The Palatine Chapel in Palermo
Symbiosis of cultures and religions.

(Extract from the original essay)

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Since ancient times, the island of Sicily has been a crossroads for many cultures, religions, and peoples, such as the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, and Spaniards among others. This mixture of cultures has led to the development of unique traditions, music, architecture, and art. The prime example of the influence that these many cultures had on the island and state of Sicily is the Palatine Chapel in the Norman Palace in Palermo. The aim of this essay is to show the different cultural and religious elements in the Chapel through an analysis of its incredible architecture and mosaic art.

In order to understand the genesis of all these elements, it is necessary to look back at the history of this island. The First Punic War turned Sicily (fig. 1) into a Roman province. The Romans left a huge footprint on Sicily, especially on cities such as Messina and Palermo. After the Vandal invasion and the destruction of the Western Roman Empire, Sicily was captured by the Byzantines under the general Belisarius, who was commissioned with this task by the emperor Justinian. The Byzantines left many temples and a large Orthodox (and Greek) population. In the 9th century, the Arab Muslim Caliphate took the island from the Byzantines. Palermo became the capital of the island and its rulers were tolerant towards the many different cultures and religions. Under Muslim rule, Sicily was inhabited by Greeks, Jews, Slavs, Berbers, Persians, and Arabs, all of whom tolerated each other and were able to keep their religions in exchange for paying higher taxes (the so-called jizya tax). In the 10th century, Fatimid control over the island waned and a number of political crises left Sicily divided into many small Shiite states, vying for power. Later on, the Norman brothers Robert Giuscard and Roger d’Hauteville saw an opportunity and, with the support of the Pope, conquered Sicily and Southern Italy.

Fig. 1 The most important cities of Sicily
The Normans are descendants of the Vikings who settled in the region of Normandy in Northern France. The new kings reorganized the church on the island in accordance with its organization before the Muslim conquest, but kept the Arab administrative division in three parts, with Palermo as Sicily’s capital. Thanks to the Norman Conquest, Romanesque culture and architecture came to the island and, under the rule of Roger’s son, king Roger I d’Hauteville, the many cultures and the three religions (Orthodox and Catholic Christianity and Islam) became part of a single state – the Kingdom of Sicily. The rule of king Roger was tolerant towards the people and he even issued edicts and laws in different languages. His court was cosmopolitan – it was comprised of Arab poets, musicians, geographers, the Byzantine monk and theologian Philagathos of Cerami, and Nilo Doxopatres – an ex-deacon of the “Hagia Sophia”. King Roger d’Hauteville ruled a multi-cultural and multi-religious country and the greatest example of their intertwining and of the Arab-Byzantine-Norman architectural style was the Palatine Chapel.

During the Middle Ages, it was a practice of rulers to build private chapels in their own palaces. The Palatine Chapel was commissioned by King Roger in 1132 as a private sanctuary. It was probably built over another structure, which now functions as a crypt. Eight years were necessary for the chapel to be built, but much more were needed for its mosaics. An inscription in the chapel indicates it was completed in 1143, but chroniclers state that the mosaic decoration continued all the way through the rule of Roger’s son William I. It is believed that the chapel was fully finished during the rule of Roger’s grandson – William II d’Hauteville.

The architecture of the Palatine Chapel is a “hybrid” of different cultures and religions. It is a product of the Arab-Norman-Byzantine architectural style. The Arab influence can be seen in the Saracen arcs, the
oriental garments in the images, the presence of floral and animal motifs, some characteristic capitals, and the presence of certain figures. The mosaic art is characteristic of the Byzantine influence, as well as some of the saints’ clothes, the style of depiction of the faces (except in the cathedral in Monreale), the shape of the temples (cross-churches) with three apses, and the presence of a dome.

Fig. 3 The Chapel’s Sanctuary with the dome and the three apses

The contribution of French and Norman art and architecture can be seen in the Gothic laws (St. John the Hermit), the use of classical columns, the full-face depictions of people, some Romanesque arcs, the construction of three naves (fig.4), and the Latin inscriptions. Although debatable, the center of the whole structure is the so-called Sanctuary, which is comprised of 2/3 of the traditional plan of a Byzantine church, which

Fig. 4 The three naves and the chapel’s wooden ceiling
consists of two arms with equal length and width in the shape of a Greek cross, while the “Latin” part of
the temple with the three naves is considered secondary in importance. Examples of the Byzantine
influence on the chapel are the three apses in the East part of the sanctuary (Diaconicon, Presbytery and
Prothesis – fig. 3), and the dome, which lies on a drum. The Medieval arcade in front of the entrance to the
chapel resembles those of Medieval castles, but it may have been influenced by the palace of Diocletian in
Split. The Western influence is exhibited by the style of the columns, the East-West orientation of the naves
and floor, which in turn is an example of how Muslim and Orthodox designs mix. This symbiosis can be seen
in the porphyry discs and geometric shapes, which are put together in an Occidental opus sectile style. It
is believed that the throne was located on a small platform in the Western part of the chapel (fig. 5), but
there are different opinions on the matter. Other possible places where the king and queen might have stood are the balcony (fig. 6) in the sanctuary or together with the other people in the central
nave. The Muslim elements in the architecture of the chapel are the ceiling, made using the muqarnas technique (with cantilevered compartments), as well as some arches and capitals.

