offer an analysis which creates an opportunity for the building to exist as its own entity, as an ensemble engineered for the sole purpose of serving the Norman monarchy. We will proceed with separate descriptions of architecture and decoration programs and finally with a full analysis of how these two elements work together to meet a specific propagandistic goal.

A) Architecture

The chapel lies at the center of the palace, on an east-west axis, and is today accessed from the *piano nobile* of the 18th century Cortile Maqueda. (Fig. 23 and 24) The main level can be analyzed in three different sections. The first one, to the east, is itself a combination of three elements: a choir surmounted by a dome and two transept arms (including a royal balcony to the north), together forming a sanctuary. Tronzo compares it to a Greek church, as it is "partly surrounded by a high wall and raised above the level of the nave by four steps."¹¹⁶ A parallel can also be drawn between this tripartite composition of many contemporary Romanesque churches, such as San Clemente in Rome, rebuilt just before the year 1100 on top of a 4th-century basilica. (Fig. 25) Its western wall is divided into a main apse, at the center, and two side chapels which are separated from the rest of

¹¹⁶Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 9.

the church by a series of steps on which rests a low wall. We must also consider a group of churches closer to Palermo, built in eastern Sicily and nearby Calabria between 1090-1130, thus under both Roger I and Roger II.¹¹⁷ These seven edifices, such as SS. Pietro e Paolo at Italà or S. Giovanni Vecchio at Bivongi, exemplify the architectural model of the domed basilica and the particular feature of an altar-sanctuary. (Fig. 26) Although they have lost their original barriers, Nicklies affirm that, “Each sanctuary would have been separated from the nave and aisles by a barrier,” in a similar fashion as in the Palatine chapel.¹¹⁸

The second section, running from east to west, is the nave, formed by two colonnades with an aisle on either side, supporting a clerestory. (Fig. 27) The most impressive feature of the nave, and of the chapel overall many would argue, is its wooden ceiling. (Fig. 28) Unlike the masonry vaults of the sanctuary, the ceiling of the nave is made up of twenty star-shaped panels arranged in the muqarnas, or stalactite, technique.¹¹⁹ A comparable combination of a dome and a nave can be observed at the Hagia Sophia, which always constituted a great source of inspiration for the Norman monarchy. However, the churches erected in the Norman kingdom, including the seven mentioned above, seem to have taken this concept of hybridization a step further. (Fig. 29) The domed sanctuary, a type prevalent in the Byzantine world, and the basilican nave, following a Western model, are here not so much combined, but rather juxtaposed. This allows the wooden-roofed nave and the vaulted sanctuary the possibility to exist within their own space, expanding the functional capacity of the chapel as a whole. We will explore these possibilities in the following chapter.

¹¹⁷Also includes S. Maria at Mili, S. Alfio at San Fratello, S. Maria de Tridetti at Staiti, S. Filomena at Santa Severina, S. Maria di Terreti near Reggio-Calabria. See Nicklies.

¹¹⁸Nicklies, 102.

¹¹⁹Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 10.

The third area of the chapel is the throne platform on the western wall of the building. First, we must realize that this platform is placed where the main axial door of a western church would normally be, which will later force us to generate new hypotheses concerning the functionality of this chapel. The actual royal seat is long lost, but the space on the west wall is nonetheless of great interest. It is framed by what has been called “a symbolic *fastigium*, or a two-dimensional ciborium” using a marble revetement, such as porphyry, one of the most recognizable symbols of emperors throughout history.¹²⁰ (Fig. 30) At the bottom of this wall, one can notice that the decorative arcade of pointed arches seems to be floating above the ground. This leads us to the conclusion that the throne must have been placed on an additional podium, thus connecting the level between the last step of the stairs and the level of the arcade.¹²¹ In total, there was thus a series of six steps to reach the throne: a direct allusion to the throne of King Solomon, also echoed by the presence of two lion figures in the roundels above the marble frame.¹²² Although a parallel with the Old Testament king already gives us an idea of the royal importance of this space, one must take into account another element in order to fully grasp the relevance of the throne platform. Ćurčić encourages us to view this space not from the bottom of the steps, but from across the nave, underneath the arch which separates the nave from the sanctuary. From there, the throne is framed by a physical arch, like a triumphal arch, creating an entrance facade for the rest of the church, now clearly distinct from the sanctuary.¹²³ In our mind, this space can now function on its own, as it does not follow the

¹²⁰Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 142.

¹²¹Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 142.

¹²²Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 142.

¹²³Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 143.

orientation of the eastern apse. To further the analogy with Solomon, the columns which support the arch leading into the nave, facing west, are spiral, like the solomonic columns of the Temple of Jerusalem. As one could almost expect, the mosaic decoration above this arch includes an image of Solomon himself.¹²⁴

Britt's research has concluded that in respective analyses of the throne platform, "Islamicists have drawn parallels with ceremonial ritual in the palaces of the Fatimid caliphs, Byzantinists have sought to link it with aspects of imperial ceremony which took place at the court of Constantinople, and medievalists view it as imitative of royal coronation ceremonies in northern European courts."¹²⁵ We will discuss the parallels with such ceremonies in the following chapter when discussing the function of the chapel. In this discussion we will further demonstrate that the throne platform cannot be examined on its own, but rather as half of a co-dependent pair formed with the royal balcony in the sanctuary mentioned above.

Following the analysis of the Cappella's component parts, one must not assume, however, that the structure functions on only one level, as it is in reality a two-storied arrangement. Scholars have hypothesized over the years about the origin of this plan. Grabar, the first to write on this aspect, and then Krönig make a parallel between Roger's chapel and western medieval palace chapels, also two storied, such as Aachen, as we saw in the previous section.¹²⁶ Beck attributes the Normans' inspiration rather to the Byzantine tradition of many palace chapels - such as the Sergios and Bacchos church, the modern day

¹²⁴Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 143.

¹²⁵Britt, 30.

¹²⁶Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 126.

'Little Hagia Sophia' in Istanbul, built in the sixth century by the emperor Justinian.¹²⁷ While these two interpretations are correct - Roger must have looked to the architecture of Justinian and Charlemagne to fashion the imperial image he desired - their comparisons are not entirely suited to this context, as they feature central plans.

For this reason, we will rather explain the two storied arrangement of the cappella with a third theory. Kitzinger and Ćurčić shift the existing understanding of the floors to identify the main level of the cappella as the upper level of the structure and to bring in a new element in their interpretation: the crypt which was mentioned in the previous chapter, here as the lower level.¹²⁸ (Fig. 31) Two staircases, one in each of the side aisles of the chapel, directly lead to the space below, creating a passage we will discuss later.¹²⁹ The organization of the church above is echoed in the plan underneath, where the tripartite arrangement of the sanctuary is replicated. Interestingly, Beck also mentions that, "originally it was possible to get from the lunette in the *piano nobile* to the crypt without entering the church, from the point where the facade loggia reached the church."¹³⁰ This direct connection between the loggia and the crypt allowed the king to move easily and privately between these spaces.

This peculiar arrangement serves as the first evidence of the complexity of Roger II's planning. While clearly aware of existing architectural models in the west and in the east and keen to imitate the symbolism that they carried, Roger purposely refused to entirely replicate one model rather than another. The uniqueness of the Cappella Palatina is all the

¹²⁷Beck, 125.

¹²⁸Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 126.

¹²⁹Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 126.

¹³⁰Beck, 127. This connection between the two spaces was removed by Valenti circa 1932.

more accentuated by the fact that no other example of this particular architecture has survived, if any ever existed. We will now see how Roger's desire to establish his own artistic precedent is further exemplified in the decoration of his chapel.

B) Decorative Program

As with its architecture, the decorative program of the Cappella Palatina follows a known model only to a limited extent. We must keep in mind that a significant portion of the mosaics have been restored or heavily altered since the 12th century, such as the main apse, for example. For this reason we must leave those elements out of our analysis that were not built specifically in the context of Roger II's reign. We will also see that it is impossible to describe any of its original elements as purely Byzantine or purely Islamic. Scholars such as O. Demus and E. Kitzinger have assigned the underlying foundation of the program to the Byzantine tradition with some divergences. As with their architectural influences, the Normans were most likely inspired by precedents at the Hagia Sophia and Aachen, as well as by Justinian's churches in Ravenna, such as San Vitale. (Fig. 32) Just as in the mosaic arrangements of the sanctuaries in some of these Byzantine churches, there is a Pantokrator figure of Christ at the top of the main dome, surrounded by angels, Old Testament prophets, apostles, and saints depicted on a lower level. (Fig. 33) The transition from the dome to the square below is different here, however. Indeed, in most Byzantine churches, it is done through pendentives rather than squinches, so that the Four Evangelists can act as the "corner supports" for the dome, echoing their role as pillars of

the faith.¹³¹ In the Cappella, the Evangelists are depicted within the drum of the dome instead.

The mosaic scheme we have described so far has much in common, at least from an iconological point of view, with the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna (547), one of the greatest examples of Byzantine mosaic and imperial imagery. There too, images of Old Testament prophets, apostles, and other founding figures are essential features of the apse, flanking Christ. The rest of the side walls are occupied by Old Testament scenes and by two of the most well known compositions of the Byzantine world: the emperor Justinian himself with religious, state, and military officials to the left of the apse and his wife Theodora with court women and eunuchs to its right. (Fig. 34) By placing their image so close to the altar, the pair establishes a direct connection between them and the divine. Respectively holding the bread and wine meant for the celebration of the Eucharist, Justinian and Theodora act as the representants of God on Earth, offering protection and redemption for their people who in turn worship them and these images.

The mosaics covering the sanctuary walls in the Palatine chapel, including the areas beneath the dome and in the two wings off to the sides, follow a very particular arrangement organized around the primary theme of the New Testament, thus differing from San Vitale. The way that the scenes of the Life of Christ are arranged is also entirely unique to the Cappella. All the singularities we will mention below must be attributed to the presence of the royal balcony, which was mentioned above, privileging “a viewer who

¹³¹Ernst Kitzinger, "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects." *The Art Bulletin* 31, no. 4 (1949): 269-92. doi:10.2307/3047256, 272.

looked from the north and was elevated above ground level.”¹³² (Fig. 19) In an effort to emulate the divine imagery of the great Byzantine emperor Justinian, Roger II also chose to include himself in the scheme of the sanctuary to establish himself as a human bridge between his people and God. Instead of doing so in the means of a mosaic, however, he takes this concept much further by creating a space in which he - and his descendants - can appear physically.

Therefore, from the north wall of the northern transept arm, the King would have assisted with the liturgy with an unparalleled view of the mosaics. The images directly presented to the King’s view were not chosen by chance; their presence carried a precise ideological meaning. The first particularity we will examine is the noticeably unbalanced distribution of the New Testament scenes throughout the sanctuary. They occupy indeed a much greater portion of the southern wing, taking the form of full narratives, while in the northern wing there are less scenes but more figures of saints.¹³³ The scenes facing the king on the southern wall were most probably chosen for their symbolic meaning. The Flight into Egypt, the Presentation in the Temple and the Entry into Jerusalem were in Early Christian iconography “conceived of in terms of the triumphal progress and solemn reception of the ruler, or, to use the classical expressions, as the king’s *profectio*, *adventus*, and *occursus*.”¹³⁴ (Fig. 35) These terms, originally associated with the Roman emperor cult, create a direct metaphor for the arrival of the ruler as the savior Jesus Christ.¹³⁵ The symbolism linked to the Roman Empire is also a concept inspired by Justinian, who had

¹³²Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 284.

¹³³Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 276.

¹³⁴Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 279.

¹³⁵Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 279.

aspired to restore the Empire. Justinian never achieved this ambitious goal, but he was very successful in restoring the cult of the emperor with powerful imagery. In a similar fashion to Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, he understood the importance of developing and spreading the image of an absolute ruler, as a religious leader, a military commander, and a learned man. It is this all-encompassing role which Roger would work so hard to recreate.

Another detail which might easily be overlooked is the depiction of two Jews opposite a bust of Christ who has converted them by showing them the way of the Light. This would have been of great importance at the time, as “the conversion of the Jews was a particular concern of Roger II towards the end of his reign,” which is when these mosaics are believed to have been produced.¹³⁶ The conversion of Muslims also became important for the King, but the presence of Jewish figures specifically emphasizes the origin story of Christianity and its ties with Judaism. Directly facing the royal loggia, four warrior saints have been placed, symbols of religious, but most importantly military power. Standing by their side is bishop St Nicholas, patron saint of the Normans.¹³⁷ To the western side of the balcony, a group of women can be seen. (Fig. 36) Saint Catherine, great martyr of the Greek Orthodox Church and herself of royal blood - she was the daughter of a king - is flanked by Saint Agatha, the patron saint of the city of Palermo, and another unidentified female.¹³⁸ Their royal garment suggests “a queen or princess with her ladies-in-waiting,” thus appropriate in this royal sphere of the upper northern wing.¹³⁹ The last detail we will mention is the presence of the Virgin and Child on the eastern wall of the balcony. It is

¹³⁶Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 277.

¹³⁷Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 284.

¹³⁸Henry Gally Knight, *The Normans in Sicily: Being a Sequel to "An Architectural Tour in Normandy."* (*Architectural Tour* .). London: John Murray, 1838, 155 and 340.

