

ISLAMIC PARADISE IN A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT THE CEILING OF THE CAPPELLA PALATINA IN PALERMO, SICILY

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Aloha from paradise. It seems especially appropriate for someone who lives in Hawaii to speak on the subject of heavenly gardens. Supposedly I live in one. I, however, did not come to Hungary to talk about heavenly gardens in Hawaii. I came to talk about a garden of paradise on another island, the island of Sicily. But first, we might ask, what is there about islands? Especially those in a warm setting? Do islands by their very separation from landmasses imply an escape? Do they also become a surrogate for that virtual paradise in the sky?

This paper considers the ceiling of the 12th century Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily. Since I began research on the Cappella Palatina two questions have interested me. First, what is the provenance of the artists who constructed and painted this spectacular ceiling? Second, what does this ceiling represent?

In the absence of written documentation regarding the first question, scholars have suggested that the artists were brought to Sicily from Fāṭimid Egypt. In fact, the paintings in the Cappella Palatina have come to define the Fāṭimid style. Other scholars, again based on style, have argued that the artists came from 'Abbasid Mesopotamia. Still others propose a North African origin.

Some scholars have suggested the consideration of an alternative origin, that the artists were indigenous to Sicily and that the ceiling represents a survival of a type of construction and ornamentation that adorned the palaces of the Muslim princes of Sicily. By establishing the background of Muslim and Norman rule in Sicily, it may be possible to understand why the artists could have been Sicilian and, likewise, we might understand the complex meanings of the ceiling paintings.

Sicily is strategically located almost centrally in the Mediterranean Sea. It is a stepping stone between Europe and Africa – between the Christian and Muslim worlds. The island of Sicily was celebrated for its lushness until the 19th century. No doubt this contributed to it being just the kind of escape spoken of earlier – an escape for the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Muslims, the Normans, and innumerable other European peoples.

For two and a half centuries, from the 9th through 11th centuries, the Muslims were in control of Sicily. By the early 8th century C.E., the Arabs had established rule all along the African coast facing Sicily. They began their first full-scale incursion into Sicily in 827. Palermo was conquered in 831 and soon the western region of the island called Val de Mazara became predominantly Muslim. By 902 the Muslims conquered all of Sicily.

Their rule was immensely constructive and they developed an intellectually alert cultural life. They introduced citrus trees, sugar cane, cotton, flax, and date-palms into Sicily and under them the island became the richest prize in the Mediterranean.

Tolerance marked Muslim rule and in the 9th century Palermo became one of the world's great centres of scholarship and art. When Ibn Hawqal visited Sicily in the 10th century he found 300 mosques in Palermo. He was amazed at the affluence and intellectual life of the city. Unfortunately, today, other than the written accounts of travellers of the time, almost no physical evidence of the Muslim period in Sicily survives.

In 1061, with a handful of knights, the Norman Count Roger de Hauteville seized Messina. By 1091 he had gained control of the entire island. Upon his death in 1101 Roger's widow served as regent for her eight-year old son who died two years later. She continued her regency until 1111 in the name of her second son, Roger II, who came to be the most illustrious of the Norman kings of Sicily. His reign was marked by order and prosperity. The Muslims, Greeks, and Latin Christians were allowed freedom of worship and each community was largely governed by its own code. A harmonious synthesis of three civilizations, Latin, Byzantine, and Muslim, permeated all aspects of life and produced a unique culture of exceptional brilliance.

Roger grew up in Palermo in an atmosphere that was decidedly not Norman but one that was primarily Greek and Muslim. His studies and the affairs of state were conducted in Greek and Arabic as well as Latin. The inscription on the palace sundial is in three languages, Latin, Greek and Arabic. However, it is Muslim in spirit for it invokes Allah's help for the ruler's long life and the support of his rule. The date is according to the Muslim era. With this cosmopolitan background it becomes easy to see why Roger's court took on the particular Eastern flavour it did and why he has been termed the "baptised sultan" (Norwich 1967:280-294). He was reputed to have a harem, and the luxuriousness of his palace and court could compare with those of the Byzantine emperors of Constantinople or the Muslim caliphs. As in the East, the pomp and splendour were calculated to impress, for Roger intended to be looked upon as a divine king whose authority came from God. The account of the historian Albert of Aix who witnessed the arrival of Roger's mother when she arrived in the Holy Land to marry King Baldwin of Jerusalem attests to the great wealth and craftsmanship of Sicily. She had sailed the Mediterranean amidst a splendour the world had not seen since the days of Cleopatra.

