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RESEARCH

The Norman Sicily Project: A Digital Portal to Sicily's Norman Past

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The cultural heritage of medieval Sicily faces enormous challenges. Rich and diverse as it is, it is beset by numerous problems that have rendered it fragile and often inaccessible. The situation is such that many sites are unsigned. Others are very difficult to get to. And even others – ones that are more easily located – have erratic hours, essentially locking out the average visitor to Sicily unless s/he is willing to invest the time and have the language skills necessary to persuade residents in the surrounding area to get the access keys.

Given these challenges, we are developing *The Norman Sicily Project* to document the cultural heritage of medieval Sicily during its Norman period (in other words, c. 1061–1194) so that a wide audience can learn about what was once there and what still remains. The site attempts to reconstruct what we know about the society by bringing together images, basic identifying information, geolocation data and, in some cases, videos, using modern web development techniques. It also offers genealogical information and visualization tools that can help visitors understand the data in new ways as well as sustainability data related to the monuments' physical states. The intention is that the project will offer scholars, students and the general public who are interested in Norman Sicily the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with each other while suggesting a web-based model for other medieval communities.

Keywords: Norman Sicily; Digital Accessibility; Geolocation; Cultural Stone Stability; Arab-Norman Architecture; Open Linked Data

1. Introduction and rationale

§1 An interactive website that features monuments constructed on the island in the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, *The Norman Sicily Project* is an effort to offset the many challenges that face the cultural heritage of medieval Sicily

while, over time, offering new resources and means to interpret the surviving data for students and specialists. Rich and diverse as it is, Sicily's patrimony is beset by numerous problems that have rendered it fragile and often inaccessible, despite that in July 2015 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized the unique blending of Byzantine, Islamic and Western European elements on the island by inscribing nine sites¹ – collectively known as Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale – in its World Heritage List on account of their “outstanding universal value” (UNESCO 2015). Although there are six other UNESCO sites in Sicily (the Aeolian Islands, the Archaeological Area of Agrigento, the Villa Romana del Casale in Piazza Armerina, the late Baroque towns of the Val di Noto, Syracuse and the Rocky Necropolis of Pantalica, and the natural site of Mount Etna), the itinerary approved four years ago is the first to feature the island's medieval monuments. As identified cultural treasures, these sites are now guided by a management plan that helps to protect them from the negative consequences of human action and to minimize the effects of natural disasters. But so many of Sicily's medieval sites – indeed, the vast majority – are not so fortunate. The reasons for the challenges are varied but certainly include regional poverty and mismanagement of external funding. For example, Pinotti's research (2015) suggests that the presence of mafia in an economy alone lowers GDP per capita by some 16%. This project calls attention to these cultural treasures and makes them accessible to a wider public. In so doing, it hopes to make it possible for medievalists to more easily incorporate these monuments, and the historical period during which they were constructed, into their teaching and research.

§2 One of the numerous challenges against Sicily's Norman past is that the surviving monuments are often difficult to access and some are poorly signed. For example, the magnificent Benedictine abbey of Santa Maria della Scala or della Valle (colloquially referred to as “La Badiazza”), that appears in **Figure 1** built by Count

¹ The Bridge of the Admiral, the Cathedral of Cefalù, the Cathedral of Monreale, the Cathedral of Palermo, the Church of San Cataldo, the Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio [frequently simply referred to as “La Martorana”], the Monastery of San Giovanni degli Eremiti [St. John of the Hermits], the Royal Palace and its Palatine Chapel, and the Zisa Palace.

Roger I and his wife, Adelasia, to which we traveled in August 2015, was frustratingly elusive – a casualty of both difficult access and poor maintenance by the authorities. The one small rusted sign pointing visitors toward an unpaved road, which we passed three times, hangs upside down, wedged among a number of others.² Visits can also be complicated by topography and geographical remoteness. A journey to the Norman remains at Geraci Siculo featured in **Figure 2**, which stands approximately 3,600 feet above sea level, during that same month required a 45-minute drive along a windy road followed by an uphill climb without the benefit of handrails. In addition, the demands of modern life can jeopardize the future of already fragile structures. Such was the case of the chapel of the palace complex known as Uscibene (or Lo Scibene), which appears in **Figure 3**; the building was so dilapidated that Sicily's authorities seized possession of it in early 2014. The structure was then slated for demolition



Figure 1: The Benedictine Abbey of Santa Maria della Scala (La Badiazza), Messina.