¹³⁹Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 285.

figure of the Hodegetria, the Virgin who literally ‘points the way,’ presenting her infant son as the salvation of mankind. (Fig. 37) Following the 8th-century iconoclasm phase of Byzantine art, this image was one of the most widespread, becoming “a potent twelfth-century image of dominion in the Byzantine sphere, and one thus to be kept in close physical proximity to the ruler.”¹⁴⁰ Not only that, it is a direct reference to the lost icon of the Hodegetria in Constantinople, “palladium of empire and dispenser of victory, prayed to by emperors and generals upon departing on their campaigns, thanked and praised for victories upon their return.”¹⁴¹ The detail which references the icon in Constantinople specifically is the Greek inscription which accompanies it and translates to ‘Mother of God who points the way.’ In addition, the close proximity of St John the Baptist on the same wall is a direct echo of the liturgy which would have taken place underneath: the rite of Proskomidi, or “the preparation of the eucharist in the Greek Church.”¹⁴² The words of John (“Behold, the Lamb of God” I, 29) are an allusion to the central particle - called *Amnos* or Lamb - of the eucharist bread and recall Christ inside the womb of the Virgin.¹⁴³ These many symbols of royal, religious, and military symbols of power and triumph were obviously chosen as the “proper pendants” to the glory of the king when viewed by the audience from below.¹⁴⁴

The nave and its side aisles are decorated with narrative cycles, the former with scenes from the Old Testament and the latter with scenes of the lives of the apostles Peter and Paul. Interestingly, these mosaics are accompanied by Latin inscriptions while the ones

¹⁴⁰Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 55.

¹⁴¹Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 285.

¹⁴²Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 273.

¹⁴³Kitzinger, “Mosaics,” 274.

¹⁴⁴Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 55.

in the sanctuary are Greek.¹⁴⁵ This discrepancy has now been attributed to a later redecoration of the nave by Roger's son and successor, William I who replaced what was probably originally a non-figural scheme of decoration.¹⁴⁶ This assumption has been made by several scholars, such as Tronzo and Agnello, based on a written description by Philagathos, a contemporary of Roger II and William I. As a mendicant preacher, Philagathos spent time in Sicily and compiled a collection of sermons and homilies, including a number from the Cappella Palatina. In the nave and aisles at the time, according to his writing, "A great many curtains are hung, the fabric of which is threads of silk, woven with gold and various dyes, that the Phoenicians have embroidered with wonderful skill and elaborate artistry."¹⁴⁷ As these tapestries must have been installed on special occasions, it seems rather unlikely that they would have obstructed key biblical scenes on these days. Tronzo thus comes to the conclusion that this evidence "implies a decoration of lesser (i.e ornamental) rather than greater (i.e. figural) purport, which was capable of being hidden at such an important time."¹⁴⁸

When it comes to the ceiling of the Cappella, it is easy to see it as its own entity, as it drastically differs from the Greek and Byzantine motifs we have encountered thus far, both in terms of style and ideology. The muqarnas, as we have mentioned earlier, is an Islamic architectural feature which was already discussed in the context of 10th-century Fatimid Egypt, but which can also be witnessed in Abbasid architecture of the 8th and 9th centuries in the palace of Baghdad, Iraq. In Palermo, muqarnas would have been visible throughout

¹⁴⁵Britt, 28.

¹⁴⁶Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 64-8. Britt, 29.

¹⁴⁷Ernst J. Grube and Jeremy Johns. *The Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina*. London: Saffron Books, 2005, 13. Translation of Philagathos.

¹⁴⁸Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 68.

the city, especially in mosques, of which there were more than three hundred, as reported by geographer Ibn Hawqal in 973.¹⁴⁹ This architectural element was therefore probably incorporated into Norman buildings. Unlike most Islamic examples, however, the muqarnas in the Palatine Chapel is not made of stone (like at the Zisa pavilion, see Fig. 10) or stucco, but wood.¹⁵⁰ Another non-Islamic example of this, although definitely stemming from the Fatimid muqarnas type, was built in Constantinople in the middle of the twelfth century, in the so-called Mouchroutas, a hall forming part of the Great Palace. It is described as having had an “extraordinary carved wooden ceiling featuring “domes” and stalactites, painted in vibrant colors and accented with gold leaf.”¹⁵¹ In the Cappella, the ceiling, originally entirely painted and gilded, is composed of twenty star-shaped panels at the the very top and more semi-circular ones to the sides, coming down over the aisles, like stalactites. The scenes represented are far from the sacro-religious program of the sanctuary, however; they depict banquets, dancers, drinkers, and even people playing chess and strange-looking beasts.¹⁵² (Fig. 38) These images are there to convey the idea of richness and abundance at the court under the reign of the Norman kings and are accompanied by Kufic inscriptions such as “prosperity,” “perfection,” “good fortune,” and “power.”¹⁵³ While Byzantine art was deemed appropriate for the saints and angels of the sanctuary because of its universal format and ideology, Islamic art was the preferred method to represent the terrestrial kingdom of Roger. Tronzo argues that, as the “native

¹⁴⁹Houben, 28.

¹⁵⁰Fabrizio Agnello, “The Painted Ceiling of the Nave of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Essay on its Geometric and Constructive Features.” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 407-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25769703>, 407.

¹⁵¹Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 141.

¹⁵²Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 59.

¹⁵³Britt, 29 and Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 60.

vocabulary of Norman Sicily, and arab land,” Islamic motifs were much more adequate.¹⁵⁴ We will make note that the prohibition of human and animal depictions stems not from the Quran, but from the Hadith, thus allowing for more liberty away from the mosques. The sunni branch of Islam is known to follow the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad much more rigidly than the Shiites, to which the very influential Fatimid caliphate of Egypt belonged.

There is one figure among them which ties this entire scheme back to the greater context of the Royal Chapel and Roger himself. A “seated ruler, cross-legged on a low platform, dressed in a caftan, wearing a crown and surrounded by servants” is depicted on seven different occasions.¹⁵⁵ (Fig. 39) The man is shown drinking a red beverage, probably red wine, although it does not reference the partaking of the Eucharist but rather the courtly lifestyle of Palermo; he is also flanked by two servants. If his title is already conveyed by his attributes, such as the crown, his identity is revealed by his physiognomy. According to Jeremy Johns, although the overall style of the image is Islamic, the rendering of the face, hairstyle and beard is “European.”¹⁵⁶ This becomes especially apparent when we compare it to other figures painted on the ceiling. Many of the other male figures are shown with much darker and thinner facial hair which surrounds their face and ends in a small beard. The “European” figure, on the other hand, has a much fuller, rather gray-ish beard. (Fig. 16) For scholars, this can be none other than Roger II. Indeed, “what other

¹⁵⁴William Tronzo, "The Medieval Object-enigma, and the Problem of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo." *Word & Image* 9, no. 3 (1993): 197-228. doi:10.1080/02666286.1993.10435488, 227.

¹⁵⁵Britt, 29.

¹⁵⁶Jeremy Johns, 'I re normanni e il califfi fatimiti. Nuove prospettive su vecchi materiali.' *Del nuovo sulla Sicilia musulmana* (Rome 1993): 9-50, 31-40.

Western king in Eastern garb could Roger have tolerated seven times in his chapel on the ceiling under which he repeatedly sat or stood?"¹⁵⁷

Orientalist Giovanni d'Erme brought forward a very interesting analysis of the chapel's ceiling, which is definitely worth mentioning in this context of artistic *mélange*.¹⁵⁸ He identified a number of images which carry a deep iconological meaning of inherent duality between opposing figures, neither of which can ever completely win. It is the case for two wrestlers fighting, one white and one black. The white one wins in one painting while the black one wins in another. It is the same scenario for a dueling scene between a snake and a lion; the lion seems to be the winner in one panel, but is defeated by the snake in another. This idea of opposites is reiterated in two paintings above the throne platform of the Sun and the Moon. The key concept to take away from these images is not duality in itself, but complementarity. This is particularly exemplified by the motif of two lions, one darker and one lighter, which stem from the same head. (Fig. 40)

In d'Erme's opinion, the origin of these images and concepts is unequivocal. The only other spatio-temporal setting in which he has been able to locate similar motifs is proto-Islamic, late-Sasanian Iran.¹⁵⁹ How then can we explain that these images from six centuries earlier travelled across the Middle East and the Mediterranean to reach 12th century Palermo? Using the historical evidence laid out by Italian historian Michele Amari, d'Erme has pointed out that the Muslim army which took over Sicily from the Byzantine was composed of an important core of horsemen from Xurasan, a region in north-east

¹⁵⁷Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 60.

¹⁵⁸Giovanni M. D'Erme, "The Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Iconographical Source to Be Read En Lieu of Lacking Texts." *Oriente Moderno* 23 (84), no. 2 (2004): 401-16.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25817940>.

¹⁵⁹D'Erme, 402.

modern Iran.¹⁶⁰ We must therefore come to the conclusion that this Persian influence survived, especially in the Sicilian capital, which is where the horsemen were settled throughout the occupation of the island. Some Persian artistic features must have been perpetuated by the knowledge of these men, some of whom must have been craftsmen. Even if Roger might have hired Persian artists at some point during his reign, it is difficult to assess, however, whether or not these Persian motifs were part of the decorative scheme from the start. In the so-called Mouchroutas mentioned above, the figures depicted on the ceiling wore Persian clothes, “explained by the fact that the artist responsible for the entire ensemble was actually Persian.”¹⁶¹

If the motifs blend in completely on a stylistic level with the Islamic theme of the ceiling, their underlying meaning is in fact far from the Islamic tradition. Indeed, the concept of dualism that resonates in them is “really proper of Iran and absolutely repugnant to the monistic orthodoxy of Islam.”¹⁶² 21st-century Iranian thought revolves around the “irreconcilable opposition” between Light and Dark, in which one must choose one or the other, Good or Evil. These images, however, come from the much older Sasanian theological context in which both “Principles of Being” harmoniously coexist within each person and cannot exist without the other. Sasanian kings especially were believed to be born from a solar father and a lunar mother and were therefore expected to play “the role of the indispensable warranter of cosmic balance.”¹⁶³ By bringing together East and West,

¹⁶⁰D’Erme, 404.

¹⁶¹Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 141.

¹⁶²D’Erme, 402.

¹⁶³D’Erme, 408.

Christianity and Islam, Roger must have particularly appreciated this strong symbol of balance and order.

We now have established an encompassing picture of the Cappella Palatina as it was in Roger's time, in terms of architecture and decoration. Although it has been easier to look at each element and influence separately, we must now try to understand their meaning in their context of coexistence. How did these motifs and architectural structures work together in Roger's interest? How was the space used on a regular basis to accommodate crowds and rituals? And finally, can we identify a dominant artistic influence in the art and architecture of his reign? If so, which one, and why?

Chapter 6

The final chapter of this work will be dedicated to the analysis of the functionality of the Cappella Palatina, using our previous evaluations of architectural and decorative elements to support our thesis. We have already solidly established two important characteristics of this structure: the first one is its hybrid nature, mixing Eastern and Western architectural and pictorial motifs in one complex structure, and the second is the existence of two royal spaces, the balcony in the sanctuary and the platform in the nave. We will now explore the relationship between these two spaces to specifically answer the question as to whether or not they are indeed meant to work as a single integrated entity. We will also analyze the practical use of the chapel as part of the greater palace complex. In these processes, we will once again use relevant comparisons from the East and West in order to determine which model influenced Roger II the most in his planning of the chapel, and speculate as to why. Our last objective will be to identify important departures from pre-existing models in order to reveal the unique character of the building, and by extension, of Roger II himself.

A) Two Spaces, One King

Until now, we have confined our analysis to the chapel as a unified structure working as a whole in order to fully appreciate the multitude of styles and influences within its walls. This approach, however, is somewhat limiting in the context of the building's actual use. Our understanding might be skewed at first by the current appearance of the nave, which as we have mentioned, was redecorated by William II in the second half of the 12th century. The presence of Old Testament mosaics, logical pendants

to the New Testament scenes of the transept, and the absence of a physical separation with the sanctuary create the impression that this is one continuous, communicating space. We must rather focus on several key points which explain why this cannot be the correct interpretation of the relationship between the nave and the sanctuary designed by Roger II.

The first important element we will discuss is the undoubtful existence of two distinct royal spaces. From his seat in the elevated balcony, Roger would have had a place of priority in the liturgy, as we will discuss below. His subjects, had they been accommodated in the nave as in standard western churches, however, would have barely seen him, not to mention that the original chancel barrier would have blocked their view of the altar almost entirely. A high wall, 183 cm tall, surrounds the chancel on its north, south, and east sides, while on the west side, two lower semi-transparent screens finish enclosing the sacred space.¹⁶⁴ The height of this lower section in the Middle Ages is unknown, but we can imagine it would have made it difficult for the audience to have a clear view of the liturgy and would have created a strong feeling of separation. Another essential detail of the nave is the absence of a central door on the western wall. In lieu of this feature, we find the throne platform discussed in the previous chapter. We must therefore not interpret the nave as a typical space for the faithful to congregate and attend the liturgy. Ćurčić explains that the two areas are not meant to function as a single entity because they are not used facing the same way: the sanctuary is oriented, towards the east, while the nave is occidented, towards the west.¹⁶⁵ The sanctuary, due to its orientation, its original decoration, and the presence of an altar, is clearly dedicated to the religious function of the

¹⁶⁴Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 47.

