

# The Muqarnas Ceiling of the Cappella Palatina: Cultural Fluidity and Construction of the Royal Identity

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**Abstract:** The muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina was constructed in 1140 and is painted with themes ranging from court life to animals, mythical creatures to magnificent gardens. The ceiling is a testament to Roger II's ambition for power, legitimacy, and multicultural harmony under Norman rule. Many scholars have tried to pinpoint the provenance of the ceiling as purely of Fatimid origin. However, upon inspection of the interconnectivity of the 12th-century Mediterranean and the incorporation of various Fatimid, Byzantine, North Syrian, and North African visual models, such a claim warrants scrutiny. This essay will consider how the subject matter, style, materials, and structure of the muqarnas ceiling function to form a new Norman language that addresses all the people of the Mediterranean. By synthesizing the iconography and style of different cultures, Roger uses material culture to symbolize his universalistic ambitions and elevates himself as an equal to other contemporary powers. The fluidity in the Norman visual language is also demonstrated.

**Keywords:** Muqarnas Ceiling, Norman visual language, Cultural Unity.

## 1. Introduction

Over the years, the splendid muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina (fig. 1) in Palermo, an interesting case of a traditionally Islamic decorative device deployed under a

Christian context, has attracted much attention and admiration from scholars and visitors alike. Extolled in the late twelfth century work *Epistola...de calamitate Siciliae* and by Tomasso Fazello in the 16<sup>th</sup> century for its "outstanding elegance of the curving," the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina is an exceptional example of refined carpentry.<sup>[1]</sup>



Figure 1. Muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina, c. 1130-43, Palermo

This paper argues that the muqarnas ceiling is an exemplary expression of a new Norman language formed by synthesizing different religious influences, exemplifying Roger's intent of bringing harmony across different cultural realms while enhancing his legitimacy. This paper will consider how the subject matter, material, structure, and style of the ceiling function to form a new Norman language that addresses all the people of the Mediterranean.

Construction of the muqarnas ceiling in the Cappella Palatina began in the year 1140 AD.<sup>[2]</sup> The ceiling measures approximately 18.84 x 5.60 meters and is painted with a plethora of diverse themes, ranging from court life to animals, mythical creatures to magnificent gardens.<sup>[3]</sup>

Defined as a "three-dimensional decorative device used widely in Islamic architecture in which tiers of individual elements, including niche-like cells, brackets, and pendants [...] projected over those below," the muqarnas ceiling is a splendid feat in carpentry.<sup>[4]</sup>

Although in some areas, the paintings on the ceiling are

damaged with the original layer of plaster no longer intact, scholars such as Nicolle have pointed out that claims of the 15th-century overpainting are grossly exaggerated, meaning the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina is a precious example of well-preserved 12th-century painting.<sup>[5]</sup> Furthermore, the muqarnas ceiling is a scarce surviving example of complex Islamic painted carpentry. While most muqarnas vaults are singularly molded out of stone or stucco, the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina is divided into several segments, with the vault's surface assembled by thin wood elements.<sup>[6]</sup> The multicultural harmony in content and style makes the ceiling a product of the religious exchange and acceptance under Norman Sicily, offering a unique window into the multicultural Norman realm under Roger II. The Cappella Palatina also assumes a more private role as a royal chapel. The iconographical and architectural choices for the muqarnas ceiling offer a more intimate insight into Roger's aspirations and projections for his newly established kingdom of Sicily.

For a long time, scholars have tried to pinpoint the stylistic and iconographical features present on the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina as belonging to a specific religion. For example, William Tronzo categorized the muqarnas ceiling as serving the function of an Islamic audience hall.<sup>[2]</sup> Many scholars have claimed that the ceiling is of Fatimid origin due to resemblances in style and iconography with surviving Fatimid art.<sup>[8]</sup> However, upon closer inspection into the multi-ethnic and diverse historical background of Norman Sicily, such narrow attributions appear to be flawed, and must be reassessed.

