

The Normans in Sicily | Christian Sicily and Islamic Figurative Culture: Foundations and Continuity

'It was the Normans that left Sicily with some of the most valuable examples of Islamic art.'

Paradoxically, it was the Christian kingdom of the Normans that left Sicily with some of the most valuable examples of Islamic art to be found in the Mediterranean basin, albeit with the addition of classical, Byzantine and Iranian elements. Instead of seeking to antagonise its predecessors, the new dynasty consciously assimilated Islamic culture and customs, looking to the contemporary Muslim world for the refined culture that it could offer. Contact between the cultures was not limited to Muslims who had remained on the island, but most notably extended to the relationship between the Norman court and the Fatimid Caliphate of Cairo, which is evident from diplomatic and commercial relations and even in the exchange of gifts, such as those between Caliph al-Hafiz (r. 1131–49) and Ruggero II. It is highly likely that some of the craftsmen employed in the royal Norman workshops came from Egypt.



Name:

Painted wooden ceiling of the Palatine Chapel

Dynasty:

Between 1131 and 1140 Norman

Details:

Palermo, Italy

Justification:

The extremely sophisticated painting on the wooden ceiling of the Cappella Palatina demonstrates the assimilation of figurative and stylistic models borrowed from Egyptian Fatimid art.



Name:

Rectangular piece of wood

Dynasty:

Hegira 5th century / AD 11th century Fatimid

Details:

Museum of Islamic Art
Cairo, Egypt

Justification:

The repertoire of images and the lively style of low-relief carvings produced in Egypt are comparable to the imaginative painting on the ceiling of Cefalù Cathedral.



Name:

Frescoed architectural fragment from a bathhouse

Dynasty:

Hegira 5th century / AD 11th century Fatimid

Details:

Museum of Islamic Art
Cairo, Egypt

Justification:

This fragment from a fresco dating to the Fatimid era presents marked compositional and iconographic similarities with the painting on the wooden ceilings of the Cappella Palatina and Cefalù Cathedral.



Name:
Painted wooden ceiling at Cefalù Cathedral

Dynasty:
Between 1131 and 1154 Norman

Details:
Cefalù, Italy

Justification:
Some details of the painted wooden ceiling of Cefalù Cathedral, which was used as a burial place for Norman kings, display a clear stylistic and iconographic influence by Egyptian Fatimid art.



Name:
Door jamb

Dynasty:
12th century Norman

Details:
Regional Gallery of Sicilia, Abatellis Palace
Palermo, Italy

Justification:
The low-relief carving on the wooden door-jambs in the Casa Maturano, Palermo, are comparable to similarly refined Fatimid pieces.



Name:
Wooden panel

Dynasty:
Hegira 5th century / AD 11th century Fatimid

Details:
Museum of Islamic Art
Cairo, Egypt

Justification:
An elegant example of Fatimid carpentry similar to the low-relief carving found on the wooden door-jambs from the Maturano residence in Palermo.
