

Cefalù

Roberto Coroneo and Martin Kauffmann

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T015090>

Published online: 2003

Updated in this version

updated bibliography, 2 October 2012

Italian town on the north coast of Sicily, located on a bay forming a natural harbour, defended by a castle. The diocese of Cefalù is documented from AD 866–8, and in 1050 the town was already fortified. In the second half of the 12th century the historian Ugo Falcando referred to the *nova moenia* built by the Normans. This included the present cathedral, refounded by Roger II probably on the site of its predecessor, at the foot of the cliff dominating the slope on which the historic centre of the town lies. The main axis of the Norman town plan is the Via Regia (now Corso Ruggero), which leads from the Porta di Terra to the cathedral square, on which were also located the bishop's palace (rebuilt 1793) and the *domus regia* of Roger II. Cefalù is now noted mainly for the cathedral and its mosaic decoration.

1. Cathedral architecture.

According to the *Liber privilegiorum ecclesie Cephaleditane* (1329; ed. C. Mirto, Palermo, 1972) the church, dedicated to the Saviour and SS Peter and Paul, was founded by Roger II in 1129 in fulfilment of a vow made after deliverance from a storm at sea. Shortly after his coronation in 1130, Roger promulgated two decrees: the first, dated 1131, postponed the laying of the first stone to Pentecost; the second, dated March 1132, entrusted the cathedral to the first bishop, Jocelmus, an Augustinian canon. An inscription once set in the wall behind the main altar recorded that the church was completed between 1131 and 1148, and the latter date also appears in the mosaic inscription in the conch of the apse.

In 1154 Roger II had two porphyry sarcophagi (moved to Palermo Cathedral, 1215) placed in the choir, and decreed that the cathedral would become his family mausoleum. He was not buried there, however, perhaps because the building was still unfinished when he died that year; the canons of Cefalù requested the transfer of his remains from Palermo only in 1170. A bull of Pope Alexander III dated 1171 refers to the completion of Cefalù Cathedral and names Bosone I as its bishop. Two inscriptions dated 1240 are set in the upper part of the façade and in the roof of the south apse, while another of 1236, painted on a wooden ceiling beam in the nave, records the restoration of the roof. The building was consecrated on 10 April 1267.

Cefalù Cathedral has an aisled, basilican nave of seven bays with a pointed arcade resting on columns. There is a slightly projecting transept and a two-bay, rib-vaulted sanctuary terminating in an apse covered by a pointed semi-dome. Instead of opening off the transept arms, the two flanking apses stand at the ends of deep, barrel-vaulted spaces that continue the line of the nave aisles. The transepts and choir are taller than the nave, and there are two superimposed triumphal arches at its eastern end, the upper one above the level of the nave roof. At the west end, two square towers project beyond the aisle walls and flank a

triple-arched portico, rebuilt in 1471. The thick, double-skinned walls of the church are of grey–brown tufa, an easily worked stone, but their lower parts are constructed in a very hard, bluish–grey limestone. The white marble and granite columns of the main arcade are spolia.

The discrepancies in height between the nave and choir and the ambiguous documentary evidence have led to much controversy over the dating of the various parts of the cathedral. According to Samonà (1940), the nave columns formed part of a Roman structure on the site, perhaps a basilica, substantial sections of whose walls were incorporated in the Norman fabric. The short initial building phase (1131–2) would thus be explained by the restoration of an existing structure. Samonà further claimed that the nave contained more archaic features than the transepts, which he attributed to the 13th century, proposing that the cathedral was only completed near the time of the consecration of 1267. Schwarz (1943–4), on the other hand, attributed the east end, with its strong sense of verticality, to the reign of Roger II, and proposed that work was abandoned at his death in 1154. Although Di Stefano (1960) recognized the use of isodomic masonry *in situ* at the base of the façade and the campanile and of Classical spolia in the interior, he refuted Samonà's theory that they formed part of a Roman building and argued that the materials came from the preceding medieval church. Like Samonà, however, he believed that the nave was earlier than the choir and proposed that Roger founded a modest church that was later heightened, but only at the east end. He attributed the plan, the aisle walls, the chapels flanking the apse, and the lower part of the campanile to a first phase (1131–6), and the heightened east end to a second phase (1138–48): this included the sanctuary, the intersecting arcades decorating the exterior and the transepts. The central vessel of the nave, within established aisle walls, would belong to a third campaign of 1154–66, during the reign of William II. After discoveries made during the restorations of 1976–7, Thieme and Beck argued that the large, re-used blocks at the base of the campanile and the façade came from fortifications, rejecting the theory that there was a change of plan: analysis of the double triumphal arch revealed that the upper arch was older than the lower and was designed for a tall choir like the present one, while the lower arch was inserted to accommodate a barrel-vaulted nave. According to this hypothesis, the building is essentially homogeneous, and the only change (c. 1150, based on the Islamic character of the painted ornaments on the beams) was to the height of the nave and the type of roof, of wood rather than stone. The verticality of the east end, then, would be the result of a decision made during the first phase (1131–45)—or in any case not later than 1148, when the central apse was raised (and its oculus consequently blocked up) and decorated with mosaic.

