I. Introduction[1]

Most books on mosaics focus exclusively on the question of their iconography and their style, leaving aside any consideration of materials and craftsmanship. Indeed, the problem of most authors who deal with wall mosaics and frescoes is that they depend on reproductions that under the best circumstances are colour or black and white analogue or digital photographs, the latter taken with an i-Phone. It has been my good fortune, thanks to my Sicilian friends and colleagues[2], to have been able to climb the scaffolds of the Martorana, the Palatina and Cefalù Cathedral, where over the last 15 years the notes and photos for this book were taken. Moreover in Greece, thanks to the courtesy of several Greek friends I was able to climb the scaffolds in the churches of Daphni and Chios as well.[3] Last, but not least, I am particularly grateful to Dr. Maria Lidova who enabled my access to the scaffold of the church of St Michael and to take pictures in the presbytery of Hagia Sophia in Kiev. This book is thus based mostly on direct observation. Repeated examination of the Norman mosaics at eye level drastically changed my ideas, and I started to study everything from scratch, including the written documents[4] and the architecture of the monuments in question. Although I have studied early Christian, Byzantine and medieval mosaics up close from scaffolds for half a century, I only very slowly acquired a certain expertise with the Norman mosaics.[5] It was the repeated meeting with the mosaics at eye level that moved me from contemplation and reflection to a knowing seeing of the delicate forms and colours.

Moreover, digital photography and the various models of photoshop have enabled me to continue a close evaluation of many of the mosaics I studied while on the scaffolds. To make these photos I had to return dozens of times to the scaffolds, and switch repeatedly between one church and another. Most images were made with a professional camera with high resolution (24 mb), and this permitted me to discover the process of the making of the design and of how the *tesserae* were laid out. This perhaps sounds rather banal, but the laying-out of the tesserae was a technically complex and demanding job that had not been described before the invention of digital photography. Furthermore, the process of creating the Ruggerian mosaics in Sicily was particularly complicated, because all were made nearly contemporaneously. This in turn required a logistically sophisticated distribution of labor and organization of the various mosaicists who worked according to a master plan. The work force was divided into competencies: there were specialists for faces, figures, scenes, trees, architectures, inscriptions and gold grounds. The opportunity to analyse the lay-out of the tesserae led me to discover 'how things were made', and to detect the originality, mastery and craftsmanship of the mosaics. The third chapter is dedicated to these problems.

I have tried to accept each work of art for what it is – a unique and unrepeatable artistic creation connected in a more

1 The author's English text was not only cleared of errors by Julia Triolo with the greatest dedication and competence, but also considerably improved thanks to her thorough analysis of my arguments and trains of thought. My great debt of gratitude cannot be adequately expressed in words, but it comes from the heart.

2 I am especially grateful to Prof. Fabrizio Agnello and Architetto Gaetano Corselli D'Ondes who allowed me to access the scaffolding of Cefalù and the Martorana.

3 I am grateful to Prof. Panagiotis Vocotopoulos, Prof. Maria Panagiotidi and Prof. Sophia Kalopisi who kindly organized several visits and access to the scaffoldings of Daphni and Nea Moni in Chios.

