The Glories of Norman Sicily

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The Norman Palace in Palermo, Sicily.

As Rosicrucians, we are taught to be tolerant of others' views and beliefs. We have brothers and sisters of like mind throughout the world, of every race and religion. The history of humankind has often demonstrated the worst human aspects, but from time to time, in what seemed like a sea of barbarism, there appeared periods of calm and civilisation. The era we call the Dark Ages in Europe, was not quite as "dark" as may be imagined. There were some parts of the Western world where the light shone like a beacon. This is the story of one of them.

It all started in the year 1016, when a group of Norman pilgrims visited the shrine of St. Michael on the Monte Gargano in southern Italy. After the "pilgrims" had surveyed the fertile lands of Apulia lying spread out before them, promising boundless opportunities for making their fortunes, they decided that they would start a crusade to "rescue" southern Italy from the Byzantine Empire and the Greek Orthodox Church, and restore it to the Church of Rome. As they were few in number, they decided to return to Normandy, recruit more followers, and return the following year. Thus the Normans started to arrive in the region, which was to become the hunting ground for Norman knights and others anxious for land and booty. At first they arrived as individuals and in small groups, but soon they came flooding in as mercenaries, to indulge in warfare and brigandage. Their Viking ways had clearly not been entirely forgotten.

Robert Guiscard and Roger de Hauteville

One of them, Robert Guiscard, having established his ascendancy over the south of Italy, acquired from the papacy, the title of Duke of Naples, Apulia,

Calabria, and Sicily. The Papacy, caught between the Lombards and the German Holy Roman Empire to the north and the Byzantine Empire to the south, came to regard the Normans as guarantors of its independence.

Robert Guiscard *by Merry-Joseph Blondel.*

Robert Guiscard, though primarily a Norman knight, was a shrewd politician and used his natural astuteness to achieve a concordat with Pope Nicholas II, whereby, in return for receiving the title of Duke of Apulia, he agreed to chase the Saracen Arabs from Sicily and restore Christianity to the island. For this purpose he summoned his half-brother Roger de Hauteville to join him from Normandy. Contemporary records describe the youth as being handsome, tall, and well proportioned, as well as being strong and courageous in battle, yet always remaining friendly and cheerful.

Roger arrived in Italy in 1056, a mere 10 years before another buccaneering Norman, William of Normandy, invaded England. During his early years, Roger helped Robert Guiscard to establish his rule over southern Italy, fighting not only against the Byzantine forces, but also against dissident Norman and Lombard barons.

Together they started the conquest of Sicily, but, after Robert had helped Roger to conquer Palermo, the Arab capital of Sicily, and Roger, in turn, had helped Robert to storm Bari, the Byzantine provincial capital on the Adriatic Sea, Robert remained on the mainland. This left Roger a free hand in Sicily. Roger recognised Robert as his overlord, and in return he was granted the title of Count of Sicily and Calabria.

Prior to the Norman entrada into Sicily, the Arabs had occupied the island for two and a half centuries. It was divided into three mutually antagonistic emirates. Although the majority of the population was Greek, having been a part of the Byzantine Empire for centuries, the laws and administration were Islamic. Roger appreciated that occupying Sicily would be a challenge, as well as a chance to escape from Robert's shadow. Whenever possible, he and his knights avoided military confrontation, unless they were sure of winning the battle. When they did engage in operations, their discipline and military tactics gave them the victory. Yet it was impossible to administer a country with so few Normans. The terms under which Roger accepted the surrender of Palermo laid down the principles he was to adopt in pacifying the rest of the island.

There would be no reprisals, and he would stop looting immediately. All Arab lives and property would be respected. He sought their friendship and would ask only for their allegiance and an annual tribute. In return, he undertook not to interfere with the practice of the Muslim faith or the application of Islamic law. These terms applied to the conquest of the rest of the island, though that took him nearly

30 years to complete. The Arabs lost their independence, but for them it was the beginning of an unprecedented order such as they had never known before, under a strong central government, which enabled them to develop their artistic and intellectual talents.