² We are certainly not the first to worry about the condition of many of these monuments. White (1938, 157) commented on the “lamentable state” of this monastery, calling upon the Soprintendenza dei Monumenti, “which has restored so admirably many of the ancient treasures of the island,” to give it the attention of which it was in need. Clearly, restoration work has been done since that time. However, the building—with its broken windows revealing signs of new wear—was not open. No visiting hours were posted and there was no one in the vicinity with whom we could begin a conversation for the keys.



Figure 2: The Castle Chapel and a Section of Wall at Geraci Siculo.



Figure 3: The Chapel of Uscibene, Palermo Before Recent Restoration Work.

in favor of Palermo's tram project (Comune di Palermo 2014).³ More recently, the Regione Siciliana has made available 100,000 Euros to restore the chapel; however, we are unsure of the extent to which it has been repaired and to which it is now accessible (Fiorenza 2016).

³ The building cannot be dated with certainty, but the style suggests a Norman foundation. In July 2014, after managing to make our way into the gated residential area in which Uscibene now sits, we met an elderly man who was cited for having failed to maintain a work of historical and artistic importance (Comune di Palermo 2014). He told us that he simply did not have the money necessary for the structure's upkeep and that he was shocked to learn that the city was holding him accountable.

§3 Other structures have been absorbed into newer ones, such as the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena in Palermo, shown in **Figure 4**. Built by Roger II, at one time it was the location of the burials of his immediate family members (Deér 1959, 3). The church is now in a barracks of the *carabinieri* and serves as its chapel; its location in a semi-militarized zone means it is inaccessible to most except on very



Figure 4: The Church of St. Mary Magdalene, Palermo.

rare occasions. Similarly, the Church of the Holy Spirit (also known as the Church of the Vespers) is located inside the Cemetery of St. Ursula, one of Palermo's functioning graveyards. Masses are said there for the dead before they are interred. That the Holy Spirit remains a living church makes access more difficult for scholars and other interested visitors. That the public is asked, quite understandably, not to take photos when inside the cemetery out of respect for the deceased and their families adds to the challenge. Yet other surviving sites betray the effects of natural disasters, such as Caltabellotta's stunning cathedral that appears in **Figure 5**, built by Roger I in the 11th century and damaged by an earthquake in 1968. With all this said, it should be noted that although *The Norman Sicily Project* has been developed to address the real and pressing issues of accessibility, a great deal of credit must be given to the Sicilian people – both lay people as well as cultural authorities – who have been enormously supportive and have gone to great lengths to open doors for us, quite literally. We are enormously grateful to the many Sicilians who have assisted us and we hope that this project will serve as a small reward for their kindness.

§4 We should also make explicit that *The Norman Sicily Project* is not a conservation effort but rather one that, at least for now, focuses on digitally documenting the monuments from Sicily's Norman past while, when possible, making



Figure 5: Cathedral Church of Santa Maria, Caltabellotta, in its Context.

attempts to assess their present states and their future sustainability.⁴ To evaluate sites' structural and surrounding environment data, our colleague, Greg Pope of Montclair State University's Department of Earth and Environmental Studies, has applied field-based Cultural Stone Stability Index (CSSI) scoring (Allen et al. 2018) to a select number of the monuments.⁵ In addition, to test building stone condition and integrity with minimal impact, at some locations he has used a type N Schmidt Hammer – a small rebound instrument that emits a discreet and non-destructive strike to a rock (2.207 Nm impact energy) – to measure hardness of select stones in order to estimate the extent of their deterioration (Dorn et al. 2008).

§5 To further develop the level of expertise that guides the project, the team has recently created an Advisory Board, which includes two additional historians of Norman Sicily (Sarah Davis-Secord, University of New Mexico and Alex Metcalfe, Lancaster University) as well as two art historians (Lisa Reilly, University of Virginia and William Tronzo, University of California, San Diego), who work on the period's monuments. The Board also adds two additional experts in earth science (Thomas Paradise, University of Arkansas and Alice Turkington, University of Kentucky) as well as in digital humanities computing (Matthew Gold, CUNY Graduate Center and Sebastian Heath, ISAW, New York University). We are eager to enhance the scientific profile of the project – particularly its archaeological aspects – with closer attention paid to questions regarding issues such as constructive phases and physical manifestations of monastic houses as they relate to gender and order. For example,

