

PALERMO

TREASURE MAPS

Twenty Itineraries
Designed to Help
You Explore the
Cultural Heritage
of Palermo and
its Province

Soprintendenza per i Beni culturali
e ambientali di Palermo

NORMAN MONUMENTS PAVILIONS AND GARDENS

Edited by **Lina Bellanca**

REGIONE SICILIANA
Assessorato dei Beni culturali
e dell'Identità siciliana



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Twenty Itineraries Designed to Help You Explore the Cultural Heritage of Palermo and its Province

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For around two hundred and fifty years, Palermo was an Arab city. The Fatimids and the Aghlabids made their capital from what was in ancient times, an important but by no means the largest centre in Sicily. It became one of the most famous cities in the Islamic world, a world that stretched from the banks of the Indus to the Atlantic coast. Palermo was an obligatory stop-over on the pilgrims route from the West to Mecca. It was an attractive destination for Arab travellers such as Ibn Hawqal, who visited it in 973 and left behind a famous description. Not a single building of this city, which is perhaps as fabulous as one of the cities in the *Arabian Nights*, is still standing. If one disregards any archaeological excavations, everything built by Muslim architects, and still visible today, was produced for the new rulers of the island, the Normans.

During their long journey through Europe, firstly as knights and mercenaries and then later as conquerors in their own right, the Normans encountered the Byzantines in southern Italy, initially serving them and then subsequently fighting them. They assimilated from them their style and forms of power, as shown by the court rituals they instituted, as well as the celebratory artistic language adopted evidenced in the use of precious mosaics as decoration of the main churches that they erected in Sicily. Before landing on the island, the Normans had never come across the Islamic world. Judging by the traces that they have left, it is no exaggeration to say that they were amazed and seduced by it. The Normans were not numerous. Their advantage lay in their armed strength, which allowed them to hold the reins of government,

but they were of insufficient numbers to enable them to populate a territory and impose their lifestyle. This resulted in their showing themselves open and receptive to the inhabitants of the lands in which they settled. Displaying great pragmatism, they were able to appreciate and assimilate the benefits of a civilization that differed from the western, feudal and Latin culture of France from which they came. Thus they did not try to overwhelm and erase the Arab element (though this did happen later, with the arrival of various waves of Latin colonizers). Instead, they grasped and made use of every aspect of Arab civilisation.

Some of the most visible results today of this process of assimilation and let us say, integration of Muslim civilization, are the “Palaces of Pleasure”, the “Sollazzi”. Constructed by order of Roger II and the two Williams, they are based on models that have no equal in all of Christian Europe, and the like of which are found only in Spain, which at the time was Islamic. The work of the Arab architects and craftsmen is visible in every kind of “public” building commissioned by the new rulers, and in particular in buildings with a decidedly exotic appearance (but intended from the outset for Christian worship) such as the Churches of Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio, San Cataldo, San Giovanni degli Eremiti and San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi (St John of the Hermits and St John of the Lepers). However the decorations, both in their nature (mosaics) and in their design, and the rites themselves that were celebrated in those churches and palaces, derived from

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a monarchist and Christian tradition, with a pronounced intermingling of Latin and Greek-Byzantine elements.

It is, however, in the realm of their private pleasures, as exemplified by the “*Sollazzi*” (pavilions) and their surrounding gardens that the Norman kings cast off the role of *rex* and *basileus*, and adopt that of the sultan. This aspect of Sicilian court life was preserved until the 14th century, and never failed to amaze foreign visitors as evidenced by both the stories in the *Novellino*, dedicated to Frederick II, and those of the *Decameron* set in Palermo. Here the Islamic world clearly prevails, its art, its refined idea of beauty so different from the rude and rough manners of the Western European cavalry.

Thus, immediately outside the walls of the densely populated city of Palermo, Roger, William I and William II seize large areas of countryside and, relying on the ability of Islamic gardeners and architects, turn these areas into parks for their personal use and for that of their court. There are the orchard and vegetable garden for the first fruits, the garden itself to delight the eye and for the pursuit of gallantry and moving further away from the city - an estate for that most chivalrous of pleasures, hunting. Scattered throughout this vast suburban territory are various buildings, all in Islamic style, some of which have held up better than others over the centuries: the Maredolce Castle (which represents one of the furthest points of this system of parks), the Altofonte Castle, the Cuba Sottana, the Cuba Soprana, the Uscibene and finally the Zisa, the furthest point, on the opposite side of this parkland.

The focal point, on account of its lay out, is

the model of the Islamic garden, derived from the gardens of Persia which can be found over a vast area stretching from Kashmir to Andalusia. The garden, as noted by the agronomist Giuseppe Barbera, occupies a privileged place in the representation of the Islamic world. It is a sacred place of bliss, and Allah is called “the Gardener”. For people who lived in mostly arid or desert territories, areas where the presence of water and fertile soil allowed cultivation to occur, became a corner of paradise on earth. The crops that the Muslims planted around Palermo, testify to all their sophisticated agricultural and botanical knowledge, as well as to their almost religious devotion to the fertility of the earth and to the beauty of the green world. The Normans felt keenly the charm of this oriental world of delights and created and maintained for around a hundred and fifty years a world apart of parks, fishponds and fairytale buildings, secreted from the world and reserved for the pleasure of the few; an unimaginable reality at that time in any other part of Europe.

With the decline of their power and that of their successors, the ending of an oriental lifestyle at court and the feudal struggles of the 14th century, this secular “paradise on earth” began to fade away, until - from the 16th century onwards - it survived only as a badly utilised relic.

It was partially brought back to life during the 19th century: to some extent thanks to the rescue and restoration work begun at the time but mostly thanks to the romantic re-evocation of a unique historical reality.

NORMAN ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN RECOVERY AND RECONFIGURATION

Lina Bellanca

The architectural heritage of the Normans has been the subject of extraordinary attention by scholars and architects, who, since the 18th Century, have dedicated themselves to its conservation. A significant part of the long life of these monuments consists of the history of their restoration.

The presence in Sicily of a Commissione per l'Antichità (Commission of the Antiquities), established in 1778 by will of the Bourbon kings, enabled the implementation of the first conservation measures on some of these monuments as far back as the late 18th century. The first restoration, in 1779, of the laconicum (the sweat room inside the thermal baths) in Mareddolce can be attributed to Gabriele Lacillotto Castelli, Prince of Torremuzza (1727-1794), and precursor of the concept of the protection of Sicily's cultural heritage.

According to the restoration culture of the time, interventions were aimed at removing the successive historical periods so as to highlight the original Norman parts. On some of these monuments there are still highly visible reintegration works dating back to the 19th century. In the first half of the 20th century interventions become more substantial and invasive, with the introduction of innovative materials used in the restoration and reconfiguration of missing parts often without sufficient documentation. The endless disputes, for example, about the pre-existing dome, which crowned the Cuba, confirm the profound scholarly interest in these monuments and the desire to make the Norman architecture visible by rebuilding the missing parts, either through restoration or idealised reconstruction. The paintings by Rocco Lentini (the painting which represents the Cuba dates back to 1921), which reconstruct the palazzi of the Zisa and the Cuba based on input from the architectural restorers of the time, allow us once again to visualize the

architecture and its context as originally conceived by the Norman architects. In the restoration, the original masonry in small ashlar blocks of limestone, perfectly carved and spliced, worn out over time, are flanked by newly produced stone to refill the lacerations, the gaps left by the removal of unwanted accretions. These operations were often merely interpretive of the original architectural structure. They were

1
*The Cuba,
an imaginary
reconstruction painted
by Rocco Lentini, 1921*



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not exhaustively documented and today few traces remain.

Over the years, there have been numerous types of maintenance interventions on these monuments that today make it difficult to identify the mortar and works that distinguish the original structure from the integrations.

The “restoration of restoration”, more and more frequently necessary to contrast the passage of time and often to rectify the improper choice of materials used, makes reading the monument extremely complex

and can sometimes be misleading.

The study of the documentation on restorations always provides greater opportunities to analyse in depth the history of the monument, identifying the phases of construction, distinguishing and dating the restoration work that must be considered within the timeframe and the evolution of this discipline.

It should also be born in mind that Norman monuments are largely State property and therefore accessible to the public. The Soprintendenza of Palermo (earlier known

2

The Cuba before the retaining wall was removed





as the Commissione per l'Antichità) has been responsible for the safekeeping and preservation of these monuments, some of which were handed over to them in the second half of the 19th century after the suppression of the religious orders: e.g. Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti and the Chostro (*Cloister*) of Monreale. For the other Norman monuments the Soprintendenza is committed to the expropriation and subsequent restoration of assets acquired. The history of the restorations, the changes in ownership

and the fragmentation of the property within the historical complexes had caused upheavals and degradation. An example is the Castle of Mareddolce whose courtyard, as late as the nineties, was divided and occupied by several co-owners, surrounded and hidden from view by a series of modifications and its architectural shape altered by wide reaching interventions. The Soprintendente Vincenzo Rao “Worried about seeing the chapel of the Castle of Mareddolce, in this city, utilised as a goats’ shed and other ignoble uses”

3
*The current state of the
Cuba.*

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4

The Zisa before restoration

5

The current state of the Zisa



suggested to the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione (Ministry of Education) in June of 1915 “to use it for the time being, [for a yearly rent of Lit. 125] and meanwhile start the process of expropriation”. The acquisition of the Chapel of San Filippo was finalised in 1926, while the expropriation of the entire monumental complex and part of the lake was only completed in 2011.

The restoration of the Zisa, which was acquired by the state from private owners in 1951, was completed in the nineties when the Sicilian region was ready and able to fund the restoration of the monument, which was in poor condition.