Roger realised that the Muslims needed to be persuaded to voluntarily accept his regime, and to do so he had to treat them with tolerance and understanding, thereby creating an atmosphere of internal harmony and mutual respect. For this purpose he accepted the Arab bureaucracy which existed on the island, consisting of a mixture of Arabs and Greeks. He also adopted many of their titles; the Christian governor of Palermo for instance, being addressed as "Emir", while his principal minister, George of Antioch, a Greek, who was also the Admiral of his Navy, manned by Greek crews, held the title of "Emir of Emirs." Roger also established a crack force of Arab troops with Arab officers. By maintaining their traditional fighting methods, the corps provided an outlet for the military instincts of the Muslims, while giving them pride and participation in the new Sicilian state.

Some mosques, which had originally been Christian, were reconverted, but others remained untouched. Islamic law was administered by Emirs in local courts. Arabic became an official language, along with Latin, Greek, and Norman French. Where Greek Christians were resentful of these changes, he allowed them to keep their local titles and also provided material aid for the reconstruction of their churches. While encouraging the establishment of Latin cathedrals and abbeys, he himself helped to found Basilian monasteries and churches, using imported Byzantine craftsmen. Arab scientific and artistic endeavours were encouraged, and many who had fled to North Africa or Spain returned to the island. Thus he laid the foundations of a multiracial polyglot state, in which Norman, Greek, and Arab, under a firmly centralised administration, followed their own cultural and religious traditions in freedom and concord.

The result was that, when the "Great Count" died in 1101, he had transformed Sicily into a nation, heterogeneous in religion and language, but united in loyalty to its Christian ruler. Sicily was well on the way to becoming the most brilliant and prosperous state in the Mediterranean, if not in the whole of Europe.

Floreat Sicilia

His son Roger II (ruled 1101-1154) was nine years old when he succeeded as Count. His mother, a northern Italian from Liguria, acted as Regent for him. During his long minority he was educated by Greek and Arab tutors, who helped him to develop the exotic side of his nature. With dark eyes, hair and complexion, his appearance was that of a southerner. He had grown up in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect, so he was able to understand the complex system of checks and balances on which the internal stability of his country depended. Unlike his forefathers, he disliked war and preferred to use diplomacy, possibly accompanied by financial inducements. By these means, he was able to acquire the duchies of Apulia and Calabria, and so unite the south of Italy into a single dominion.

During a crisis in the Papal tenure, when two Popes were elected at the same time, he first acquired the triple Dukedom and then in 1128 was named King of Italy south of the Garigliano. By 1140, he was able to depute two of his sons, Roger of Apulia and Alfonso of Capua, to administer his mainland territories, while he remained at Palermo. King Roger II was able to establish a corpus of laws, many of them borrowed from the codification of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the

The interior of the Monreale Cathedral in Palermo, Sicily.

sixth century. While making it clear that the existing laws of his subject peoples should continue in force, except where there was a direct clash with royal ordinances, all Greeks, Arabs, Jews, Lombards, and Normans under his rule were to continue to live according to the customs of their forebears.

Roger adopted an almost mystical view of the divinely-held power of the king. The law was the will of the Divine, and the king was its ultimate interpreter. The feudal system which prevailed on his mainland dominions belonged to Western Europe; the civil service in the Sicilian provinces was based on Arabic institutions, but the monarchy followed Byzantine traditions, many of which went back to ancient Persian times, and can still be found in British royal ceremonial. The king also established a coinage for the whole kingdom. A small coin, worth a third of a ducat, minted in Palermo had, on the obverse a Latin inscription surrounding a Greek cross, and on the reverse, in Arabic, the date when it was struck in Palermo, using the Islamic calculations from the Hegira (departure of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca).

Although Palermo was an Arab city, the Greeks played a part in building the new nation, respecting the balance between Muslims and Normans. In the early days, before the arrival of Latin religious and civil immigrants, they prevented the Latins from being swamped. By neatly counterbalancing the claims of the Latin Church, they gave Roger a powerful bargaining counter in his dealings with Rome.

