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ARAB-NORMAN PALERMO AND THE CATHEDRAL CHURCHES OF CEFALÙ AND MONREALE

“[...] the great mosque cathedral was once a Christian church [...] it is difficult for the human mind to imagine its aspect for the superb craftsmanship, the unique decorative patterns, rich in flair and creativity, the diverse images, the gilded friezes and the calligraphic weaves.”

The Book of Roger, Idrisi

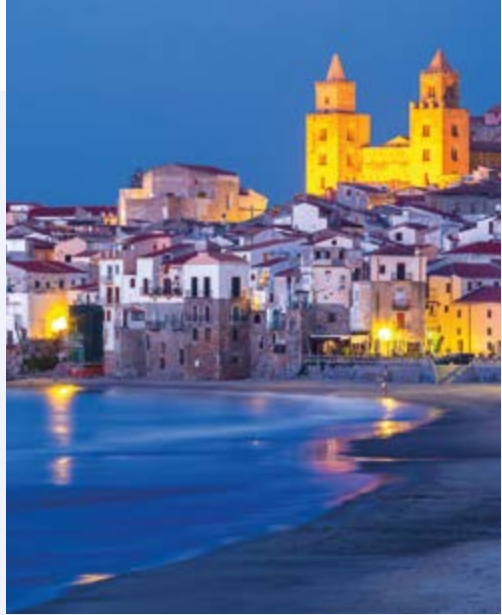
It was 1138 when the traveller and geographer Idrisi, invited to the court of the Norman king Roger II, praised the wonders of the cosmopolitan city of Palermo. At that time civilizations interacted, the Islamic workforce built churches for Christian patrons, the green Genoardo (from the Arabic word Jannat al-ard, Heaven on Earth) wrapped the royal palaces with the shade of the palms and the scent of citruses. Now as then, the tangle of battlements, the domes, the honeycomb patterns, the pointed arches and the richness of golden mosaics whisper exotic words to the ears of the travellers enraptured by the fairy-tale charm of Sicily's Arab-Norman Heritage. The phrase “Arab-Norman” identifies a group of monuments (including nine protected by UNESCO) erected between 1130 and 1194 in the Normal Kingdom of Sicily, but not only: it combines in two words the essence of a world where Muslim, Byzantine and Roman-Latin civilizations merge into an inseparable whole, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape and soul of Palermo. Nicoletta Agnello Hornby in her book *Siamo Palermo* says: “Palermo today hosts people from all over the world and of all religions [...]. I persist in thinking that [racism] in Palermo does not exist, we are too accustomed to diversity and we have learned to tolerate and to be tolerated”.



SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1487
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: BONN, GERMANY
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2015



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: With their combination of Byzantine, Muslim and Catholic art, the Arab-Norman monuments are an icon of cultural syncretism and embody Sicily's multi-ethnic soul. The stylistic synthesis of the different art and architectural models created new spatial and decorative concepts that spread widely throughout the Mediterranean region.



“He covers the day with the veil of the night that eagerly follows; and He created the sun and the moon and the stars, subjugated under His command.”

We delve into the syncretism of Arab-Norman Palermo starting from this sura of the Koran, engraved in Arabic characters in the heart of Christianity: Palermo’s Cathedral.

We admire the **1 Cathedral** from the outside, where the different ages intermingle through patterns of lively squiggles. As a matter of fact, down through the ages, 15th-century portals, domes covered with majolica tiles and a bell tower were added to the original Arab-Norman wonder. We now head to the **2 Royal Palace** (or Norman Palace), headquarters of the city government from the 9th century until now, and walk through the Royal Apartments until reaching the marvellous Palatine Chapel. Commissioned by Roger II, the chapel combines the Latin basilica layout with Moorish architecture and Byzantine mosaic art. Still blinded by the brightness of the mosaics, we take refuge in the spirituality of the nearby **3 Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti**: the five peculiar red domes rising over the cubic structure recall the