## 2. The Historical Background

With the growth of Sicily's cotton and silk production industry during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the island evolved an important converging point for trade.<sup>[8]</sup> Strategically positioned along the trade routes between Muslim and non-Muslim Spain, Italian sea republics, the Maghrib, and near the wealthy nations of Byzantium and Egypt, Sicily was a critical crossroad for commerce and exchanging ideas.<sup>[7]</sup> Hence, Sicily's mercantile and political significance soon attracted the Normans' ambitions. Originating from Normandy in Northern France, the Normans claim they first set foot on the south through pilgrimage.<sup>[9]</sup> However, they soon became involved in local struggles for power after political leaders discovered their military prowess and deployed the assistance of these Norman mercenaries.<sup>[9]</sup> Soon, there was a steady inflow of Norman recruits coming down to the south, building up a strong Norman presence in southern Italy. In 1060, when the Normans deployed by different Muslim emirs marched into Sicily, they were less motivated by piety and more by hopes of obtaining territories for themselves and ceasing to be nomadic workers.<sup>[9]</sup>

The conquest of Sicily by the Normans was no easy ordeal. Before the arrival of the Normans, the Muslims of North Africa had conquered Sicily, causing the island to be under Islamic rule for over two centuries. The Norman invasion of Sicily began in 1061 and was completed in 1091.<sup>[10]</sup> The Hautevilles, Robert Guiscard, and Roger consolidated their power over the Norman lands.<sup>[2]</sup> The Normans adapted well to their new environment. Politically, they modeled their forms of administration on contemporary Egyptian Fatimid practices. Socially, they were tolerant towards the preponderant Muslim population, bequeathing them the freedom to practice their religion. Under the rule of Sicily's first king Roger II (1130-54), and that of his successors, the

regime entered a prosperous epoch of effective governance and economic power.<sup>[11]</sup>

Roger II was an intriguing character. Originally the count of Sicily (1105-1130),<sup>[12]</sup> Roger II exploited the rift in the Roman Curia and the consequent antagonism between Innocent II and Anacletus II to pave the way for his rise as king. In a demonstration of shrewd political sagacity, Roger II gave Anacletus the support needed to obtain the papal throne. With this alliance, Anacletus II declared in 1130 that Roger and his heirs "shall be anointed as kings," propelling Roger II to his long-coveted throne.<sup>[13]</sup> With the birth of a new Norman kingship, Roger II sought to establish the legitimacy of his rule through various means, often drawing inspiration from Islamic and Byzantine frameworks of custom and royal imagery.<sup>[8]</sup> Roger II justified his rule as a continuation of an ongoing lineage of ancient rulers in Sicily. He followed the Byzantine tradition in presenting himself as a representation of Christ on earth, making him only answerable to God and therefore bypassing the need for papal authority. Named king by a Latin Pope, a speaker of three languages, and known for wearing Islamic clothing, Roger II practiced religious tolerance, deploying a strategy of accommodation towards his multicultural subjects.<sup>[6]</sup> This allowed him to establish a Siculo-Christian kingdom in harmony with the diverse climate of Sicily and the Mediterranean, helping him consolidate his power. Thus, one can view Roger II as encapsulating the multid denominational environment of Medieval Sicily, where the political and societal conditions allowed Byzantine, Islamic, Jewish, and other cultures to coexist and function together.

The Cappella Palatina (fig. 2) is a perfect visual representation of Roger's *modus operandi* of cultural acceptance. A royal chapel located in the Palace of Palermo, the Cappella Palatina was built between the years of 1134 and 1143 AD. The Cappella Palatina displays a strong sense of cultural hybridity, as can be seen through features such as a western basilican nave, Byzantine mosaics, Kufic inscriptions, and a glorious muqarnas ceiling above the church's central nave.<sup>[14]</sup> In the Cappella Palatina, the iconography and techniques of different religions have been united and reconstructed into a new Sicilian visual language. In doing so, Roger II presents to the world a Sicily that has matured from being a peripheral Byzantine province into a great kingdom governed by an enlightened king capable of uniting domestic and foreign skills into harmonious coexistence. The Normans created a more advanced royal consciousness by synthesizing diverse religious elements.