She had with her two triremes, each with five hundred warriors and seven ships carrying gold, silver, purple, and great quantities of precious stones and magnificent vestments, to say nothing of weapons, cuirasses, swords, helmets, shields blazing with gold and all other accoutrements of war such as are employed by mighty princes for the service and defence of their ships. The vessel on which the great lady had elected to travel was ornamented with a mast gilded with the purest gold, which glinted from afar in the sunlight, and the

prow and the poop of this vessel, similarly covered with gold and silver and worked by skilful craftsmen, were wonderful to behold. And on one of the seven ships were the Saracen archers, most stalwart men clothed in resplendent garments of great price, all destined as gifts to the King—such men as had no superiors in their art in the whole land of Jerusalem (Norwich 1967:287-288).

The Cappella Palatina at Palermo was built by the Norman king, Roger II, in 1140. It is a heterogeneous structure combining the traditions, talents and workmanship of the people who had inhabited the island of Sicily before conquest by the Normans. Structurally it combines a Latin basilica plan with a Byzantine central plan. The nave, in the form of a colonnaded basilica, connects with a three-apsed sanctuary with a domed central section. Despite the pronounced individuality of both sections, great care was taken to link them together both structurally and in the decoration to create a harmonious whole. The sanctuary and nave walls were decorated with mosaics of Byzantine origin, and wooden ceilings, constructed and painted by Islamic artisans, cover the nave and aisles.

The two side aisles have angled ceilings with descending ribs and are relatively flat by comparison to the main ceiling (Photo 1). The ceiling in the central nave consists of two rows of ten octagonal stars with interstitial hanging stalactite vaulting which forms a complex three dimensional ensemble of coffered niches. A description of the construction methods has not been found but a fragment of wooden stalactites of unknown Sicilian provenance and photographed in 1973 in San Giovanni degli Eremiti (later moved to the Palazzo Abitellis) may shed significant light on the construction of the ceiling (Photo 2). The fragment is a series of vertical beams carved into niches at the bottom that are wedged within a framework. On the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina the hundreds of small surfaces created by this architectural extravagance are painted with a marvellous harmony of colour. Inscriptions in Arabic, which are also Muslim in spirit, outline the octagonal star forms, while geometric designs and arabesques cover the ribbed interstices between niches. Within the niches is an abundance of animal motifs and figural representations.

It seems likely that the ceiling represents a heavenly garden—an architectural depiction of the gardens that were built by the Muslim rulers of Sicily and which were emulated and constructed, in turn, by the Normans. This is both a depiction of a real garden and an Islamic vision of paradise similar to those that probably ornamented the Muslim palaces of Sicily.

The garden and its connotation with paradise is an entirely reasonable image of heavenly bliss in lands where water and the shade of trees are a welcome relief amidst rocks, desiccated plains, and withered vegetation. The garden serves as a promise of paradise and shows the pathway to heaven. For the Muslims who had crossed the Mediterranean from the desert wastes of North Africa and the Middle East, the garden, and possibly the entire island of Sicily, with its valued supplies of water and vegetation was an expression of God's bounty.

The ceiling also serves to verify and authenticate the rule of Roger II. In an effort to enhance his political power, Roger had Muslim artists represent the Islamic image of paradise in the palace chapel in the same manner that Muslim rulers, as a means of political and religious validation, used lavish evocations of the world to come in their own material world.

Islamic art has the ability to be simultaneously worldly and religious. In the same way that the caliph and the Norman prince were both rulers of earth and the highest representatives of heaven on earth (Gelfer-Jorgensen 1986:178), the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina can logically be concerned both with life on earth and with the life to come.

Because in Islam there is a propensity toward symbolic thought, the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina may serve as a visual representation of the written word that describes the heavenly garden as found in Islamic literature and also in the Qur'an. The octagonal stars (Photo 3) so integral to the ceiling's construction, may serve as an allusion to the firmament and the inner medallion may be similar to the domes of mosques or the sunburst medallions (*šamsa*) that decorate the pages of illuminated manuscripts and symbolize the vault of heaven, but more importantly, the central unity of God.

The paintings on the Cappella Palatina ceiling, with their wealth of figurative and animal imagery set amidst a profusion of vegetal arabesques, not only portray the pleasures of this world, but also the next. The paintings are both literal and symbolic depictions of paradise. Here the concepts of the earthly court, with its pleasurable gardens, and heavenly paradise are combined. The paintings on the ceiling emphasize the fact that the pleasures of the next world are not unlike those of this world, for as A. Kevin Reinhart states, heavenly pleasures are only heightened and cleansed of imperfection (Blair and Bloom 1991:21).