typical Arab “cube plus sphere”, symbol of the meeting between earth and the celestial sphere. Inside, the mystical quietness of the garden together with the perspective of the cloister pointed arches enchant visitors. We carry on our tour by car or bus to reach **4 Zisa Palace**, from the Arabic word *al-aziz*, i.e. “splendid”, which reconciles the austere stateliness of a fortress with the exotic appeal of a fairy-tale house. The next destination is the “golden temple”: the **5 Cathedral of Monreale**, whose entire architecture was designed according to the mosaics, as everything seems to converge towards the Christ Pantocrator’s icon. A second day of visits is needed to complete the tour of Arab-Norman sites: we start from Piazza Bellini, the square overlooked by the **6 Church of San Cataldo**, which can be recognised by its red domes, and the

charming **7 Martorana** (Church of Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio), whose mosaics are among the oldest in the city. The railway station is not far so we can catch a train that, in around an hour, will take us to **8 Cefalù**. Its Cathedral, with the two Norman towers surmounted by 15th-century spires (intentionally different, one is the symbol of the Catholic Church, the other of the Empire) includes a rich mosaic heritage. Once back in Palermo, possibly after a stop at the famous crescent-shaped beach of Cefalù, there is still time to delve into history on the **9 Admiral’s Bridge**: it takes an effort of imagination to appreciate the monumental work needed for its construction, as this humpback bridge made of stone was built in the 12th century by Arab workers together with Norman technicians.



THE PUPPET THEATRE

“The Norman and Angevin conquerors left this people much more than their Cathedrals in Cefalù and Monreale: they were left a whole tradition of heroic legends and champions, whose images and simple colours still recently decorate the village carts, and provide themes to the Sicilian puppet theatre.”

En pèlerin et en étranger, Marguerite Yourcenar

The puppet theatre, UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, tells stories of love and battles in a saraband of colourful and joyfully rowdy turn of events. Fully armoured and armed, the puppets are the champions of Christianity at the service of Charlemagne, or Saracens, while the female figures range from the beautiful Angelica, loved by Orlando and other knights, to the mysterious Gemma della Fiamma, princess and warrior. The puppet theatre has entertained generations of Sicilians, enraptured by the *cunti* (tales) and the stomps of the puppeteers marking the rhythm of the battles and the storytelling. In Palermo you can still watch shows staged by professional puppeteers, “heirs” of a job handed down from father to son.



"ROSALIA WAS A YOUNG GIRL FROM PALERMO. SHE WAS JOYFUL, VIVACIOUS, ALWAYS WILLING TO PLAY, AND TO RUN IN THE CITY ALLEYWAYS."

Rosalia, the young girl in the tale *Rosalia Picciridda* written by Laura Lombardo is actually the “*santuzza*” (little saint) loved by Palermo inhabitants that will surprise the travellers in different parts of the city, with her iconography at first not always reassuring...

For example, they can see her sculpture on the parvis of the **1 Cathedral**, starting point of this itinerary, while she is... trampling a woman. Don't worry: in the sculptor's intention the unlucky woman represents the plague! From the Cathedral we take a little detour towards Salita Artale, where some Sicilian carts, hand-painted by Franco Bertolino, are displayed in his **2 workshop-museum**. Now let's walk back to Via Vittorio to find another magic workshop: in the space of the **3 Associazione Agramante**, you can see a puppet master at work, while sculpting

the wooden body that is hidden underneath the puppet armour. His creations “play” in the nearby

4 Teatro Argentio, where every day at 5.30 p.m. a show is staged. Now let’s venture into the Albergheria to admire the rooms full of coat of arms, armours and royal decors of

5 Palazzo Conte Federico, whose courtyard displays a vintage car. We then poke around **6 Vicolo Cagliostro**, whose graffiti represent the picaresque figure of count Cagliostro, alchemist and adventurer, and peep at the chaotic **7 Ballarò** market, with its stalls packed with goods, to finally go back and take Via Casa Professa. The **8 Church of the Jesus**, overlooking this road, contains marble puppet theatres that are little Baroque masterpieces. Once we reach **9 Piazza Bellini**, we enter the awesome Monastery of Santa Caterina to sweeten our day with the delicacies of the “I segreti del chiostro” confectionery.