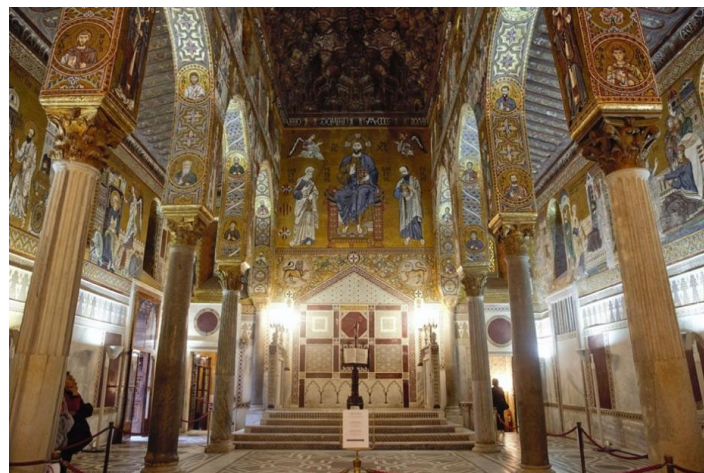


Figure 2. Interior of Cappella Palatina looking west, 1130-43, Palermo

### 3. The Features and Structure of the Muqarnas Ceiling in the Cappella Palatina

Muqarnas ceilings are commonly used in Islamic architecture and found in celebrated monuments such as the Gunbad-I Qabus (1006-1007) and the shrine of Imam Dur (1085-1090). Muqarnas decoration can be made from stucco, wood, stone, and brick and is composed of small geometric niches and pendants superimposed over those below. Observable on structures such as cornices, vaults, squinches, pendentives, and niches, muqarnas ceilings are a common feature in Islamic palaces. Believed to date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century, the origin of the muqarnas remains widely disputed.<sup>[4]</sup> There is a sparse geographical distribution of the earliest surviving 11th-century muqarnas ceilings. This observation could indicate that the muqarnas ceiling was first developed in Iran, Egypt, North Africa, Central Asia, or Iraq and later dispersed to other lands. Other scholars, like Rosintal, interpret the wide distribution of muqarnas ceilings as evidence of simultaneous developments in different lands.<sup>[15]</sup>

The muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina is constructed out of three large multifaceted three-dimensional units made up of small cells. The squinches, niches, and arches forming the muqarnas are all decorative.<sup>[7]</sup> Built from wood panels with thicknesses ranging from 250mm × 120mm to 660 mm × 430 mm, the muqarnas ceiling was initially covered with a thin coat of plaster and painted with vegetal, epigraphic, and figural motifs (fig. 3). The curved surface consists of seven levels, with twenty large units alternating with twenty-four small units (fig. 4).<sup>[16]</sup> Two rows of ten stellate octagons in the shape of eight-pointed stars interpose the three rows of eleven cupolas (fig. 5).<sup>[4]</sup> Scholars have pointed out the stylistic similarities and parallels between the spatial and geometric framework of the ceiling in the Cappella Palatina with that of North African Maghribi architecture.<sup>[7]</sup> According to the analysis of Cavallari, the vault is supported through the usage of “wedge arrangement.”<sup>[3]</sup> Further research has also revealed the presence of a concealed superstructure holding up the muqarnas.<sup>[16]</sup>



Figure 3. Detail of the motifs on the muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina, 1130-43, Palermo



Figure 4. Detail of the muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina, 1130-43, Palermo



Figure 5. Eight pointed stars on the muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina, Palermo, 1130-43

As the Norman kings were Latin Christians, many believe the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in Sicily is unique because it is an intriguing example of muqarnas decoration used in buildings for non-Muslim patrons. However, the Cappella Palatina is not the only instance of muqarnas decoration being deployed within a Christian context. There is a mouchroutas structure, which has a muqarnas vault in a honeycomb structure, constructed in the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine imperial palace at Constantinople.<sup>[17]</sup> Constructed two hundred and thirty years later (1377-80), the ceiling of the Sala Magna in the Palazzo Chiaramonte of Palermo also demonstrates similar architectural techniques to the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina with wood panels covering consoles inserted into the walls.<sup>[6]</sup> The examples above suggest that the medieval Mediterranean world did not view the muqarnas as a feature strictly confined within the boundaries of the Islamic world. Instead, patrons are likely to have incorporated it more so for its aesthetic purposes to elevate their prestige and enhance the grandeur of their setting. Hence, it highlights the cultural flexibility in the visual language of the medieval Mediterranean world, reminding viewers not to heedlessly categorize and demarcate motifs and characteristics into narrow margins guided by modern understandings of cultural divisions. As a result, one gains a broader perception of the interlinked historical context into

the efflorescence of cultural convergence under the multiethnic harmony of Roger II's Sicily.