Villa Napoli suffered a similar fate. Passing from the last heir of the Di Napoli family to the Sicilian region in conditions of extreme deterioration, initial restoration in the nineties slowed down this process of degradation

The compulsory purchase procedures, long and complex, have often hampered the recovery of these assets, which is still in the restoration stage for both Mareddolce and Villa Napoli. (In the case of Villa Napoli the assignment, in 2005, of a substantial part of the property to the Fondazione Orchestra Sinfonica Siciliana has interrupted the process of recovery due to the loss of previously authorised funding). The conservation status of the Uscibene, today still private property and divided between many co-owners, requires urgent consolidation and the Soprintendenza instituted procedures for the acquisition of the most significant parts, which have survived in an urban context riddled with illegal buildings, in preparation for a restoration that should ensure public use.

ISLAMIC GARDENS

Giuseppe Barbera

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The parks and gardens of Palermo from the Arab and Norman period have a clearly defined landscape model, Islamic, and as such they should be labeled. To continue to define them as Arab Norman (a non-existent landscape category), Arabian (the Arab culture unites but does not understand the cultural complexity of the Islamic world), Moorish (the Moors were the Arabs of christianised Andalusia), Saracen (the name of a tribe) or, in a comical excess of patriotic pride, Arab Sicilian or Norman Sicilian, helps neither to comprehend its nature nor to place it within its cultural background.

The theory supporting the probable existence of such landscapes and architectural buildings, during the centuries of Islamic domination, notwithstanding the lack of evidence provided by archeological ruins or documents, should be examined further. In any case it is an established fact that the workforce and “designers”, during the Norman and Swabian era, were certainly Arabs and that the ruling patrons had fully accepted this model of landscaping based on the Islamic “lifestyle”.

The Islamic gardens stemmed, for historical and geographical continuity, from those of the Persians. The Koran exalts their symbolic value and incorporates their landscaping components: water, shade, trees, flowers, the regular shaped structure enclosed by a fence that protects the fruits of cultivation and of culture. They are the product of a civilization, Islam, which during the Middle Ages, connected the world from the river banks of the Indus to the Atlantic coast, studied philosophy and the Greek and Asian sciences, learned from the Latin people, the Byzantines, and the Egyptians; “Finding science

is a religious obligation” Muhammad said and poetry was an instrument of communication widely utilised to impart knowledge. In the Islamic gardens, from Kashmir to Andalusia, knowledge born from the encounter between nature and differing histories, was reproduced in plants and in architecture, showcasing technical capabilities, productive decisions, aesthetic values and ethical foundations. Throughout the centuries of Islamic rule

6
The south-east facade of the castle of Maredolce and the garden



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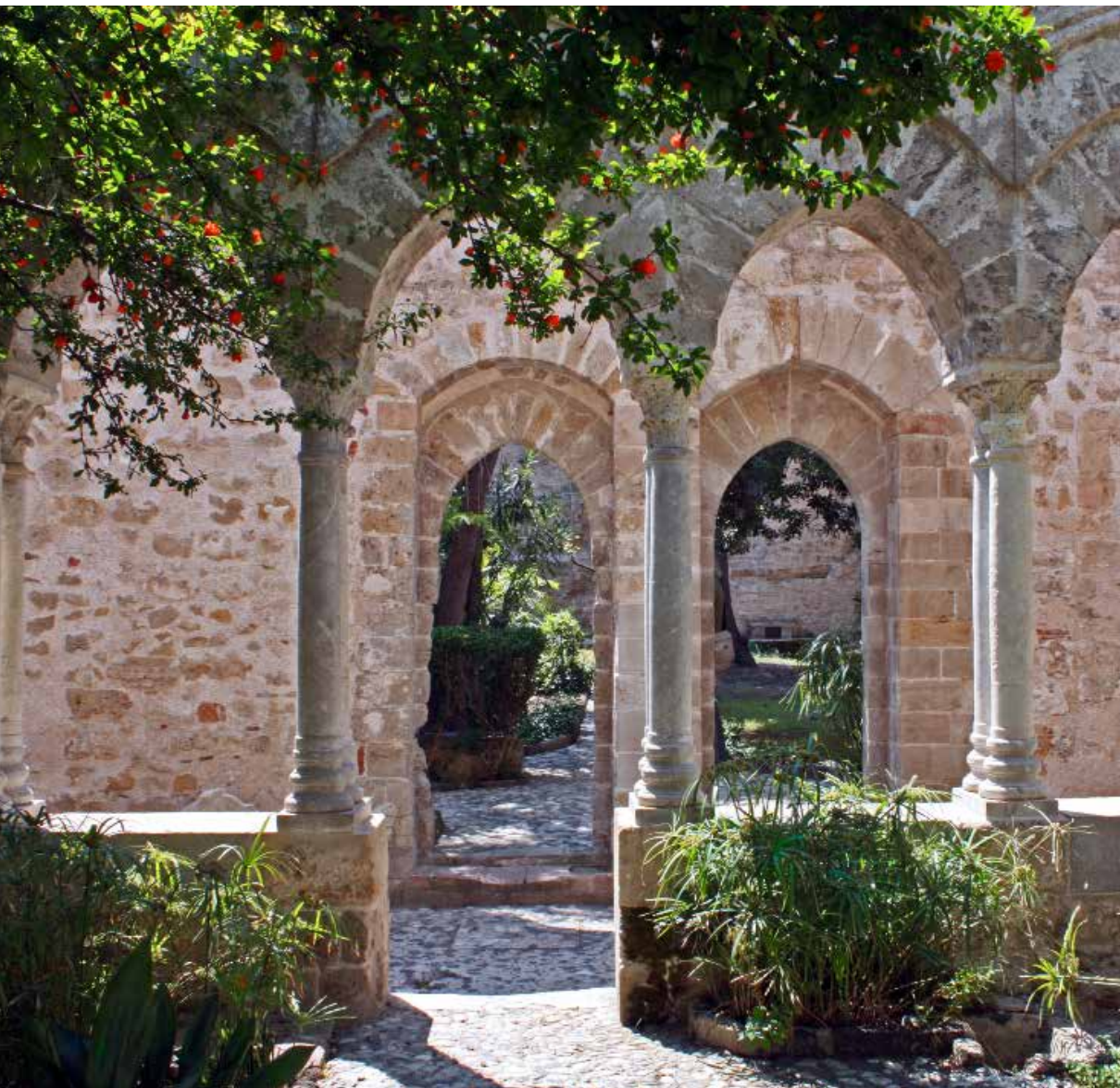
and then during Norman times, Sicily has participated in the definition of that landscaping culture of which extraordinary examples still survive such as the Iranian gardens of Kashan, Isfahan and Shiraz, as well as the Alhambra in Granada and the Agdal of Marrakech. Gardens were usually placed outside of the city in a panoramic position, enclosed by walls, with a formal center, divided into a geometric design by water canals bordered by flowers, embellished on the corners by fountains and pavilions and connected to large areas of water, “lakes” with an island in the center, in which are large buildings were reflected, formally and functionally linked to the open spaces.

The water was used to refresh the air and above all – in this resides the essence of the strength of the farming communities of the arid and semi-arid regions - to irrigate the fruit trees planted in large flowerbeds. On the outskirts of the park there were large shady areas ideal for hunting. In the parks there are banquets, and flirting but also new plants and new agricultural, hydraulic and mechanical techniques are tested, poems are written and recited (*rawdiya*, the poetry of the gardens, contains wonderful examples of Andalusian, Sicilian, Persian and Maghrebin verses). The flowers, fruits, fragrances, colours and the shade are enjoyed, business and science are debated. This is what the Arab and Norman parks in Palermo were like. They were born and developed according to Islamic agronomic knowledge and cultural aesthetics influenced both by neighboring Tunisia and also Andalusia. Andalusia in those

years had a flourishing agronomic school, whose leading representatives, during their journey to Mecca, visited Palermo bringing and taking away species and botanical varieties, cultivation techniques, but also landscaping suggestions. “The branches from the gardens” that “seem to stretch out” to look at “the fish in the water and to smile”, in the famous poem by Abdar-Rahman dedicated to the park of the Favara in Palermo, precede the indications of the *Trattato di Agricoltura* by Ibn Luyun about the “positioning of the gardens”. Whereas the superb orange trees on the small island “in the center of a large artificial lake, (from whence comes an alternative appellative of “Maredolce”), filled with various species of fish from different regions, anticipate the instructions of Ibnal-Awwam, the most important of the Andalusian agronomists, whereby in the gardens the bitter orange trees should “appear as though they have been planted in the water”.

Archaeological excavations, iconographic sources, ancient archival documents, reports of travellers and literary texts: the few sources available on Islamic gardens in Palermo confirm their compliance with the general Islamic model. In fact, considering the centuries in which they were created, the active participation of the Sicilian experts in its formation appears important.





MAREDOLCÉ

THE FAVARA OR MAREDOLCÉ

Maria Ala, Giuseppe Barbera

The “castle” of the Favara was built presumably in the Arab period as the home of the Kalbit Emir Giafar II and became one of the large estates belonging to King Roger II. It gave Palermo one of the parks celebrated by Arab poets as the place most favoured by the Norman royals for their personal delights.

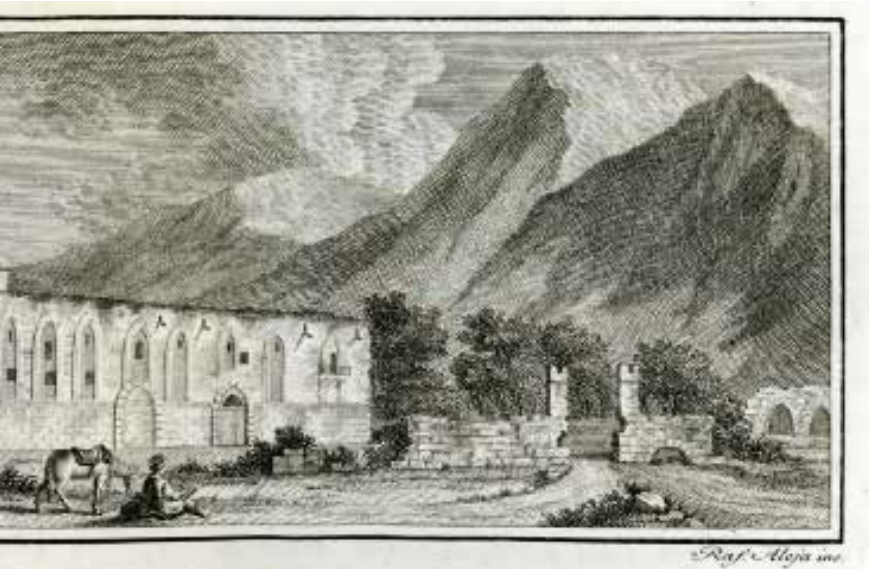
The park, which originally stretched to the Church of San Ciro at the foot of mount Grifone, included a large stretch of water

8
Maredolce, aerial view



which enclosed three sides of the royal palace and in the centre there was an island planted with citrus fruits, which set against the blue waters of the lake, created a striking chromatic effect. The vistas opening onto the surrounding countryside must indeed have been breathtaking: in the back-ground the imposing formations of the nearby mount Grifone and in the foreground the lake and the island with large citrus plants and soaring palms. The sensation of finding oneself between two seas must have been surprising: the Tyrrhenian Sea on one side and the “sea” of the fresh water of the Favara lake on the other.