¹⁶⁵Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 140.

building. The nave however, with its Islamic ceiling decorated with banqueting, drinking, gambling, and hunting scenes, its walls covered by curtains, and its main focus point being the royal throne, must rather be understood as a secular space. Ćurčić compares it to a palace hall or *aula regia* like at Aachen or Constantinople, where religious and secular spaces are also closely juxtaposed.¹⁶⁶

The example of the Chrysotriklinos survives only through textual evidence, but still makes for a very relevant comparison. (Fig. 41) Built in the Great Palace of Constantinople by Justin II (565-578), this large octagonal room was surmounted by a dome and was used as a throne room by Byzantine emperors.¹⁶⁷ The space was divided into eight apses; the main, eastern one was dedicated to the throne. The closest one to it on the north side, served as the oratory of St. Theodore as well the imperial vestry and the two spaces were simply separated by movable curtains.¹⁶⁸ The proximity of secular and religious areas was therefore not a novel idea in the Cappella Palatina. The example of the palace of Charlemagne at Aachen, however, presents a plan in which the sacred space, the Palatine chapel, is distanced from the imperial hall, the *aula regia*. (Fig. 42) This hall, modelled on the Basilica of Constantine in Trier, consists of one main longitudinal area headed by a large apse meant to receive the emperor during civic ceremonies. Charlemagne did have a throne inside the chapel, from where he could attend services, but he was not intended to play a role in them. Looking at the buildings at Constantinople and Aachen, it is now easier to visualize the juxtaposition in Palermo between a centrally planned sanctuary and a longitudinal nave. The novelty of the Cappella Palatina is that, despite being a hybrid

¹⁶⁶Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 140.

¹⁶⁷Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 140.

¹⁶⁸Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 140.

structure, it retains two different focal points to be used by Roger II on separate occasions. If his choice was to keep two royal thrones within the same building, there must have been a particular reason. We will now try to understand how the space was used on these occasions, taking into account architecture and symbolism.

B) Liturgies and Ceremonies: A Hypothetical Narrative

As we begin to comprehend the practical usage of the Cappella Palatina, it is important to state, as many scholars have done, that very little is known of medieval Sicilian liturgy itself. When needed, we will here again rely on the homilies left behind by the mendicant preacher Philagatos. In addition, we will also be able to use our knowledge of Byzantine liturgy, of which more details have survived and which would have certainly been a great source of influence in Sicily. We will first attempt to understand the use of the royal box within the sanctuary and then of the throne in the nave.

According to Tronzo, the religious and civic spaces were used one after the other, starting with the liturgy in the sanctuary. Only the King would participate in the liturgy with the officiating members of the clergy - although an audience would probably have been present in the nave - before coming down to his terrestrial kingdom to meet his subjects.¹⁶⁹ From his balcony, Roger II appeared in an elevated position, not only over the people, but also above the clergy. The physical location of the box clearly states the ruler's symbolic closeness to the realm of the divine. Thanks to archaeological evidence, Beck has come to the conclusion that this box actually looked like a window divided into three.¹⁷⁰ This tripartite arrangement would have shown Roger II at the center with his two sons at

¹⁶⁹Tronzo, "Object-Enigma," 226.

¹⁷⁰Beck, 128-130.

his sides, as in a triptych. To grasp the full meaning of this information, we must look at the wall which was directly opposite to the balcony, the southern wall of the transept. There, we have already mentioned the presence of a mosaic representing the Entry into Jerusalem. It is however, the scene above it which is most relevant to our analysis, namely the Transfiguration. (Fig. 43) In this composition, following the details mentioned in the scriptures, Christ is depicted at the center, lifted up and flanked by the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Moses, echoing the royal trio facing them. The apostles below Christ, John, Peter, and James, who have fallen to their knees in awe and adoration, were on the other hand a representation of Roger's subjects kneeling at his feet, a ritual we will explain below.¹⁷¹ This juxtaposition established a direct relationship between Roger II up high in his balcony and Christ up on Mount Tabor, equating the ruler to the Son of God ascending into Heaven.

Such an explicit arrangement actually marks somewhat of a departure from Byzantine protocol. In Byzantium, according to Kitzinger, "there was a strong theoretical objection against the portrayal of any other person - and be it the emperor himself - in the likeness of the Saviour."¹⁷² While the Cappella Palatina did not *per se* offer a permanent representation of Roger II as Christ - outside of his physical presence during the ceremonies - there is another instance in which it is the case. The portrait in the church of La Martorana, briefly mentioned in a past chapter, shows Christ himself crowning Roger II. Their faces, including their hair and facial hair, are so similar that they easily could be swapped for one another. This daring artistic decision, despite the established tradition, is

¹⁷¹Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 128.

¹⁷²Ernst Kitzinger, "On the portrait of Roger II in the Martorana in Palermo". *Proporzioni*, 1950, 30-33.

characterized by Kitzinger as “Byzantine, but with a Western twist,” meaning that the overall style of this golden mosaic is Byzantine, but that its subject matter, the King in the likeness of Christ, is Western.¹⁷³ Beyond this graphic representation, the text of Philagathos reinforces the concept of Roger and Christ’s sameness, using the words ‘Saviour’ and ‘Christlike’ to address the Sicilian king in his homily.¹⁷⁴

To go back to the ritual of kneeling at the ruler’s feet, it is directly borrowed from Byzantine court ceremonial, which had appropriated it from the Persian tradition of *proskynesis*, literally ‘to come forward and kiss.’¹⁷⁵ At the court of Roger II, the ritual of kissing was replaced with bowing and not only applied to the common people, but also to the clergy, including the bishops.¹⁷⁶ While the details of this bowing ceremony in Sicily are not known, there exists a surviving testimony of *proskynesis* in Constantinople. Liutprand of Cremona was a diplomat sent to the capital of the Byzantine empire in the 10th century and has provided us with a detailed and quite interesting description of this particular practice: “He explains that after he had prostrated himself three times and lifted his head, he was shocked to find that the emperor, who had been seated on a throne at eye-level, was elevated as high as the ceiling of the hall and was wearing totally different attire.”¹⁷⁷ The logistics of this procedure are unfortunately hard to understand: how was the emperor lifted up so high? How did he change attire without the audience noticing? How was it appropriate for the emperor to change in a sacred, public space? It has not been mentioned by other scholars, but parallels can definitely be drawn between this repetition of bowing

¹⁷³Kitzinger, “Portrait,” 32.

¹⁷⁴Kitzinger, “Portrait,” 32.

¹⁷⁵In the Eastern Orthodox church, this ritual is still performed today during the adoration of icons.

¹⁷⁶Mack Smith, 26.

¹⁷⁷ Cyril A. Mango, *The art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: sources and documents*. University of Toronto Press, 2013, 209-210.

movements and Muslim prayer rituals. The term mosque itself, in Arabic *masjid*, means 'place of prostration' and is where Muslims perform cycles of standing, kneeling and bowing to the ground while reciting prayers.¹⁷⁸ While the testimony of Philagatos raises more questions, it does give us a better idea of liturgical practices in Byzantium and hints at a certain appreciation for theatricality. This fits in quite well with the experience of the Transfiguration, as the audience (or apostles) witness the emperor (Christ) changing before their eyes (being transfigured) and ascending towards the ceiling (Heaven).¹⁷⁹ In addition, this echoes the scene of the Ascension which occupied the western wall of the northern transept, thus equating the upper sphere of the church (including the royal balcony) to Paradise.¹⁸⁰

Although Tronzo argues otherwise, based on our knowledge of the architecture of the chapel and of the contemporary liturgical practices, we would like to offer an alternative narrative for the usage of the space. In the case of Roger II and the Cappella Palatina, we imagine that a public ceremony would have taken place in the nave, before the king walked up to his balcony to take part in the liturgy. This succession of events would have created the perfect parallel between Roger and Christ in the context of the Transfiguration, which symbolizes an upward transition from Earth to Heaven. An inverse sequence of events, starting up in the balcony and ending down in the nave would not have carried the same deep symbolic meaning and would have anchored Roger to the terrestrial world rather than lifted him to the realm of the divine. In our narrative, a civic gathering involving the king's subjects would have been conducted in the nave first, facing west

¹⁷⁸Vincent J. Cornell, *Voices of Islam*. Westport (Conn.): Praeger, 2007, 13.

¹⁷⁹Ćurčić, "Some Palatine," 138.

¹⁸⁰Slobodan Ćurčić, "Further thoughts on the palatine aspects of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo." *The Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Swiridoff, 2011): 525-533, 531.

towards the royal platform. The people would have come to pay respect and bow to Roger, Christ-like and therefore acting as their intermediary with God, recalling the scene in which the apostles kneel before Christ on Mount Tabor. Only after the *proskynesis* would the king have ascended the stairs up to his balcony in the sanctuary to reach the realm of the divine, distanced from his terrestrial kingdom, echoing the Transfiguration of Christ.

The civic ceremonies, like the liturgy, were greatly inspired by the practices of the Byzantine empire. Brent also points out the influence of northern traditions, stating that in the case of German emperors, from Charlemagne onward, “the consecration of the ruler and his acclamation by the court took place” in two different locations as well.¹⁸¹ Although, once again, no Sicilian text has survived to describe the processes of these occasions in the Cappella, we must look at the building itself to answer our questions. The presence of a narthex behind the west wall and of two doors leading into the side aisles of the nave cannot be taken into account in this analysis, as they were additions of the 1180s under William II. We must therefore look elsewhere to determine the entrance of the chapel, specifically at the marble floor. (Fig. 44) Made in the *opus sectile* technique, Philagatos describes it as extremely colorful, resembling a never-ending spring meadow.¹⁸² Since similar geometric patterns in medieval, Byzantine and Islamic floors usually indicated a sense of movement, Tronzo concluded that it would have created a path through the chapel and to the king himself, as part of a ceremonial procession.¹⁸³ This close relationship between architectural space and floor decoration was an important concept in Byzantium, more so than in the West, where pavements particularly in Italian churches “tend to be

¹⁸¹Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 18. Citing Brent.

¹⁸²Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 30. Translation of Philagathos.

¹⁸³Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 100.

much looser in this respect.”¹⁸⁴ Tronzo mentions the floor of the Pantokrator monastery (now turned mosque) in Constantinople as an appropriate 12th-century comparison for the Cappella. (Fig. 45) It is a well-preserved Byzantine example of an arrangement in which “considerable attention was paid to the coordination of pavement and architecture in the sense that each portion of the building defined architecturally, each bay and subdivision, was reflected in the composition in the floor,” in this case, “where not only the central space but also the ancillary areas and even the soffits of the arches are reflected in the design.”¹⁸⁵

The original entrance of the Cappella has been established to be at the western end of the south aisle because of the details which differentiate this particular spot from the rest of the floor. Instead of the ample curvilinear or rectilinear patterns observed everywhere else, we can see here narrow bands filled with much smaller, intricate patterns. In ancient and medieval buildings, this would have marked the place of a threshold.¹⁸⁶ To further support this claim, we must note that this threshold is placed in front of the largest door of the edifice. The public would have reached the door from the Cortile Maqueda, where they would have ascended a large staircase, which was mentioned in Chapter 4.¹⁸⁷ Once they had passed the threshold into the church, the visitors had a profile view of the king, who would have been standing on the platform on the west wall (the throne itself was one of William II’s additions). Following the processional route provided by the marble floor, they would have known to move down the aisle one bay to

¹⁸⁴Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 36.

¹⁸⁵Tronzo, *The Cultures*, 36.

¹⁸⁶Tronzo, “Object-Enigma,” 223.

¹⁸⁷ The archaeological evidence was brought up by Valenti. See chapter 4.

their right, towards the east. In this spot, there is actually a second threshold, which would have led the visitors into the nave, right in front of the royal platform to perform the greeting ceremony of *proskynesis*.¹⁸⁸ Tronzo does not mention the exit procession of the subjects, but we can imagine that after their encounter with the king, the visitors could have crossed the nave to enter the north aisle and descended the inside staircase at the eastern end. Once below, in the crypt, they could have gone back out into the Cortile Maqueda where they had started their journey. The use of the two inside staircases was definitely part of the procession under William II. The public would enter through the two doors from the narthex and gather in the aisles - without entering the nave - before exiting down to the crypt.¹⁸⁹

As it would be his main point of exposure to his subjects, Roger II planned a very particular decorative program for his platform. We have mentioned in the previous chapter the strong Solomonic imagery, including the presence of lions and six-stepped staircase. In addition to these references, we must also imagine that the wall behind him did not yet have a mosaic of Christ, but rather a large window which was later filled in by William II.¹⁹⁰ The presence of light shining down onto the ruler would have greatly contributed to his image as a divinely appointed figure, creating a sort of halo around him. Imagining a visitor bowing at the bottom of the steps, looking up to the king swallowed by light, we can immediately see the parallel with the apostles witnessing the Transfiguration of Christ. According to Philagatos, Roger II would preside over these ceremonies - at least during the

¹⁸⁸ Tronzo, "Object-Enigma," 223.

¹⁸⁹ Ćurčić, 142.