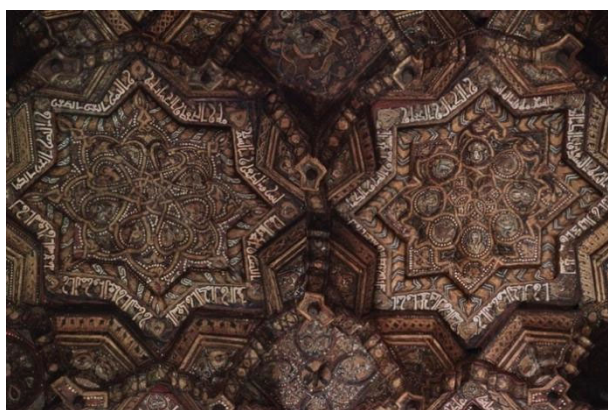
#### 4. Material

The usage of wood in the construction of the ceiling is interpreted as an allusion to Solomon. Solomon's Hall of Justice is believed to have had a gilded cedar roof in the Bible and the Normans referred to their dynasty as the House of Israel in their coronation ritual. Therefore, it is likely that the incorporation of firs, pines and other types of wood are an intentional Solomonian reference.<sup>[2]</sup> Solomon is a key Old Testament example of wise kingship.<sup>[18]</sup> Hence, the association of Roger with such an important biblical figure propels Roger's status, allowing the legitimacy of his throne backed by the weight of tradition.

In addition, Solomon also built the first Temple of Jerusalem. Hence, on a broader level, there seems to be a parallel between the Temple of Jerusalem and the Cappella Palatina, which also serves a religious purpose as a chapel. Thus, imbued throughout the ceiling seems to be a subtle expression of cultural attainment, announcing the Cappella Palatina as capable of rivalling buildings of other cultural centers. Therefore, Roger's authority in the international realm is proclaimed and elevated.

#### 5. Artisan Origin

The muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina demonstrates a strong Fatimid Egyptian input in its construction. One of the focal points in the ceiling is the eight-pointed stars (fig. 6), of which there are twenty. Constructed by superimposing two squares at 45-degree angles to each other, the eight-pointed stars are a common feature in Islamic art and architecture.<sup>[6]</sup> Furthermore, the dexterity with which the ceiling was created and integrated into the Cappella Palatina's architecture and the construction of the ventilation, support, and sustenance systems all display high expertise. Hence, this implies that the craftsmen deployed to work on the ceiling were familiar with Islamic techniques in constructing similar muqarnas vaults.<sup>[16]</sup>



**Figure 6.** Detail of muqarnas ceiling with Arabic inscriptions, Cappella Palatina, Palermo c. 1130-43

In his discussion of "Muslim Artists and Christian Models in the painted ceilings of the Cappella Palatina," Jeremy Johns makes the compelling point that the sophistication of the ceiling's construction signifies that the carpenters constructing the Cappella Palatina were skilled and experienced in creating similar ceilings for Islamic palaces but were unfamiliar with Christian chapels. Johns observes

that many of the inscriptions and paintings are too high up, seemingly more accommodated to Islamic palatial halls. He goes on to state:

*In the north and south elevations of the nave, the rhythm of the units of the muqarnas sides of the ceiling is out of time with the rhythm of the clerestory windows and the arcades. This awkward irregularity suggests that the original design was not created especially for the chapel but was conceived as a template that could be adjusted proportionally to cover any rectangular space.<sup>[16]</sup>*

