MONREALE FROM ITS ORIGIN TO THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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INTRODUCTION

The monastic complex of Monreale lies ten or so kilometres to the south of Palermo, on the slopes of Mont Caputo overlooking the Conca d'Oro. The last royal foundation of the Norman Hauteville dynasty, this collection of buildings was erected at the behest of King William II (1172–89). Although this latter was a key figure in the history of Sicily, whose death without leaving an heir marked the end of the Norman kingdom of Sicily, his personality has somehow been eclipsed by the glorious reign of Roger II.¹ The cathedral of Monreale forms part of a sequence of royal foundations, such as the Cappella Palatina begun by Roger II, completed by William I, and the church of Cefalù, the first royal cathedral and sponsored by this same king. A grandiose undertaking, William II's foundation vies with the earlier creations as much in its scale as in the richness of

its decoration. It is not a simple church but a royal and monastic cathedral, destined to become a dynastic mausoleum and the seat of a powerful archbishopric, rivalling that of Palermo. Every artistic aspect of the structure was designed to express the ambition, the greatness, indeed the excessive nature of the new creation. Architects, sculptors and mosaicists from a wide range of different, often distant regions pooled their skills in order to erect a temple to the glory of God, but also to that of the sovereign and patron. The architecture refers to a Nordic tradition, the capitals in the cloister recall Provençal sculpture, while the mosaics compete with the gold of Byzantium. Nonetheless, it remains a hazardous business to seek to attach each of these forms of artistic expression to a single tradition or to a specific provenance, hence the richness and complexity of this monument which, as we shall see, has so captivated historians of art.

A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE CATHEDRAL’S FOUNDATION

The name Sancta Maria Nova in Monte Regali derives from the dedication of the church, erected to the glory of the Virgin Mary, from the site the monastery occupies, and from the royal function of the place, which served Roger II as a game reserve. The Cathedral's foundation has given rise to some confusion in the historiography.

In the 19th century, when interest in Siculo-Norman art was gathering pace, the new studies then published were faced with problems of dating which engendered errors of interpretation. Domenico Gravina, on the basis of his observation of the stones in the south wall, concluded that there had been a change in the workforce at a certain point, and formulated the hypothesis that William II had restored an earlier Byzantine church dating from the sixth century.2 Elaborating upon Gravina’s proposal, Fedele Pollaci Nuccio then suggested that the earlier Byzantine church was perhaps one of the seven founded in Sicily by Gregory the Great.3 This theory was belied by Otto Demus, who, in the mid-twentieth century, pointed out that such variations in construction were to be found in the majority of Romanesque cathedrals.4 We should therefore take at face value William II’s declaration, which we may read in the diploma of

2 Gravina, p. 23.
4 Demus, p. 99.