

Detail from the mosaic with Roger II receiving the crown from Christ, Martorana, Palermo



Christ Crowning King Roger II. 1143-1151. Mosaic. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.14451816>.

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Portfolio II

Pictured above is a mosaic from Palermo, Sicily. The mosaic has been moved from its original location,¹ but now resides in La Martorana, also known as Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, a church built in the late twelfth century by George of Antioch, chief minister to King Roger II.² George of Antioch was a Byzantine, and had much influence on the King.³ The mosaic itself could have been produced any time between 1143 and 1151, during the rule of Roger II.⁴

Within the mosaic, there are two figures. The figure on the left, placed slightly below the figure to the right and identified by the Greek letters above him that translate to "Rogerios Rex," is King Roger II. He is dressed in traditional Byzantine imperial clothing and is wearing a crown with his head slightly bowed.⁵

The figure on the right, placed just a step above the King, is Christ. He can be identified by the halo surrounding his head. His clothing is much more simple than Roger's and when one takes a look at his feet, one can see that he is floating, further exemplifying his heavenly status.

The positioning of the King and Christ is significant in that it puts forth the concept of the King being slightly below Christ. This ties into the idea of the divine right to rule, reinforcing

¹ Karen C. Britt, "Roger II of Sicily: Rex, Basileus, and Khalif? Identity, Politics, and Propaganda in the Cappella Palatina," *Mediterranean Studies* (Kirkville, Mo.) 16, no. 1 (2007): 26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41167003>.

² *Christ Crowning King Roger II. 1143-1151. Mosaic.* <https://jstor.org/stable/community.14451816>.

³ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 26.

⁴ *Christ Crowning King Roger II.*

⁵ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 26.

Norman rule as divine authority. To hammer home this concept would help legitimise the rule of the Norman monarchy in Sicily.

Looking further into the context of the mosaic, it is essential to note that King Roger II was the first Norman King of Sicily. He earned his title in 1130 when the schismatic pope, Anacletus, gave it to him in exchange for his sworn fealty.⁶ He would continue to rule until he died in 1154, leaving a significant legacy.

Prior to the Norman conquest of Sicily, the region had been ruled by Romans, Byzantines, and Arabs. The Arab Sicilian rule lasted over two hundred years until the Normans arrived.⁷ This long rule resulted in a number of Muslim Arabs and Berbers living on the island, side by side with Christians and Jews, which led to much cultural exchange and adaptation.⁸

The Normans, led by Count Roger I, took over Sicily in 1091. Roger I's rule was a continuation of the ongoing adaptation of culture. His rule was also a prime example of the Normans incorporating the ideas and culture of those that they had conquered into their governance. One example was when the Count included Muslims in his army and permitted them to practice their religion without requiring conversion to Christianity.⁹ Another case was his employment of Byzantines in governance, valuing their administrative skills, and, in return, he funded the construction of monasteries for them.¹⁰

This attitude of adaptation over assimilation was appreciated as the standard by Roger I's son and heir, Roger II. Roger II's mother, Countess Adelaide, had been influenced by the Byzantine Greeks and imparted this influence to her son.¹¹ Roger II held respect for Byzantine

⁶ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24.

⁷ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 22.

⁸ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 22.

⁹ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24.

¹⁰ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24.

¹¹ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 24-5.

administration and culture, as seen in the way that he ruled, his choice of chief advisors, and the style of the mosaic pictured, reflecting Roger's political strategy.¹²

Roger II's path to royal authority raised doubts about the legitimacy of his monarchy. His right to rule was challenged by both Eastern and Western emperors, as well as the Pope, forcing him to take steps to strengthen the legitimacy of his reign.¹³ His admiration for Byzantine legitimisation strategies was evident. He attempted to diminish the power of the papacy during his reign by using Islamic and Byzantine methods of ruling; the eastern idea of an empire where the ruler was Christ's representative on earth was particularly helpful in this.¹⁴

Roger and his administration wanted to portray the image of the restoration of the monarchy instead of the creation of the monarchy. They claimed that kings had previously resided in Sicily.¹⁵ The thought was that a monarchy with deep enough roots was less likely to be questioned.

One theme expressed in this artwork was the concept of ruler legitimacy. As previously discussed, Roger II had to establish the legitimacy of his reign. The choices to put him in Byzantine clothing, to use the Byzantine style of mosaic art, and to include Christ with his hand on Roger's crown were all part of a strategy. Roger and his administration sought to show that he had ties to a previous Sicilian kingship. They adapted and adopted Byzantine culture by using mosaics to produce a desired narrative, a type of political and religious propaganda. Finally, they used the positioning of Christ to show Roger's divine right to rule.

Another theme that the mosaic displays is the divine right of kings. The divine right of kings is a political doctrine that asserts a ruler is chosen by God and has the divine authority to

¹² Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

¹³ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

¹⁴ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 26.

¹⁵ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 26.

govern.¹⁶ This theme could be further expanded to describe the religious nature of the Sicilian society during this period. For a concept such as the divine right of kings to work effectively, those that the monarch is ruling over must believe in the power of God. They must be a pious population. Therefore, those living in Sicily during the rule of King Roger II were a deeply religious group of people.

The final theme of the mosaic is cultural adaptation. The technique used in the mosaic was distinctly Byzantine. The depiction of Byzantine-style clothing in the image is also noteworthy. It could be concluded that Roger II wanted to align himself with the authority that other empires had. While Roger II was more immersed in Sicilian culture than his father, who was the only Norman King of Sicily to have actually stepped foot in Normandy, he was still regarded as a Norman.¹⁷ This mosaic exemplifies the extent to which the Normans incorporated elements of various cultures into their rule.

The mosaic from La Martorana offers insight into the techniques in which King Roger II of Sicily used art as a tool for strengthening his power and the legitimacy of his rule. Through the depiction of Roger in Byzantine imperial dress, one can see how Roger admired and respected the authority of the Byzantine Empire. This choice was made to exemplify his status as a ruler, chosen by divine methods. This artistic choice of a mosaic displays the broader political context of Roger's reign, during which he faced challenges to his legitimacy from both the papacy and other rulers. The mosaic also highlights the cultural adaptation that defined Roger II's rule and how he integrated Byzantine, Muslim, and Christian elements into his governance

¹⁶ "Divine Right of Kings," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified December 11, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/divine-right-of-kings>.

¹⁷ Britt, "Roger II of Sicily," 25.

and art. The mosaic is more than an artistic work; it is a piece of propaganda that reinforced King Roger II's position as a ruler.

Bibliography

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