Bibliography

G. Samonà: *Il duomo di Cefalù*, I Monumenti Italiani, 16 (Rome, 1939)

G. Samonà: *Il duomo di Cefalù* (Rome, 1940)

H. M. Schwarz: 'Die Baukunst Kalabriens und Siziliens im Zeitalter der Normannen, i: Die lateinischen Kirchengründungen des XII. Jahrhunderts und der Dom in Cefalù', *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* [prev. publ as & also known as *Kstgesch. Jb. Bib. Hertz.*], 6 (1942–4), pp. 1–112 (59–110)

S. Bottari: 'L'architettura del medioevo in Sicilia', *Atti del VII congresso nazionale di storia dell'architettura: Palermo, 1950*, pp. 109–54 (129–40)

- A. Dillon: 'Il chiostro del duomo di Cefalù', *La Giara*, 1 (1952), pp. 140–52
- G. Di Stefano: *Monumenti della Sicilia normanna* (Palermo, 1955); rev. by W. Krönig (Palermo, 1979), pp. 44–55
- J. Deer: *The Dynastic Porphyry Tombs of the Norman Period in Sicily* (Cambridge, MA, 1959)
- G. Di Stefano: *Il duomo di Cefalù: Biografia di una cattedrale incompiuta* (Palermo, 1960)
- W. Krönig: *Cefalù: Der sizilische Normannendom* (Kassel, 1963)
- P. Héliot: 'La Cathédrale de Cefalù, sa chronologie, sa filiation et les galeries murales dans les églises du midi', *Arte lombarda*, 10 (1965), pp. 19–38; 11 (1966), pp. 6–25
- V. Pace: 'Le componenti inglesi dell'architettura normanna di Sicilia nella storia della critica', *Studi medievali*, 16 (1975), pp. 395–406
- T. Thieme and I. Beck: *La cattedrale normanna di Cefalù: Un frammento della civiltà sociopolitica della Sicilia medievale* (Copenhagen, 1977)
- Atti della tavola rotonda sul duomo di Cefalù: Cefalù, 1977* [incl. articles by S. Braidà Santamaura, C. Brandi and W. Krönig]
- Documenti e testimonianze figurative nella basilica ruggeriana di Cefalù* (exh. cat., Cefalù Cathedral, 1982) [full bibliog., pp. 163–70]

2. Cathedral mosaics.

Martin Kauffmann

The mosaic decoration of Cefalù Cathedral is limited to the main apse and presbytery, though a more extensive scheme may have been planned. At the centre of the scheme, in the conch of the main apse, is a bust of *Christ Pantokrator*, who holds an open book containing the Greek and Latin versions of the Gospel of St John 8:12: 'I am the Light of the World ...'. This figure dominates the space with an undeniable ascetic grandeur. An eschatological inscription stretches around the arch above. The curved wall of the apse below is divided by bands of ornament into three registers. The upper register contains the *Virgin* in the centre, her hands uplifted in prayer. On either side of her, two *Archangels* dressed in Byzantine court costume turn towards the centre. Each of the two registers below contains six *Apostles*. The inscriptions naming the figures in the apse are in Greek, although the larger inscriptions are in Latin. The scheme resembles that of a Byzantine cupola, adapted for the apse of a basilica: instead of being ranged around the cupola and supporting arches the Virgin, angels and Apostles are now arranged in superimposed layers.

In the presbytery, each compartment of the quadripartite vault contains a six-winged angel, accompanied in both the western and eastern compartments by two half-figure angels. The side walls contain single figures in four storeys. The south wall bears *Abraham*, *David*, and *Solomon* in the lunette below the vault, three prophets in the second level, four warrior saints in the third, and four Greek Church Fathers in the fourth. The north wall contains *Melchizedek* with *Hosea* and *Moses* in the lunette, three prophets in the second level, four holy deacons in the third, and four Latin Church Fathers in the fourth. Thus the east end

of the cathedral is populated by a heavenly court of Christ surrounded by the prophets, saints, and angels of the Church. In the presbytery both the names of the figures and the texts on the scrolls of the prophets are in Latin, except for the names of the Greek Fathers.

The figure types at Cefalù are predominantly Byzantine and are usually considered to be the work mainly of Greek artists. The statuesque *Apostles* in the apse avoid monotony by the variety of their poses. All are in a contrapposto position, but despite the delineation of hips, thighs and knees the bodies are hardly traceable beneath the intricate patterning of the richly coloured draperies. The simplified contours make the figures stand out against the gold ground. The figures of the lower registers of the presbytery walls tend to be stiffer and more frontal, their draperies thinner and flatter. The mosaic inscription in the apse giving the date 1148 may not mean that all the decoration was completed by then; the presbytery mosaics may well have been completed during the reign of William I, who succeeded Roger in 1154. A comprehensive restoration of the mosaics was carried out in 1857–68.

Bibliography

Bibliography

O. Demus: *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily* (London, 1950), pp. 3–24, 304–53, 375–96, 404–8, 417

E. Borsook: *Messages in Mosaic: The Royal Programmes of Norman Sicily (1130–87)* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 6–16

A. Cilento: *Byzantine Mosaics in Norman Sicily: Palermo, Monreale, Cefalu* (Udine, 2009)

For further bibliography, see §1 above.

See also

Islamic art, §1, 2: Geography and trade

External resources

None: Cathedral (details), Digital Imaging Project: Mary Ann Sullivan, Bluffton College (Cefal) <http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/cefalu/cathedral.html>

None: Cathedral (Pantokrator Mosaic), 1148, None (Cefal) <http://www.ou.edu/class/ahi4263/byzhtml/p07-05.html>