

The history of Palermo

It was founded by the **Phoenicians** on the seashore almost 3000 years ago, and it seems that at that time its name was Ziz, "flower".

Certainly it was very beautiful, even if nothing is left of this city now, except for the trace of its first layout, followed for centuries: a long avenue leading from the sea to the low hill where - today as then - the palace of the government stands.

It was a base for the **Carthaginians**, then, after their defeat by the **Romans**, it was occupied by the latter. There are practically no vestiges of the Roman epoch either, though the city flourished under them. In fact it was in a rather marginal position with respect to the heart of the empire and it became even more so with respect to Constantinople, when Sicily became part of the possessions of the Eastern Roman Empire. In 831, after a siege lasting about a year, Palermo fell into the hands of the **Arabs**.

This was the start of a new life for the city, which in a few years turned into a splendid metropolis, compared for its splendour to Cordoba and the Cairo.

Palaces and mosques rose amid the splendid gardens of the "Western Medina" and the skyline was marked by numerous slender minarets.

The city, called **Balarn**, was the capital of the Sicilian emirate and is said to have had 300,000 inhabitants.

In 1061 the **Norman** army led by Count Roger and **Robert the Guiscard** set out to reconquer Sicily. Eleven years later they got to Palermo.

However, the coming of the new seigneurs did not lead to a decline of the Islamic city.

Though the Normans demolished the mosques, they used Arab architects in the construction of their sumptuous Palermo dwellings; and though they got a strong hold on the island, yet they left the administration of the kingdom in the hands of Islamic functionaries.

Under **Roger II**, Palermo - the capital of the new Norman kingdom lived a period of splendour. It was the centre of trade between east and west and from all over came noblemen, traders, adventurers attracted by the mirage of the rich city and the sumptuous court.

Palaces and churches in Arabic-Norman style were built. This greatness continued under **Frederick II of Hohenstaufen**, who made his court the greatest centre of cultural life in those days. Never again, in the centuries that followed, was such magnificence attained, even though, under the **Spanish** domination, the city was enriched with splendid Baroque monuments.

A brief return of the past splendour came at the start of the twentieth century, when Palermo had its "**belle époque**", thanks to the success of young families of entrepreneurs who brought a wind of modernity to the city, raising not only the economic level but also the cultural and artistic one.

Since **1946**, Palermo has been the chief city of an autonomous region. It is a modern and active city, with about 730,000 inhabitants, very rich in monuments from all epochs. A thorough visit to the city takes about six days.

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Artistic Vestiges

Norman Palace

On the little hill where the palace now stands, probably both the Phoenicians and the Romans built a fortified citadel dominating the whole area of the city. However, nothing remains of these earliest constructions. The Arabs, after building a castle there, abandoned it, because the emir preferred to move with all his functionaries and troops to the seaside in Al-Halisah district. The Normans restored the building and transformed it into a splendid palace. Its heart consisted in a very spacious royal room, also known as the green room, where the king held assemblies and the residential suites, the services and servants' quarters, were in different wings, connected by terraces, loggias and gardens rich in greenery and ponds, which already revealed the Arab-like taste of the sovereigns, who, here as elsewhere, referred themselves to Islamic architects.



From the stylistic point of view the palace is one of the high points of Fatimite palatial art in the west, because of both the architectural qualities and the abundant decorations, that the artists did in the various rooms.

After the death of Frederick II in 1250, began the decline of the palace, which went on for about three centuries, until the Spanish viceroys made it their residence.

However, though they saved the palace from complete abandon, they also modified it in accordance with their own taste. Hence few of the rooms have maintained their original Norman look. Nevertheless, among these there are two authentic jewels: Roger's Room and the Palace Chapel. Roger's Room was originally a bedroom. It is a belvedere room looking out over the Gulf of Palermo. The walls are elegantly decorated with mosaics showing hunting scenes enlivened by stylised plants and figures. This is a rare example of mosaic art from the period, with roots in the Persian east and North Africa.

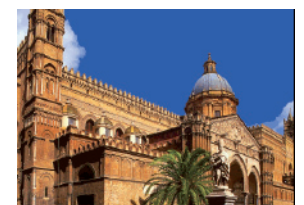
St. John of the Hermits - It was founded at the behest of Roger II in 1142, and in the most splendid years of the Norman domination the annexed monastery was the richest and most privileged in Sicily. The church, now no longer consecrated, is very small and, despite traces of tiles, mosaics and frescoes and the stalactite ceiling of the mosque on which it was built, it has no particular elements of interest to the laymen. What is fascinating, instead, is the exterior of the building. The five red cupolas are a characteristic element of various Arabic-Norman buildings. Then there is the garden: the construction is immersed in greenery and the colours of citrus fruit trees, agaves, bougainvilleas, roses, pomegranates and other flowering shrubs. The luxuriant plants climb up the walls, wind round the white columns of the little cloister, daze one with their scent. This is one of the most characteristic monuments of Norman Palermo, and is often chosen as a symbol of the city.



The Cathedral (Madonna Assunta) - It is in the oldest sacred part of Palermo, where the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Byzantines and the Arabs put up their own places of worship.

After getting to power, the Normans were at once concerned to replace the Muslim mosque with a Christian church.

