Stuccoes from the Early Norman Period in Sicily: Figuration, Fabrication and Integration

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Abstract
This study examines fragments of stucco reliefs from three churches located in Sicily and southern Italy, Santi Pietro e Paolo at Itàla, San Giuliano at Caltagirone, and Santa Maria de Terreti near Reggio Calabria. The churches and stuccoes date from the late eleventh century and reveal unexpected connections and conflicts among cultures, artists and patrons during the first years of Norman rule. Stucco, a material that is rarely included in discussions of European art of the Middle Ages, merits serious consideration; in this article, it helps illuminate such major art historical questions as the status of “Islamic” Sicily and the genesis of the polyvalent art forms associated with the later Norman kings.

Keywords
Stucco, Romanesque sculpture, Sicily, Normans, Norman Sicily, Roger I

Norman Sicily currently occupies a prominent place in the art historical imagination, a seam between cultures and continents located at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, but where does it reside in the history of medieval art? The traditional taxonomies of the field, such as Byzantine, Islamic, Latin, or Romanesque, are too rigid to accommodate its polyvalent arts, which range from manuscripts written in Arabic, Latin, and Greek to monuments of similar diversity.1 This study explores the seam-like character

of Norman Sicily by probing episodes of art production in which Islamic and western Christian cultures overlapped. It does so by focusing on a type of object rarely considered in the canon of Western medieval art, stucco reliefs, and their relationship to better-known Islamic prototypes.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, scholars have wrestled with the formative role played by Islamic art in the visual and material cultures of Norman Sicily. Studies both old and new have interpreted the multifaceted evidence of Islamic artistic traditions under the Normans, from the layout and decoration of the Greek monasteries on the island, which seem indebted to mosques in present-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria, to the widespread uses of muqarnas ornament, which was associated as early as 1841 with Fatimid Cairo. These architectural ideas, along with other artistic and cultural expressions of the court, are unimaginable without Sicily’s Islamic period, which began with invasions launched by the Aghlabid emir of Kairouan in 827 and ended with the fall of Butera and Noto to the Normans in 1091. Thus, the centuries of Islam have been fundamental to Sicily’s cultural identity, a signifier of its Oriental exoticism in the