Some scholars have gone as far as trying to identify the ceiling's creators as specifically Muslim. The 1997 book *The Cultures of His Kingdom* by William Tronzo presents the muqarnas ceiling as serving the function of an Islamic audience hall.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1859, Di Marzo accredited the craftsmen of the ceiling to Fatimid origin due to the ceiling's strong links to Islamic iconography and stylistic influences.<sup>[7]</sup> However, to take such a view would be too parochial. Firstly, many claims have been based on comparisons with a minimal array of surviving Fatimid art and Muslim palaces. Hence, such judgments lack a comprehensive understanding of Fatimid architecture. Secondly, no inscriptions or documentation survive indicating the provenance of the ceiling's creators. This makes the claims unverifiable and purely grounded in the dogmatic modern demarcations between the different cultures and religions; to solely think that the creators of the muqarnas ceiling were Muslim is to take the ceiling out of its diverse historical backdrop and interpret the characteristics of the ceiling under current-day standards.<sup>[7]</sup> Being trapped in modern mindsets is dangerous as concepts of culture and art evolve over the centuries. Indeed, the usage of certain cultural features may also not be as telling of the artist's origin as it may seem at first glance. Just as Jones points out, the lack of continuous inscriptions on the ceiling indicates the presence of Sicilian artisans using pattern models.<sup>[7]</sup> Due to the interconnectivity of the court, Roger's court would have interacted with various art forms, from lavish gifts sent from other rulers and Roger's military campaigns. Thus, it is likely that Sicilian artisans would have adopted a shared international courtly style. Therefore, the idea that the craftsmen were all Muslim is incompatible with the original background and purpose of the creators.

Furthermore, to believe that the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina originates and caters to only one specific group of people is also to forget how interconnected the medieval Mediterranean was. It dismisses the position of Sicily as a central melting pot for trade and ideas. Indeed, under this geopolitical context, one distinct and isolated foreign force could not have a decisive impact on the architecture and art produced in Sicily. Additionally, believing the ceiling to be purely constructed by Muslim hands disregards the existence of domestic Sicilian artisans. It may be highly probable that a large number of artisans and carpenters working on the ceiling were foreign to Palermo. Indeed, it would have been difficult for domestic expert workshops to survive the 90-year gap without royal patronage before the accumulation of Norman rule in 1130.<sup>[16]</sup> However, it is essential to note that exclusively deploying imported craftsmen is extremely expensive.<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, it is far more likely that the muqarnas ceiling is a product of the collaboration between the talents of foreign and domestic craftsmen.

It is unsurprising that Roger deployed the talents of people from such a wide array of cultures. The Norman kingdom under Roger was no stranger to using ideas and motifs from

within and outside national boundaries to strengthen his image as a legitimate and powerful ruler. On a personal level, Roger was avidly interested in the cultures beyond the Sicilian realm. His desire to learn from the customs of others are reflected in As-Safadi's claims that Roger dispatched artists to draw out their observations of the provinces of the "east and west, the north and south".<sup>[19]</sup> Roger also displayed great openness to the presence of people from other nations. In 1129, Roger II declared that all merchants at his Great Court of Melfi would be under his protection.<sup>[20]</sup> Hence, the eclectic origin of the muqarnas ceiling can be interpreted as an echo of Roger's international approach to governance and expansionist policies.

On a broader national level, the sustenance of the Siculo-Norman regime always relied heavily upon the confluence between domestic and foreign forces. Due to its strategic location in the central Mediterranean, Sicily was situated amid the power dynamic between external forces such as the pontifical states and the kingdom of France, making Sicily highly susceptible to imported influences.<sup>[13]</sup> It also meant Sicily was a converging point for Christian and Muslim merchants. The Normans attempted to attract foreign merchants into Sicily using measures such as tax reductions.<sup>[20]</sup> This shows how the cultural exchange was vital commercially. Furthermore, the advisors of Roger's court were a diverse assemblage of Muslims, Latin Christians, and Byzantines, reflecting the multi-cultural and accepting environment under Norman rule.<sup>[2]</sup> As such, the multiethnic ambience of the muqarnas ceiling perfectly reflects the societal and political conditions of its time.

