The Religious Art of Sicily: 600 BC – 1200 AD

A study day comprising three lectures by Gerald Deslandes

7 March 2018: 10.30 - 15.30

Perseus Slaying Medusa c 550 B.C. from Temple C at Selinunte

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Phoenician Libation Bowl, 8th Century BC

The traditional way of describing the early religious art of Sicily is to present it as a product of distinct political and religious cultures and as part of a wider narrative of conflict between east and west. It is true that there is evidence of a struggle between Greek and Phoenician influences from about 750 BC, which is mirrored in the rivalry of the Carthaginians and the Romans from 264 BC. After the fall of Rome in 476 the island came under the sway of the Byzantines in 728 AD and of the Arabs in 840 AD. The conversion of Byzantine churches to Islamic mosques that took place was then reversed during the Norman era from 1038 to 1194 AD. The difference was that instead of reverting to Byzantine authority, they came under the aegis of the Lateran tradition of the pope in Rome.

For these reasons it is tempting to compare Count Roger's seizure of Palermo in 1071 to the reconquest of Cordoba in 1080 or the launching of the first Crusade in 1095. Yet the political and religious identity of Europe that these struggles helped to define was still largely undetermined at the

end of the Norman era. In the ancient world the links between all four corners of the Mediterranean are evoked by Plato's description of the great cultures of antiquity as grouped around it '*like frogs around a pond*'. Even before 1071 the movement of Arabs, Normans, Vandals, Lombards and Teutonic knights created temporary alliances in southern Italy that occasionally overstepped religious boundaries. It is true that Roger II, the pope's *'half heathen king',* lived in a quasi-eastern court with Arab craftsmen, concubines and advisers. Yet it is no less remarkable that he patronised the monastic traditions and mosaic artists of Constantinople and was represented by them in the guise of a Byzantine emperor.

Roger II, Capella Palatina

The Pre-Christian Era

The Temple of Juno Lacinia: Agrigento c 430 B.C.

The interweaving of political and religious ideas and of public and private interests that we associate with Norman Sicily can be found as early as the 5th Century BC in the Temples of Hera at Agrigento and Selinunte. At Agrigento the temples were built in 450 BC and 430 BC and were rededicated to *Juno Concordia* and *Juno Lacinia,* her Roman equivalents, after 264 BC. Their Doric pillars and hexastyle façades closely resemble those of the contemporary Temple of Hera at Paestum of 450 BC, which stands next to the first temple to the goddess built in 550 BC. This resemblance was no doubt intended to assert Agrigento's political identity in the cultural context of *Magna Graecia.* The building of two temples at Agrigento within a twenty year period may imply the existence of two different donors who would have been eager to attract the prestige associated with sponsoring a religious building. In this there is a direct comparison to the building of the *Martorana* and its neighbour *San Cataldo* by two different Norman admirals in Palermo in 1147 and 1154.

As a refuge, meeting point and symbol of communal power, the temples at Agrigento command the valley from the ridge line while at Selinunte they dominate the coast. At Agrigento their association with the private experience of childbirth and the communal interest of the harvest is reinforced by their proximity to temples dedicated to Demeter and Persephone. In the same way at Selinunte there is a temple with an image of the Carthaginian goddess Tanit. Her associations with fertility can be compared with that of the Mesopotamian goddess, Ishtar, the Roman goddess, Juno Caelestis, or indeed the Nativities of the *Cappella Palatina* and Monreale.

The most striking image at Selinunte is a relief of Perseus slitting the throat of the Medusa. Although it was probably completed in 550 BC, it evokes the later destruction of the city by the Carthaginians in 409 BC and their notorious use of human sacrifice. In contrast Segesta, which had encouraged Carthage to attack Selinunte, turned on Carthage during the First Punic War and used its mythical associations with the story of Aeneas to acquire a privileged position with the Romans.

The Byzantine and Arab Periods

Byzantine Ring, Agrigento c. 650 AD

Fatimid Ceramic

As elsewhere, the ancient peoples of Sicily worshipped a heterodox pantheon of gods that were largely indifferent to men's interests. At the same time they believed in natural spirits, household guardians, myth, sacrifice and prophecy. Christianity and Islam introduced a monotheistic morality to the island and linked the celestial order to the political hierarchy on earth. Byzantine priests, like their Arab equivalents, went through a period of doubt about the use of graven images. Both religions redefined the spaces that were reserved for the laity and priesthood. Ancient temples had been physically accessible from all sides but contained a ladder-like succession of 'cells' used for the reception of gifts, the carrying out of sacrifices, the housing of a religious image and the storage of treasure. At the *Temple of Juno Concordia,* which became a Christian church in the sixth century, the arches in the walls of these cells were opened up and the spaces closed between the columns. Screens and steps were introduced, which separated secular functions such as the work of scribes from that of theclergy. Churches were divided into areas for the preparation of offerings, the celebration of rituals and the storage of vestments. At Selinunte recessed tombs appeared that resembled early Christian catacombs and the pre-Hellenic necropolises on the island. In contrast between 840 and 1070 the Moors converted churches such as the Cathedral in Syracuse into mosques with large, inclusive spaces for the faithful and with a *mihrab* and *muezzin* for the clergy.

The Norman Period

John Julius Norwich's description of the *Capella Palatina* as *'a seemingly effortless fusion of all that is most brilliant in the Latin, Byzantine and Arabic traditions'* sums up the Normans' borrowing of columns from ancient sites and their combination of Arab carving with Byzantine mosaics. The portrait of Roger II sitting cross-legged on the ceiling among the honey-combed arches of the Arab *muquannas* provides a sensuous lived-in counterpart to the idealised Byzantine Christ in the *calotte.*

At nearby Monreale the lively, secular quality of the mosaics are reminiscent of Pompeii and of Justinian's Palace in Constantinople. Yet their comparison of Old and New Testament themes contains allusions to the Normans' Viking ancestors and the pictorial devices of the Bayeux tapestry and the Winchester Bible. They also include the earliest representation of Thomas a Beckett to whom Wiiliam II was linked through his father-in-law, Henry II. Such secular concerns had inspired William's original invitation to the Benedictine monks to create the Cathedral of Monreale as a counterweight to the Bishop of Syracuse and the Norman knights that had opposed his mother's appointment of her cousin as Bishop of Palermo. The young bishop's escape along underground passages from the cathedral is a reminder of the continuing need for religious buildings to provide a physical refuge as well as symbolic expressions of temporal power. The interweaving of religious and secular themes continues in the carvings in the cloister of Monreale. The covered walkway itself derives from the architectural traditions of the gardens in Roman villas and the pillared colonnade or *peristyle* that surrounded Greek temples.

Bibliography

John Julius Norwich: *Sicily, An Island at the Crossroads of History,* 2015

G Messineo: *Ancient Sicily: Monuments Past and Present*, 2006

The Coronation of Roger II, the Martorana c 1140 AD