Then in 1184 the archbishop of Palermo, Walter of the Mill, had the building demolished and started the construction of a splendid new cathedral, a symbol of religious power in the city.



After just a year the church was consecrated and dedicated to Maria Assunta. In the ensuing centuries additions and restoration modified the original look. The picturesquely incongruous union of styles gives life to a grandiose and on the whole not unpleasant overall effect. The façade, closed in between two high towers with mullioned windows and little columns, is linked by two ogival arches to the campanile at the front of it. In the façade there is a big fourteenth-century portal with bronze wings. A picturesque portico in fifteenth-century Gothic-Catalan style, under which there is an ornated portal of the same century, that decorates the long right side. Lastly, particularly beautiful and charming is the apse part, the only one which has maintained the original twelfth-century shapes. The interior, though big and bright, appears cold compared to the exterior. Along the walls there are Gagini statues of saints in marble. In the first and second chapels in the right nave there are royal and imperial tombs, including those of Roger II, Henry VI of Hohenstaufen, Constance de Hauteville and Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, all imposing porphyry sarcophagi: in the family tomb we thus find the founder of the Norman kingdom of Sicily, its destroyer, the involuntary cause of its end and its last beneficiary. Among the numerous chapels we must mention the one known as Santa Rosalia's, where, in a silver urn, done in 1631, the ashes of the patron saint of Palermo are kept. Lastly there is a very fine treasure, including precious objects and embroideries found in the royal and imperial tombs (particular mention must be made of the golden tiara of Constance de Hauteville), sacred vestments, chalices, censers, etc.

Quattro Canti (Four corners) - This is the better known name of the little Piazza Vigliena, which is the centre of the oldest part of the city. The project for the layout of the square was made in 1608 and works began in the same year. Once the architectural work was done, it was possible to move on to the decoration of the four walls on three levels: at the bottom, four fountains, surmounted by statues each representing one of the four seasons; above them the statues of the Spanish monarchs Charles V and Philip II, III and IV; at the top, the four saints protecting the city: St. Christine, St. Olive, Santa Ninfa and St. Agatha. The square was for a long time the centre of the city, a place for elegant promenades, exchanges of news and gossip, a market for servants seeking masters. It was also a symbol of the Spanish town planning reform, which sought to give magnificence to the two main streets in the city, Via Maqueda and the Cassaro, now Corso Vittorio Emanuele, by opening up a square at their intersection.



Praetorian Fountain - It was originally created for the Florence villa of Don Pedro of Toledo by the mannerist architect Francesco Camilliani. However, Don Pedro's son preferred to sell it to the Palermo council, and was paid an exorbitant sum for it. In 1574 it was brought to Palermo in 644 pieces and the sculptor's son, Camillo Camilliani, was called on to put it together again. The whole square, in which there are several elegant edifices, including Palazzo delle Aquile, the town hall, was laid out in a different way in relation to the fountain, which from then on became the boast and glory of the city. Circular in layout, the fountain is made up of superimposed tubs on which there are allegories, divinities, animals' heads, all enlivened by the pleasant playing of the water. The iron railings around it were designed by Giovan Battista Basile and put up in 1858.



Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio or Martorana Church

It was completed in 1143 thanks to a generous donation by Admiral George of Antiochia. An Arab traveller, Ibn Giobair, who visited it in 1184, defined it "the finest work in the world". Today, unfortunately, the church no longer has its original splendour, having undergone numerous modifications, which disfigured its original look.

Nevertheless it remains one of the finest religious edifices in Palermo and indeed in all Sicily. In 1436 it was ceded to the nuns at the nearby "Martorana" convent, from which it takes its second name, as the chapel of the convent. In 1588, in order to contain the ever-increasing number of nuns, the edifice was enlarged: knocking down the original façade (replaced by a Baroque one) lengthened it, and the atrium and narthex were incorporated in the new construction. In 1683 the apse was demolished and replaced by a big chapel with frescoes. Intact in its splendid proportions remained only the Romanesque campanile, raised over the entrance to the original church, though unfortunately deprived by the 1726 earthquake of the little cupola surmounting it. Entering the church you can still make out the original Greek cross layout which so struck Ibn Giobair.

The mosaics at the Martorana, like those at Cefalù and the finer ones at the Palace Chapel, were done by a group of artists who were brought on purpose from Constantinople to Palermo and worked here between 1140 and 1155. However, unlike those at Cefalù and the Palace Chapel, no later additions have been made to them. At the entrance, on the northern side of the nave, there is a dedicatory mosaic in which George of Antiochia is portrayed at the feet of the virgin Mary - the latter has come down to us in a perfect state of conservation. On the other side we find what is perhaps the most precious treasure of the Martorana: a mosaic of Roger II symbolically crowned by Christ.



Massimo Theatre

It is one of the biggest and most magnificent theatres in Europe, designed by G.B. Basile, under whose direction the project began (1875), it was completed by his son Ernesto (1897). It stands in Piazza G. Verdi, a square made by demolishing a lot of Baroque buildings, some of great value. The theatre, with noble architecture inspired by neo-classicism, occupies a surface area of 7730 square metres and fully satisfied the desire for decorum and balance of the bourgeoisie in the last century.