Under the Norman regime, it was common for multi-ethnic elements to fuse to create a new, united visual language. In 1147 AD, silk weavers were imported from Greece.<sup>[7]</sup> Indeed, there were vibrant contributions from many international artisans, such as Italian sculptors, Byzantine mosaicists, and Fatamid scribes in creating the Norman artistic identity.<sup>[16]</sup> Hence, the multi-cultural input behind the creation of the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina fits in with the trajectory of the kingdom, reflecting Roger's universalistic ambitions. It connects Roger with the great powers of the past and present, cementing his legitimacy as a tolerant ruler capable of assimilating different cultural characteristics and uniting a diverse population. The varied origin of the ceiling indicates a fusion of cultures, therefore highlighting the importance of not compartmentalizing the features of the ceiling into disparate cultural categories but observing it from a wider angle as a fusion of different traditions and customs.

## 6. Painting and Subject Matter

The paintings on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina are a compelling example of synthesizing multicultural iconographies and traditions in Norman Sicily. Painted using tempura paint over a layer of gesso covering the wood, the paintings display diverse influences from Islamic to Romanesque, Coptic to Central Asian.<sup>[21]</sup> This section will explore the multicultural ambience of the ceiling through the paintings of motifs, dancers, musicians, and notable Christian elements on the ceiling.

The vegetal and geometrical motifs and calligraphic styles found on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina are common features in the arts of Fatimid Egypt.<sup>[16]</sup> The usage of vegetal ornamentation echoes the environment of the Islamic *majlis*.<sup>[22]</sup> Intriguingly, due to the seemingly incompatible height of the chapel with the size of the

ornaments, much of the ornamental detail is indiscernible from the ground. However, it is essential to note that in Medieval art, the symbolic and cumulative effect of the motifs often prevails over the pursuit of naturalism or attention to specific details. Thus, the viewer is encouraged to perceive the many figures functioning together as a broader picture and leave an open eye to the interaction and relationships between the figures.

Painted on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina are 19 dancers in motion, mostly wearing closely fitted tops and loose trousers with golden hems (fig. 7). In Islamic and Byzantine art, gold hems indicate luxury.<sup>[23]</sup> Therefore, the richly decorated clothing could enhance the wealth and opulence of the Sicilian Norman court, reflecting the power of its patrons. Indeed, striving for pomp was not rare under Roger II's governance. In the Abbot Alexander of Teles's chronicle of 1135, he captures the lavishness of Roger's coronation by stating, "The glory and wealth of the royal abode were so spectacular that it caused great wonder and deep stupefaction".<sup>[13]</sup>



**Figure 7.** Women dancer performing a sleeve dance, Cappella Palatina, Palermo, 1140

Furthermore, as the clothing style is closely correlated with that commonly found in Fatimid art (fig. 8), the girls depicted are probably *jawārī* or *qiyān*<sup>[21]</sup> (singing slave girls in the Islamic world). These girls were highly trained in the arts of poetry, dancing, and music, often performing before the rulers of Fatimid Egyptians. As such, they often symbolized the sophistication of the Islamic court. The strategic placement of the Palatine dancers on the east face of the muqarnas surrounding depictions of princes and references to Solomon has led scholars like Kapitaikin to suggest that they are referencing triumphant biblical dances.<sup>[23]</sup> The power dichotomy is apparent; Islamic entertainers celebrate their Christian and Norman patrons. Hence, by bringing the imagery of the *jawārī* or *qiyān* into the Cappella Palatina, the artists not only highlight the cultural interconnectivity between royal courts but also propel Roger's prestige by inviting the audience to view him as on par with the great

muslim powers of his time. This example of synthesizing different cultural iconography for his use demonstrates Roger's skill in creating a united visual language.



