

Sicily Revealed

Mosaics of Palermo



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food, or wine.

Having finally won the island of Sicily from entrenched Islamic forces after thirty years of battle, the Normans set upon creating a multicultural kingdom to inspire the world. While the Norman civilization has since faded from history, its brilliant churches, glittering with mosaic decoration, serve as enduring reminders of its greatness. They are yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we take a look at four 12th century Norman churches, located in and around Palermo: Cefalù Cathedral, Palatine Chapel, Martorana, and Monreale Cathedral. Wonders of engineering and design, they selectively borrow features from Sicily's three prevailing cultures — Western Christian (Latin), Byzantine Christian (Greek), and North African Islamic — to reveal a unique and compelling aesthetic.
- **Mosaic style.** We detail the prevailing style and explain how it changed over time. As part of this review, we touch on relevant symbolism and the technical hurdles mosaicists encountered. In particular, you will see how Christ Pantocrator images adapt and evolve to meet new requirements. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Sicily's mosaic treasures and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!

David Raezer

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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Sicily Revealed: Mosaics of Palermo

Version 1.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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and the hand of an artist.

—

Guy de Maupassant,
from his travel memoir written after a trip to Sicily in 1885.

[Download the English translation](#) of Maupassant’s “The Wandering Life” for free.

Sicily and the Normans

The Center of the Mediterranean

Since antiquity, Sicily has been prized for its strategic position at the center of the Mediterranean Sea (see [Fig. 1](#)). The island gem promised those who could conquer it fertile soils, security from military attack, and the opportunity to serve as the clearinghouse for trade goods among the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe.