The name Maredolce, given the location, probably originates from the term *Albehira*, a mangled form of *El-boheir* that in Arabic means “small sea”. Beniamino da Tudela in 1172 describes the stretch of water as



9
Mareddolce, the view of the castle in the XVIII century. An engraving by Raffaele Aloja from "Libro del consiglio di Egitto tradotto da Giuseppe Vella" (in Palermo: by the Reale Stamperia, 1793)

both large enough and deep enough to allow the launch of royal boats painted and adorned with gold and silver. Based on the information contained in historical sources and of what has been miraculously preserved of the original park, it is possible to hypothesize that it corresponded to the *āgdal* of Persian origin.

The lake fed by abundant channels of water, the "nine streams", declaimed in the poems by Abdar-Rahman, all coming from a single spring, the *Fawarah grande* that "flows from the nose of the mountain (the nearby mount Grifone), and is the largest source of water for rural Palermo"; This is how it was described for the first time by Ibn Hawqal, Persian merchant and geographer visiting Palermo in 973. The term *Fawarah* in Arabic signifies pool of water or spring; its name indicates a great

richness of water in the area, in fact it is present both as spring water (Church of San Ciro in Mareddolce and the Favara) as well as that of phreatic groundwater. The wide availability of water and its skilful use allowed the cultivation of orchards and gardens with "trees full of all the most exquisite kind of fruit" inside the park. From the bitter oranges they made syrups, juices, jams and sugared fruits; from the orange blossom they extracted essential oils and from the bark medicinal properties. A extensive reed bed was also cultivated, much like those of the Zisa and the Cuba, for the production and sale of canes used as poles and supports, especially in viticulture, and for the manufacture of *cannicci*: large vats for the storage of grain. From the Lake at Mareddolce to the Church of San Filippo, a large vineyard was

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*Castle of Maredolce,
the South-East facade*

cultivated, still known in 1437 as *Duchena di lu Maridulci* (from the Arabic *dukkan*, a slightly elevated wall), while the date farm, destroyed by Angevines, extended from the Favara to the entrance of the city. Soon, however, the lake that had aroused so much admiration began to dry up until it disappeared altogether. In its place a sugar mill was erected, documented by some interesting archaeological remains and by a great millstone.

What currently remains of the Maredolce Park is the castle, the island and the containing wall of the lake which is still perfectly visible, as well as the irrigation system of Arabic origin, although in part modernised. This system exploits the

minimum inclines which allows the water to arrive to each plant: from the “*gebbia*” water passes through the “*saja*”, a masonry or clay open air duct and from here passes into the “*cunmutti*”, earthen canals that carry the water in the “*casedde*” hollows made around the trunk of the tree and from here between the “*vattali*”, embankments of earth necessary to increase the efficiency of the irrigation. The tangerine trees, largely “*Tardivo di Ciaculli*”, occupy most of the island’s surface. Other species bear witness to a high specific biodiversity: apricots, walnuts, figs, medlars from Japan, pears, white mulberries and olives. Each fruit is represented by old varieties in large part no longer present in modern systems of fruit cultivation.

11

*Castle of Maredolce,
the outside of the
palatine chapel*

MAREDOLCE: AN ARABIC POEM

Favara of the two lakes [or “the two seas” the actual sea and the fountainhead of the “*Mare dolce*”; but from the description it sounds as if it talks about two pools], you combine every desire: dulcet views and enchanting vistas.

Your waters divide into nine rivers; oh beautiful dividing currents!

Where your lakes meet, there love presides, and on your canal passion pitches its tent.

Oh beautiful lake of the two palms, and royal hostel surrounded by the lake!

The clear water from the two springs resembles liquid pearls, and the surrounding area a sea. The branches in the gardens seem to reach out to watch the fish in the water, and smile. The big fish swim in the waves of the park, the birds chirp in its orchards.

The superb orange trees on the island look like fire burning on emerald branches. Lemons seem to have the pallor of a lover, who has spent the night complaining about the anguish of distance. And the two palms are like two lovers who, for fear of the enemy, have chosen a fortified castle. Palms of the two lakes of Palermo, may you be watered by a continuous flow of rain! May you enjoy a happy fate and obtain all your desires, may all adverse events slumber. Prosper, and offer shelter to lovers; over the security cast by your shadows, love watches unsullied.

Abdar-Rahman al-Itrabànishi, poet from Trapani in Arabic language from the era of Roger II . It is cited by: Francesco Gabrieli, “Ibn Hamdis”. In: *Delle Cose di Sicilia*. Edited by Leonardo Sciascia. Vol. I, Palermo: Sellerio, 1980, p. 26-27



THE CASTLE

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The Favara castle complex in Mareddolce is located under mount Grifone, in what is nowadays a rundown area, but which was once occupied by lush gardens, part of the ring of suburban parks, that in Norman times surrounded the city. Today, after years of abandonment, it has been restored. The Chronicon of Romualdo Salernitano, dating back to the reign of William II (1171-1189), contains the oldest testimony about its foundation, and assigns every credit to Roger II. To him, therefore should be attributed both the realisation, via some taxing excavation, of the “beautiful fish pond in which various species of fish, stemming from a variety of locations were introduced”, as well as the “seductive” building erected as its complement. This

news is confirmed in the subsequent works by Ugo Falcando, who lived in the second half of the 12th century, and by Pietro from Eboli, who died around 1220.

The beginning of its decline is likely to have been due to its sale by Frederick II



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of Aragon to the Teutonic Knights of Magione in 1328, who wanted to turn it into a “Hospice”. The resulting changes in ownership determine continuous interventions up to when, between 1777 and 1778, the structure, having passed into the hands of the ducal family of Agraz, is reduced to a farm building, adapted for that purpose by the architect Emanuele Cardona. In subsequent years, the state of abandonment reduces the building to an animal shelter, worthy of its attribution as a “Castellaccio”. Only recently, having become the property of the Region of Sicily, has a preliminary restoration, carried out by the Soprintendenza ai beni culturali di Palermo, initiated a wide ranging program for the recovery of the whole area, bringing it back to the attention of scholars.

Little or nothing remains of the great body of water, which has long since dried up and been replaced by a citrus grove. Traces of a quadrangular portico, more consistent

in the western corner, remain instead along the walls of the internal courtyard and this likens the palace of Mareolce to the contemporary residences built in Fatimid North Africa, presumably late re-workings of the Roman castrum and of their forums. However, its Islamic character is revealed externally, in the sharp outlines of the building, originally surrounded on three sides by the waters of the large fish pond in which it was reflected. The two-dimensional walls with slightly recessed blind arcades, the paucity of the ogival openings (predominantly lancet windows) that provide rare areas of shade and finally the marked horizontal prospect, generated by its proportions (the building covers 55 x 50 meters but is only between 7 to 10 meters tall) and accentuated by the flat terraced roofs resting on the extrados (top surface) of the vaults. In this peculiarity the castle of Mareolce differs substantially from the Cuba and, even more, from the Zisa. However, it is not the only factor to distinguish it from other Norman “sollazzi” or pavilions. After a succession of careful measurements of the accretions from earlier periods, the architects Matteo Scognamiglio and Gaetano Corsello D’Ondes were able to prove the use of the cubit of 44.4 cm deriving from the Roman-late antiquity age. This is a singular metric unit that not only dictates the size of every single brick on the surviving ancient flooring of the porch but determines, by the use of multiples and submultiples, the thicknesses of the walls, the sizes of the apertures and of the rooms. The design of the building is governed by a refined and rigorous geometric control. This

12

*Castle of Mareolce,
the vault of the
Palatine chapel*





13
*The Castle of
Maredolce, the royal
hall with muqarnas.*



14
*The Castle of
Maredolce, plissé vault*

15
*The Castle of
Maredolce, the arcade*

construction expertise is also reflected in the numerous cross vaults, accurately made with small blocks, used to cover the more than twenty-five rooms that follow each other, almost continuously and on one level, around the central courtyard. It is not entirely clear what the use of the individual parts is. However it is possible to identify together with the royal apartments, the northwest wing due to the size of the rooms and the presence of the chapel, a small longitudinal church plan, punctuated by two aisles. Despite the small size, its presbytery is extremely complex: raised, tripartite and topped by a dome on hanging corner niches forming an octagonal tambour. A rectangular room precedes the area for worship. Often identified as for royal use, it concludes, on the shorter side adjoining the chapel, to which it gives access, with an alcove surmounted by a pavilion vault, cadenced by stucco creasing, entirely similar to those visible in the Uscibene and in the castle of Caronia.