4 I thank Dr. Peter Litwan and Dr. Bruno Häuptli for a correct interpretation of the Latin and Greek documents.

5 B. Brenk, Il concetto progettuale degli edifici reali in epoca normanna in Sicilia. Quaderni dell'accademia delle arti del disegno. Firenze 2 (1990) pp. 7–12; idem, La parete occidentale della Cappella Palatina a Palermo. Arte medievale II serie, Anno IV/2 (1990) pp. 135–149; idem, La simbologia del potere. I Normanni, popolo d'Europa 1030–1200. ed. M. D'Onofrio. Venezia 1994 pp. 193–198; idem, Zur Bedeutung des Mosaiks an der Westwand der Cappella Palatina in Palermo. Studien zur byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte. Festschrift für Horst Hallensleben zum 65. Geburtstag. eds. B. Borkopp, B. Schellewald, L. Theis. Amsterdam 1995 pp. 185–194; idem, Zur Programmatik der Kapitelle im Kreuzgang von Monreale. Rhetorik der ‚varietas' und herrscherliches Anspruchsdenken. Opere e giorni. eds. K. Bergdolt and G. Bonsanti. Venezia 2001 pp. 43–50; idem, Arte del potere e la retorica dell'alterità. La cattedrale di Cefalù e S. Marco a Venezia. Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana 35. 2003/4 (2005) pp. 81–100; idem, Bronzi della Sicilia normanna: le porte del duomo di Monreale. Le porte del paradiso. ed. A. Iacobini (Milion 7). Roma 2009 pp. 471–489; idem (ed.), La Cappella Palatina a Palermo (MIRABILIA ITALIAE 17). 4 vols. Modena 2010; idem, Rhetorik, Anspruch und Funktion der Cappella Palatina in Palermo. ed. T. Dittelbach, Die Cappella Palatina in Palermo. Swiridoff 2011 pp. 247–271; idem, Zum angeblichen Prothesis-Raum in der Cappella Palatina in Palermo. Filopation. Spaziergang im kaiserlichen Garten. Beiträge zu Byzanz und seinen Nachbarn. Festschrift für Arne Effenberger. eds. N. Asutay-Effenberger, F. Daim. Mainz 2012 pp. 11–26; idem, I volti delle botteghe bizantine: nuove osservazioni e conclusioni sulle tecniche dei mosaicisti nella Cappella Palatina di Palermo. Arte medievale IV. Ser./3 (2013) pp. 237–256; idem, Concetto e significato dei mosaici e delle pitture della Cappella Palatina a Palermo. Byzantino-Sicula VI. La Sicilia e Bisanio nei secoli XI e XII. Atti delle X giornate di studio della Associazione italiana di studi bizantini. eds. R. Lavagnini e C. Rognoni. Palermo 2014 pp. 257–273; idem, Per la ricostruzione della parete settentrionale del presbiterio della Cappella Palatina a Palermo. Il potere dell'arte nel medioevo. Studi in onore di Mario D'Onofrio. Eds. M. Gianandrea, F. Gangemi, C. Costantini. Rome 2014 pp. 181–191; idem, Il percorso del Re. Riflessioni per il concetto architettonico del palazzo reale di Palermo sotto Ruggero II. Temporis Signa. Archeologia della tarda antichità e del medioevo11 (2016) pp. 177–198; idem, The mosaics of Cefalù revisited: innovation and memory. Codex Aquilarensis. Revista de Arte Medieval. 34 (2018) pp. 13–33. B. Brenk, Zum Konzept des Königspalastes in Palermo (Palatium sacrum, Sakralität am Hof des Mittelalters, eds. M. Luchterhand, H. Röckelein. Regensburg 2021 pp. 235–260).

or less transparent manner to tradition. I begin from the assumption that the artist basically aspired to create a unity, a wholeness and an entirety, even if this was not always possible. I have felt no compelling need to slice up a building or a mosaic program into dozens of phases just so as to placate an aprioristic chronology of styles and iconographies.

I focused my investigation on the originality of Norman in comparison to Byzantine programs, and on the originality of Norman and Byzantine craftsmanship.[6] I am convinced that the Norman spirit of these mosaics has yet to be discovered. While it has not always been possible to come to clear-cut conclusions, it must be said that a great deal of the present book attempts to reveal the Norman originality.

Whoever undertakes to study the Norman mosaics in Sicily must necessarily consult the monograph, still today unsurpassed, by the great Viennese Byzantinist Otto Demus: *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*.[7] Demus (1902–1990) wrote his *opus magnum* during and after the Second World War in England and in Canada, and published it in English in 1949. A year earlier Ernst Kitzinger (1912–2003), another great art historian who had fled Germany and found a new home at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D. C., travelled to Sicily. Demus had been so generous as to allow Kitzinger to see the drafts of his as yet unpublished monograph. Also in 1949 Kitzinger published his paper on the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in *The Art Bulletin*.[8] Kitzinger reports that much of the material was gathered during a visit to Sicily in the summer of 1948. It seems to me that he mainly needed to check some final details once he arrived at the Cappella Palatina. Kitzinger was chiefly interested in the program and in the arrangement and function of the mosaics, following up on Demus's slightly earlier book 'Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium' of 1947. Kitzinger's subtitle: 'An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects', is a direct response to this book by Demus, which itself was an absolute novelty. Neither author, however, actually observed the Sicilian mosaics close up from a scaffolding. Interestingly, Demus never returned to the topic of the Norman mosaics, whereas Kitzinger went on to publish many articles on them, crowning his scholarly activity with the monograph on the mosaics of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio in 1990.[9] His book is above all a study of the iconography of the mosaics. It is based on meticulous iconographic comparisons and the identification of the models that the author suspects lie behind each image. Its main thesis is that the mosaics of the Martorana were copies or remakes of those in the Cappella Palatina (completed by 1143), and thus were created during the late forties of the 12th century. Despite the lack of a valid basis for his thesis, Kitzinger postulated that the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina and those of the Martorana were executed by two different and independent Byzantine teams who were called from Constantinople.[10] The illogicality is obvious: why should a new team of mosaicists be recruited just a few years later again from Constantinople for the Martorana in order to simply copy the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina (1143) made by an earlier Constantinopolitan team? Is it at all plausible first that a new team could so easily be found, and second, be convinced to do such an inferior kind of work – that is copying rather than inventing?