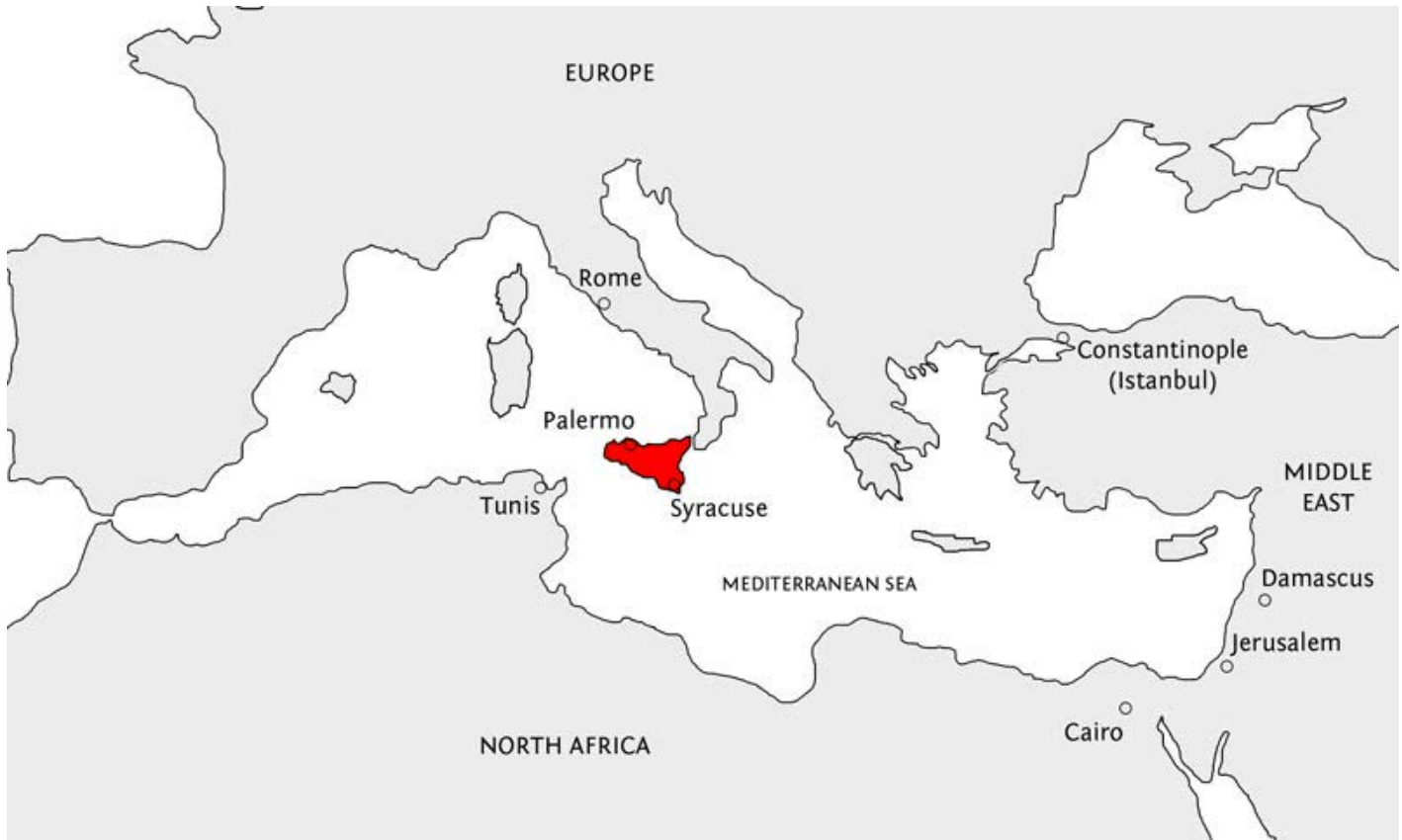


Fig. 1. Sicily at center of Mediterranean basin. See in [Google Maps](#).

Three Civilizations

After the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE, three civilizations controlled the island in succession:

- **Byzantines.** Based in Constantinople and born out of the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire was the powerhouse civilization in the Mediterranean. It controlled Sicily from the mid-6th century to the early 9th century; in fact, for five years, in the mid-7th century under Emperor Constans II, the Sicilian city of Syracuse became the capital of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines championed the Orthodox Christian faith.
- **Saracens.** North African Islamic forces wrested control of Sicily from the Byzantines, taking

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Christ Pantocrator in the Apse

A half-figure **Christ Pantocrator** (see [Fig. 3](#)) — meaning Christ Almighty or Omnipotent — occupies the upper portion of the central apse. This specific representation of Christ, used in all of the churches of Norman Sicily, has its roots in Byzantine Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

- The top edge of the apse's pointed arch holds a **Latin inscription** that reads *factus homo factor hominis factiq redemptor iudico corporeus corpora corda deus* (I, man's maker, now made man, and redeemer of him I made, God in flesh, judge all human hearts and bodies), **reinforcing Christ's role as supreme creator, redeemer, and apocalyptic judge.**