SAN GIOVANNI DEGLI EREMITI

THE CONVENT

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Opening Hours

Mon-Sat 9.00 to 19.00

Sun. and holidays 9.00 to 13.30

Bordering the ancient city walls, to the south of the Norman building once lapped by the waters of Kemonia, one of two rivers that flows through the city, the Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti constitutes one of the most unique monuments of the architectural heritage of Palermo and is

historically one of the most problematic. There are two theories advanced by scholars regarding its origin. The oldest theory dates from the 17th century. Expounded by the historian Rocco Pirri in his *Sicilia Sacra*, he connects the site with one of the Benedictine monasteries founded in the 6th century by Pope Gregory the Great in the Sicilian possessions of his own mother, that of San Ermete defined by the same Pope in one of his letters as being “near the Church of San Giorgio «*ad Sedem*»”, then presumably destroyed during the Islamic invasion. In fact there is a cult building dedicated to the latter saint still existing near San Giovanni degli Eremiti (Oratory of

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San Giovanni degli Eremiti, in a photo by Giuseppe Incorpora in 1880 ca





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*San Giovanni degli
 Eremiti, lateral
 view from Via dei
 Benedettini*

San Mercurio), which is equally as old, in spite of its current baroque appearance. The other theory dates back to the second half of 19th century, offered by the architect-restorer Giuseppe Patricolo. He sees proof of the existence of an Islamic era prayer room, later reused by the Normans, in the traces of previous constructions, still visible along the outside of the southern part of the church. In reality the two theories, although compatible, have never been definitively corroborated or disproved by subsequent studies, or by discoveries of remains and inscriptions. Besides, the constructive techniques, belonging to what remains of the large quadrangular enclosure with its portico on the north side and to those of the adjoining rectangular hall, do not differ from those in use in Palermo during the period of the County of Sicily (1071-1130) and could, therefore, refer to this period. Also problematic is the question relating to the origin of the term “Eremiti” (Hermits). In agreement with Rocco Pirri, many

scholars believe in the corruption of the name San Ermete. Proof of this would appear to lie in the similarity of the two names as well as the dedication to San Mercurio, the Latin equivalent of Hermes, also the plain on which San Giovanni stands, together with a well at one time in existence there, known for its miraculous waters, and in the oratory nearby. However, it was at the behest of King Roger that around 1132, an abbey was built adjacent to the royal palace, dedicated by him to San Giovanni then donated to the Benedictines as a monastery. From the 14th century the monastery under-went a slow but steady decline. In 1464 the Benedictines from the Abbey of San Martino delle Scale repopulated San Giovanni, by now almost devoid of priests, by order of Pope Paul II. Nevertheless the Abbey's decline continued. This explains the decision to implement a radical reform of the building of worship, transforming it from a monastery to a secular church at some point between the third or fourth

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San Giovanni degli Eremiti, the bell tower and the dome

decade of the 16th century, perhaps in conjunction with the arrival of Charles V in Sicily. Consequently, the former chapter house is turned into a hall, more easily accessible from town. The ancient temple is transformed into the choir for the monks, a decision that remained until Giuseppe Patricolo, in 1882, undertook an extensive and incisive restoration campaign aimed at returning it to its presumed original appearance. Substantial demolitions were carried out; most of the monastic structure disappears, judged not to belong to its original configuration, especially those on the north and east side of the church, connecting it with the cloisters and the so-called abbot's house. Today access to the complex is through the lush garden full of exotic plants that replaced it. These restorations liberated the church almost entirely (the only exception being the south east corner), thereby bringing to light the facade patterning, two-dimensional and formed by layers of perfectly aligned ashlar blocks. It becomes very plain to see that the presbytery and the southern side of the building underwent major alterations in the 16th century. This is where Patricolo restores extensive areas of the apses along the ancient wall separating them from the former chapter room, whilst retaining the evidence of what he maintains was a pre-existing mosque: traces of vaults and a central colonnade in the hall and the entire south side of the church, with its "strombate" windows (windows covered by a small arch) protruding externally rather than internally and the remains in the external wall of the spans. There are only a

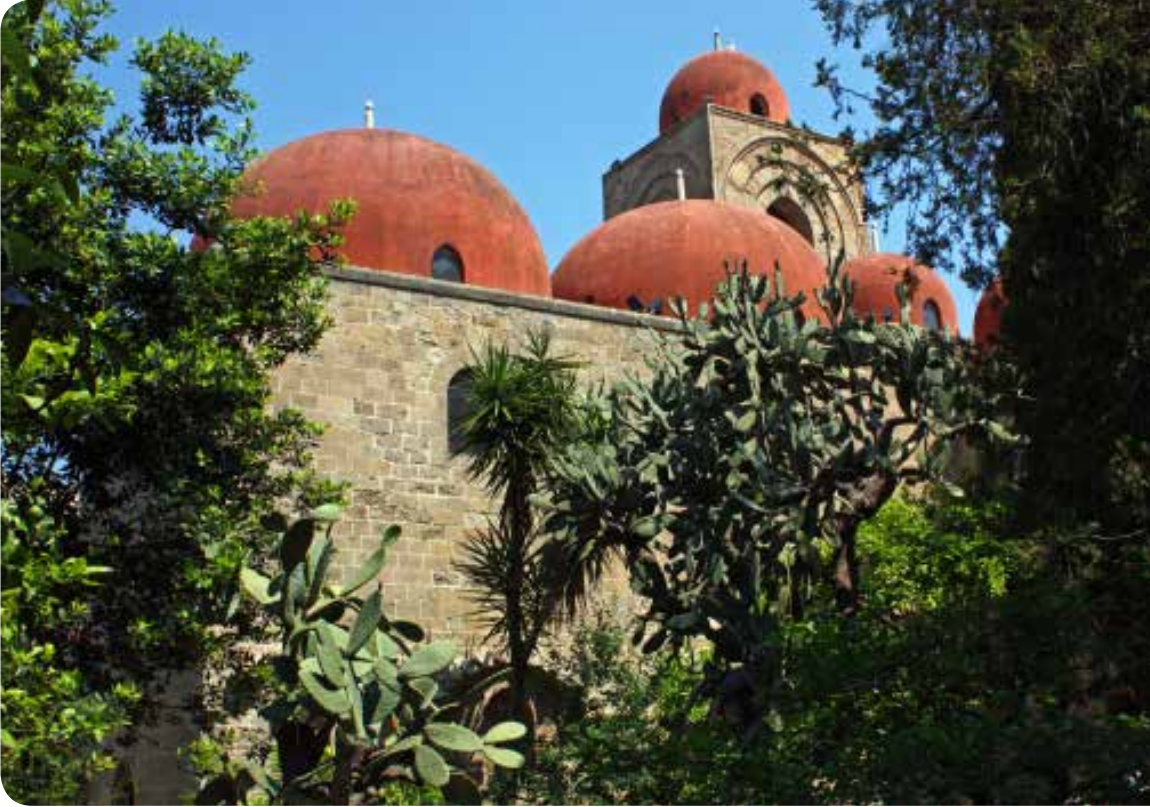
few elements, but sufficient to support the theories of the Palermitan scholar. Besides, according to 19th century historiographers, even a Christian building, built under the Normans was affected by a markedly "Arab" style. Jacques Ignaz Hittorff in 1835 and Domenico Lo Faso Pietrasanta, Duke of Serradifalco three years later, were both in agreement. Even Michele Amari, the 19th century Arabist Sicilian, who translated most of the Islamic inscriptions on the island, identifies in the Fatimid architecture from Cairo the immediate precursors of the Abbey and many other buildings in Palermo. The common feature is held to be the vaults, featuring a hemispherical cupola suspended by means of octagonal windowed squinches over square bays, outlined with multiple projecting arches. A system that in the church with its cruciform floor plan, is repeated five times: over the two large bays of the aula and on a smaller scale, over the space preceding the main apse, over the diaconicon and finally over the bell tower at the north end, designed to be totally integrated with the prosthesis which constitutes the base. An architectural style based essentially on geometrical rigour and total control of the construction techniques, creating deliberate and calibrated effects of light and shadow without resorting to sculptural or pictorial works, marble decorations or mosaics, relying instead on the clever use of the ogival openings, probably originally protected by perforated barriers. It is, perhaps, externally that everything





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*San Giovanni degli
Eremiti, the cloister*



achieves greater expressiveness through the contrast between the geometric simplicity of the underlying volumes and the scattered placement of the domes on top, restored to their alleged red colouring by Patricolo, who found fragments of that colour in situ. According to Bruno Zevi, one of the greatest architectural scholars of the 20th century, this goes beyond the mere processing of Islamic words, inaugurating a syncretic language capable of creating

an egalitarian merger between the three different civilizations (Muslim, Greek-Byzantine and Latin) found in Sicily by the Normans. There is still a great deal of disagreement with regard to Sicilian contemporary architecture: the position of the tower, not belonging to the facade (as in Cefalù, Monreale, Church of San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi) or connected to it (Palermo Cathedral, Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio): the floor plan of

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*San Giovanni degli
Eremiti, the domes*

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*San Giovanni degli
Eremiti, inside the
church and the dome*

the presbytery that accentuates the diagonal dimensions instead of the more usual centric plan; the unusual positioning of the cloister, built at some unspecified date between the end of the 12th and the first half of the 13th century in the north-west corner of the garden. This choice is due to

the impossibility of realising a four-sided portico both on the north side of the church, due to the extreme unevenness of the terrain, as well as on the opposite side, designated as a cemetery. Thus, built perforce in the free space between the church and the city walls, the construction



is based on an unusual rectangle visibly stretched along the north-south line. Reduced almost to a ruin, its present state, characterised by lancet arches with recessed lintels and small paired columns, is the outcome of an accurate reconstruction through numerous restoration campaigns.

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San Giovanni degli Eremiti, affresco

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San Giovanni degli Eremiti, the so called "Arab room"

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THE GARDEN

Adelaide Catalisano

In 1072 the Normans, led by Roger I and Robert Guiscard, triumphantly entered the city of Palermo taking possession of it and as of 1130, Roger II assumed the title of King of Sicily.