⁴ As of August 2019, we have been able to conduct sustainability-related field surveys of nine monuments. Six were performed in July 2017 on the following: the monasteries of St. George (Gratteri) and Sts. Peter and Paul d'Agrò (Casalvecchio Siculo), the castles in Monreale (the Castellaccio) and Sperlinga, as well as the *chiesa madre* of Caltabellotta (formerly dedicated to St. George) and the church of the Cuba of Santa Domenica (Castiglione). To these we added in July 2019 sections of San Filippo d'Agira (Agira) and the cloister of San Bartolomeo (Lipari) as well as the suspected former locations of Santa Venera di Vanella (Castroreale) and Santa Maria di Roccadia (located in Carlentini, though it is unclear whether any sections from these latter two sites date from the medieval period). During this same month, we also performed an assessment of the pre-Norman rupestrian Chiesa Bizantina di San Pietro, Buscemi, which is carved into the side of a mountain and very difficult to reach.

⁵ The CSSI is a field-based scoring assessment derived from the successful Rock Art Stability Index (RASI). See Cervený et al. 2016. More information about both the RASI and the CSSI is available at the Stone Heritage Research Alliance's (2019) website.

we hope to obtain funding to work with an archaeologist in the future, to whom we will make available our photographs, field notes and observation scores, resistance instrument data and facade sketches from past field visits. In the meantime, we look forward to the results of *Sicily in Transition: Exploring the Archaeology of Regime Change* (Carver et al. 2019), a project supported by a team of scholars at the Universities of York, Rome Tor Vergata and Salento, which will speak broadly to demographic, agricultural and commercial change on the island before, during and after the Norman period.

§6 The fragility of Sicily's Norman past is unfortunate, especially since the decades between 1060 and 1200 were defining ones in the island's history, a time when Sicily was pulled into the western European orbit in which it remains today. Indeed, although the Normans, too, were invaders, their position in Sicily's historiography is complicated as numerous writers in later centuries considered them – perhaps somewhat paradoxically – to be liberators. In addition, this is an exciting period in the island's history, one when it did not suffer from the poverty and economic stagnation with which it has become associated. As UNESCO notes on the Arab-Norman itinerary's website, these years witnessed the “...socio-cultural syncretism between Western, Islamic, and Byzantine cultures [that] gave rise to an architectural and artistic expression based on novel concepts of space, structure, and decoration that spread widely throughout the Mediterranean region” (UNESCO 2015). Indeed, in a polyglot society, art can be an extraordinarily important form of communication (Tronzo 1997, 108–109). It can overcome language barriers and convey powerful messages about authority and identity that would otherwise be impossible. The Norman rulers of Sicily's diverse population were clearly aware of this.

§7 There is a relative dearth of Anglophone studies of Sicily's medieval history. Although this may not be consequential for researchers, it can be problematic when attempting to teach students with English-language texts. Writing in 1992, English historian Donald Matthew noted in his *Norman Kingdom of Sicily* that many of his fellow academics were unhappy with the limited number of sources they could recommend to students who could not read foreign languages (Matthew 1992, 1). Ten years later, it was still challenging to assemble a current English-language

bibliography for undergraduates. Thankfully, however, the situation has improved (Davis-Secord 2010). With that said, *The Norman Sicily Project* has the potential to make an important contribution to undergraduate research conducted in history departments in English-speaking countries. It also can benefit popular audiences, such as tourists and the island's local communities. It is for this reason that the project team is eager to secure funding to develop an Italian-language version of the site.

§8 As for scholarly Internet resources about Norman Sicily, they are few. Occasionally, it is possible to locate a website that has information about sites of historical interest, but these electronic resources (such as Etnanatura 2019) are often created with today's nature enthusiasts in mind. There is also the genealogical site *Medieval Lands* (Foundation for Medieval Genealogy 2019), which provides important information for medieval rulers, including those who governed Norman Sicily, along with references to primary and secondary sources. In addition, there is an Italian-language image-based site, *Medioevo Sicilia* (Tropea 2019), that offers historical background and bibliographic information on various monuments that span the medieval period. It is not an effort, though, to register the island's Norman past. *The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database* (Bruzelius et al. 2019) provides access to images that speak to Norman Sicily as well. Yet, it differs from this project in chronological and geographical scopes as well as in its focus on existing image collections. The sites are also distinguished by their technological approaches. *The Norman Sicily Project* has a commitment to linked open data and offers access to all of its information in machine-friendly formats. Its metadata conform to an accessible and publicly referenceable vocabulary. In addition, its attempt at providing sustainability data for some of the monuments as well as its recording of information shared with its team members by local residents during field visits also set these projects apart.