- As with all subsequent depictions, Christ's head backed by an inscribed cross halo and flanked by the letters **ICXC**, a Greek Christogram for "Jesus Christ". The letters IC represent the Greek characters Iota (I) and Sigma (ς), the first and last letters of Jesus (Ιησους); the letters XC represent Chi (Χ) and Sigma (ς), the first and last letters of Christ (Χριστος).
- Christ raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing and holds an open book in his left hand.
- **The inscription on the book**, in both Latin and Greek, is from [John 8:12](#): "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."



Fig. 3. Apse Pantocrator mosaic, Cefalù Cathedral.
Photo by: Gun Powder Ma, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Palatine Chapel

Visiting the Church

- The Palatine Chapel or Capella Palatina is located in downtown [Palermo at the Palazzo Reale in Piazza Indipendenza, 1](#) (see in [Google Maps](#)).
- According to the [Sicilian Regional Assembly website](#), visiting hours are Monday-Saturday: 8:15 am – 5:45 pm; Sunday and holidays: 8:15 am – 1:00 pm.

Author Tip: *A veritable jewel box, the Palatine Chapel is unquestionably the most ornate and visually impressive of the Norman churches. Unlike Cefalù Cathedral where a Latin (Catholic) aesthetic prevailed, the Palatine Chapel is more of a hybrid, revealing significantly greater Greek (Orthodox) influence. There is first-rate mosaic decoration throughout.*

Motivation for Church's Construction

The church was intended as a palace chapel and never competed with Cefalù in ecclesiastical importance. As such, it was designed to show off the opulence of the Norman kings and the artistic wealth of Sicily.

History

Construction on the Palatine Chapel began under Roger II in 1132, only one year after Cefalù Cathedral. However, unlike at Cefalù where progress moved forward slowly, it was completed by 1140.