¹⁹⁰ Tronzo, "Object-Enigma," 215.

inauguration, which he describes in detail - wearing the Diadem of Wisdom.¹⁹¹ This combination of symbolic details create the setting for Roger to act as “rex et sacerdos, supreme judge of civic and ecclesiastical matters.”¹⁹² In this western part of the building, the people had to answer to him, not God, to whom they had their backs turned when facing the king. The Cappella was therefore a monument where the worship of both Roger and God were to be conducted separately and equally.

C) Departure From Tradition

Although the divine character of the all-powerful ruler represented half of the identity of the Byzantine emperor, Roger II expanded on this concept even more during his reign. This can especially be seen in the hierarchical system he established between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms. The architecture and liturgical practices of the Cappella Palatina, as we have understood them, do not offer an opportunity for the people to be in direct contact with the higher power: their view is literally blocked from the altar and sacred ceremonies. The king is their only intermediary as he is the only one with a position in “both realms.”¹⁹³ The case was very different in Byzantium: “Although the emperor was the head, he was not the sole hinge between the here and the beyond; the possibility of access, unmediated and direct, to the higher power was something that was always open to all.”¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, in the royal churches of his descendants, such as Monreale and Cefalu, the only throne in the building is part of the sanctuary, but placed at eye-level, facing the seat of the bishop. Roger’s obsession with imitating the all-powerful, divinely chosen

¹⁹¹Beck, 121.

¹⁹²Ćurčić, “Some Palatine,” 143.

¹⁹³Tronzo, “Object-Enigma,” 227.

¹⁹⁴Tronzo, “Object-Enigma,” 227.

Byzantine emperor seemed to have eventually surpassed the very standards he was aiming to achieve. The other particularity which defines Roger's program for the Cappella as unique is his choice of Islamic art for the audience hall. He truly believed that these motifs and techniques were more suited to be the setting for his terrestrial kingdom and this was understandable, as we know that the city of Palermo herself was predominantly Muslim at the time. His successors, especially William II, would implement many changes that would greatly diminish the Islamic character of this space, such as the addition of Old Testament scenes underneath the muqarnas in the nave.

By appropriating Byzantine imagery, Roger sought to emulate the powerful status of the Byzantine Emperor. With the Cappella Palatina, he created for himself a stage from which he could perform his many different roles both in the terrestrial and divine kingdoms. While he drew much of his inspiration from imperial Western and Byzantine precedents, we must observe that Roger went beyond anything that had been done before him by establishing himself as an equal to Christ and therefore as sole intermediary between the people and God.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis we have examined a number of comparisons for the Cappella Palatina in the West and East. This process has allowed us to determine some of the decorative and architectural models which influenced Roger II in the conscious design of his palace chapel. In common with other scholars, we have come to the conclusion that the Byzantine empire, its traditions, art, and symbols had a particularly strong impact on the Norman king. On a lesser scale, Islamic art plays a very interesting role inside the Cappella. The presence of Islamic motifs, such as the muqarnas ceiling and the Kufic inscriptions, can be interpreted as an appropriate choice in terms of political strategy and secular symbolism. Roger II established his capital in a predominantly Muslim region and therefore used the local vocabulary of Islamic art for the depiction of his court and secular kingdom. The Western elements, such as the longitudinal nave, have been discussed here as having lesser importance; specifically, the space of the nave itself which does not function as it would have in Western churches, and is used in Palermo as a palace hall rather than an audience space for liturgical purposes. Interestingly, Roger's descendants would follow the opposite path, reinforcing Western traditions and progressively diminishing Eastern motifs inside the chapel, a choice which was reflected in their society and government.

Although the hybrid character of the Cappella was never debated, this analysis has given us the opportunity to detect Roger's departures from existing models, and to speculate on the context of the decisions made during the chapel's design. His concept of earthly and divine kingdoms united within the same space yet working separately allowed him to create a position of power which differed from the emperors in the East and West,

before and after him. The precedents established by rulers such as Charlemagne and Justinian shaped Roger II's idea of kingship, especially the latter, due to the Byzantine history of the island and the influence of the Byzantine Empire in the Mediterranean in the twelfth century. Taking the concept of the Byzantine Emperor a step further, Roger effectively elevated himself to the realm of Jesus Christ, acting as the sole connection and intercessor between God and his people, the redeemer of souls, the Savior. The Cappella Palatina was ostensibly built as a chapel, dedicated to the worship of God, but we have seen that the most important figure within these walls was in reality Roger himself. The space was an essential instrument in the shaping of his identity as an all-powerful ruler.

Roger II was not destined to rule and did not originally inherit a royal crown, yet he managed to unify a religiously and politically divided people in Sicily and south Italy. His strategic manipulation of the kingdom's diversified culture contributed to unique artistic creations and long-lasting prosperity. The Norman period of Sicily established the island as a strong, organized player at the center of Mediterranean trade and politics. For centuries after his death, Roger's magnificent reign lived on through his descendants in the powerful European Houses of Hohenstaufen, Capet, Barcelona, Habsburg, Savoy, and Bourbon.

Figures

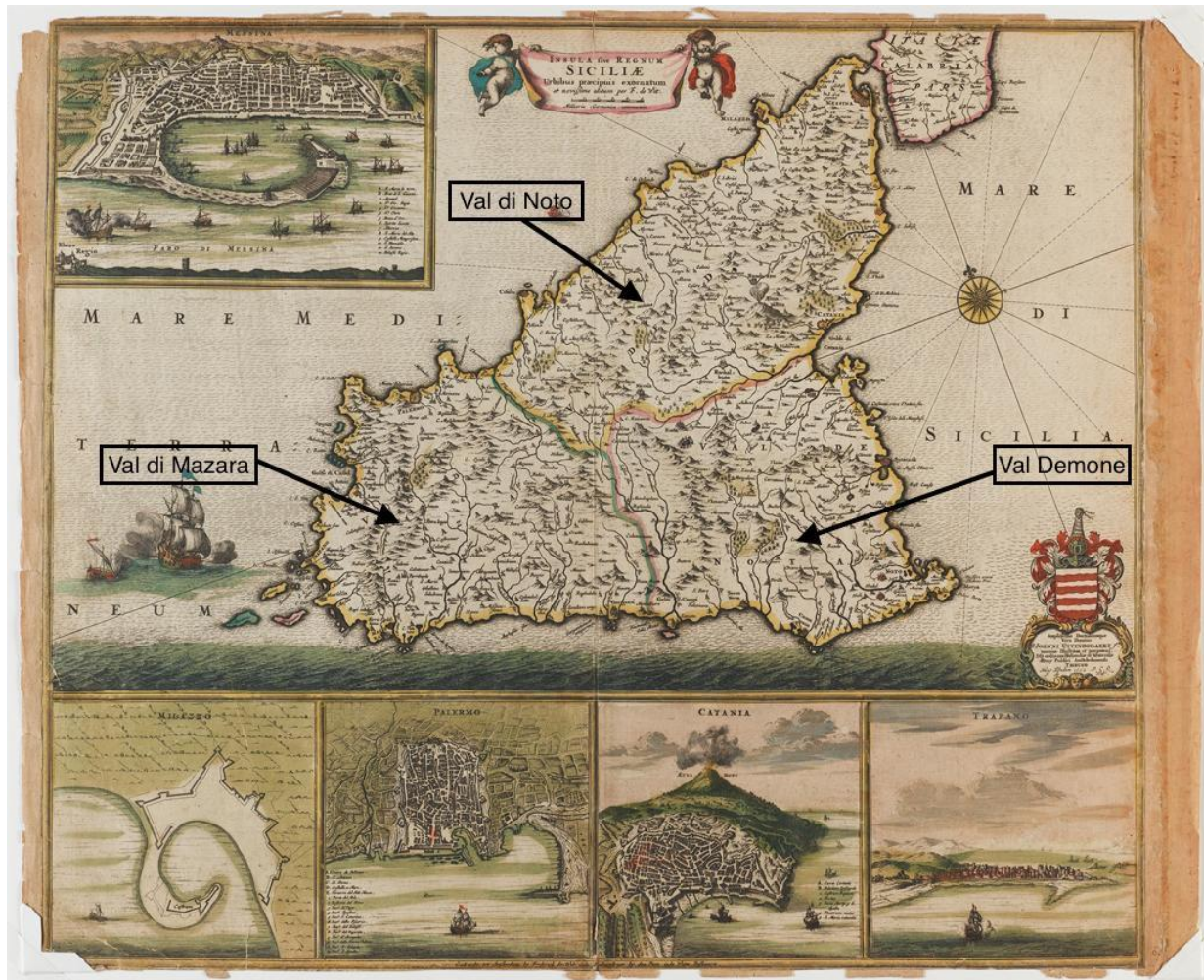


Fig. 1. Map of Sicily (Val di Mazara in the West, Val di Noto in the North, Val Demone in the East).
French. 1662. Map of Sicily. Prints. Place: Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection.
http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_41316170.

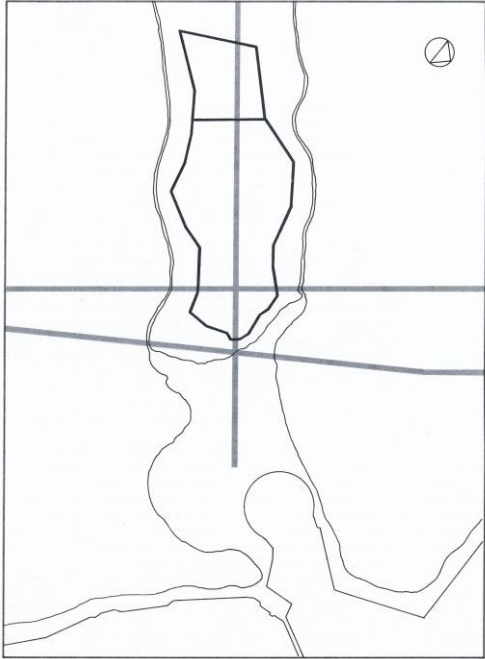


Fig. 2. City wall of Palermo under the Byzantines.
 (See Fig. 4 for comparison)
 Maurici, *Castelli Medievali*, 25.

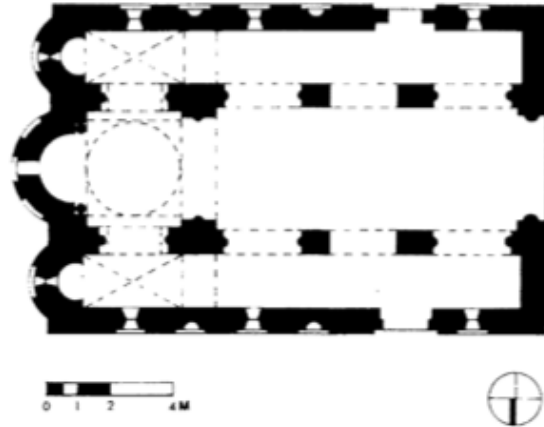


Fig. 3. Example of a domed church in Calabria:
 S. Maria de Tridetti, plan, later 11th to early 12th c.
 Nicklies, "Builders," 103.

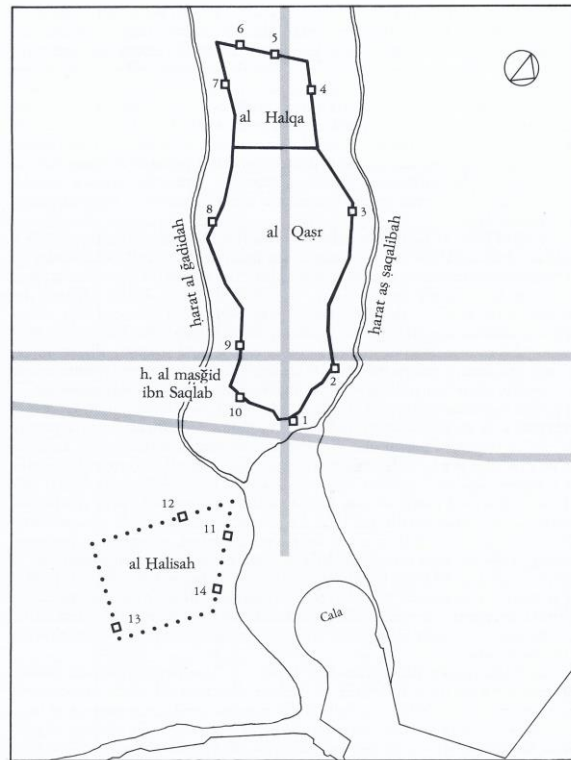


Fig. 3. City wall of Palermo under the Arabs.
 Maurici, *Castelli Medievali*, 57.



Fig. 5. Example of Kufic script: Details from the border of a Qur'an, Iran and India (?), 14th century. Ink, opaque watercolour and gold on paper.
Canby, *Islamic Art*, 12.



Fig. 6. Example of geometric patterning: Octagon detail from the Blacas ewer, northern Iraq, Mosul, signed Shuja bin Mana, dated AH 629/AD 1232. Brass inlaid with silver and copper.
Canby, *Islamic Art*, 21.



Fig. 7. Example of arabesque: Pilgrim bottle, Syria, 1340-60. Gilded and enamelled glass.
Canby, *Islamic Art*, 28.



Fig. 8. Zisa pavilion, left. Cuba pavilion, right. Palermo. 1180.

1165-1175. La Zisa (al-aziz). Architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/HARTILL_12316281.

King William II. 1180. Cuba Palace, exterior. Architecture and City Planning, Architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ISLAMIC_DB_1039587277.