2. The site's features, contents, and future directions

§9 It is for these reasons that we are developing *The Norman Sicily Project*, whose splash page appears as **Figure 6**, which documents the cultural heritage of Sicily between the years c. 1061 and 1194 by bringing together into a single website

basic identifying information, geolocation data, images, videos, and, in some cases, relevant knowledge shared by local stakeholders using modern web development techniques. A navigation bar at the top of each page offers links to “People,” “Places,” “Chattels,” “Essays,” “Analytics,” “Resources,” and information about the site. “People” directs visitors to a force-directed graph that renders a genealogy we have developed for the rulers of Norman Sicily and their wider world, as demonstrated in **Figure 7**.

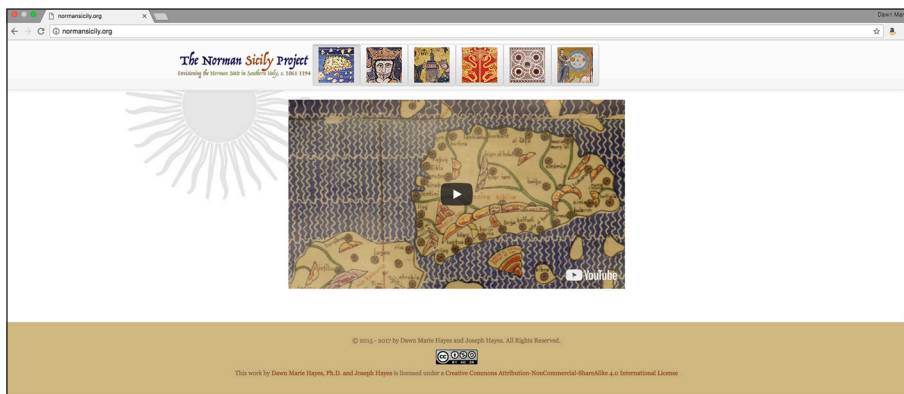


Figure 6: The Norman Sicily Project's Splash Page.

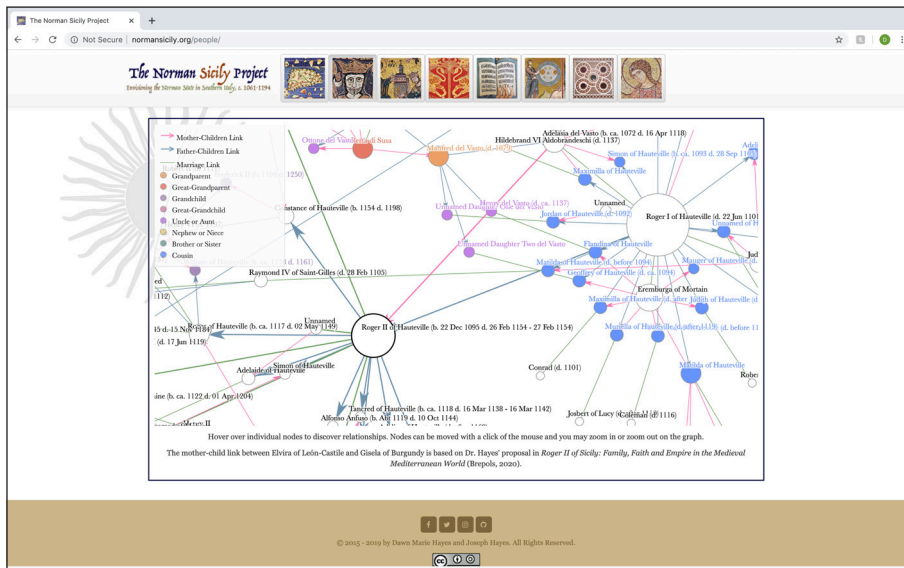


Figure 7: A View of the Interactive Force-Directed Graph of the Hautevilles and their Family Networks.

The over 900 individual records we have compiled thus far (whose appearance will likely be modified for visual clarity as we turn our attention to development and redesign of the site beginning in the fall of 2019) provide a visual sense of the intricate relationships between the Normans in southern Italy and the people (and, by extension, the families) with whom they established marriage alliances. We have created an interactive view into the family tree, which enables visitors to determine precise relationships within the extended family. How best to associate the genealogical information with the other data in the site – beyond linking place names to corresponding site records – is currently under consideration. This is an especially important question as its answer will help determine the degree to which the human and physical data interact with and help explicate each other.