**Figure 8.** Women dancer performing the Asian sleeve dance, carved ivory, Fatamid Egypt or Sicily, 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello

Scholars such as Johns and Kapitaikin have also identified the presence of Byzantium, Coptic Egyptian, Syrian, East Christian Mesopotamian, and Sicilian Christian sources on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina.<sup>[16]</sup> Some examples of Christian scenes include paintings of a bearded horseman spearing dragon (fig. 9), David or Samson astride a lion, solar chariots at the west end and a plethora of Solomonic references in the eastern wing.<sup>[2]</sup>



**Figure 9.** Marvellous combat between horseman and dragon, Palermo, Cappella Palatina, Nave ceiling, muqarnas, south side, Large unit 18, Panel 14

In *Musician tuning a Triangular Psaltery* (fig.10), the figure sits on top of a *curule* chair and is surrounded by an inner polylobed frame, both of which are rarely seen on the other musicians depicted on the ceiling.<sup>[16]</sup> He plucks the string of the triangular psaltery with his left hand while twisting the peg of the shortest string with the other. The choice of seating and the instrument he holds are not observed in Islamic painting, suggesting a reference to the Romanesque model of *King David tuning his Psaltery* (fig.11), likely found

in illuminated manuscripts.<sup>[16]</sup> David was known for his military conquests, the centralization of control, and the establishment of a new capital, following a similar power trajectory to Roger. Therefore, using this model could be an attempt to parallel Roger with biblical characters to give him divine legitimacy. Notable is how the triangular psaltery has eight strings. Under Christian contexts, the number eight represents resurrection and holiness, which surpasses nature.<sup>[24]</sup> Hence, the transcendental quality and connotation of new beginnings match with the religious purpose of the chapel while also serving as a subtle blessing for the newly established Norman rule.



**Figure 10.** Musician tuning a triangular Psaltery, Palermo, Cappella Palatina: Nave ceiling, Muqarnas, North-eastern corner unit, panel 27



**Figure 11.** King David: David rex. Psalterium dicitur decacordium. From the Hortus Deliciarum of Herrad of Hohenbourg

The presence of 27 crosses distributed across the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina reinforces the sense of Christian solemnity.<sup>[21]</sup> The Christian iconography is often strategically positioned so that they are the foci. Thus, despite the paintings having a heavy focus on Islamic features like the traditional palatial cycle, their placement in more peripheral positions on

the ceiling makes it seem like the banqueters in the *majilis* are celebrating the Sicilian Norman patrons and Christianity.<sup>[21]</sup> This fascinating Christian-Islamic interplay elevates the Normans as being able to masterfully wield the skills and talents of other cultures to establish a stable Christian kingdom, emphasizing their superiority and prestige.

On the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina, many of the scenes, such as the image of the musician tuning the psaltery and the scribe, integrate seamlessly with the rest of the ceiling in terms of style and composition despite having Romanesque models.<sup>[16]</sup> This blending of religions can also be seen through how the many paintings depicting scenes from the Old Testament were not solely Christian, sharing links to other religions like Islam. Hence, scholars have pointed out that Muslim artists may have been able to discern their sacred figures, such as Dānīyāl, amongst the Romanesque models.<sup>[16]</sup> This retranslation and fusion of diverse characteristics show the audience from Roger's time could flexibly maneuver over what the contemporary viewer may dictate as cultural divides. Hence, Norman's involvement in a broad scope of cultural spheres and the fluidity of boundaries is emphasized, highlighting how the elements worked together as a Norman visual language of its own, a perfect representation of, in Eugenius of Palermo's words, the Norman ambition to "harmonize the inharmonious and mix together the unmixable [. . .] blending and uniting into a single race disparate and incongruent people".<sup>[25]</sup> Therefore, it is clear that the Norman visual language is an integral part of the Norman construction of their royal identity as ruler of all peoples and a reflection their expansionistic aims.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper explores the role of the ceiling in the Cappella Palatina as a window into Roger's ambition of bringing amity across religious spheres and how he constructed his royal identity to boost his legitimacy. It displays how the muqarnas ceiling acts as a projection of Roger's ambitions and policy. Additionally, the paper has introduced the need to perceive the visual expression of the Normans in the Cappella Palatina as a new language of integrated religious motifs instead of a collection of disparate religious characteristics.

The incorporation of the muqarnas, a traditionally Islamic three-dimensional decorative device, within a chapel for Latin Christian patrons is a testament to the cultural fluidity of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean. With a newly established kingdom and without any precedents in governance, Roger borrowed Byzantine and Fatimid customs, a move arguably vital the stability of his rule over Sicily's diverse Muslim, Byzantine, and Latin Christian population.

