

Monreale Cathedral

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Cathedral in Sicily that contains the largest surviving ensemble of mosaic decoration in Italy.

1. Introduction.

It was formerly a Benedictine monastery. The foundation of the monastic house of S Maria Nuova by King William II of Sicily (*see* Hauteville, House of family, §2) marked the climax of Norman ecclesiastical and artistic patronage on the island. The site chosen was on a hill overlooking Palermo. By a papal bull of 1174 (which refers to the monastery being under construction) the foundation was exempted from episcopal jurisdiction and made subject only to the papacy, which effectively delegated its involvement to the King as Apostolic Legate. In 1176 one hundred Cluniac monks, under the first abbot, Theobald (*reg* 1176–8), came at William's invitation from the abbey of Santa Trinità at Cava dei Tirreni near Salerno. In the same year William endowed the abbey with extensive properties, including a large area in west-central Sicily, and exempted it from royal taxation. In 1183 Pope Lucius III (*reg* 1181–5) constituted it as a metropolitan see with an abbot-archbishop; the name Monreale was used here for the first time.

Monreale was intended as a royal mausoleum and as a counterweight to the independence of Palermo Cathedral, then being rebuilt by Archbishop Gualtiero Offamilio (*reg* 1169–90). It is now known chiefly for the mosaic decoration of its church; but the cultural diversity of Norman rule in Sicily is exemplified by the contrast between the Byzantine mosaics and the sculpture of the cloister capitals, which is predominantly Romanesque. William II, who died in 1189, was the last ruler to be buried here; intended as the 'Saint-Denis of the Hautevilles', Monreale did not maintain its position after the downfall of the dynasty.

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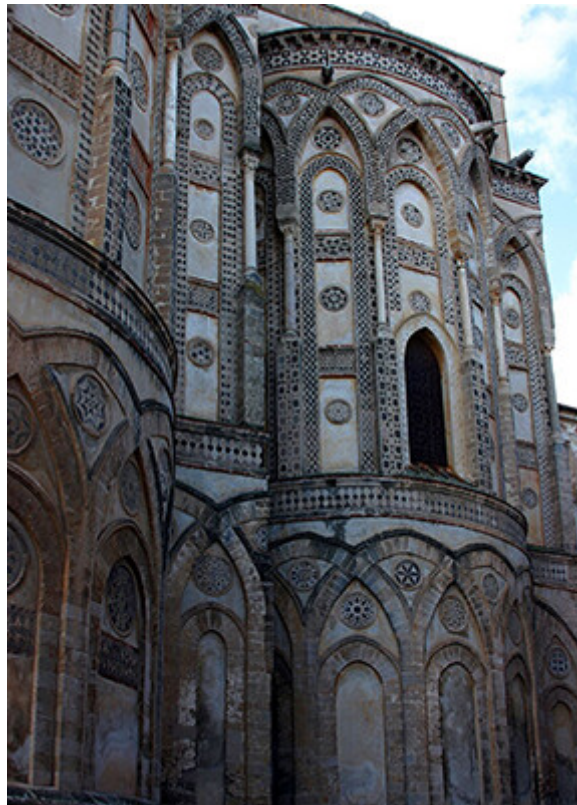
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2. Architecture.

The cathedral measures 102×40 m. At the west end two squat, square towers project beyond the aisle walls and flank a portico, built in 1770. The exterior of the east end is covered in polychrome decoration of inlaid stone, creating an elaborate pattern of intersecting arcades and roundels (see fig.). Inside, the nave appears unusually wide, with large pointed arcades supported by antique columns and capitals opening on to the aisles. The crossing with its massive, wall-like piers is almost square, and it is surmounted by a lantern pierced by large windows. The slightly projecting transepts lead to deep apsidal chapels. The dominating feature of the building is the main apse, framed by the receding sequence of arches in the chancel. The apses and presbyteries are spanned by pointed barrel vaults; other parts are covered by a timber roof. The large expanses of wall surface seem to have been designed with the mosaic decoration in mind.



Monreale Cathedral, exterior of the south and main apses, late 12th century; photo © José Luiz / Wikimedia / CC BY-SA 4.0

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3. Mosaics.

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The scheme of mosaics begins in the nave with the *Creation* and subsequent Old Testament scenes, progresses to the *Life of Christ* in the crossing, transepts and nave aisles, and culminates in the apse with a hieratic array consisting of *Christ Pantokrator* with his heavenly court. The programme imitates many features of the mosaic decoration of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, but it is more expansive; and in the absence of a cupola, the main apse and presbytery form the sole theological centre. Although the style of the mosaics is Byzantine, almost all the inscriptions are in Latin, not Greek, and the disposition of the scenes in unbroken friezes is contrary to Byzantine practice. At Monreale the walls are covered with images: the surfaces not containing the main scenes—piers, soffits, and spandrels—bear prophets, saints, and angels.