§10 “Places” leads to a portal of structures associated with the Normans in Sicily. It now focuses on monasteries but, as the project develops, it will include other types of sites such as fortifications, churches, palaces, bridges, gates, and baths. Lynn Townsend White’s (1938) *Latin Monasticism in Norman Sicily*, an enduring authority on medieval monastic foundations on the island, has provided the majority of the monastic sites. However, we have also consulted additional sources on Basilian monasticism, such as Mario Scaduto’s *Il monachesimo basiliano nella Sicilia medievale* (1947). The monastic inventory currently includes 176 sites and notations have been made when the secondary sources we have consulted provide contradictory information. The 153 fortifications that will soon appear include those in *Castelli medievali in Sicilia: dai bizantini ai normanni* (Maurici 1992), *Medieval Castles in Sicily: A Guide to Castle Itineraries on the Island* (Sicilian Region 2001), as well as a handful of others we have added if either documentary or architectural evidence suggests that the fortification existed during the Norman period. In other words, the vast majority of these locations have been added from published sources though very occasionally we have learned about monuments that may be of interest through on-site exploration and conversations with locals. For example, during a visit to Santa Maria di Licodia in July 2016, residents maintained that the Benedictine monks had a summer abbey not too far away from the main monastery, a structure that had been restored and is now a reception hall. We have made an entry for this location with

a caveat. This approach enables knowledgeable locals to contribute to the project while record notes will caution the user, where appropriate, when the information is uncorroborated by a scholarly source. We are employing a number of strategies to develop a largely ad hoc database of churches; these include mining antiquarian works such as *Sicilia sacra* (Pirri 1733/1987), some modern works such as *Monumenti della Sicilia normanna* (Di Stefano 1979) as well as recent publications including the Touring Club Italiano's red guide on Sicily (Touring Club Italiano 2009).

Over time, as the site continues to develop, the "Chattels" link will take visitors to information and images about the period's moveable objects and "Analytics" will include charts and graphs that will demonstrate statistically significant relationships and a map that displays the monuments' location against the seismic threat level reported by the Italian government's Dipartimento della Protezione Civile. "Resources" now includes downloadable datasets in multiple machine-readable formats so that users can conduct their own analyses as well as the vocabularies of metadata. It will also soon include a form through which visitors can submit feedback as well as additional information about existing sites that the project's team will either corroborate in advance of inclusion or place in the separate section of each record that is set aside for unverified information.

§11 Taking guidance from the U.S. National Park Service's *Guide for Local Surveys*, each site's examination includes elements of the Service's reconnaissance and intensive surveys we have designed for this project, recorded on site via a Google Form, or on a hard copy [an example of a completed form may be found in Appendix A]. These site visits supplement with descriptions of geographical contexts, GPS coordinates, elevations, images, and notes information that is available in published sources. The records will include the dates when they were first created and last updated. In addition, each record will include a field that indicates its state of completion. Possible values are "Draft" and "Reviewed"; the former signifying that although the record has been created, the field values have not yet been reviewed and the latter confirming that all fields have been checked for accuracy. Our intention is, over time, to photograph all sites that have suspected Norman remains. In addition, as noted above, as of the summer of 2017, our effort to document Sicily's Norman

past has begun to benefit from a pilot sustainability study of six buildings – two monasteries, two castles and two churches – distributed across the island, examining stones that have endured centuries of weathering as well as of natural disasters. We plan for this collaboration to continue, enabling us to assess many other Norman monuments in Sicily in order to get a better sense of the threats to their physical integrity. The findings of this collaboration between history and earth science – as well as of additional research conducted in July 2019 – have significant potential as they offer modern appraisals of medieval sites. The data, too, are beginning to be included in *The Norman Sicily Project*.

§12 As **Figure 8** indicates, each site has its own unique record, which can be accessed a number of ways, though the main approach to the information is offered via the site's map-based interface. **Figure 9** reveals the tool tip that appears when hovering over a name. Individual records for monastic sites, an example of which can be seen in **Figure 10**, offer available information on gender, status, subject of dedication, monastic order, founder(s), and whether there are any visible traces. Each classification of a site is contained within its own layer on the map and, as the project develops, it will be possible to superimpose multiple layers on the map at the same



Figure 8: Detail of a Map with Markers and Search Box.



Figure 9: Detail of a Map Displaying Site Tool Tip.

