

The Normans in Sicily

Occupied from AD 827 by the armies of the amir of Kairouan, Sicily was part of the Islamic world until 1061, although some staunch pockets of Greco-Byzantine resistance in the east of the island managed to hold out until 965. Despite limited immigration from North Africa, the Iberian peninsula, Egypt and the Middle East, the social structures of Islam were established and spread quickly. During these two centuries of Arabic presence, Qur'anic law guaranteed profession of the Christian faith, although not without discrimination. In 1061 the Normans, led by the Altavilla family, landed on the island from their bases in Southern Italy. In 1094, Roger I (Ruggero d'Altavilla, r. 1098–1101) established the County of Sicily, which was inherited by his son Roger II (Ruggero II d'Altavilla, r. 1112 as count; king 1130–54). His successors William I (Guglielmo I, r. 1154–66) and William II (Guglielmo II, r. 1171–89) continued his aggressive policy towards Muslims, Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire before the succession of the Swabian dynasty in 1194. Just as they had during the period of Arab rule, the Christian and Muslim communities existed side by side, ensuring the survival of social rituals and customs from the Islamic period, evident in particular in the new Christian dynasty's re-use of sites and buildings valued by the previous rulers. This cultural continuity was reinforced by ongoing political relations between the Normans and the Islamic world. One of the most emblematic expressions of these relations was the marked desire of the Norman dynasty, once the Kingdom of Sicily had been established, to reshape Sicilian art using models derived from Islamic art, which were consciously added to existing, modest Siculo-Arabian and Byzantine forms in art and architecture. The result was a proactive syncretism that made Siculo-Norman art one of the most original in medieval Europe and the Mediterranean.



Painted wooden ceiling at Cefalù Cathedral

Between 1131 and 1154
Norman
Cefalù, Italy



Zisa

1165-1180
Norman
Palermo, Sicily, Italy