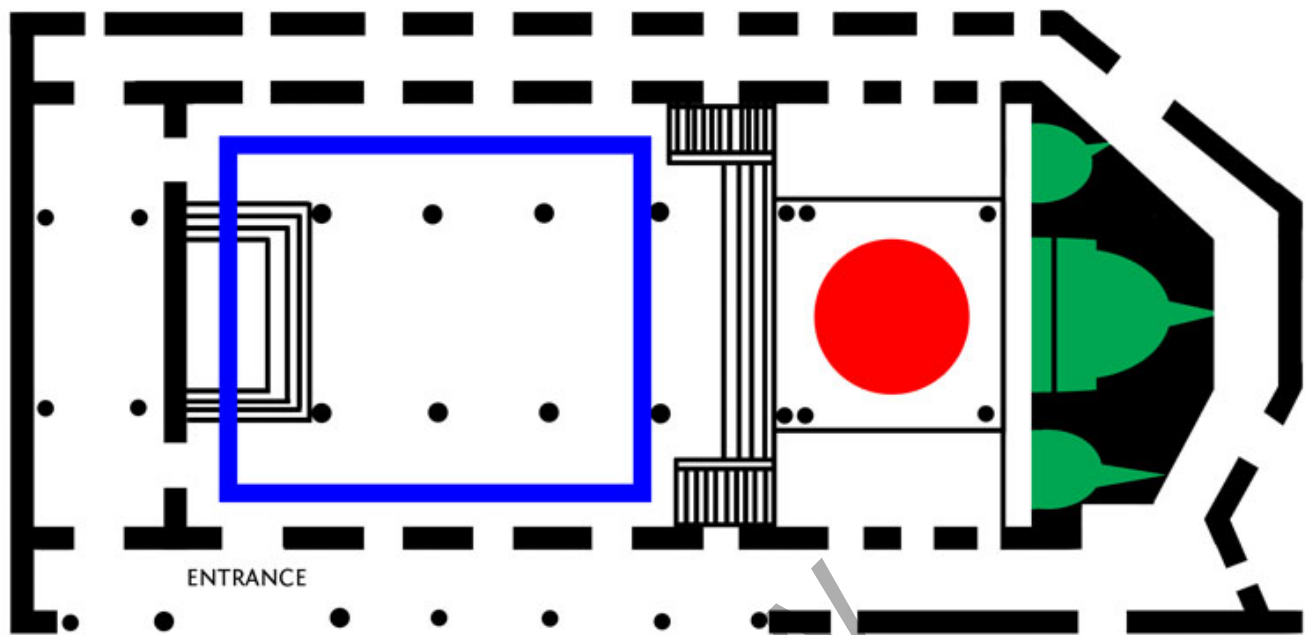


Fig. 6. Floorplan, Palatine Chapel. Highlights added.

Architecture and Layout

Hybrid layout

Compared to Cefalù Cathedral, the Palatine Chapel was more successful in combining elements of Western Latin and Eastern Greek churches.

- **Western Latin elements.** The western half of the church assumes the shape of a Latin basilica, with a long central nave flanked by two aisles (dark blue highlights in Fig. 6).
- **Eastern Greek elements.** The eastern half resembles a Byzantine central plan church, with a square crossing surmounted by a dome (red highlights in Fig. 6). The east wall is pierced by triple apses (green highlights in Fig. 6).

Interior appearance

The Byzantine preference for wall surfaces that de-emphasized structural, load-bearing elements prevailed. This freed walls to serve as a blank canvas for mosaic designs that conjured an other-worldly, sacred space, enveloped in gold.

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Palatine Chapel Mosaics

Overview

The Palatine Chapel's mosaic work adheres to two distinct programs: the initial program initiated under Roger II; and a new, altered program under William I.

Decoration under Roger II

Dates and location

Decoration under Roger II likely dates from **1143-1154**. The mosaics originally covered most of the east side of the church.

- The **mosaics of the dome, dated to 1143, are the finest in the chapel** (see Fig. 9) and have not been impacted by later modification or restoration. They were executed five years before the famous apse mosaics (including the Pantocrator) of Cefalù Cathedral.
- Roger's Byzantine mosaicists also did the work on the central square below the dome, the transept (with the exception of the scenes from Christ's life in the south transept and the figures of the Virgin and John the Baptist above the northern apse), and parts of the three apses.