Fig. 9. Example of muqarnas. Shah Mosque, muqarnas. Ordered by Shah `Abbas I; finished under Shah Safi I. 1611-c. 1638.

Architecture and City Planning, Architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ISLAMIC_DB_1039423420.

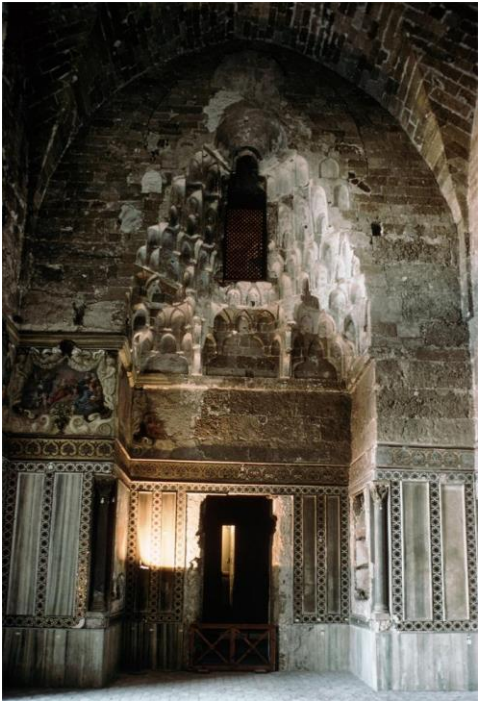


Fig. 10. Remains of muqarnas inside Zisa pavilion, Palermo. 1165-1175. La Zisa (al-aziz), Transverse view through passage openings. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/HARTILL_12316290.



Fig. 11. Mantle of Roger II. Muslim artisans in the Royal Workshop of Palermo. c. 1133-34. Place: Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (Vienna, Austria). http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/LESSING_ART_10311441087.



Fig. 12. Christ crowning Roger II. St Mary of the Admiral, Palermo. 1143-1151. Christ Crowning King Roger II. mosaic. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_10310196562.

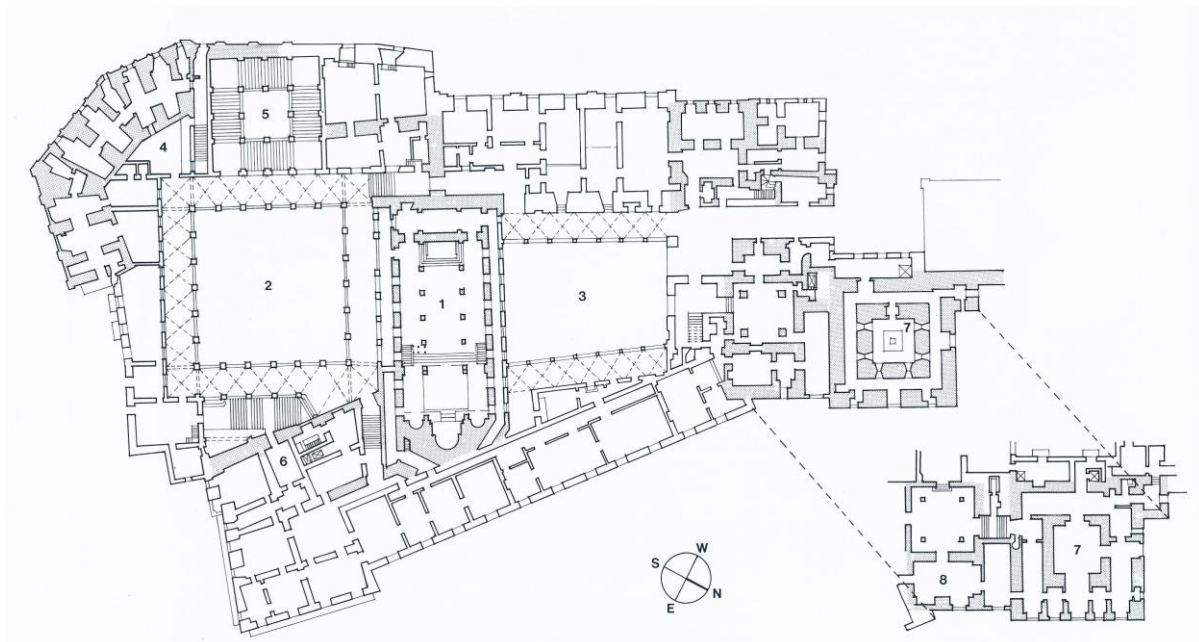


Fig. 13. Norman Palace of Palermo. 1.Cappella Palatina; 2.Cortile Maqueda; 3. Cortile della Fontana; 4.Prigioni politiche; 5.Eighteenth-century staircase; 6.Torre Greca; 7.Torre Pisana; 8.Norman Stanza Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*, Fig. 5 (drawing: Ju Tan, based on *Palazzo dei Normanni*; pls. II and III).

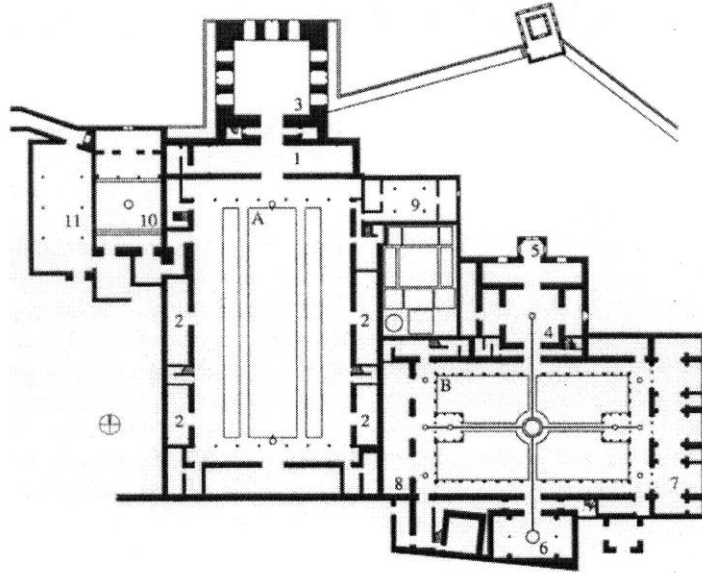


Figure 14. Ground floor of the Alhambra palace in the latter half of the fourteenth century. A: Patio de Comares; B: Patio de los Leones.
Willmert, "Alhambra," Figure 2.

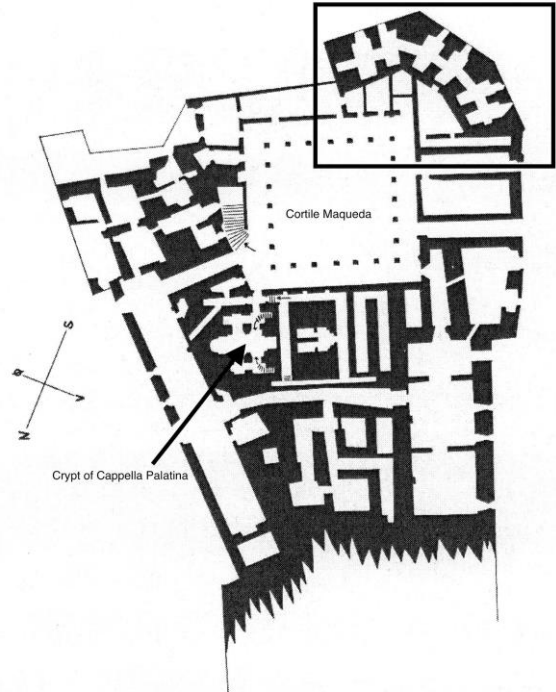


Fig. 15. First floor plan of Norman Palace, Palermo.
(Muslim foundations framed)
Beck, "The First Mosaics," Fig. 55.

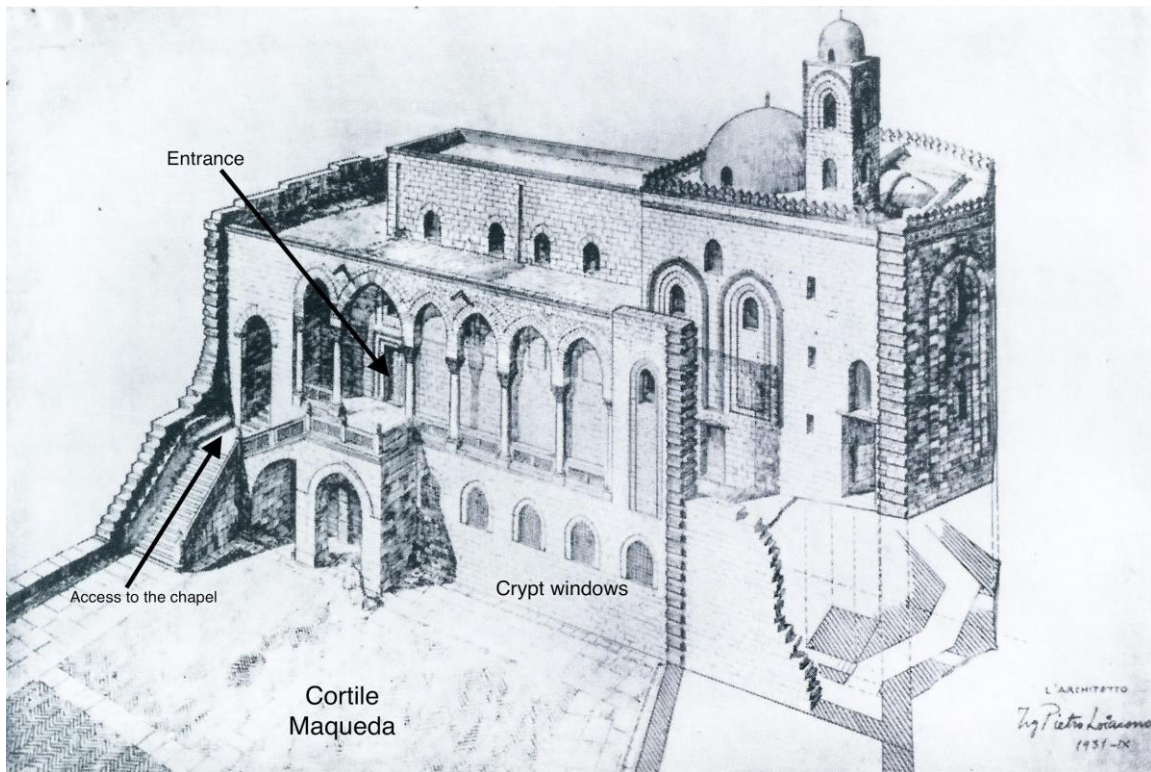


Fig. 16. Norman Palace, Palermo. Reconstruction of entrance into the Cappella Palatina in the period of Roger II.

Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*, Fig. 16 (photo: after Di Stefano, *Monumenti*, pl. 52, fig. 86).

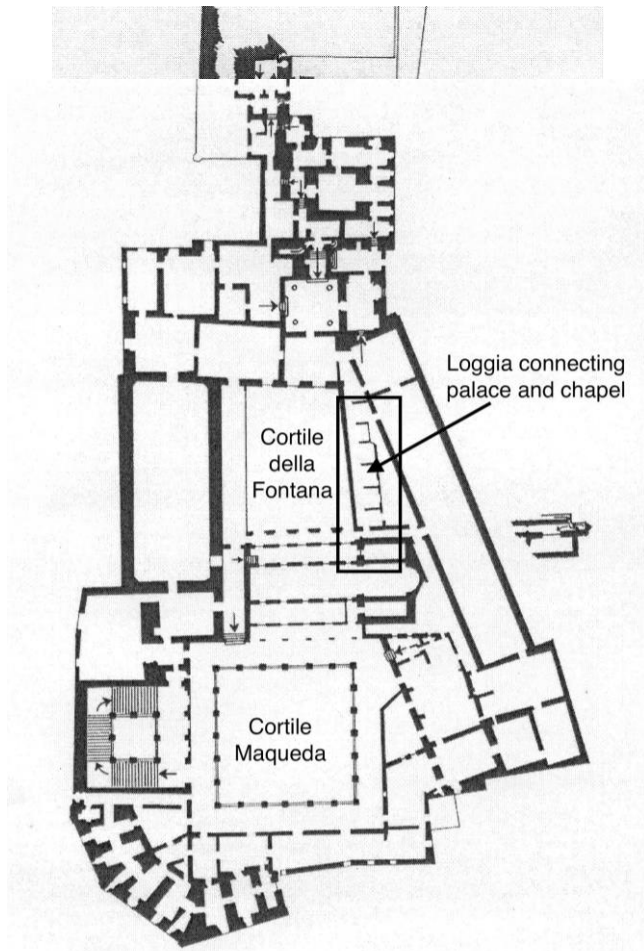


Fig. 17. Second floor plan of Norman Palace, Palermo. Beck, "The First Mosaics," Fig. 56.

Fig. 18. Third floor plan of Norman Palace, Palermo.

Beck, "The First Mosaics," Fig. 57.