Upon inspection, one also learns that borrowing different Fatimid, Byzantine, North Syrian, and North African visual models are used to enhance Roger's prestige and reinvent his identity as a legitimate Christian sovereign. Indeed, references to Solomon through the usage of wood and the eclectic range of paintings on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina reflects Roger's ambition in drawing upon various iconographies, customs, and ideas to construct his identity as a powerful ruler relevant to the international stage. The depiction of the *jawārī* or *qiyān* parallels Roger's political policies in borrowing contemporary Fatimid governance structures. It also recalls the lavishness and refinement of Fatimid Egyptian courts, demonstrating the legitimacy of Roger by establishing his relevance and association with the great powers of the Byzantine, Muslim, and Latin Christian

worlds. Meanwhile, the 27 crosses across the ceiling and the strategic placement of Christian iconography in focal points also unite the Islamic elements into honoring both the Christian God and Norman rulers. The immaculate fusion of different influences such as Romanesque models with Islamic style and composition shows the multiethnic harmony in the Norman kingdom, showing how they work together in creating a wider Norman visual language. Hence, the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina can be interpreted as a symbolic translation of Roger's aim to stop Norman Sicily from being considered a peripheral vassal to the papacy. This ambition had been implemented politically through Roger's emulation of Byzantine customs in presenting himself as directly unanswerable to God. In this sense, striving for broad legitimacy demonstrated in the ceiling can be considered an integral part of Roger's construction of his royal identity.

Through the sophistication of construction and the incorporation of classic Islamic features such as the eight-pointed star, artisans working on the ceiling were likely well-trained in Islamic techniques. However, due to the significance of Sicily as a converging point for trade and cultures and the lack of comprehensive surviving Fatimid art, the paper reveals the impetuosity of categorizing the origin of the ceiling as purely coming out of Fatimid hands. Hence, it highlights the importance of viewing the visual culture of Norman Sicily not with the scrutinizing eye for divergent differences, but rather setting it against its historical background and assessing it as an eclectic fusion of the diverse climate of its time.

As an expression of material culture that transcends divides like language, the muqarnas ceiling can be instinctively understood by everyone, from Arabs to Romans, Greeks to Byzantines. In a sense, the construction of the muqarnas ceiling mirrors Roger's construction of his kingdom. The lands Roger inherited from Count Roger I, his cousin Duke Apulia, and the rulers of the various vassal states in Southern Italy had shared widely different histories. However, with Roger's ascension to the throne, they were united anew under an all-compassing political authority. Hence, the creation of a Norman visual language serves as a perfect demonstration of Roger's ambitious artistic patronage to meet his universalistic ambitions.

The discussion around the nature of the muqarnas ceiling also raises important questions about the taxonomy of the arts. When classifying works of art and architecture, one should perceive them under their historical context. There should be more awareness that the arts cannot be clinically classified into distinct categories, more nuance is required. One should seek to broaden the lens of perception and cease to view different aspects under narrow distinctions and instead consider the broader effect and purpose as a visual mechanism operating simultaneously. There should be a more ready acceptance of cases when the boundaries blur and form a united, unique language. Indeed, to be narrow-mindedly guided by current cultural demarcations is to fall into the trap of single ethnocultural nationalism and fail to appreciate the vibrant cultural exchange of the 12th-century Mediterranean.

Stemming from the construction of Norman royal identity and visual language can be more research comparing the visual mechanisms of different conquerors of the Medieval Mediterranean. The crusaders were also prominent conquerors of land in the Mediterranean in the 11th and 12th centuries. Indeed, the crusaders claimed control of the Holy

land of Jerusalem in 1099, not long after Sicily fell to the Normans. As Jerusalem and Palermo are meeting points for various artistic traditions, an interesting angle for future research would be to compare how Normans and other Christian conquerors inherited the diverse traditions and iconographies of their new lands. It would be interesting to see if the artworks produced under crusader in Jerusalem control also deployed Islamic aesthetics and techniques for Christian contexts, much like the muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina. This comparison could offer a fascinating insight into how conquerors of the same period differed or echoed each other in their visualization of Christian power, offering a broader view into the significance of the Norman visual language.

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