Sicilian-Norman Art

During the twelfth century there was a flowering of Sicilian-Norman art, as illustrated in their sacred buildings, which were a fusion of Byzantine, Arab, and Norman design and construction. They were actively encouraged by the clergy who, along with the Norman barons, were responsible for commissioning them. Their architecture combined various elements, Muslim, Romanesque; Byzantine, and Gothic, producing monuments of composite style, harmony, and dignity.

Their secular buildings also reflected Muslim models, whose levels of refinement were unknown in northern Europe. Their architectural remains can be seen and admired in the Cathedral of Cefalu, with its colossal mosaic figure of Christ Pantocrator (Ruler of All) holding an open book with words from the Gospel of John in Latin and Greek: "I am the

Light of the World, he who follows me will not walk in darkness."

At Monreale, the cathedral was one of the architectural wonders of the Middle Ages, with its aura of majesty and splendour. In the Cappella Palatina, or Palatine chapel, attached to the royal palace, the light changes constantly, highlighting the mosaics representing the Holy Spirit and the theology of light. The Martorana, also in Palermo, founded by George of Antioch, had quotations from Byzantine hymns written in Arab calligraphy around its walls. These illustrated, in their different ways, the fusion of Norman, Byzantine, and Islamic art.

A statue at the Norman Palace in Palermo, Sicily.

They are exemplified by the solidity of Norman architecture, the beauty and elegance of Greek mosaics, and the slender arches supported on twin columns, as well as the honeycombed ceilings, of a style that was purely Islamic. Moreover, in the tolerant atmosphere of Palermo, there were visible advances in style. The static figures of Byzantine iconography gave way to swirling draperies, with rhythm and movement in the drawing. Islamic artists moved away from their abhorrence of the human form to experiment with painting figures in mythical scenes.

The king himself was famous for his insatiable intellectual curiosity, as well as a profound respect for learning. He gave a permanent home in Palermo to many of the foremost scholars, scientists, doctors, philosophers, and mathematicians of the Western and Arab worlds. Roger himself was very knowledgeable in mathematics, also studied by Arab scholars, in addition to medicine and astronomy. At his court, Arabic became an intellectual scientific language in its own right. He would spend much of his time in the company of these savants. Such poets as flourished in Palermo were nearly all Arab, but the King's preference was for science. He encouraged his geographer al-Edrisi to collect information from ships arriving in his ports, about the places, climates, conditions and peoples of the areas they had visited.

From the hard geographical facts elicited, Roger was aware that the Earth was round, with water adhering to it as seas and oceans. There were also flourishing developments in the matter of classical literature. The Norman churchmen stimulated a return to the study of Latin writings, while ancient Greek documents (many originals having been destroyed by barbarian invasions), were released from Byzantine sources, and texts which had hitherto only been known from Arab translations, were now seen in their original form.

Through Roger's enthusiasm, Sicily became the clearinghouse where, for the first time, Western and Asian scholars met on an equal footing. Under his inspiration, studies were made in philosophy, mathematics, applied chemistry, medicine, and astronomy, by scholars who brought learning from around the Mediterranean

Cefalù Cathedral.

Sea. At that time, Roger II was probably the wealthiest ruler in Europe, and his court in Palermo the most brilliant.

Many future developments during the 12th Century can be attributed to the influences of the court of Roger II. There was a transformation of philosophical methods. Legal studies entered a new phase. New styles of architecture were instituted, while poets composed their verses in the secular language. By reviving an interest in the writers of Roman antiquity, scholars learned to express themselves in a graceful and efficient form of Latin, in addition to studying ancient Greek traditions. In the Muslim world moreover, there was an expansion of knowledge in mathematics, science, and astronomy.

The End of an Era

The centralised constitution which both Rogers established in Sicily needed a strong efficient monarch at its center. Roger's son and grandson, William I and II, lacked that capacity and, in their reigns, the pattern of government began to unravel at the seams.

With the arrival of German influence in 1194, in the person of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI Hohenstaufen, the son of Barbarossa, it caused the triumphs of Norman Sicily, except for their architectural achievements, to wither, fade, and die, till today, they are but a memory.