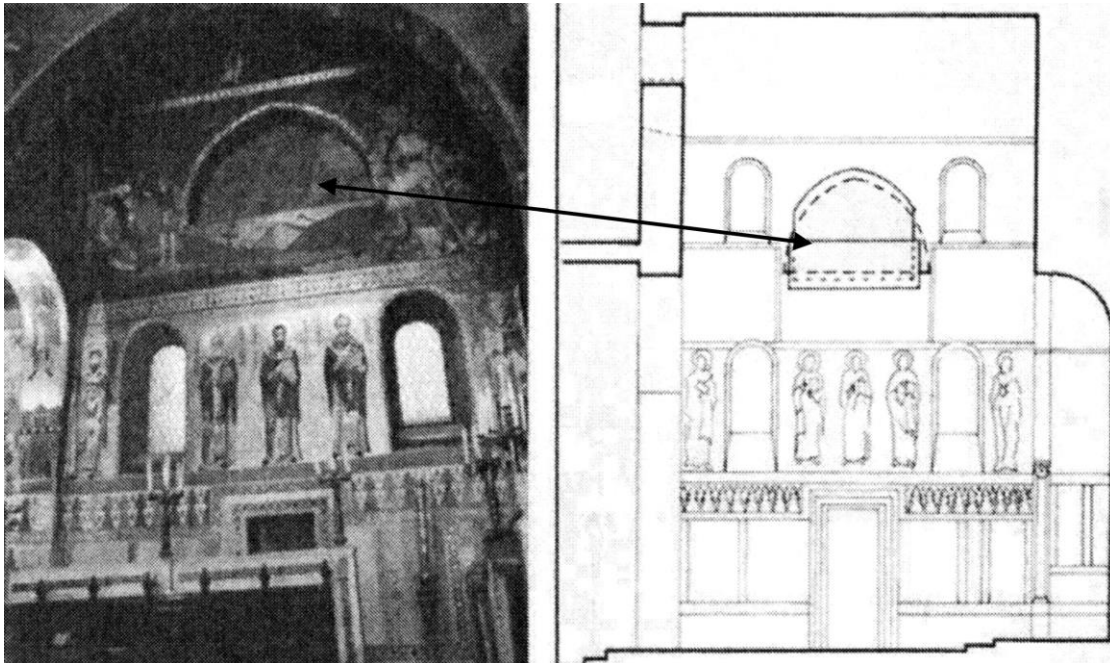


Fig. 19. Original opening of the royal balcony. Northern transept, Cappella Palatina.

Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," Fig. 7.



Fig. 20. Court of the Lions, Alhambra, Granada.

1377-1391. Granada: Alhambra: Court of the Lions: looking east. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_4182200003781

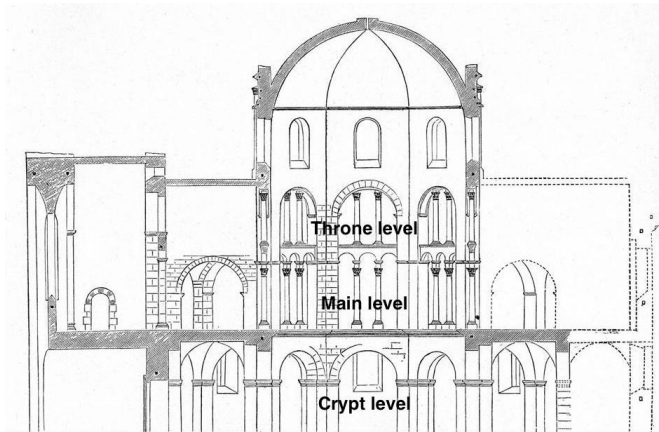


Fig. 21. Section plan of the chapel at Aachen.

Odo of Metz. 792-805. Palatine Chapel of Charlemagne section. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/KOHL_HISTORY_1039765339.

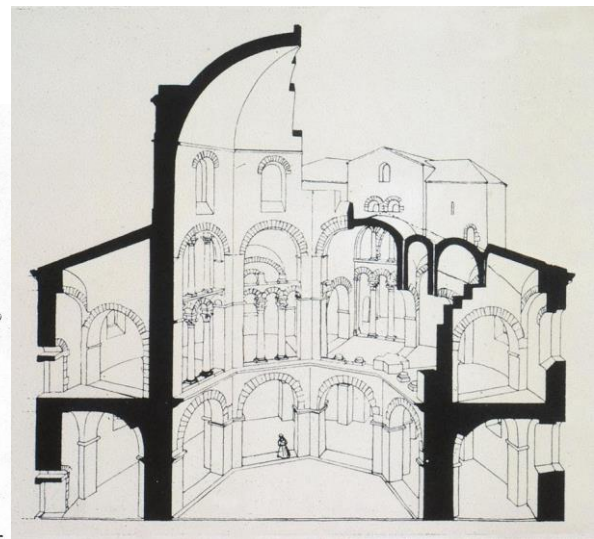


Fig. 22. Section plan of the chapel at Aachen.

792-800. Aachen: Palatine Chapel: cross section, Palatine Chapel. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003423280.



Fig. 23. Entrance to Cappella Palatina from Cortile Maqueda.

15th century, Image: 2011. Courtyard (cortile) of Norman Palace, Arches of Renaissance courtyard of Norman Palace. Architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ALANGDALEIG_10313899167.

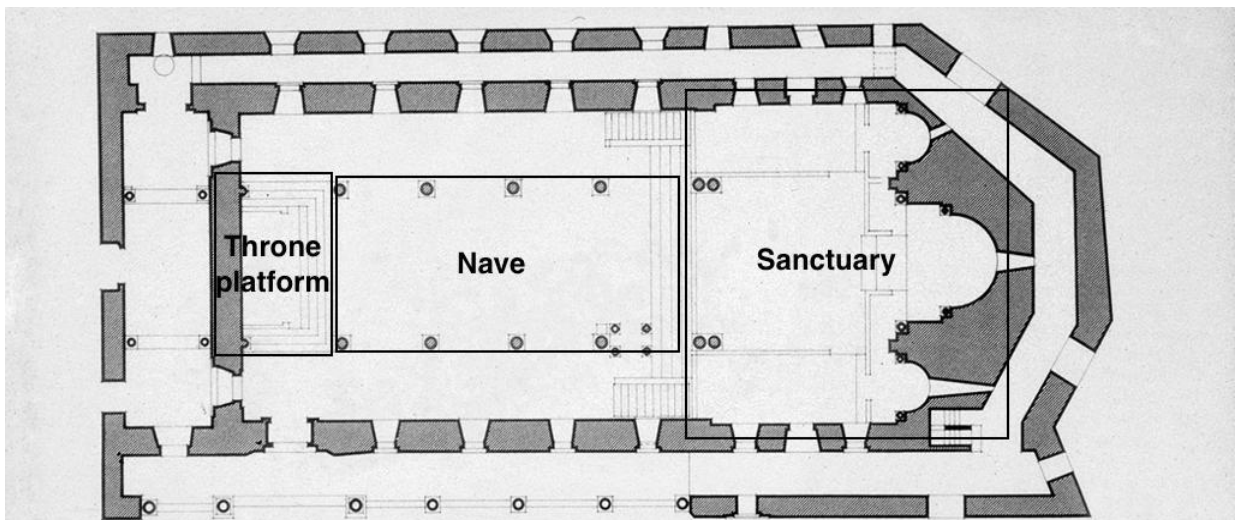


Fig. 24. Plan of the Cappella Palatina, Palermo.

Unknown. Begun 1130. Cappella Palatina. Ground plan. Palermo. Architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ABRMAWR_SITE_10312105368.

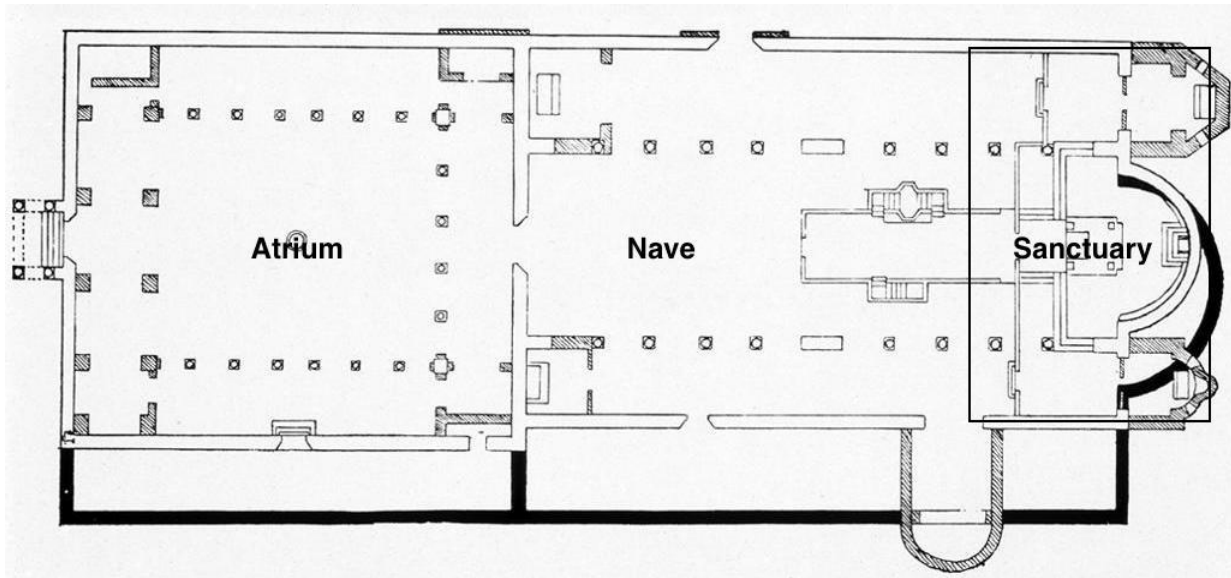


Fig. 25. Plan of San Clemente, Rome.

Unknown. 4th-12th century. San Clemente. Plan of upper church in relation to remains of lower church. Rome. Architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ABRMAWR_SITE_10312105181.

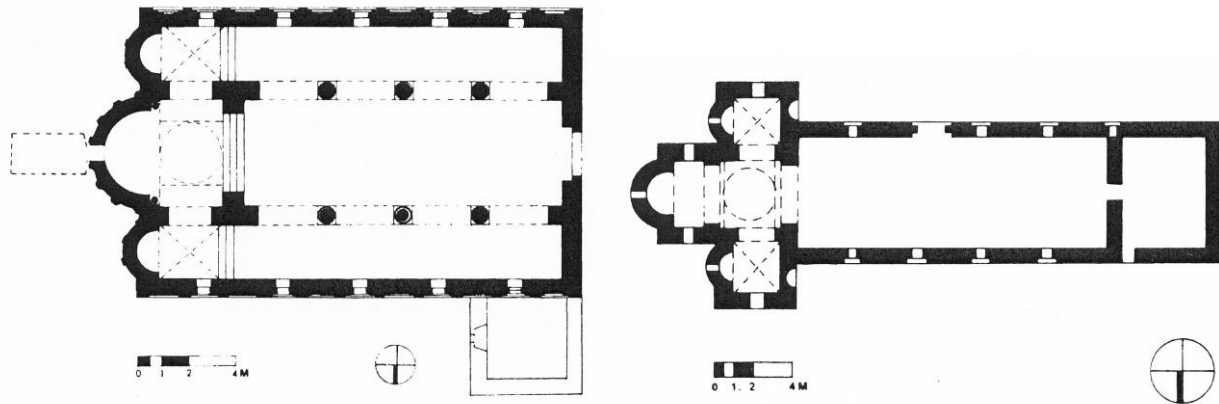


Fig. 26. SS. Pietro e Paolo at Itàla, Sicily (left) and S. Giovanni Vecchio at Bivongi, Calabria (right).
Nicklies, "Builders," Figures 5 and 11.



Fig. 27. Interior of Cappella Palatina, view to east.
Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*, Fig. 7.