The mosaics of the original western entrance portico were destroyed in 1770, but it is known that they consisted of scenes from the *Life of the Virgin* and the *Infancy of Christ*. The nave bears Old Testament scenes in two tiers from the *Creation* to *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (see fig.). The cycle is similar to that in the nave of the Cappella Palatina, but some composite scenes have been expanded into separate episodes. The placing of Old Testament scenes in the nave had Italian rather than Byzantine origins. On the west wall the cycle is interrupted to include three scenes from the lives of the south Italian bishop-martyrs Castrensis, Cassius, and Castus. The relics of St Castrensis had been given to William II in 1177.



Monreale Cathedral, mosaics depicting the story of Abraham and Esau on the nave arcade, c. 1180–90; photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY

The New Testament scenes form the largest surviving monumental New Testament cycle in either East or West. No attempt is made to place the scenes usually considered most important in the most prominent positions. The *Infancy* scenes, from the *Annunciation to Zacharias* to the *Baptism*, are arranged in a double tier around the walls of the crossing. Miracle scenes fill the nave aisles. Each transept arm contains a triple tier of Christological scenes: from the *Temptations* to the *Judgement of Pilate* in the south, and in the north the continuation of the Passion with *Resurrection* scenes, ending at *Pentecost*. The iconography is predominantly Byzantine, but it appears not to be dependent on the Cappella Palatina, where many of the scenes are absent. Whereas the layout of the nave mosaics is essentially a refinement of that of the Palermo cycle—for instance in making sure that the scenes are not cut off by the arcade—in the crossing and transepts the disposition of scenes was much more experimental.

The main apse of Monreale is a variation on that of Cefalù Cathedral. The image of Christ Pantokrator fills the conch with an all-embracing gesture. Below, the Virgin sits enthroned with the Christ Child on her knees, flanked by archangels and Apostles, with a row of saints below. Both rows continue from the apse on to the presbytery walls: but whereas the Apostles turn towards the centre, the saints below are shown in

strict frontality. The choice of saints, which includes the earliest surviving representation of St Thomas Becket, canonized in 1173, seems to reflect William II's ecclesiastical policy. The side apses and chapels contain scenes from the lives of St Peter (south) and St Paul (north). Each sits enthroned in the conch of his respective apse. Where the Cappella Palatina had a unified sequence of scenes from their lives (in the nave aisles), at Monreale they have been separated.

Two royal images are found in the crossing. Above the royal throne on the north-east pier is a mosaic of *Christ Crowning William II*, the inspiration for which is to be found in the mosaic panel of Roger II being crowned by Christ in the church of the Martorana in Palermo, which itself depends on the coronation rituals and portraits of Byzantine emperors. On the opposite pier William is shown offering the church of Monreale to its patron, the Virgin.

Despite some discernible differences of style between the mosaics in different parts of the building, for instance in modelling techniques, the mosaics generally display a homogeneous vocabulary of faces, gestures, draperies, and ornamental motifs. Entire walls are treated as unified formal units. Overall there is little evidence of stylistic change or development, nor are there conspicuous gaps or overlaps in the iconographic programme. It is likely that the mosaics were executed in a single campaign, and that they were substantially complete by the time of William II's death in 1189.

The most instructive way to look at the style of Monreale is in relation to that of the same scenes in the Cappella Palatina. For all their rhythmical agitation, the figures at Monreale are not more dramatically expressive. Drapery folds are more intricate and form swirling patterns, in which the parts of the body (hips, knees, and calves) are isolated at the centre of spiral movements. Seams perform zigzags, contours ripple. Despite the strong contrasts between shadows and highlights, few deep colours are used. Individual elements are subordinated to a larger complex of forms: figures are joined in groups that form a common contour, or are inscribed within settings whose contours echo those of the characters. This style is not foreshadowed in the Cappella Palatina, and there is little well-preserved Byzantine mosaic decoration of this period outside Sicily; but the evidence of wall paintings in Serbia, Russia, and Cyprus shows parallel developments and suggests that the style of Monreale was the outcome of renewed contact with Byzantine art.

The clear iconographic relationship between the Cappella Palatina and Monreale, considered together with their stylistic differences, raises questions about the transmission of compositional prototypes and the working practices of the artists involved. Demus and Kitzinger have distinguished iconographic prototypes from stylistic models, conceiving of the former being brought to life in terms of the latter. The use of 'motif' or 'pattern' books is evident in the adoption of substantially similar figure types to portray characters in similar poses in a variety of scenes.

Monreale marks the climax and the end of artistic production under the Normans in Sicily. The art forms patronized by royalty, and probably executed by Greek artists, lacked local roots and did not survive the fall of the Hauteville dynasty. For western Europe, Monreale must always have been a conspicuous artistic achievement, although its influence is difficult to measure against other sources of Byzantine art.

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4. Sculpture.