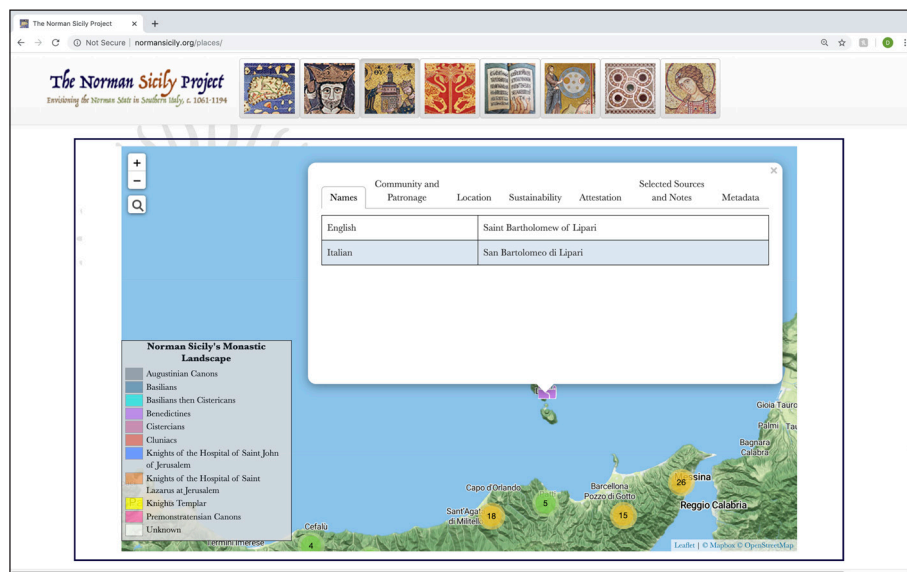


Figure 10: Detail of a Monastic Record.

time. Videos and images are provided for each type of site whenever possible, all of which will be made available freely during the 2019–2020 academic year through a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (Creative Commons [2019]).

§13 To help visitors interpret the data, we have been developing visualization tools which will facilitate understanding of the relationships between numerous variables, such as gender, status, monastic order, earliest surviving record, reign, geographical location (including density), subject of dedication and relative elevations. The strength of these relationships will also be explicated through tests that will probe statistical significance. The intention is that the visualizations will help users to better comprehend the complex cultural landscape of Norman Sicily. They may be applied to many different types of sites, including fortifications and churches. A choropleth map using location quotients calculated for monasteries according to monastic order is already available (Joseph Hayes 2017). We are fully aware that this data can be problematic; we are not so interested in the numbers themselves but in the general patterns and trends they suggest. To this end, the data have been made available in multiple machine-readable formats so that users can conduct their own analyses.

§14 There are a number of features and resources that are in the planning phase. An Italian-language version of the site is one. Another is an extended bibliography that is searchable by title and keywords, a collection of sources that may be enhanced with web scraping technologies. Yet another is a relative chronology of developments in Europe and the Mediterranean littoral, enabling the viewer to consider events that occurred in Norman Sicily against their wider historical backdrop.

§15 As noted above, *The Norman Sicily Project* wants to help extend the web of data. Users can download the latest versions of the datasets in various machine ingestible formats including CSV, GeoJSON, JSON-LD, RDF/XML, N-Triples or Turtle from the site's "Resources" page (see Hayes & Hayes 2019a) while previous versions are available as well (Hayes & Hayes 2019b). We have also contributed to Perio.do and have combined elements from existing vocabularies into a custom vocabulary for the project and published it in a freely available and publicly referenceable format that is also on the site's "Resources" page (Hayes & Hayes 2019a). As the site progresses, we will work to identify and build upon existing vocabularies for medieval places. We have linked each site to matches in *GeoNames*. As for the selection of services to facilitate the development of the site, preference will be given to open-source ones. If open-source services are not available, priority will be given to providers that make respect for intellectual property rights explicit.

§16 By embracing open data standards, *The Norman Sicily Project* positions itself as a foundational project that facilitates one of the most exciting possibilities that extends from the application of digital technologies to historical data: meaningful comparison and analysis across regions and periods using information from numerous projects. By freely providing its data in multiple accessible formats and accompanied by a vocabulary that clearly describes what they contain, *The Norman Sicily Project* permits scholars to join its data to their own datasets and perform analyses with greater ease.

§17 We are very interested in collaborating with other scholars, including those living and working in Sicily. In July 2017, we met with officials from the Palermo office of the Dipartimento dei Beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, making them aware of the project and asking if they would be interested in participating. This visit also provided an opportunity to discuss permission to take and use images of the buildings of which they are custodians, which has been graciously granted. During the summer of 2019, we had the opportunity to visit additional Norman sites across the island as well as to meet with local historians in the provinces of Syracuse and Messina.