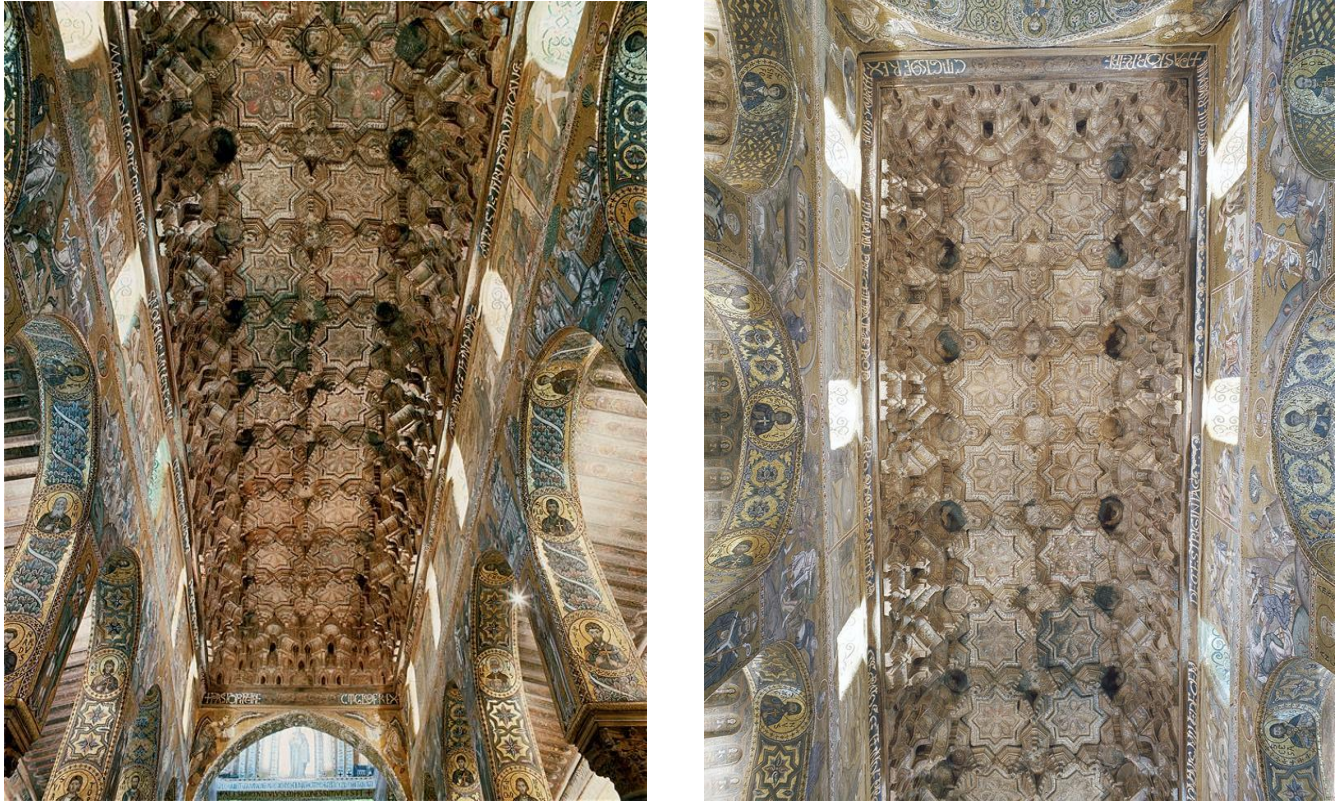


Fig. 28. Muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina.

1130-43. Palermo, Palatine Chapel, Interior, Ceiling. architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_1039931508. 1130-43. Palermo, Palatine Chapel, Interior, Ceiling. architecture. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_1039929825.

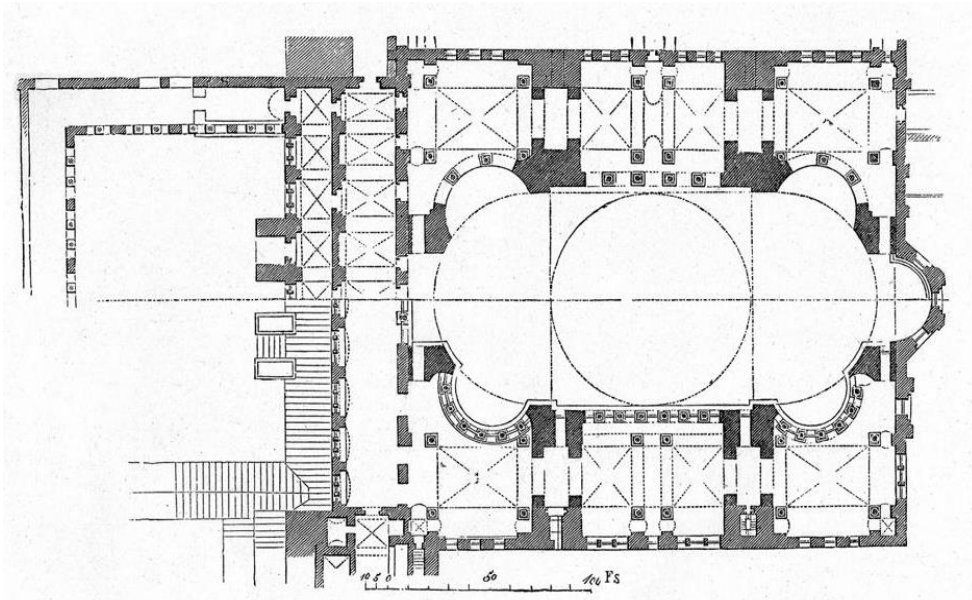


Fig. 29. Plan of the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

Anthemius of Tralles & Isidorus of Miletus, Greek. 532-537. Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Constantinople plan. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/KOHL_HISTORY_1039765327.

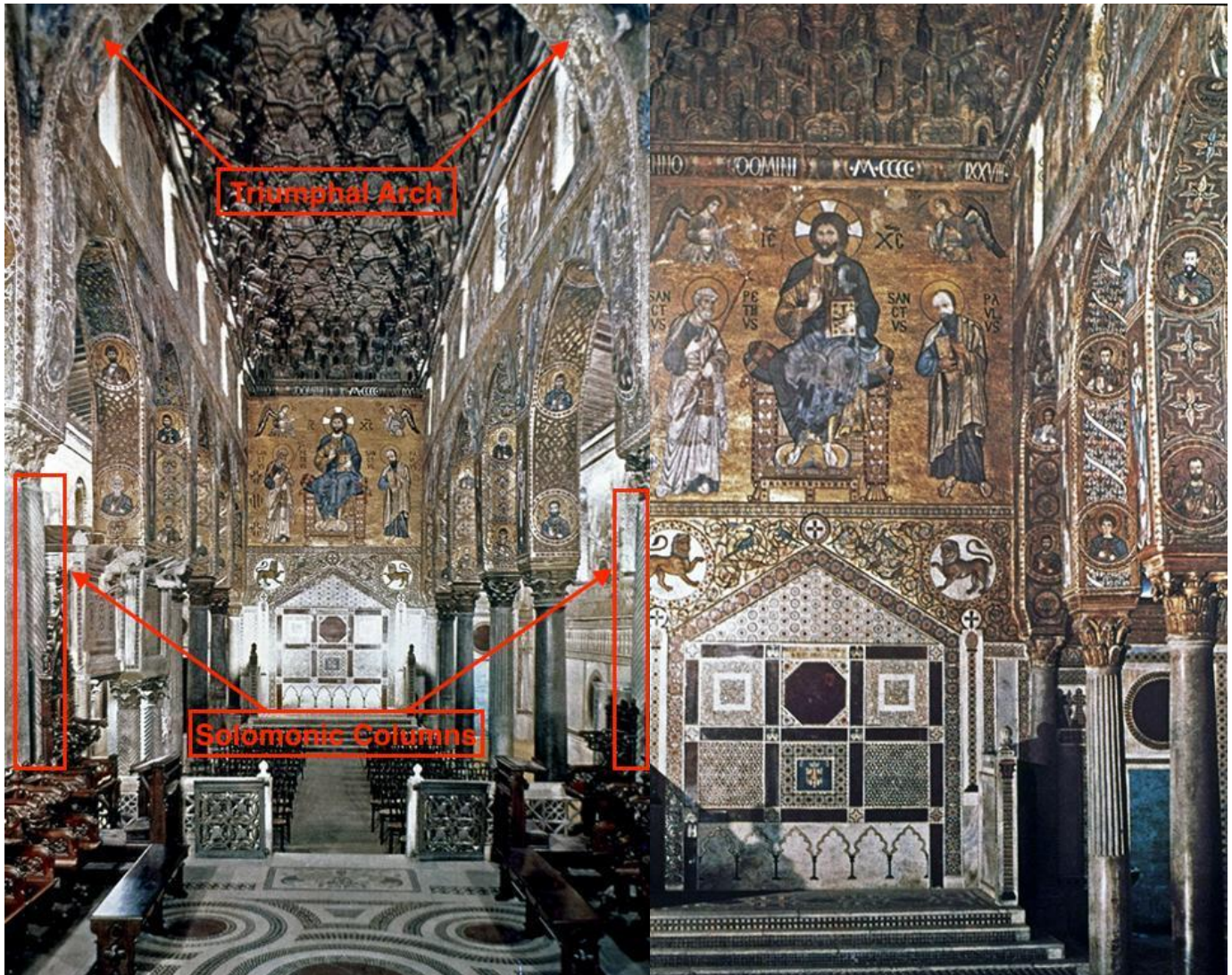


Fig. 30. Throne Platform, Cappella Palatina. View from the sanctuary (left) and view from the nave (right). Roger II (Norman ruler, 1095-1154). Work: begun 1132, consecrated in 1140, finished ca. 1170, Era: CE, Image: May 1976. Palatine Chapel
 Cappella Palatina
 Palace church
 Palace chapel, interior, west wall. chapel (rooms or structures). http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/SS7730878_7730878_10820797. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/SS7730878_7730878_10820799.

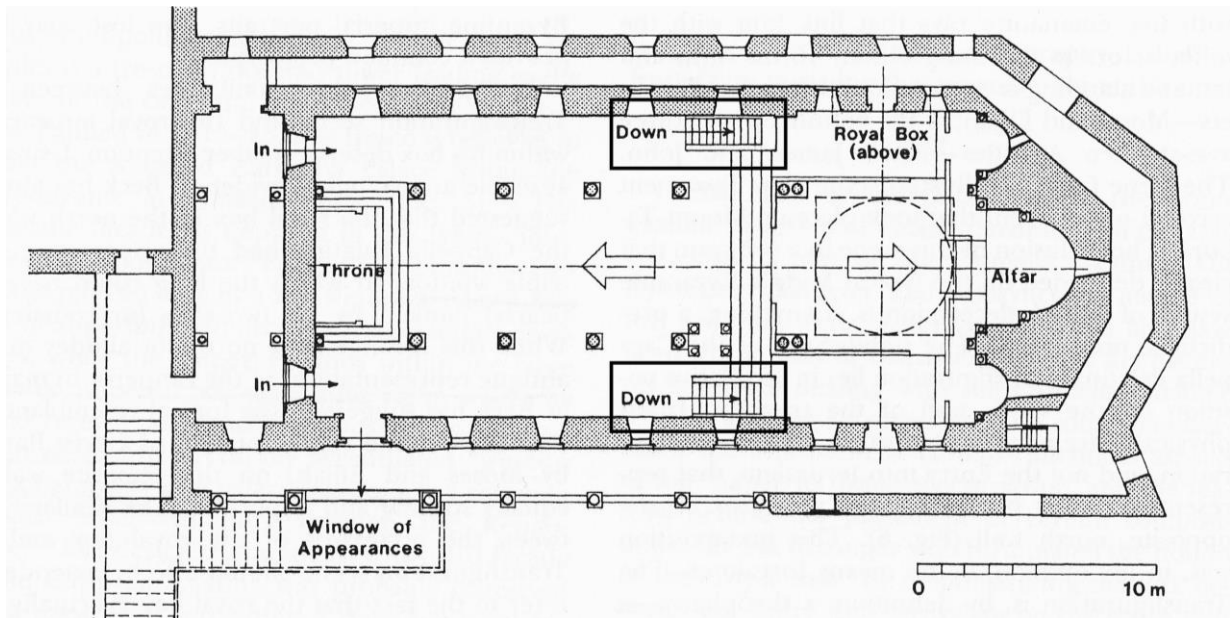


Fig. 31. Plan of Cappella Palatina, highlighting staircases leading to the crypt.
 Ćurčić, "Some Palatine Aspects," Fig. 4.

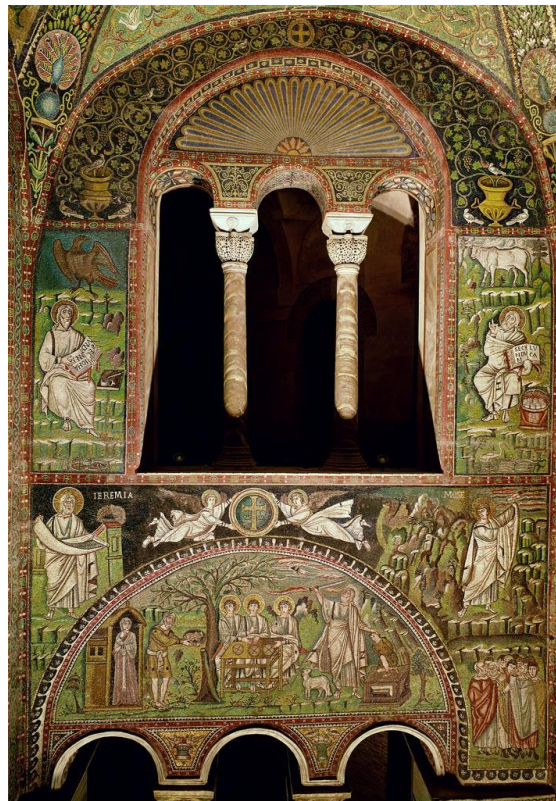


Fig. 32. Mosaics at San Vitale, Ravenna. Decorated c. 546-548. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_10310196653.



Fig. 33. Dome mosaic, Cappella Palatina.

1142-1143. Christ Pantocrator, surrounded by angels, dome. mosaic. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_10310196924.



Fig. 34. Mosaics at San Vitale, Ravenna. Emperor Justinian I and attendants (right) and empress Theodora with court (left).

547 CE. Emperor Justinian and his Attendants. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/LESSING_ART_1039490576.

Theodora & her Court. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001126190.