So Palermo with its 300 mosques (according to the testimony of the Ibn Hawqal on the eve of the year 1000), despite being defined by William Appulo,

historian of the Norman conquest, “a city opposed to the name and the worship of God, subject to demons”, appeared to the Normans to be a piece of heaven on earth. It was certainly the charm of this city, trading center and meeting place for merchants and pilgrims, which favoured, at least at first, the maintenance of cultural and economic ties with the southern Mediterranean, respecting the Arab influence in the fields of science and the arts and more generally, the creation

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San Giovanni degli Eremiti, aerial view of the garden



of a climate of cultural exchange. The Monastery of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, founded (or re-founded) by Roger II, with its garden, is a excellent example of this continuity, which is also to be seen in the layout of the buildings, the settlements and the farms. The area around the Abbey was already surrounded by lush gardens and orchards, due mainly to the waters from neighbouring Kemonia. In the edict issued in 1148 by Roger, the same monastery garden is described as being lush with

orange trees and rose gardens. The cloister, however, is not cited so it would seem that it was built at some later date.

Though located in an area originally water-rich, archival documents often refer to water shortages likely to compromise the health of the plants. Matters come to a head with the lowering of the street level, leading to the demolition of a large part of the aqueduct's pipeline.

The current configuration of the garden probably dates back to the end of the 19th century. In 1874, the Town Hall, having bought the land adjacent to the Abbey wanted to introduce some exotic plants, thereby creating a small informal garden, crisscrossed by paths. Today the garden has been given a romantic makeover. It follows the configuration of the ground on different levels using irregular flower beds and paths that climb up from the lowest part, bordering the road and the plateau in front of the cloister, a layout very different from the original one. Overall, the flora in the garden of San Giovanni degli Eremiti is very diverse and articulated and there is often no real continuity; the different species are frequently crowded or arranged chaotically as they have probably been added to the existing flora without any definite project. Nevertheless, the existing vegetation has created an environment of particular beauty that helps to enhance the surroundings of the preexisting structure.



THE ZISA

THE GARDEN

Maria Ala, Giuseppe Barbera

“At that time King William built in Palermo a Palace relatively tall and beautifully decorated, which he named the Sisa. He surrounded it with beautiful gardens and charming orchards, and rendered it extremely delightful with several water canals and pools”. It is one of the oldest news articles contained in the chronicle by Romualdo Salernitano, about the palace of the Zisa and its *garden paradise*. This major work was realised in a relatively short period of time and it was finished before King William’s death in 1166.

The decorations and the finishings were carried out in the years after 1166, i.e. in the early years of the reign of William II and it is to him that the inscription in *naskhi* on the arch of the entrance to the “*Sala della Fontana*” refers: “Whenever you wish, you will see the most beautiful possession from amongst the most splendid realms in the world: of the seas and the mountains which (dominate) it, whose peaks are tinged with narcissus... and you will see the (great) King of the century living there (which) bestows on him magnificence and happiness This is the heaven on earth which opens the eyes. These are the *Musta’izz* and this (building)

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The Zisa, an imaginary reconstruction, painting by Rocco Lentini, 1935





is the *Aziz*". The inscription "*yearning for glory*" is the meaning of *Musta'izz*, attributed to William II, while the palace is named *al-Aziz* (noble, splendid, glorious) which later became commonly known as the Zisa. The appellation "*earthly paradise that opens the eyes*" is attributed to the nature of the Zisa garden, the paradise promised in the Koran to virtuous men. The regular form of the small pool in front of the palace, nowadays only its remains are visible, suggests that it had a geometrical layout. It is still possible to make out

the longitudinal axis that, starting from the "*Sala della Fontana*", marks the floor and traces outside, the symmetry of the rectangular shaped pool, with at its center, perhaps, a kiosk, no longer visible, with a dome and open on all four sides. There is, however, no evidence of the existence of an orthogonal axis, with the typical cross of the *caharbàgh*, a quadripartite garden. Unlike the Maredolce park, in the Zisa, water does not lap the building, but is generated inside the "*Sala della Fontana*" pouring through a canal from two small

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The Zisa, the facade

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The Zisa, the "Sala della Fontana"

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The Zisa, exhibition hall



internal square pools to then reappear in the outer pool, thereby giving life to the central axis of the garden, and simultaneously a natural cooling of the atmosphere. The temperature of the interior was, in fact, lowered by the effect of water evaporation present in the building both internally and externally. The presence of water, together with the “the towers of wind”, located at the sides of the building and used to channel the winds, forcing them to cross the building thereby creating an efficient chimney effect, created a natural cooling effect during the summer months.

The symbiotic relationship existing between the internal and external areas of the palace is represented by the water theme as well as by that of the garden. Indeed, there is a particular continuity between the *garden-paradise* outside the palace and the symbolic one inside. The idea of paradise on earth, that will become manifest in all its excellence outside the palace, is anticipated in the great *iwān* of the “*Sala della Fontana*” through sculptured motifs: the capitals with large pecking birds, fish carved in the *shadhirwān*, the mosaic in the canal, now disappeared, of two peacocks either side of a palm tree and mosaics depicting hunting in the garden, with two archers letting off their arrows at birds hidden among the branches of a tree. Like the description of paradise in the Koran, it was a garden made of shadows, canals and reservoirs powered by water from the near-by source of the Gabriele, exotic animals, flowers, vegetable gardens and orchards with fruit trees of every species: bitter oranges, *lumie* (a small sweet lemon, *Citrus lime*), lemons, apricots, grapes



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and figs. In the garden onions, cabbage, melons, parsnips, radishes, turnips, beans and possibly pumpkins, eggplants, spinach, artichokes and sesame were cultivated. A large reedbed was cultivated for the production of canes, which were sold to gardeners and growers as poles and supports for vegetables and vineyards. No source provides information about the size of the garden and nothing suggests that it was a continuation of the Genoard. Between the two there was in fact a large swampy portion of park, that of the Danisinni. We have only a fragmented knowledge of events concerning the Zisa and its garden from the Norman age onwards: the water features and the garden statues were used in 1402 by King Martin I (of Sicily), returning from the conquest of Sicily, to refurbish the palace of Barcelona, while a few years

later, because of a demographic crisis, the garden, as well as many irrigated grounds belonging to suburban houses, were leased for the cultivation of barley. In 1625, during the plague, the Zisa was used as a lazzaretto. The palace was in such a bad state of repair that it was given free to the purchaser of the “tenimento” of the Zisa, Giovanni de Sandoval. He undertook a series of works that saved the building from ruin, but there were heavy transformations: the building took on the typical characteristics of a 17th century palace, while the garden conserved much of its lush character, so much so that it was later recalled by the writer Frances Elliott as “full of delight, beautifully adorned with pavilions of marble and of porphyry and shady porticos inlaid with mosaics” and “rich in bamboo canes, pomegranates and myrtle.

IPPOLITO NIEVO DESCRIBES THE ZISA

A vibrant testimony to the exotic charm enjoyed during the nineteenth century by the Islamic style of architecture dating from the Norman era, is offered in this letter by the great writer Ippolito Nievo, who came to Sicily in 1860 with Garibaldi, and became involved in the new administration of the island.

“The Zisa is beautiful! I would give my current life and also a good part of the future to be able to have lived when the Zisa was young. – Do not build castles in the air for me – The Zisa is a royal mansion

built by the ancient Muslim conquerors. It reminds me of the Arabian nights, romances sung to the sound of the guitar; sorbet of roses; turbans, my pipe and the moonlight – Everything that I value much more than office registers, and reviewing the troops. Oh poor me, I’m becoming old! If I had a beard it would be white”

Ippolito Nievo (1831-1861), *Lettera a Bice Melzi di Eriol* (1860).

It is cited from the *Mappa letteraria di Palermo*, created by Comune di Palermo on the website: <http://mappaletteraria.comune.palermo.it/map-pa-letteraria>

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Part of the large complex of lush gardens, specks of water, beautiful pavilions, which extended in the Norman era from the city walls to the Altofonte, the Palace was born as a suburban home intended for the *otia regis*, the amusements of the king and his court. Romualdo Salernitano identifies in William I (1120-1166) the buyer, placing in the last period of his life the commissioning of the site, conducted with “splendid speed and considerable expense” to outdo in “comfort and attention to detail”, the works (like the Favara) promoted by his father Roger.

There are only theories, but no certain information, concerning the interruption of work on the death of the King and their resumption and completion during the first years of the reign of his successor William II, who died in 1189. Nevertheless, it is the latter that has been accorded, according to the translation and interpretation by the Sicilian Arabic scholar Michele Amari (1806-1889), the epithet *Musta'izz*, “yearning for glory”, part of a mutilated inscription in Nashi characters placed on the entrance of the “Sala della Fontana”. Even more fragmented is the Kufic inscription engraved on the original attic wall, which was transformed into battlements presumably between the 14th



and the 15th century, thus compromising almost entirely its historical value. This is the period in which the management of the Zisa and its estates is granted to private buyers, usually high-ranking officials connected to the court such as the seneschal William Ventimiglia (from 1399) and the poet Antonio Beccadelli from Bologna known as Panormita (from 1440). Limited to the aforementioned crowning element, the reconfiguration of the two openings on the first floor and on the ground floor, the modification of two passage areas, the records of the alterations reveal the respect shown by the caretakers for the monument. This continues during the 16th century as borne out by the commissioning, in 1511, of a mosaic panel for the fountain, given to Peter Oddo the greatest mosaic artist active at that moment in Sicily, and the detailed description of the monk from Bologna, Leandro Alberti, who arrived in Palermo in 1526, describing a building that is still almost intact.