3. Sustainability

§18 A question that confronts all digital projects is how best to preserve access and maintain data. *The Norman Sicily Project* serves as a portal to resources such as datasets, vocabularies, images, and videos that will be made available and maintained in a number of ways. The source code, datasets, vocabularies and metadata are published under a permissive MIT license on *GitHub* (GitHub 2019), a publicly accessible source code repository. Images (in high resolution JPEGs for storage and lower resolution JPEGs for dissemination on the web) and videos (in MP4 formats) will be deposited and maintained in Amazon Simple Storage Service (commonly referred to as Amazon S3) (Amazon Simple Storage Service 2019).

4. Case study one: The potential for comparative thought and collaboration: The monastic landscape of Norman Sicily

§19 Quantifying evidence and using technology to render it visually can open up new ways of understanding a community's landscape. Take, for example, the stacked bar graph in **Figure 11** that represents the breakdown of Norman Sicily's monastic

houses divided by gender and by order (NB: the thin sections in the bars representing orders with small numbers of houses will be easily identified in the site by pop-up text that appears when rolling over them)⁶. With occasional exceptions, we have a good sense of the religious houses' orders and of the genders of the people who inhabited them. Female communities on the island were divided practically evenly between Basilian and Benedictine foundations with six houses each. The one known exception was the Cistercian house at Prizzi, at first a male foundation but later, around 1190, it became a community of nuns. Male communities were more diverse. In addition to Basilian foundations, which were by far the majority (63 of the 126 male houses we have identified), there were also houses of Benedictines (28), Augustinian Canons (22), Cistercians (6), Cluniacs (2), Knights of the Hospital

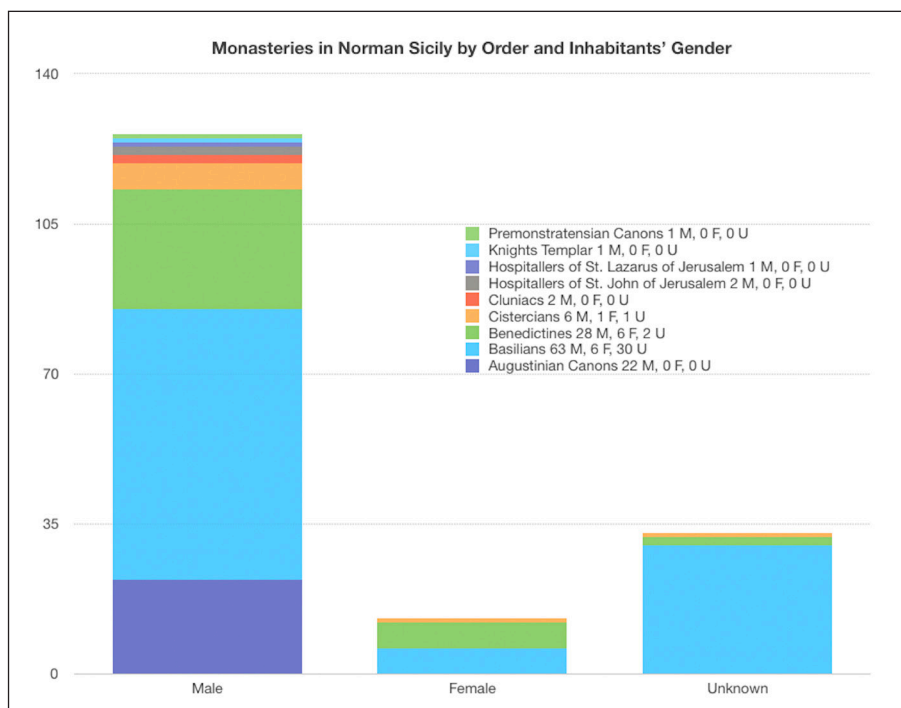


Figure 11: Monasteries in Norman Sicily by Order and Inhabitants' Gender.