In essence the ceiling is a visual representation of Islamic lyric poetry that unveils multiple levels of meaning (Photo 4). Thus, the ubiquitous cupbearer in royal iconography can be interpreted as a symbol of the power of the earthly sovereign and a desire for paradise. Mystical poetry of the Islamic world often likens union with the divine to the state of intoxication. This should not be construed as a state of drunkenness, but more a state of ecstasy with God. For the mystics "wine is the truth or their mystical experience. The lyrical terms of profane love are used symbolically to express exalted emotions of divine love and gnosticism. The beloved is God; the cupbearer is their spiritual leader" (Ullah 1963:xiii).

Musicians, *hūrīs*, and male attendants accompany the wine drinkers (Photo 5). Music, like wine, is part of the vision of paradise – a vision also inhabited by fantastic female companions and beautiful serving youths. The great 13th century historian Ibn Haldūn wrote that the sounds of music arouse pleasure and emotion in the soul (Ibn Haldūn, *Muqaddima* 330). The Sūfī Abū Hafs as-Suhrawardī, who lived in 12th century Persia, held that for gnostics listening to music brought

contemplation, but for the spiritually perfect, music allowed God to reveal Himself unveiled (Gelfer-Jorgensen 1986:109). Thus, we need to consider the fact that the inclusion of themes of music on the Cappella Palatina ceiling not only reflects physical reality but, at the same time, reinforces a more elevated and spiritual meaning.

The representations of the courtly banquet with their accompanying indulgences of music and pleasurable companions constitute both a concrete illustration and an abstract one. Closely related to this theme are numerous depictions of the hunt and the many attendant activities associated with it (Photo 6). The splendour of the royal hunt, a major theme of much Islamic literature, contains both literal and mystical meanings. As in literature, scenes of the hunt and animals, while conceptually connected to the courtly theme by representing the popular pastimes of the Islamic and Norman rulers, metaphorically represent the lover's pursuit of the beloved and the soul's search for paradise and the divine.

Animal combat scenes are a motif on the Cappella Palatina ceiling (Photo 7). Gelfer-Jorgensen proposes an interesting explanation of this theme, that the combat motif must be interpreted "positively", that the animal which is pursued and slain is also in possession of positive characteristics which are transferred to the stronger animal. Again a dual symbolism may be present on the Cappella ceiling. One is representative of royal power in which the forces of nature are transmitted to the prince; the other, a kind of magical power having a cosmic-divine nature (Gelfer-Jorgensen 1986:118-119).

The theme of animal combat along with the profusion of animal and bird motifs on the ceiling stems from a tradition of symbolism associated with animals in the pre-Islamic art of the Middle East. Their symbolic value was not lost with the advent of Islam. Instead their original significance was often absorbed into Islamic art. Confronted birds flanking trees, with their reference to the tree-of-life, have long been a symbol of paradise and eternity in the Middle East. The peacock came to be associated with the soul and eternal life and continued in Islamic art as a symbol of immortality often associated with the enthroned prince.

Trees, flowers, and vines complete the vision of the heavenly garden and the promise of paradise. The highly sought abundance of the earthly environment became a powerful image of heaven for Muslims who lived in the hostile extremes of the deserts. For the Muslims who inhabited Sicily for 250 years prior to the Norman conquest the island itself was an oasis, but the existence of the Cappella Palatina ceiling points to an Islamic architectural tradition in Sicily that unfortunately no longer survives. It seems likely that Roger II had Muslim artists fabricate a ceiling in his palace chapel that constitutes a type of construction and painted iconography with its symbolic and Islamic meaning of representing heaven, that existed in the palatial residences of the Muslim rulers of Sicily before the Norman takeover (Photo 8). It is entirely appropriate that Roger II would have the ceiling of his royal chapel

crowned with a similar depiction of heaven. Certainly the power of its significance coincided with his own religious and political agenda and served to reinforce his personal dominion over his people who embraced three distinct cultures: Latin Christian, Byzantine, and Muslim.

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Photo 1. Ceiling, Cappella Palatina



Photo 2. Wooden squinches, provenance unknown



Photo 3. Octagonal star, ceiling, Cappella Palatina



Photo 4. Cupbearer, musicians and dancer



Photo 5. Musician



Photo 6. Royal hunt



Photo 7. Animal combat



Photo 8. Palace fountain