I am unable to accept many of the hypotheses of Lazarev[11], Demus and Kitzinger[12], albeit these great scholars remain the most important Byzantinists of the twentieth century. The use of cultural generalisations (such as 'Byzantine', 'Arabicising', Eastern, Western, etc.) and their transfer to art is still endemic today and has always led to gross misunderstandings. I simply belong to another generation, and it seems to be a sort of biological necessity that each generation reinvents itself and needs a fresh start. I also am fully aware that among the readers of this text there will be prominent representatives of younger generations, and it is their right and duty to reinvent themselves, too, and to critique my findings.

Demus and Kitzinger reached their conclusions with the help of stylistic analyses, and for more than half a century their approach was universally considered with the greatest respect by scholars.[13] Both Demus and Kitzinger were convinced that the Sicilian mosaics should be considered as proxies for the sadly no longer existant mosaics of Constantinople of the 12th century.[14] With no proof offered and a total absence of supporting documents, the idea was cultivated that at any time it was possible to recruit as many mosaicists in Constantinople as one wished. Indeed, because of the lack of documentation,

6 Throughout this book, the term "Byzantine" is used to refer not exclusively to the art of Constantinople but more broadly to the art of the Christian territories associated with the Byzantine Empire.

7 O. Demus, The Mosaics of Norman Sicily. London 1949. Several years later the volume was reviewed at some length by Kitzinger in Speculum 28 (1953) pp. 143–150.

8 E. Kitzinger, The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo. An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects. Art Bulletin 31 (1949) pp. 269–292.

9 E. Kitzinger, I mosaici di Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio a Palermo. Palermo 1990.

10 E. Kitzinger, Two mosaic ateliers in Palermo in the 1140s. Artistes, artisans et production artistique au moyen âge. vol. 1. Les Hommes (ed. X. Barral y Altet) Paris 1986 pp. 277–282.

11 V. N. Lazarev, The Mosaics of Cefalù. The Art Bulletin 17 (1935) pp. 184–232.

12 O. Demus, The Mosaics 1949; E. Kitzinger, I mosaici di Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio a Palermo. Palermo 1990; E. Kitzinger, I mosaici del periodo normanno in Sicilia. 6 vols. Palermo 1992–2000.

13 A critical approach to Demus' and Kitzingers ideas is found in Liz James, Mosaics in the Medieval World from Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century. Cambridge 2017. See also B. Brenk, Ernst Kitzinger's Contribution to the Study of Norman Mosaics in Sicily. (Ernst Kitzinger and the Making of Medieval Art History, eds. F.Harley-McGowan, H. Maguire) London 2017 pp. 127–139

14 O. Demus, The Mosaics 1949 pp. 371–372; E. Kitzinger, The Descent of the Dove. Observations on the mosaic of the Annunciation in the Cappella Palatina in Palermo. Byzanz und der Westen. Studien zur Kunst des europäischen Mittelalters. (ed. I. Hutter) Vienna 1984 p. 104: "Given the fact that the art of mosaic at the court of Roger II was a wholesale import from Byzantium (…)". E. Kitzinger, Two Mosaic Ateliers in Palermo. Artistes, artisans et production artistique au moyen âge. vol. 1, Les Hommes Paris 1986 pp. 277: "But it is evident also that two different Byzantine teams were employed in the two churches".

we may never know from where exactly the mosaicists were brought to Sicily. Be this as it may, the foremost targets of this book remain the analyses of the originality of the programs, the mastery and the technique and designs of the Ruggerian mosaics in Sicily. This book is written against the erosion of the facts, and would like to activate a critical debate.