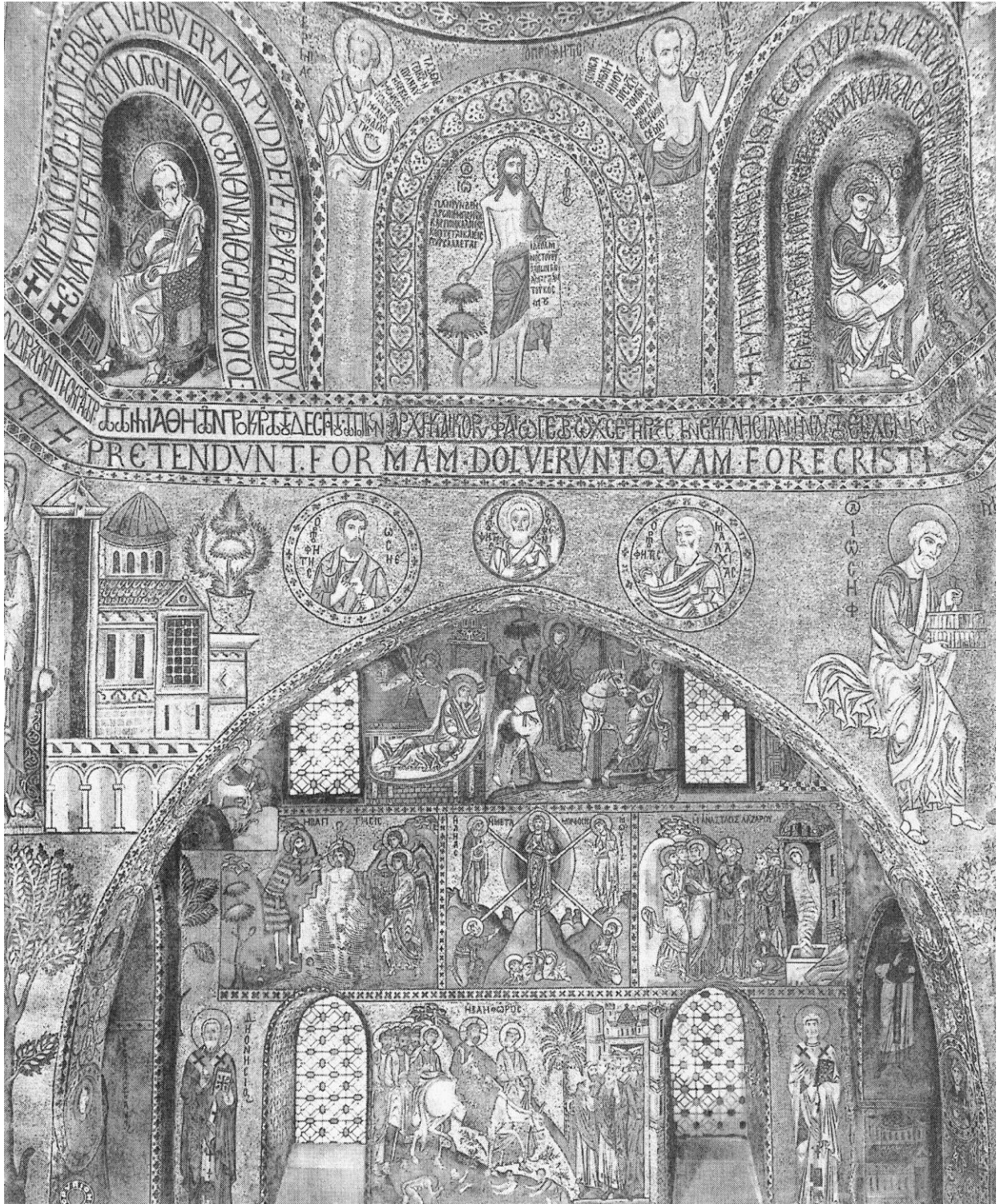


Fig. 35. View from the royal balcony, looking south. Cappella Palatina, Palermo.
 Tronzo, *Object-Enigma*, Fig. 12.



Fig. 36. Three Female Saints, west side of royal balcony. Cappella Palatina, Palermo.
Kitzinger, *Mosaics*, Fig. 16.



Fig. 37. Hodegetria, east side of royal balcony. Cappella Palatina, Palermo.
Beck, "The First Mosaics," Fig. 17.



Fig. 38. Musician figure, Cappella Palatina ceiling
Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*, Fig. 73



Fig. 39. Roger II and attendants, Cappella Palatina ceiling.
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File:Arabischer_Maler_der_Palastkapelle_in_Palermo_002.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arabischer_Maler_der_Palastkapelle_in_Palermo_002.jpg)



Fig. 40. Monocephalic lions, Cappella Palatina ceiling.
D'Erme, "The Cappella Palatina in Palermo," Fig. 1.

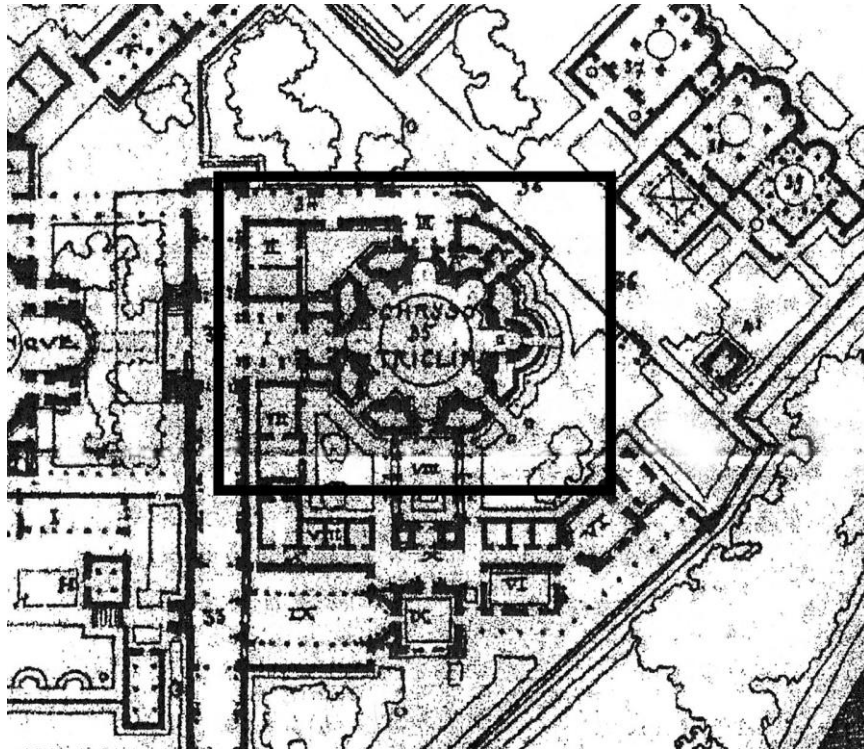


Fig. 41. Chrysotriklinos within the Great Palace of Constantinople. Walker, "Middle Byzantine Aesthetics," Fig. 15.

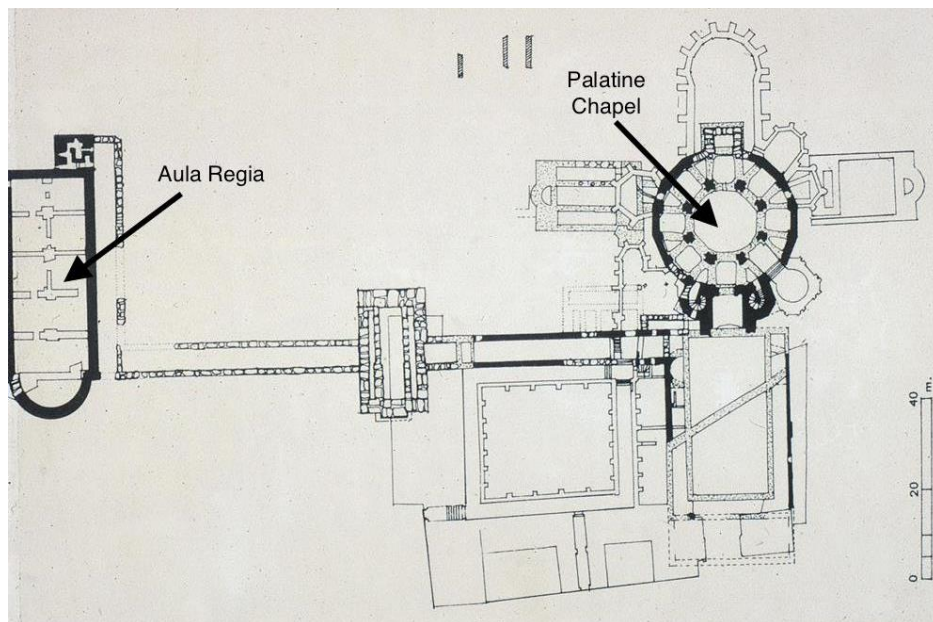


Fig. 42. Palace complex at Aachen. 792-805. Aachen: Palatine Chapel Plan with palace. http://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003423249.



Fig. 43. Transfiguration, detail of mosaic. Cappella Palatina, Palermo.
Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*, Fig. 151.

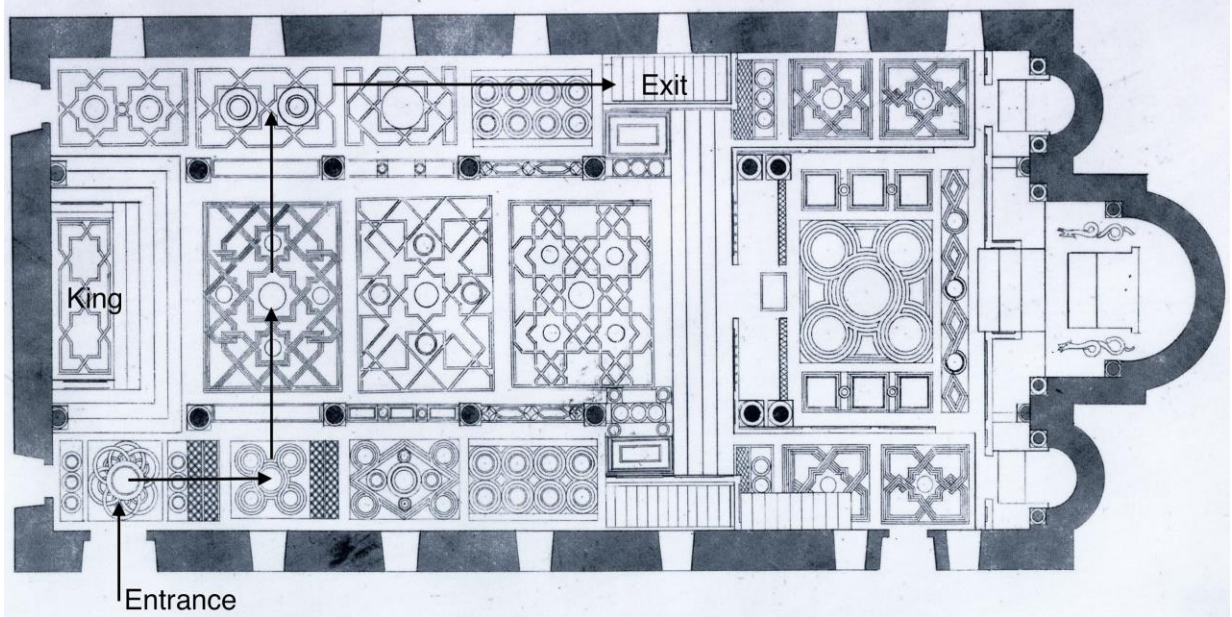


Fig. 44. Diagram of pavement, Cappella Palatina, Palermo with hypothetical processional route.
 Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*, Fig. 22.

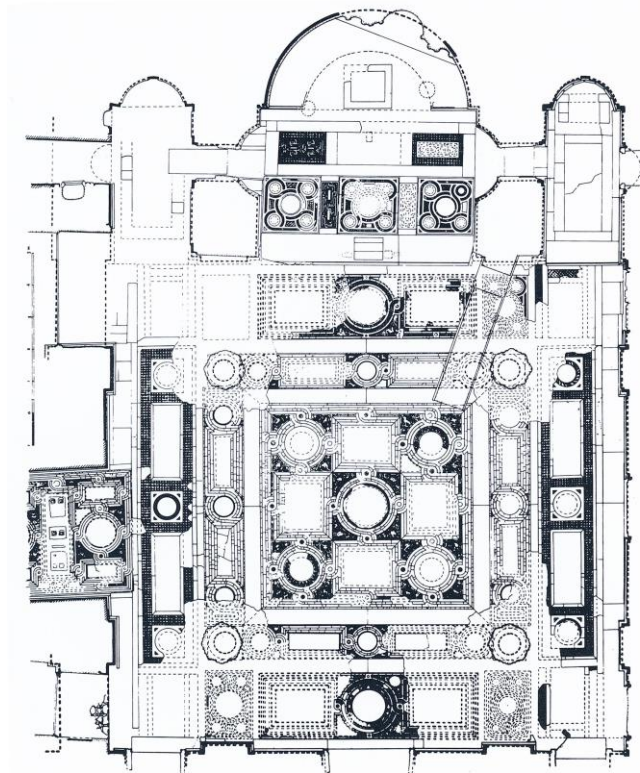


Fig. 45. Diagram of pavement, Pantokrator Monastery, Istanbul.
 Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*, Fig. 30 (Photo: after Eyice, "Two Mosaic Pavements," Fig. A)

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