Stylistic features

The mosaics under Roger II share the same general stylistic qualities as those outlined for Cefalù Cathedral. That said, the figures that were the first executed — particularly the Pantocrator and angels in the dome — are rendered in a slightly more naturalistic style than those that would soon follow in Cefalù.



Fig. 9. Dome close-up, Palatine Chapel.
Photo by: Woodguy, via Wikimedia Commons.

Author Tip: *Mosaics in Sicily don't get any better than those of the Palatina's dome — spend some time here and take it all in!*

Dome

Drawing on Byzantine precedent, **a half-figure image of Christ Pantocrator** occupies the center of the dome.

- His head is backed by an inscribed cross halo and flanked by the letters ICXC, a Greek Christogram for “Jesus Christ”. See [Fig. 9](#).
- His right hand is raised in a gesture of blessing, while his left hand holds a closed book against his chest. See [Fig. 9](#).
- A gold ring around the Pantocrator image quotes, in Greek, from [Isaiah 16:1](#): “Send lambs as tribute to the ruler of the land, from Sela, across the desert, to the mount of Daughter Zion”. See [Fig. 9](#) and [Fig. 10](#).

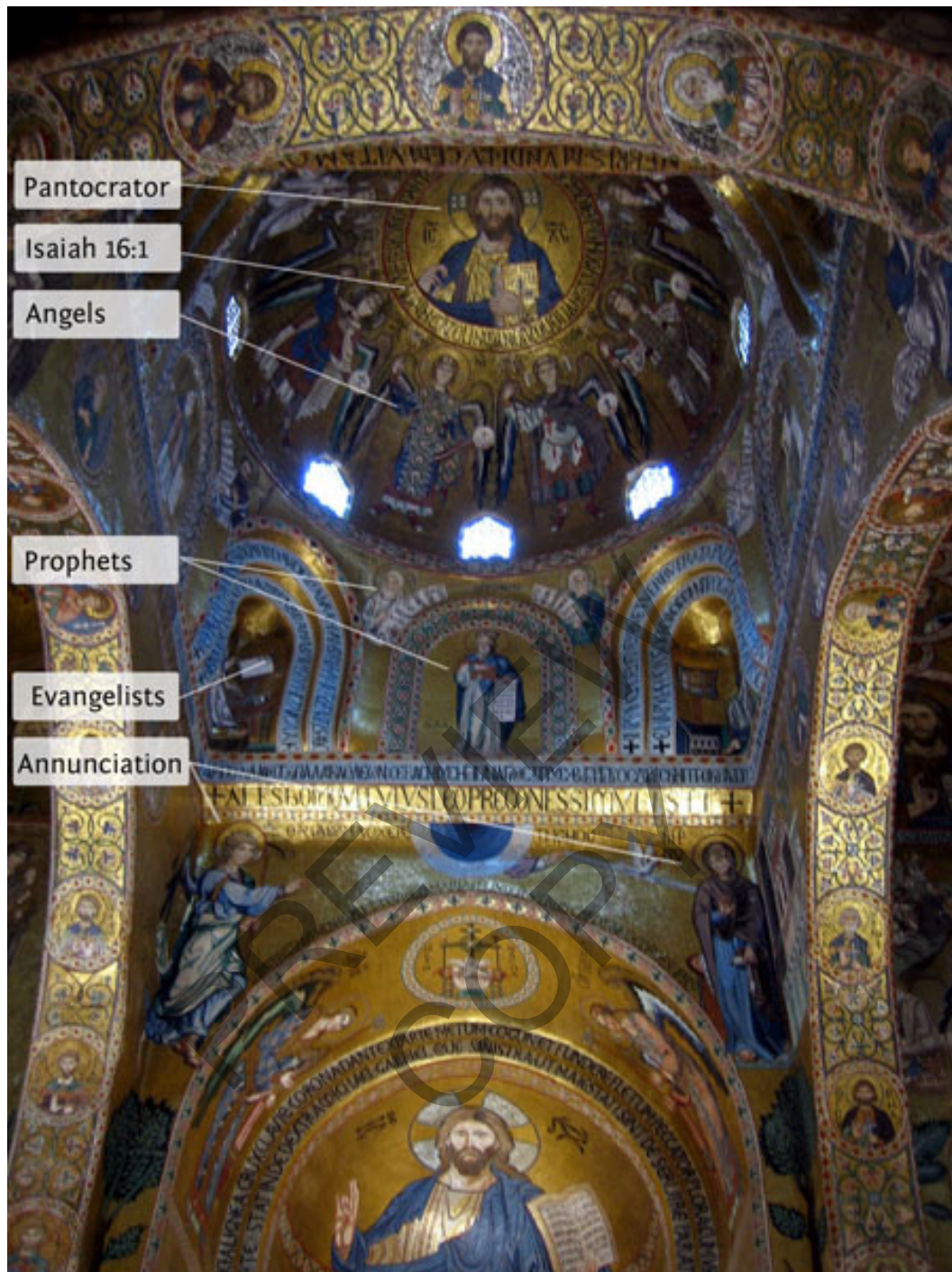


Fig. 10. Dome and apse mosaics, Palatine Chapel. Highlights added.

Encircling Christ are eight **standing winged angels** (see Fig. 10), symbolic of Christ's divine incarnation in heaven.

- The four on the eastern half (see Fig. 9) are archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. Clad in Byzantine court attire and holding white globes with crosses in their left hands, they face directly forward.
- The four on the western half are of lower apparent rank, with heads facing westward in more dynamic three-quarter views.

Below the angels are the **prophets** (see Fig. 10), symbolic of Christ's human incarnation on earth.

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highlights in Fig. 14), supported by four columns and surrounded by an ambulatory.

- **Stilted arches.** The structure employed high, narrow (stilted) arches.
- **Triple apses.** In contrast to Western Latin churches that employed a single apse, the Martorana used a Byzantine triple-apse arrangement on the eastern wall (green highlights in Fig. 14).

Islamic decorative elements

However, it was not a “pure” Byzantine structure. As with all of Sicily’s Norman churches, the Martorana was a collage incorporating Islamic elements.

- **Decorative frieze.** While a frieze (no longer extant) that ran around the upper edge of the exterior of the church carried a Greek inscription, its stonework — the lettering was set off by cutting back the background and painting it red — was of Islamic inspiration.
- **Squinchs supporting the dome.** The dome rests on four squinches, rather than the typical Byzantine pendentives; the squinches recede in three graded steps.
- **Decorative niche columns.** Consistent with practices at Cefalù Cathedral and the Palatine Chapel, the Martorana’s walls have decorative columns at the bases of arches, particularly those in areas of greatest importance.