The Norman mosaics in Sicily were determined by the ideology of a king and his admiral, Roger II and George of Antioch, both extremely powerful personalities eager to demonstrate their unsurpassable power and wealth. The architecture they commissioned is virtually flooded with mosaics, paintings and sculptures. They employed Greek and Latin mosaicists and Arabic-Fatimid painters, so that we find Latin, Greek and Arabic inscriptions on the decorated surfaces. A tangible instance of royal rhetoric is the monumental inscription of King Roger II in the dome of the Cappella Palatina (fig. 3) that states: "Other kings of former times built other sanctuaries for the saints, but I, Roger, mighty king (and) ruler of the sceptre (dedicate this church) …"[15] This formulation unequivocally asserts that King Roger's goal was to surpass all his predecessors with the power of his royal rhetoric. Here we are dealing with a topical behaviour that could be described as "sovereign excelling" or kingly extravagance. Norman royal art therefore sees itself not as a continuation of local traditions, but as a form of unsurpassable and unrepeatable concept art. It aims to be unique, i. e. without a precedent and without a successor. Norman art in Sicily was thus a purely dynastic art: it did not develop slowly, but it was created in two decades after Roger II was crowned king in 1130, and two decades ended as abruptly as it had begun. There is no artistic evidence to suggest that after the Norman dynasty was extinguished in 1189, any of the subsequent German rulers of Sicily continued working on the Norman ecclesiastical buildings. Norman art came to an abrupt end under the Hohenstaufen. Roger II eternalized his name in the inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina and the Cathedral of Cefalù, while his admiral, George of Antioch, left a self-image in the mosaics of the Martorana (fig. 6).

If this is recognized, the search for precedents, influences and parallels loses its urgency, and we may devote ourselves to the question of originality and meaning and to the study of the art itself, for itself.

A new chronology of the Ruggerian mosaics (S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio: La Martorana; Cappella Palatina, both in Palermo; Cathedral of Cefalù)

An exact and reliable chronology of the earliest Norman mosaics in Sicily will probably always remain hypothetical because there is no source to tell us who first introduced wall mosaics in these churches in Sicily. Nor is there any written evidence for

Fig. 1 Palermo, Cappella Palatina. Apse and cupola (B)

the presence of Byzantine mosaicists in Sicily.[16] The name of Roger II, however, is preserved on the lower rim of the cupola of the Cappella Palatina (fig. 3) and in the monumental apse inscription in the Cathedral of Cefalù (fig. 81). The name of admiral George as patron of the Martorana is handed down to us by a diploma of 1143, written in Greek and Arabic, and he is furthermore represented in the well known mosaic in the Martorana (fig. 6), kneeling in prayer before the Virgin.[17] The near contemporaneity of a church's construction and a mosaic program inside it is rarely demonstrable, but nevertheless not completely improbable, as there is no reason to suppose that a wealthy private founder should wait long to decorate his church once the construction had been completed. On the contrary: a wealthy founder does everything to materialize his pretentions and to eternalize his name, aspirations which are thus invariably expressed in his constructions. On the other hand there are sometimes reasons for a gap between the construction of a church and its decoration, added later. As it was

15 B. Crostini, L'iscrizione greca nella cupola della Cappella Palatina. Considerazioni filologiche. La Cappella Palatina a Palermo. Ed. B. Brenk (MIRABILIA ITALIAE 17) 2010 pp. 187–202.

16 Among the Sicilian chronicles, only the Annales Romualdi contain a note that refers rather generally and non-specifically to King William I, who "*Cappellam s. Petri, que erat in palatio, mirabili musivii fecit pictura depingi*". (see below).

17 B. Lavagnini, L'epigramma e il committente. Dumbarton Oaks Papers 41 (1987) pp. 339–341.

Fig. 2 Palermo, Martorana. Cupola and drum (B)

Fig. 3 Palermo, Cappella Palatina. Cupola, Greek and Latin inscriptions of 1143 (B)

not the task of diplomas and chronicles to mention such facts, scholars have mostly depended on stylistic analysis to determine chronology. Both Demus and Kitzinger were convinced that the mosaic decoration of the Martorana was added several years after the completion of its architecture. Demus writes: "The comparatively small number of the mosaics makes it possible to assume that they were executed within a short time, a very few years only, between 1143, the date of the endowment, and 1151".[18] Demus' proposal is based on two unproven premises, firstly "that the program of the cupola (of the Martorana, fig. 2) is an abridged version of the decoration of the Palatina cupola" (fig. 1) and secondly "that the Court chapel of the king would scarcely have been decorated after the model of the private foundation of a courtier".[19] This interpretation of the mosaics and their dating seems to stem from a monarchist view. His theory appeared to be corroborated by the 1143 date of the mosaics of the cupola of the Cappella Palatina. Kitzinger accepted this argumentation in all his papers and books, and attempted to further strengthen the edifice constructed by Demus.[20] A comparison between the Cappella Palatina and the Martorana based on new digital possibilities and a fresh reading of the Greek documents, however, points to an interpretation that reverses their conclusions (as will be shown below).