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The square cloister quadrangle on the south side of the cathedral is flanked on all sides by covered walks, which open on to the garth through pointed arcades carried on 100 double columns, each pair topped by a double capital, with quadruple columns at the corners. In the south-west corner is an open fountain house with a broad circular basin (see fig.). The bases, columns, and capitals are made of white marble, but each alternate pair has shafts inlaid with gold, red, and black glass mosaic in various patterns (chevron, scrolls, fluting, spirals, etc; see fig.); the shafts of the quadrilobe piers at the corners are carved with low-relief vine tendrils, inhabited scrolls, etc. The double capitals are uniform. Each has a heavy abacus and impost block, both usually carved from the same block of marble as the capital so that their function is more decorative than structural. Many of the capitals have the inverted bell shape of the Corinthian order, but each face is treated as a separate field for sculptural decoration. Despite their slightly elongated

proportions, the dominating effect is classical, an impression heightened by the deep, three-dimensional carving. The voussoirs of the arcades are of alternating black tufa and sandstone forming decorative patterns. The intrados of each arch overhangs its supporting abacus, making a very awkward junction, a feature that has prompted some scholars to suggest that the cloister is not in its original state and to propose various reconstructions. There are other examples of oversailing in Norman Sicily and southern Italy, however (e.g. the cloister of SS Trinità, Palermo), and there is no evidence that the cloister has ever been rearranged, nor is there anything to suggest that it was not built at the same time as the cathedral itself (c. 1172–89).



Monreale Cathedral, detail of cloister, c. 1172–89; photo credit: Vanni/Art Resource, NY

Each capital has an individual design, and most are carved with decorative motifs: fantastic animals, monsters and foliate forms (acanthus leaves, flowers, vine tendrils, etc), although human figures also appear, often as caryatids. There are few historiated capitals; out of a total of 110 carved elements, including the fountain house and the corner columns, only 16 are historiated, and these are scattered at random among the others, none occurring on the south side, for example, thus blending into the general decorative effect. The variety of designs does not affect the overall impression of uniformity, however, which suggests that one master was in charge of the work, although several teams of sculptors must have collaborated simultaneously on carving the capitals in order to complete the cloister in a short time. Sculptors from Lombardy, and further afield in the Latin world, Greeks from Sicily and the Italian mainland, and Sicilian Arabs all seem to have worked there, and one of them signed his name (EGO ROMANUS FILIUS CONSTANTINUS MARMORARIUS) in the north cloister walk, but nothing else is known of him. Although they came from different regions, many of the sculptors drew on similar sources: for example, both the Greeks and Arabs employed motifs and iconography from Early Christian models. Others used ivories (e.g. Byzantine 'rosette' caskets such as that in Palermo Cathedral Treasury), silver or silver-gilt reliefs, glass, and steatite, as visual models, and achieved distinctive results. In spite of the disparity of their origins and sources, however, the sculptors maintained an aesthetic harmony, and the work is generally of high quality.

The capitals fall into several main groups. Some of them are related to sculpture in Campania (e.g. pulpits in the cathedrals of Salerno and Sessa Aurunca) and are based on Corinthian and Composite forms, often decorated with human figures and monsters; a few examples have wind-blown acanthus leaves. Other classicizing groups include one associated with the capital carved by Romanus, which shows a faithful adaptation of antique models, use of the drill and a more linear execution; another classicizing group, in which the drill is also employed, is characterized by flatter relief, accentuating the linear quality of the carving, and the use of the human figure as an important decorative element. One large group has plainer designs, showing a stronger architectural sense, with the decorative elements subordinated to the structural. Another series of capitals bears such motifs as the calf-bearer and putti harvesting grapes derived from antique and Early Christian art. A larger group of capitals, related to local traditions under both Islamic and provincial Byzantine influence, bears symmetrical and stylized designs in low relief, with paired or confronted birds, lions, fantastic beasts, and acanthus leaves, but no figures.

One of the most interesting aspects of the cloister carvings is their lack of a coherent iconographic programme. The selection of subjects on the historiated capitals seems to have been chosen arbitrarily from the Old and New Testaments. They include the stories of the *Fall*, *Cain and Abel*, *Joseph*, *Noah*, and *Samson*; the story of *St John the Baptist*, the *Infancy of Christ*, the *Parable of Dives and Lazarus*, the *Three Marys at the Tomb*, the *Harrowing of Hell*, and *Pentecost*. Several episodes (particularly the *Noah* scenes) are closely related to the mosaics in the cathedral, in both iconography and style, but others (e.g. the *Nativity of Christ* and the *Harrowing of Hell*) are quite different. Some scenes show the influence of Early Gothic sculpture in the Ile de France, particularly Chartres Cathedral (e.g. *Pentecost* and the *Flight into Egypt* on the south-west quadrilobed capital). Other themes represented are *Quo vadis*, the *Legend of the True Cross*, the *Triumph of Church over Synagogue*, and the *Labours of the Months*. The last in particular shows a dependence on Lombardy (e.g. S Zeno Maggiore, Verona), in iconography if not in style. In one capital William II is depicted presenting the church of Monreale to Christ and his Mother in a composition usually associated

with the *Adoration of the Magi*, an unusual use of a traditional religious form to express a contemporary event. The *Legend of the True Cross*, which, unusually, appears on the same capital as the *Triumph of the Church*, is an appropriate subject for a crusading context; William II took the Cross and the Third Crusade was being assembled at Messina at the time when the cloister was being completed.

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