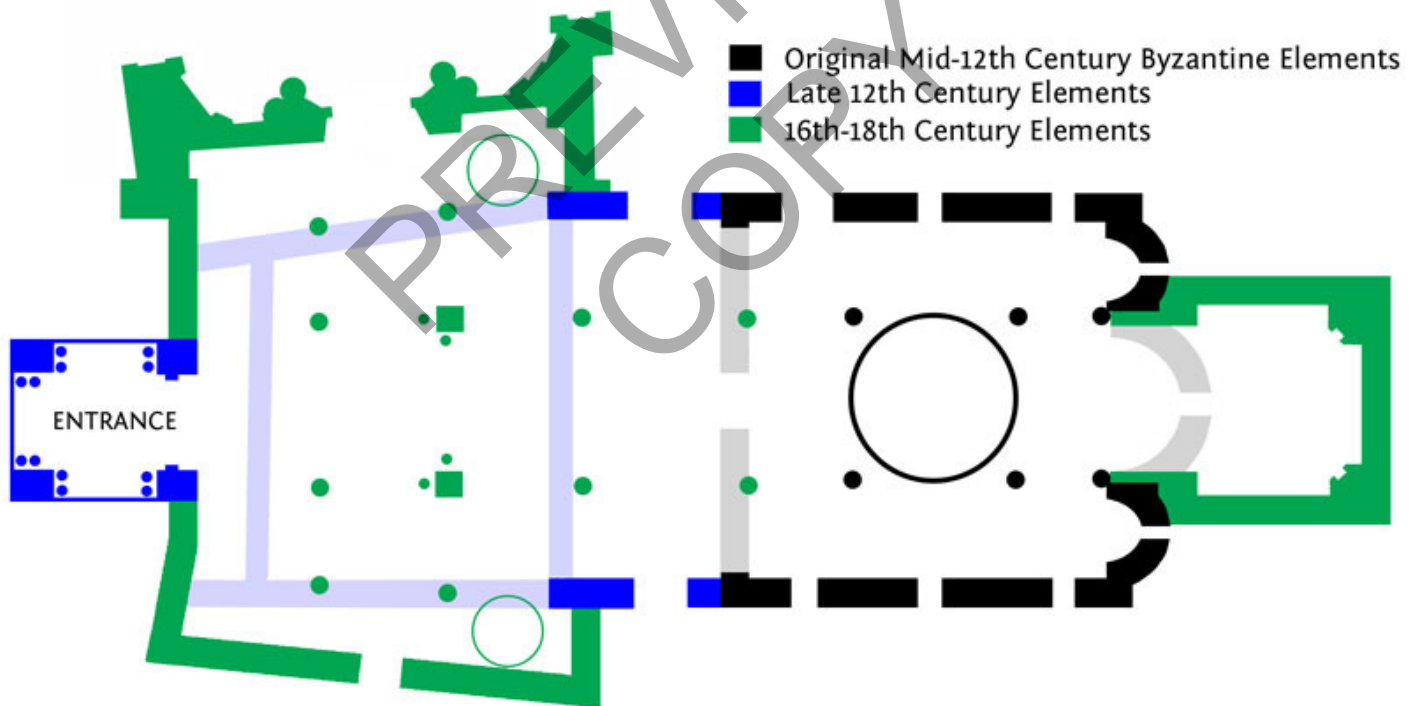


Fig. 15. Current floorplan, Martorana. Highlights added.

Late 12th Century Modifications

Very soon after the completion of the original church, it was expanded in 1146 to include an atrium

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Monreale Cathedral Mosaics

History

Monreale Cathedral's mosaic decoration was executed over a short time period and is extremely unified and homogenous. Likely the work of a team of Byzantine mosaicists, it was executed from 1183-1189 under William II.

Western Program Blended with A Byzantine Aesthetic

Beginning with William I and gaining force under William II, **mosaic designs were marked by greater influence from the Western church**; the bias toward the Byzantine tradition, so strong under Roger II, was waning. This had two far-reaching stylistic consequences:

- **More feeling and emotion.** More so than in any other church in Norman Sicily, the depicted figures convey clear emotion and gesture grandly, consistent with the Western church's preference for more approachable, humanized religious figures. This compares with the detached, otherworldly figures of the Byzantine tradition who sought to communicate the serenity of the divine and inspire contemplation.
- **Increased focus on narrative.** Mosaics increasingly took on a didactic role, educating the faithful on key Biblical events. This naturally led to greater emphasis on narratives, specifically events from the Old and New Testaments. Mosaics under William II depict groups of figures in dynamic interaction, a striking contrast with the solemn single figures and basic scenes created in the Byzantine style under Roger II.

Despite strong Western influence in the organizational and narrative program, the decorative style of the Byzantines prevailed in Monreale Cathedral, imbuing the mosaics with great visual impact, perhaps the greatest in Norman Sicily. **Monreale Cathedral, then, despite a rise in Western influence, represents a continued fusion of Western and Eastern Christian religious traditions.**



Fig. 22. Central apse, Monreale Cathedral.
Photo by: Jerzy Strzelecki, via Wikimedia Commons.

Mosaics Scale and Arrangement

Monreale's impressive mosaics — covering an area over 68,000 square feet / 6,300 square meters, the largest extant mosaic decoration in Italy — adhere to a rigid organizational program, a refined and perfected version of the earlier Palatine Chapel's arrangement.

- **Central apse.** The organization of the central apse appears to have been **inspired by that of Cefalù Cathedral**, with Christ Pantocrator sitting above levels of supporting figures (see **Fig. 22**). On the level immediately below Christ is the Enthroned Virgin holding a blessing infant Christ on her lap; this emphatically emphasizes the dual nature of Christ, human in his mother's arms and divine in heaven just above. She is flanked by the two foremost archangels, Michael and Gabriel, who each stand next to six apostles. On the lowest level, there are depictions of 14 saints, split evenly by a window in the center.
- **Side apses.** The mosaics of the side apses recount events in the lives of Saints Peter (right, south apse) and Paul (left, north apse).
- **Central square under the crossing and transept.** The center of the church recounts events in the life of Christ from the New Testament. Most of the scenes in the central square deal with Christ's infancy; those in the southern transept relate pre-Passion events; and those in the northern transept tell of Christ's final days, including his crucifixion and ascension.