S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio (La Martorana) in Palermo

In 1981 Augusta Acconcia Longo[21] convincingly argued that the tomb of the mother of George of Antioch who died in 1140 as a nun must be located inside the church of S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio, because in 1870 a fragment of her tomb inscription had been found there, though it was later lost. It seems likely that the tiny monastery where George's mother Theodula lived and died was connected to the south side of the Martorana, although this has never been proven archaeologically. Sadly, Kitzinger never considered the implications of the burial of George's mother within the Martorana in 1140, data revealed by the tomb inscription. The epitaph says that Theodula prayed to the Virgin Mother of God. If we accept this evidence that Theodula was buried in the Martorana, the latter must have been consecrated before, or at the latest in 1140. Burials in non-consecrated churches were not allowed, since the requiem (liturgy) could only be celebrated in a consecrated church. Since Constantine's time the dedication ceremony was always connected with the ceremony of the Eucharist.

Fig. 4 Palermo, Martorana. Marble slab presumably from a tomb (B)

Somewhat later, the tombs of Admiral George and his wife Irene were installed in the Martorana. All three tombs were equipped with funerary inscriptions that were copied from the 12th century onwards up to recent times. A marble slab (fig. 4) found and still preserved in the Martorana seems to be part of one of the tombs.[22] In 1625 fragments of Irene's funerary inscription were still visible on the floor of the Martorana, while George's inscription has completely disappeared. This group of funerary inscriptions was analysed by Bruno Lavagnini in an article he dedicated to Ernst Kitzinger in the latter's 1987 Festschrift.[23] This important article was a subtle exhortation to Kitzinger to read and account for the inscriptions. Instead, Kitzinger turned a blind eye to this article and to the Greek texts, because of his conviction that style is a much more reliable argument than written documents.

Moreover, there is further important evidence that speaks in favour of an early completion not only of the architecture but also of the mosaics of the Martorana. I am referring to two endowment diplomas of 1140 and 1143 in which both king Roger and George of Antioch are named as the donors, with the nuns of the "golden" church of S. Maria as the recipients. In the diploma of April 23, 1140, donations of landed property made by Admiral George on behalf of the King are spoken of. King Roger endowed the nuns of S. Maria with the fourth quarter of a vineyard, three quarters of which they had apparently received earlier; here the church is called: S. Maria Chryse.[24] Acconcia Longo showed that this church must be identical with S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio, because of the great unlikelihood that there were two golden churches dedicated to the Virgin in Palermo to whose nuns King Roger and Admiral George made donations. According to the diploma George must pay for the plot of land that was formerly royal property[25] and is now to be given to the nuns. The revenues from the

18 O. Demus, The Mosaics 1949 p. 82.

19 O. Demus, The Mosaics 1949 pp. 82–83; E. Kitzinger, I mosaici 1990 p. 124.

20 E. Kitzinger, I mosaici 1990 pp. 15–16.

21 A. Acconcia Longo, Gli epitaffi giambici per Giorgio di Antiochia, per la madre e la moglie. Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken 61 (1981) pp. 25–59; A. Acconcia Longo, S. Maria Chrysé e S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio a Palermo. Rivista di studi bizantini e neoellenici 25 (1988) pp. 165–183; A. Acconcia Longo, Considerazioni sulla chiesa di S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio e sulla cappella Palatina di Palermo. Néa Rhóme. Rivista di ricerche bizantinistiche 4 (2007) pp. 267–293.

22 E. Kitzinger, I mosaici 1990 fig. A 21.

23 B. Lavagnini, L'epigramma e il committente. Dumbarton Oaks Papers 41 (1987) pp. 339–350.

24 A. Acconcia Longo, S. Maria Chryse e S. Maria dell'Ammiraglio a Palermo. Rivista di studi bizantini e neoellenici 25 (1988) pp. 165–183. Tabularium regiae ac imperialis capellae collegiatae DIVI PETRI in regio Panormitano Palatio. Palermo 1835 pp. 13–16 Nr. V

25 B. Lavagnini 1987 p. 339.