![Fig. 5 and 6. The possible location of the royal throne and the balcony](image)

The mosaic pattern of the Palatine Chapel is interesting because of its mixed character. Despite the
mosaics being typically Byzantine in their origin, the images they show are a testimony to the many cultural
and religious influences on the island. Also, the configuration of the mosaics is thoroughly non-Byzantine.
In the dome of the chapel, one can easily recognize a typically Greek image – that of Christ Pantokrator (fig.
7). He is surrounded by angels, archangels and prophets. In conjunction with the dome, the whole sanctuary
is devoted to the life and deeds of Jesus Christ. However, one can find Muslim influences in these typically
Christian scenes, such as the floral and animal motifs in the scenes “Jesus enters Jerusalem”, “The
Transfiguration” and “The Baptism of Christ”, which include not only Jesus, John the Baptists, and the
apostles, but also Oriental depictions of the water, plants and animals. It is believed that “The
Transfiguration” (fig. 8) was an inspiration for performing the Byzantine ritual of προσκυνήσις in the chapel.
It appears that the whole order of the images in the chapel is not Byzantine, because the Byzantine tradition excludes all scenes, which are purely didactic. The sanctuary is dedicated to Jesus Christ, but the central nave is filled with scenes from the Old Testament, which are not characteristic of Byzantine churches, but, in turn, were readily used in Western Europe.

Fig. 7 The image of “Christ Pantokrator” in the dome of the chapel

However, this does not mean that these images lack Orthodox motifs, such as the depiction of God the Father with the face of Jesus Christ, and not as an old wise man, as he is painted in the Roman Catholic world. The North and South nave illustrate the lives of St. Peter and St. Paul. The most important of these images for this research is the depiction of “Peter and Paul in the dispute with Simon Magus before Nero” (fig. 9). Here, Nero is not portrayed as an emperor of ancient Rome, but is dressed like a medieval king wearing a kamelaukion, a crown, typical of the Byzantine emperors. He is also not identified as NERO IMPERATOR, but NERO REX. It is believed that the excellent acoustics of the temple were used for Orthodox chants, which praise the Lord.

Fig. 8. “The Transfiguration of Christ”
Fig. 9. “The Dispute before Nero”
The ceiling of the central nave (fig. 10) depicts the Arab Paradise. In its panels, one can find depictions of Arab dancers, musicians, animals (fig. 11), people drinking wine, as well as a very famous figure of a seated ruler in the center of the ceiling (fig. 12), who wears Arab clothes and a Byzantine crown. It is believed that this is an image of Roger himself. There are two distinct styles of clothing depicted in the chapel: in the same manner as during the time the persons lived (the apostles) or according to the style of dressing in the time of king Roger (Nero and the depictions in the muqarnas.)

The Palatine Chapel is the epitome of the influence that different religious, ethnic, political, and social phenomena and factors render on temple decoration and architecture. This transforms the Palatine Chapel into an important source of information for Sicilian traditions and for the ambitions of the ruling dynasty. This information, however, is fragmentary and does not give us answers to a plethora of important questions, and this can lead to contradictory conclusions. We should note that the chapel is dedicated to St. Peter, the founder of the Catholic church and its protector. This dedication may be an expression of gratitude towards the Pope, whose power allowed the d’Hauteville dynasty to become kings (Antipope Anacletus II himself anointed Roger). According to some researchers, this is a political move to publicly support the Pope, whilst king Roger had secret ambitions to associate his power with that of the Byzantine emperors – one of the Pope’s greatest enemies. This dual course of action can be seen in the king’s
fight for independence from Rome through the sponsoring of a culture which includes Muslim and Greek elements. After all, Roger (fig. 13) was aware that Sicily was the link between Moorish Spain, North Africa and Egypt, on the one hand, and between the Latin West, the Byzantine Empire and the Holy land, on the other. When the von Hohenstaufen dynasty inherited the island, the Orthodox parts of the kingdom were forced to adopt Latin Christianity, while Arabs were either baptized, or expelled. The Arab-Norman- Byzantine style (fig. 14), as well as the multicultural society that gave rise to it, were not able to coexist forever, but their masterpieces have remained intact though time and even today continue to astonish visitors of the Sicilian capital. The chapel is a hybrid monument with different functions, architectural decisions, and artistic styles. Aspects from the Byzantine, Roman, and Islamic arts are easily recognizable on its walls.

Fig. 13. The ambitions of king Roger can be seen in this image from the The Martorana church in Palermo, where Christ crowns him with an imperial crown, not unlike those of the Byzantine emperors of the same period.

It is far more difficult to understand what this artistic program is trying to tell us. The written sources give only limited information. It is also important to understand whether the depictions of rulers in the chapel were just images, or they were an embodiment of the dream of Roger and his family to be crowned as “Kings of Constantinople”. The adoption of the Byzantine liturgy and ceremonial are a smart move, because, as the new Romans, the Byzantines had the longest-standing imperial authority in the whole Mediterranean. During Roger’s rule, his coins and seal resembled those of former Byzantine emperors. He even wanted to wed a Byzantine princess. So, are the images of the Palatine Chapel representations of an
ambitious plan, which did not just come to be? We know that there were both Catholic and Orthodox liturgies in the chapel. But how did these two Christian communities coexist?

Fig. 14 The greatest achievement of the Arab-Norman-Byzantine architectural style – the cathedral of Monreale

The answers to these questions in the future may give us an insight into the life of the common people during the time of the d’Hauteville dynasty and into the significance of the chapel. Until then, the Palatine Chapel in Palermo remains an incredible symbiosis of the Sicilian cultures and religions, as well as an incredible and inspiring work of art and architecture.