We now head to the seaside to reach two unique places: **10 Piazza Marina**, where we can admire the jaw-dropping mammoth ficus, and the **11 International Museum of Puppets Antonio Pasqualino**, whose enchanting collection illustrates the different cultures of the world. Once at Foro Italico, the area of **12 Parco della Salute** will give you the possibility to rest and practice sports. From here, along the seafront, we reach the **13 Botanical Garden**, an oasis of exotic trees that children can explore safely. Then we go back to the city centre (better by a means of transport) to finish off with a show in the puppet theatre of **14 Compagnia dei Figli d’Arte Cuticchio**.



ARAB-NORMAN PALERMO

*Reading suggestions to understand
Palermo's multicultural soul.*

- **The Book of Roger**, Idrisi (12th century). This book, whose original title was *The Excursion of One Eager to Penetrate the Distant Horizons*, was written by the geographer of Arab origins Idrisi and commissioned by King Roger. It describes the amazement that Arab-Norman Palermo inspired in travellers at that time: "Palermo is a lovely and immense city, a perfect and wonderful stay, adorned so elegantly that travellers undertake the journey to admire its beauty".

- **La luce e il lutto**, Gesualdo Bufalino (1990). Bufalino wrote a lot about Sicily, but in this book he offers an interpretation to understand the origin of the several souls of the island and its multiculturalism: "Because Sicily was fortunate to be the hinge throughout centuries between the great western culture and the temptations of the desert and the sun, between sense and magic, the complexity of feelings and the heat of passion".

• **En pèlerin et en étranger,** Marguerite Yourcenar (1989). In this collection of articles written between 1934 and 1987, Yourcenar describes Sicily, crossroads of Mediterranean civilizations, appreciating its melting pot of cultures, religions, arts and food.

- **La sposa normanna**, Carla Maria Russo (2004). A biographical novel about Costanza d'Altavilla describing the power intrigues of Medieval Sicily and, between fiction and history, telling the story of a woman ready to do anything possible to protect her son Federico, the future *Stupor mundi*.

- **Palermo è una cipolla,** Roberto Alajmo (2005). “Can the phantasmagorical details of the Palatine Chapel, the composure of the Norman Palace, the contradictory elegance of the cathedral reassure you?” With his sharp irony, Alajmo addresses a hypothetical traveller to convince him/her to “find the courage” to leave the hotel room and explore the city. Going though the most common clichés, the author manages to make us fall in love with Palermo’s paradoxes.

• **A Sultan in Palermo**, Tariq Ali (2005). This novel set in the period of transition from the Arab to the Norman world is an analysis of the dream of harmonious coexistence of different cultures. The plot is focused on Idrisi's life.

• **Siamo Palermo**, Simonetta Agnello Hornby, Mimmo Cuticchio (2019). The two authors describe their Palermo and, through their childhood memories, give voice to the several faces and souls of this city. Cuticchio, heir of a generation of storytellers, dedicates a page to the legend of Zisa devils.

Children's books:

• **I tesori arabo-normanni. Una guida turistica per bambini**, Carolina Lo Nero, illustrated by Letizia Algeri Disegni (2017). Games and anecdotes make this book an enjoyable read.

• **Rosalia Picciridda**, Laura Lombardo, illustrated by Nina Melan (2018); **Il gatto con gli stivali della Vucciria**, Eliana Messineo, illustrated by Rosa Lombardo (2018). The illustrated books by the local publisher Ideestortepaper are an excellent introduction to the city for young readers.