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The Zisa, mosaic in the “Sala della Fontana”

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The Zisa, headstone dating from 1149, text in 4 languages, Latin, Greek, Arabic and Hebrew

The situation changes almost a century later. Reduced to a warehouse during the plague epidemic of 1624-1626, five years later it was in poor condition as noted on the rental contract stipulated by Berlinghieri Ventimiglia. In 1635 the conditions of the building are so bad that it is transferred free of charge to Giovanni de Sandoval, purchaser of the surrounding land. He immediately begins restoration, with a dual effect. He rescues it from total ruin, but in keeping with its new status, many changes are made: the construction of three vaults in the uncovered atriums on the top floor, the central one crossshaped; their external concealment with terraced pavilions encompassing laterally the terminals of the main staircase which lose their original function and are replaced by a new staircase; downstairs the creation of a mezzanine

through the addition of an intermediate floor in the vestibule entrance; the removal of several walls in order to merge rooms; the reduction of many external mullioned windows to simple rectangular holes; the opening of further windows. The interventions of Sandoval, although quantitatively relevant, do not totally nullify the peculiarities of this poignant witness to a significant and delightful cultural era, leaving untouched in particular the extraordinary “Sala della Fontana” in all its emblematic splendour. This explains why, especially in first half of the 19th century, in concurrence with a renewed interest in the Medieval Ages, the Zisa draws upon itself the attention of important scholars, becoming each time the subject of multiple interpretations. It is therefore in this century that the bases are



laid of three recurrent attitudes to be found in subsequent historiographical tracts on Sicilian-Norman architecture: these are; the propensity to emphasize the contribution coming from North Africa (Giuseppe Bellafore), that which favours the bond with the Christian West (Wolfgang Krönig) and the attempt to reconcile the two extremes (Giuseppe Spattisano, Giuseppe Caronia, Ursula Staacke).

The stylistic references to differing cultural themes from the 12th century can be read in a complex project that, in admirably uniting building, garden and land, manifests a consistency based on the profound knowledge the unknown designer had to have of the places and his ability to relate to them. The ability to close the gap between knowledge, artistic traditions and diverse religious experiences would have

allowed him to identify the root that unites Christians from the West, the East, and Muslims, or in other words, that syncretic culture that characterized a large part of the Roman Empire. For example, the reference to the *ivan* in the great hall on the ground floor, open to the East towards the park, could be more than just the result of eclectic taste, and rather more the conscious evocation on the basis of political and ideological choices, of a past capable of further legitimizing royal power.

Even today, those who go into the Zisa feel the presence of choices made for the construction and definition of the architectural space: the “*muqarnas* with stalactite vaults and a bubbling spring under a registry of golden mosaics, the inclined plane down which the water flows generating a subdued murmur, the articulated central space, the arches that connect both the vestibule and outside with the large terminal bath”. A spatial narrative that, connecting through geometric rigour and through water, both elements with strong specific strengths, incorporates a custom from the imperial era handed down by Levantine courts and literary sources. Its oldest appearance in the West is perhaps the octagonal room of the Domus Aurea where Nero revered himself as the sacred cornerstone of the state. Even the orientation of the Zisa and its surroundings appears calculated: the three large arches facing north-east (the only openings on the ground floor) allow the sea breezes inside. Cooled by the fish pond and the fountain, powered by wind-towers and directed by the particular layout of the rooms, they provide refrigeration during the sultry mediteranean summer nights.

THE GENOARD

THE GENOARD AND THE CUBA

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In Norman times a large *garden-paradise*
blossomed in close proximity to the
royal palace, situated in between what is

nowadays via Pisani and via Calatafimi at the top of the city of Palermo. A miniature, painted in 1195 and reproduced in the *Liber ad honorem Augusti* by Pietro from Eboli, has passed down to us the name: “Genoard”, “Heaven on Earth” (*Giannat al-ard*). This same garden is called, in the historical sources of the 13th century and in the sixth novella of the fifth day of Boccaccio, the Cuba. The name refers to the building housed in the garden: the large pavilion built in 1180. The name Cuba remained, according to the precious testimony of Tommaso Fazello, 16th century Sicilian historian, at least until the second half of the 16th century, when it is described as a place where “pleasant orchards bloomed, filled with all sorts of trees and continuous running water. There were also on both sides *viridaria* (garden areas) smelling sweetly of bay and myrtle. In the middle, an extremely long portico extends from the entrance to the bottom of the park, filled with domed, open-sided cubed shaped kiosks meant for the king’s entertainment... In the middle there was a large pond filled with real fish... the magnificent building for the king’s relaxation appeared to rise up out of the water... In part of this garden, because nothing should be lacking for the pleasure of the king, wild animals of all kinds were bred in abundance, both for the pleasure of the eyes and for the entertainment of the court. However, today everything is in ruins and the place is occupied by vineyards and private orchards”.

The Genoard, a fenced in space, expressed the pastoral and landscaping culture of Islamic gardens. The building was reflected

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Plan of Palermo
with the Genoard,
miniature from mss.
“Liber ad honorem
Augusti” by Pietro
from Eboli (XII
century)





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The Uscibene



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The Uscibene, internal vault

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The Cuba from an engraving from "Informatione del pestifero, et contagioso morbo..." "By Giovanni Filippo Ingrassia (1576)

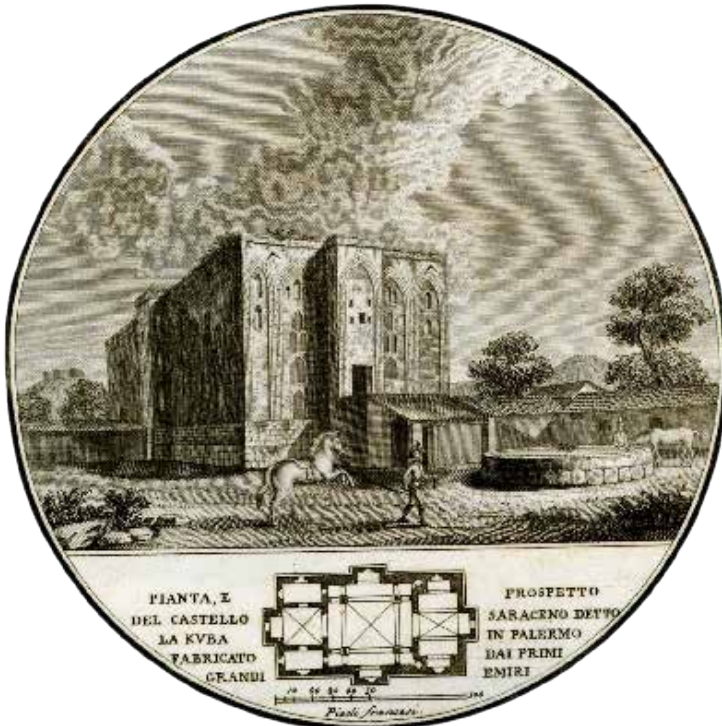
on all sides in a pool that, according to the testimony of the chief physician Gian Filippo Ingrassia, was still present in the 16th century. It had an outer perimeter of 160 canes (327.37 m) and each side measured 40 canes (81.84 m).

The garden was full of fruit trees, many of which had been recently introduced, palm trees, ornamental trees, flowers and spices. There were almost certainly pergolas made from vines, providing shade, reminding people of the "green, very green" gardens promised by the Koran to God-fearing men; they will enter into the "shady shade" to enjoy all the pleasures reserved for them. Even the "long porch" of the Cuba, described by Fazello, was probably covered with climbing vines from which, like those described in the *Arabian Nights*, "hung magnificent bunches of grapes, some red as rubies, the others black as ebony".

With the arrival of the new rulers, first Swabian and then Angevines, the *gardens of delight* in Palermo were partially abandoned, or divided up and granted in concession to supporters of the king in the government of the Kingdom of Sicily. The Cuba sollazzo was conceded in 1278 by Charles I of Anjou to Jordano known as Mazono and in 1282 entrusted to Nicolò Joppulo by King Peter III of Aragon. In 1320 it was privatised, bought by the Count Barca Siginolfo and then only five years later it was vandalized and looted by French militias who also devastated the garden. During the plague that struck Palermo in 1575, Cuba became a military hospital, of which a plan remains, attached to the report on the epidemic by the chief

physician of Palermo, Filippo Ingrassia: the building is inside an enclosure, known by the name of Piano della Gebbia, in reference, perhaps, to the ancient fishpond lapping the building. In the 18th century, the Cuba was rented by the Royal Court to serve as “the headquarters of the military cavalry” and since then the building has been commonly referred to as “the Borgognoni”. In the late 19th century, according to Amari, the district

was still used by the cavalry and leased to the Government. Until 1966, as the Cuba was located inside a military barracks, it was open to the Public only on the 4th of November, the feast day of the Forze Armate (Armed Forces). It was then acquired by the Soprintendenza ai beni culturali di Palermo and restored. In 2004, the Cuba Sottana, and the area in front of the ancient fishpond were acquired as regional state property.



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The Cuba in the 18th century. Engraving by Raffaele Aloja from the “Libro del Consiglio di Egitto” translated by Giuseppe Vella...” In Palermo by the Reale Stamperia, 1793

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*The Cuba, a detail
and inscription in
kufic characters*



THE CUBA IN THE DECAMERON

Evidence of the Cuba's fame can be found back in the 14th century in the reknown collection of short stories by the Tuscan Giovanni Boccaccio, the *Decameron*, namely in the sixth story of the fifth day. In it he tells of the kidnapping of a noble maiden of Ischia who is given by Sicilian pirates-sailors to King Federigo (Frederick III of Aragon, who reigned in Sicily between 1296 and 1337). She was kept shut up in the Cuba in a manner resembling the harems of Islamic memory.

“They, albeit she was shouting, took her, placed her on their boat, and left: arriving

in Calabria, they started arguing as to who should have the young woman, and in brief, each of them wanted her; thus, not able to come to any decision, fearing that she would come between them and make matters worse, they finally agreed that she should be gifted to King Federigo of Sicily, who was at that time young, and took delight in such things; and having arrived in Palermo, this is what they did. The king, seeing her beauty, held her dear; but seeing her in poor health, and hoping to make her stronger, commanded that she be housed in some of the beautiful homes in one of his gardens, which he called the Cuba, and which was ideal for this purpose; and so it was done”.

THE CUBA PAVILION

Antonio Aurelio Belfiore

.....
 The Pavilion, together with the garden surrounding it, was, up until the 14th century, part of the Royal state property. Together with the Zisa and other buildings from the Norman era, it formed the immense park which once existed above Palermo.