- **Nave and aisles.** The mosaics lining the nave recount Old Testament scenes (discussed in more detail below), while those on the walls of the darker aisles depict Christ's miracles.

The arrangement laid out above communicated a **powerful overarching narrative** that unfolded from entrance to apse: upon entering the church, visitors absorbed scenes from Creation and history pre-dating Christ by way of Old Testament narratives; at the transept crossing, they were presented with Christ in his human incarnation; finally, gazing into the apse, they saw the divine Christ Pantocrator, the apocalyptic savior in heaven.

Nave Narratives

The arrangement

The nave is lined with two levels of Old Testament scenes: an upper level between the windows and a lower level between the pointed arches of the arcades. The narrative begins with Creation scenes on the upper level of the south side, at the eastern end (near the apse), and continues along the west and north walls. It then drops down to the lower level of the south side, concluding on the north side at the eastern end.

The largest scenes are the **Building of the Ark** (lower level, south side, eastern end) and **Jacob Wrestling with the Angel** (lower level, north side, eastern end). See [Fig. 23](#).



Fig. 23. Lower level nave mosaics with Old Testament scenes, Monreale Cathedral. Highlights added.
Photo by: Tango7174, via Wikimedia Commons.

The narrative style

Narrative has grown appreciably in importance over the fifty years since Cefalù Cathedral. At Monreale, narrative is paramount, with every individual form subordinated to the larger goal of conveying a story.

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- **“How the Mob Turned Southern Italy into a Toxic Wasteland”** Campania’s fruits and vegetables gave way to an illegal economy of waste — much of it toxic — that is burned out in the fields or buried beneath them. *By Roberto Saviano.*
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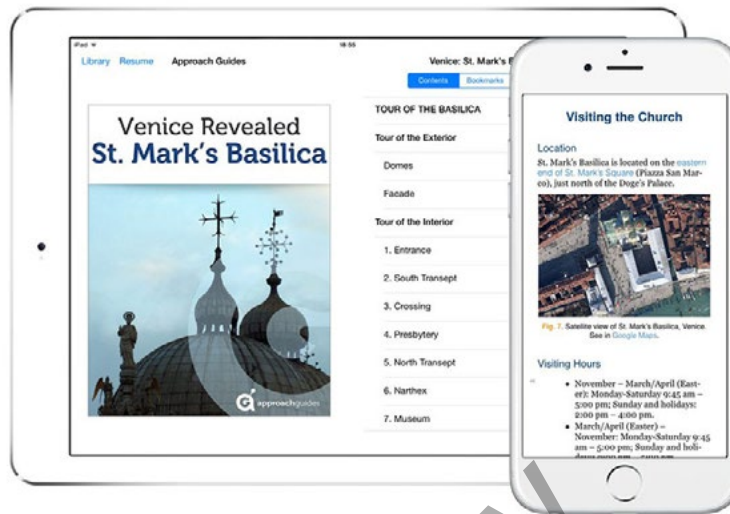
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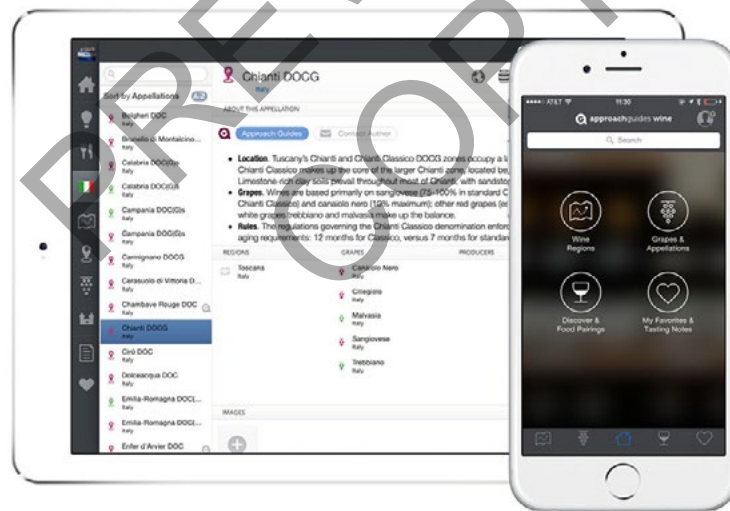
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