The only document known to date able to provide reliable information about its

construction is the half defaced Arabic epigraph found in the molding of the building. Although it is not entirely legible, William II is identified as the buyer and 1180 the year of its probable completion. However, there is no bichrome marquetry to be seen in the Cuba, characteristic of the last architectural structure of the Altavilla. For this reason, it has often been backdated, especially during the 19th century when, before Michele Amari translated the inscriptions in Naskhi

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The Cuba, lateral view



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The Cuba, inside

characters on the copingstones, it was widely held to have been built during the Islamic domination.

Information about the Cuba after its foundation is scarce. In the 14th century the building and garden are known and appreciated even outside the Island and in the 15th century they are sold to a private buyer. One of the sale documents, from the early part of the century, describes the state of the building, as still being “enjoyable in all its architectural and decorative integrity”. However in 1575, following the spread of the plague in Palermo, it became a hospital and in the 18th century a police station.

Its present state of degradation, due to its previous use, is perhaps the reason it is no longer possible to fully appreciate the monument in its original state. The multiple stylistic interventions aimed at restoring windows and parts of the walls have not helped. Particularly invasive were those carried out in in the 1930's by Francesco Valenti. He removed parts and remounted them in places considered, in his opinion, more suited to the character of the monument. This is the reason for the differing and at times contradictory interpretations made by scholars, who focused mainly on the large central hall with an overall height of (14.4 m per side) and of which only the perimeter wall and traces of the flooring remain. Everything observed here after the excavations of 1936 points to the existence of bases arranged at the vertices of an ideal square probably part, according to many scholars, of a structure on columns (no longer existing) able to support a great vault. This theory





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is supposedly corroborated by one of the etymological assumptions about the name Cuba, presumed to refer to a type of domed building.

Giuseppe Belfiore disagrees with this theory for many reasons. The first one is structural, believing that the conceivable size of the four supports is too slender, and so inadequate to sustain a stone dome eight meters in diameter. The second one is technological, as the absence of the central cover would allow the hot air to flow upwards and to be replaced by cool breezes inside the room through the lower windows (the only ones in the entire building not blind), overlooking the surrounding water (a system almost similar to that adopted in the Zisa for the upper

chamber). The third reason is historical. There is no evidence of the spherical cap neither in the 16th century description of Tommaso Fazello nor in that by the chief medic of Palermo Gian Filippo Ingrassia (who describes a square uncovered courtyard), nor in the drawing by the same Ingrassia. This is the oldest picture of the Cuba, showing a parallelepiped building with a flat roof.

With or without the dome, all scholars agree that it was not a residential home but a large pavilion, part of a system of lush gardens and orchards, probably the one indicated in the miniature painting in *Liber ad honorem Augusti* by Pietro from Eboli, and named the *Genoard* (from *Giannat al-ard*, “paradise on earth”).

41

The Cuba, a detail





Being the closest to the royal palace and the city, it was intended to accommodate, in an oasis of beauty, the court during their extra-mural activities (walks, parties, hunting etc.). Its location within a lake, in fact reminds us less of the Zisa castle and rather more of the aedicule in front of it, rather like an island in a fishpond. The existence of the large body of water that lapped three sides of the Cuba is confirmed by the high plinth privy of openings, the insertion of the northern embankment bearing traces of red hydraulic plaster, and the testimony of Ingrassia, who at the end of the 16th century, managed to measure its dimensions.

The Cuba is rectangle in shape, with four protruding walls animating each of the facades. The external symmetry is in direct

contrast to the layout of the internal spaces. In fact the two *iwān* that open onto the central court are completely different from one another. The south-west one is a copy of the complex structural system found in the "Sala della Fontana" in the Zisa; the other, larger in size, is instead an elongated quadrilateral with a trifornice cut into the inside wall and the remaining three sides partitioned by a rectangular niche each lit by a small mullioned window.

Compared to the palace built a few years before by William I, the Cuba was therefore of a more intimate dimension although probably just as rich and sumptuous. However, only traces remain of the magnificent embellishments such as the stalactite ceilings (*mocàrabe*), geometric decorations in stucco and cornices.

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The Cuba, muqarnas

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Remains of the Cuba Soprana on the Eastern facade of Villa Napoli (drawing by the architect Paolo Basile)

THE CUBA SOPRANA AND VILLA NAPOLI

Maria Ala, Adelaide Catalisano

Via F. Speciale Palermo
rel. +390917071425 - +393357957161

Opening Hours

by appointment

Around 1180 William II commissioned, in the Parco Nuovo, the Cuba pavilion surrounded by a garden of lush vegetation, rich in water and, for the delight of the king, animals were bred in the wild; the whole area was named after the Arab "Genoardo". Along with the Cuba, the Cuba soprana or Torre Alfaina and the Cubula, were also built. The Cubula was a small square pavilion topped with a cupola. According to a description by Tommaso Fazello in '500, the small Cuba is the only survivor of the many Arab kiosks that embellished the Genoardo.

44

The Cuba Soprana



Many authors, however, agree in identifying the Torre Alfaina in the few remains of an old building, nowadays incorporated into the eastern façade of the 18th century Villa Napoli. Archaeological excavations have, in fact, unearthed the remains of the original Norman building and a thick layer of cocchiopesto (earthenware) plastering at a depth of more than three meters below the large central arch of the Norman palace. This would confirm the presence of an artificial pool lapping the building, probably surrounding it, so that the water reflected the image of the building according to a setting similar to that of the Cuba.

The main façade of the Norman building, the current eastern wing of Villa Napoli, would also be perfectly aligned with the kiosk, known as the Cubula or small Cuba. The pavilion, 220 meters from the palace, is square-shaped and topped by a hemispherical dome. The ideal line connecting it to the large pointed arch of the Norman building would suggest symmetry along a longitudinal axis on which the garden was probably based. By the second half of the 14th century, however, the Norman Park has already

lost its original layout: the garden loses its original connotations and is transformed and intensely cultivated with vegetable gardens, vineyards and crops of sugar cane. It was later reborn as an “Italian garden” or the *garden of delight* thanks to Gaspare Ventimiglia, who, in 1505, was granted the land and the medieval Torre Alfaina. In the privilege accorded by Ferdinand II, the Catholic to Ventimiglia, the Torre Alfaina is identified as the Cuba soprana, and is described as being in ruins. Ventimiglia transformed the Torre Alfaina into a Renaissance villa with the main facade no longer facing the small Cuba but rather towards the Cuba Sottana. In 1630 Baronio describes the garden of Villa Napoli as a “small orchard but famous for its landscaping... there are red apples, medical herbs, limes, lemons and other fruit trees planted on his orders, endless avenues of roses and violets... in front of a sizeable fountain there is an arbor covered



by vines, which provides shade with its intertwined tendrils”. In the 19th century a romantic garden was created in the vicinity of the eastern façade of the villa. In the years that followed the garden and the villa underwent substantial changes because of the profound transformation of the surrounding area, but it was mainly during the last century that the villa and its park were victims of neglect and this resulted in a general state of decay. After its acquisition by the Regional state authorities, the villa and the park attached to it were subject to some restoration carried out by the Soprintendenza dei beni culturali in Palermo. In 2005 it became partly owned by the Fondazione Orchestra Sinfonica Siciliana. (the Sicilian Symphony Orchestra Foundation).

46
The small Cuba

45
The Cuba Soprana, the garden



THE MONASTERY AND THE CLOISTER OF MONREALE

Antonio Aurelio Belfiore, Antonietta Iolanda Lima, Adelaide Catalisano

47

Monreale, Benedictine monastery in a 19th century print. From the "Viaggio Pittorico nel Regno delle Due Sicilie" by Domenico Cuciniello and Lorenzo Bianchi, Naples 1830-1833

Piazza Guglielmo il Buono - Monreale
tel. +390917071425 - +390916404403

Opening Hours

Mon-Sat 9.00 to 19.00

Sun. and holidays 9.00 to 13.30

“For those who favour cloisters do not fail to go for a walk in this one; it will make you forget almost all the others previously visited. How is it possible not to love the cloisters, places of tranquility, enclosed and breezy, apparently invented for reflection... However, the cloisters in our region are often too severe, too monastic, a bit too sad... constricting the heart and clouding the soul... The beautiful cloister

of Monreale, however, is so suggestive, imparting such a feeling of grace that one would like to remain for ever” (Guy de Maupassant).

The monastery and cloister of Monreale belong to a Benedictine complex that also includes a large Basilica-Cathedral and a small royal residence, founded, presumably around 1174 by order of William II of Hauteville. Through the creation of the Diocese of Monreale, King William II wanted to create tangible evidence of the strength of his hold over a portion of western Sicily inhabited mainly by Muslims, always prone to rebel. The oldest documented evidence of Monreale was



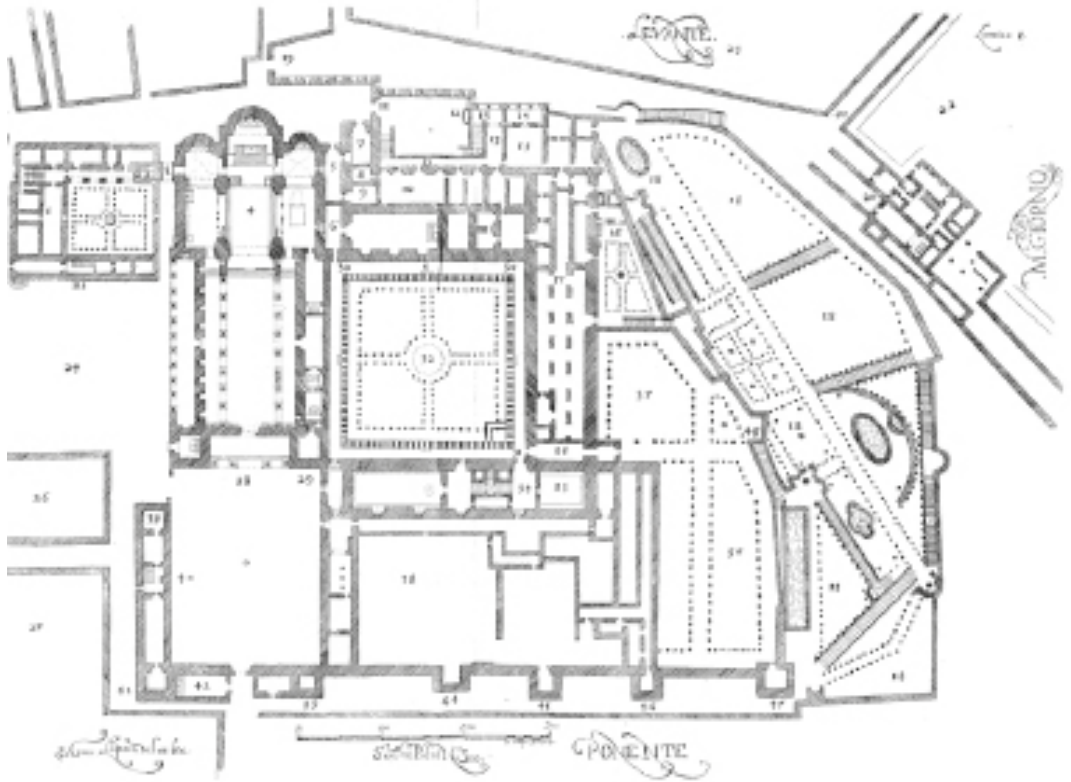


48

*Monreale, the cloister
and the cathedral*

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49
Monreale, a plan of the complex showing the cathedral and the monastery

found in March of that year. Monreale was modeled on the Duomo complex in Cefalù with its cloister, founded around 1131 at the behest of Roger II, and there are some obvious similarities. Located on the slopes of Monte Caputo, the monastery was perhaps already close to completion in 1176. Supporting this theory was the arrival, in Monreale, of one hundred religious people from Cava, from a cluniacense monastery, on the 20th

March (eve of the feast of St. Benedict), under the guidance of brother Teobaldo, destined to become its Abbot. Such a numerous monastic community would have been hard to house without a proper structure to welcome them. The following August, the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, William granted further privileges, exemptions and donations which, in number and importance, have no precedence in Sicily. These donations

are most likely those represented in the mosaic panel known as the “Dedica” showing the King giving Mary Magdalene a small imaginary model of the building and in the analogous scene carved on a capital of the cloister in which the model is more realistic. In both representations, on a par with a high ecclesiastical dignitary or an Emperor of the East, the monarch is dressed in sacramental clothing acting as a concelebrant.

There is a paucity of information on the

abbey in the early centuries of its founding. The establishment of an archbishopric (1183) has a negative effect. While increasing the prestige of the abbey, it fuels a heated argument between the secular clergy and the cluniacense order.

A long period of crisis results in the depopulation of the monastery and the collapse of some of its structures, by the second half of the 14th century. The collapse of the roof and the ceiling of the “Dormitory”, the large southern wing

50

Monreale, the cloister





51
*Monreale, paired
 columns*

overlooking the valley below, marked by a succession of mullioned windows with two-colored inlays, or alternatively blind, framed by ogival arches, probably occurred around this period.

At the end of the century and the beginning of the following the abbey takes on a new lease on life. The description left by the noble French pilgrim Nompars II of Caumont, in Monreale, at the beginning

of 1420 on his return from the Holy Land, bears testimony to the restructuring of part of the cloister's roof started in the same year. At present it is the oldest description known. It also draws an unusual picture of the structure, with a real garden embellished with a detailed complex of fountains unknown to later scholars: "(...) there is a square cloister with each corridor sixty steps long. In three of the corridors



there is a griffin from which a jet of cold water pours day and night, and the door through which you enter does not have any, but in the adjacent corridor on the right hand side, they are two: in one the water springs from a large griffin whilst in the other from a small cylindrical column of green porphyry and the water falls from the top without ever ceasing.” This last one is the only one to have survived. The

depletion of the system of fountains in the cloister is presumably due to the extensive renovations carried out during the mid 15th century by the archbishop of Ventimiglia. Of this 15th century reconfiguration little remains because of subsequent events. The additional changes were wide ranging, not only in the headquarters of the curia, but also in other buildings, used for a wide variety of purposes, following the

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53

Monreale, a capital

54

Monreale, columns



abolition of the ancient monastery after the Unification of Italy. Even though this has contributed to the spread of a patchy image of the complex, it has also permitted, during the 20th century, a series of studies, surveys, excavations and restorations from which structures not previously found during the medieval restoration, reemerged and refer to a period earlier than the age of William. Characteristic elements are the small size of the ashlar blocks, the absence of two-colour inlays, (present, on the other hand, in almost all the external walls of the cathedral, the cloister, the



55-56

Monreale, the capitals

so-called dormitory and the main floor of the former Royal Palace), the geometric simplicity with its abstention of the use of intertwined arches and the system of decorating the wall surfaces with light recesses. This opens up new perspectives of study where the pre-existing status, perhaps deliberately ignored in the official acts of the royal record office could possibly play a strong role in the building program commissioned by William II in Monreale. The cloister has a square plan and mirrors the landscaping of the garden designed as a representation of the sublime. For



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57-59

Monreale, capitals

its mystical beauty, the diversity of forms present in the paired columns and capitals and its very size, the cloister of Monreale is an outstanding example amongst cloistered gardens. The influence of Muslim civilization is present in particular where the cloister architecture is taken to mean a “sacred enclosure”, characterised by its spirituality. The cloistered garden simultaneously performs the functions and requirements dictated by Christian culture, identifying itself as a private and hidden place, whose beauty and sobriety have the task of evoking, through the expression of



nature, an environment reserved for prayer. Over the centuries the ancient monastic garden, through neglect and abandonment, has lost its original features. During the restoration of the monastic garden carried out about ten years ago, the structure of

the flora in the cloister was completely rethought, based primarily on philological and historical research and was re-landscaped in its current form, evidencing a strong tendency to symbolism. For the four sectors in which the Garden is



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divided, four diverse fruit trees have been chosen whose symbolism can be found in the Holy Scriptures. More precisely a date palm tree was planted symbolically representing justice, a fig tree evoking peace and prosperity, a pomegranate as a symbol of fertility (indicating in this case the earth's productive capacity and its ability to renew itself) and an olive tree (synonymous of peace and hope) leaving in the central flowerbed, by virtue of its rarity and its ornamental value, a beautiful *Cycas*

Revoluta already present, even though the species was only introduced into Europe in the 18th century. Common elements of each cloister quadrant are the perimeter hedges planted with laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), whose leaves are reproduced in the capitals and the borders of myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) in the internal areas; both species are a typical Mediterranean plant. The plants chosen for the cloister garden closely mirror the magnificent decorations of the capitals.

60

Monreale, a capital



CHRONOLOGY

827 AD

Beginning of the Islamic conquest of Sicily

895-896

The Byzantine Empire abandons Sicily to the Muslims

948-1004

The Kalbit dynasty takes control of Sicily

965

The Fall of Rometta, the last Byzantine bastion

1059-1060

Ibn-At-Tumnah, emir of Syracuse, asks the Normans for help against Ibn-At-Anwas, emir of Agrigento

1060-1092

Norman Conquest of Sicily. Guided by Robert Guiscard and Roger Hauteville, the Normans successively occupy Castrogiovanni (1060), Messina (1061), Palermo (1072), Catania (1085), Syracuse (1086-1088), Girgenti (1090), Butera and Noto (1091), Malta (1092)

1098

Roger, Count of Sicily receives from Pope Urban II the powers of apostolic legate

1101

Death of Roger. His wife Adelaide of Vasto, daughter of the Marquis Aleramici of Monferrat, becomes Queen

1113

Adelaide marries Baldwin I, King of Jerusalem. Roger II succeeds his mother

1117

Pope Paschal II confirms the apostolic legate to Roger II

1127

On the death of Duke William, Roger II inherits Puglia

1130

Roger II is crowned King of Sicily (including Apulia and Calabria) in Palermo

1130-1140

Roger II reinforces the new state

1146-1148

George of Antioch occupies on behalf of King Roger II, Tripoli, Mahdia, Sfax, Sousse, then Corfu, Tebe, Corinth

1154

Death of Roger II. He is succeeded by William I, known as William the Bad, born in 1120, son of Elvira of Castile

1159-1160

Loss of Norman domains in Africa

1166

William I dies. Margharet of Navarre, his wife, is Regent until 1171, during the minority of his son William II, born in 1153, known as William the Good (1166-1189)

1186

Henry (later Henry VI of Swabia), son of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa marries Constance Hauteville, daughter of Roger II and the French Beatrice of Rethel

1190

Tancred succeeds William II, who dies childless

1194

Henry VI, Emperor, seizes the Sicilian crown. Death of Tancred and the young William III

1194

Frederick II of Swabia, son of Henry VI and Costance is born in Jesi, on the 24th of December,

1197

Death of Henry VI

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1198

Death of Constance, who entrusts Frederick to the protection of Pope Innocent III

1209

Frederick II marries Constance, sister of Peter II of Aragon, in Palermo,

1212

Frederick II leaves Sicily. He returns in 1220 as Emperor

1245

Following the riots, Muslims in Sicily are deported to Lucera, in Puglia

1250

Death of Frederick II. He is succeeded by his son Conrad IV, who dies in 1254

1258

Election of Manfred, son of Blanche Lancia from Piedmont, as King of Sicily

1266

Manfred is defeated and killed at Benevento by Charles of Anjou, subsequently elected King of Sicily

1268

Charles I of Anjou defeats, at Tagliacozzo, Conradin of Swabia, heir to Conrad IV, and has him executed in Naples

1282

31st of March. Revolt of the Vespers in Palermo. Start of the war of the Vespers between Charles I of Anjou and Peter III of Aragon

1302

War of the Vespers ends with the Treaty of Caltabellotta. Sicily belongs to Frederick III of Aragon, but is separated from Southern Italy, which remains with the Angevins.

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