⁶ The data represent the entire Norman period. Given that foundation dates are often unknown, it is not possible to chart with precision the growth of monastic settlements over time. White includes the date of the earliest surviving record for a number of the foundations, but they are not enough to track the development of monasticism in Norman Sicily with any degree of specificity.

of St. John of Jerusalem (2), Knights of the Hospital of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem (1), Premonstratensian Canons (1) and Knights Templar (1). If we compare this to Burgundy, a region to which Roger II had ties, by 1200 the Benedictine Rule guided some 65% of the monastic population as a whole (compared to Sicily's 21%) whereas approximately 25% were canons (though just 13% in Sicily); 10% belonged to other orders or were hermits, a percentage much smaller than in Sicily (Constable 2004, 336 and Bligny 1960). The dramatic difference is largely due to the strong presence of Basilian houses, which not only mirrored the large number of Greek Christians on the island, but also reflected Norman public policy; the Benedictine monasteries, on the other hand, many of which were founded during the early years of Norman rule, were largely expressions of "spontaneous piety" (White 1938, 53 and Loud 2007, 89). One wonders, though, given the broader campaign of Latinization that occurred across the island during the Norman period, whether the rulers preferred to leave the establishment of Latin houses to individuals to avoid the outward appearance of divided loyalties. By establishing four important Benedictine abbeys (Lipari-Patti, Catania, St. John of the Hermits and Monreale), to which, as White observed, the majority of the other houses were either colonies or subordinates, the Normans could allow donors to endow Benedictine houses with relatively little concern while they themselves supported the Basilians and cultivated goodwill among their Greek Christian subjects (White 1938, 54).

§20 It is noteworthy that some orders had little influence (Loud 2007, 484–86). For example, Cluniacs and Cistercians combined comprised just 6% of Sicily's male houses. It is very likely that Roger II did not want to contend with the personalities and agendas of Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux as he worked to consolidate political power and build a kingdom in southern Italy and Sicily (De Leo 1994, 149–151; White 1938, 163–165).⁷ Welcoming significant numbers of monks from these

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux died in 1153, just one year before Roger II, and Peter the Venerable outlived the king by two years, dying in 1156. Just one Cluniac monastery appears to have existed during Roger II's reign; the priory of St. Mary de Jummaris of Sciacca, founded by Juliet, daughter of Roger I, was in existence by 1136, but could have been established as early as 1100. As for Cistercian houses, the first in the kingdom was Santa Maria di Sambucina, Calabria, c. 1144. The earliest in Sicily may have been the priory of St. Christopher of Prizzi, c. 1150.

orders could have destabilized an already complex political landscape. Similarly, Hospitallers and Templars were poorly represented, a fact that may be explained, as Loud (2007) has noted, by the humiliation of Roger's mother in 1118 as well as by his reluctance to raise the ire of the Muslims both in his kingdom and in North Africa (492). There does appear to have been a number of Augustinian communities, perhaps as many as 22 over the course of the Norman period, but compared to their presence in other areas of Europe as well as in the Crusader states, their influence was relatively minor (496). As for the Premonstratensian canons, more will be said about them below.

§21 Distribution by gender is also instructive. Of the 139 houses whose genders are known with a relative degree of certainty, just 13 (9%) seem to have been populated by nuns. The remaining 126 houses (91%) were inhabited by monks. Even if we take into account that the gender of the inhabitants of perhaps some 37 houses is unrecorded, it is clear that from a monastic perspective, Sicily appears to have been very much a man's world.

Clearly, the monastic makeup of Sicily was quite different from much of western Europe. The strong presence of Basilian monks and nuns is perhaps the most obvious evidence of this and can largely be explained by Sicily's specific historical and geographical contexts. But it would be interesting to compare this data to other areas in twelfth-century Europe, particularly to the French lands to which the Normans had ties. It is possible to read Sicily's monastic data against England's thanks to Alison Binns' (1989) *Dedications of Monastic Houses in England and Wales, 1066–1216*, whose catalog is based on male communities and excludes Cistercian foundations (2–3; 18–19).⁸ Nicholas Orme has conveniently extracted the English

⁸ Cistercian houses were usually dedicated solely to the Virgin Mary; the exceptions were Neath (Holy Trinity and the Virgin), Revesby (St. Laurence and the Virgin), Combermere (St. Michael and the Virgin), and Buildwas (St. Chad and the Virgin). Binns excluded female houses in anticipation of Thompson's *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Thompson 1991). The author reminds us that all monastic churches were dedicated to God and simply in honor of a spiritual patron (or collection of patrons).

We have followed Orme's lead and have separated the dedications to a single saint from those dedications that include an individual saint in a larger group. For example, we have separated dedications to St. Peter alone (5) from those he shared with St. Paul (2) and, in the case of Cefalù, St. Paul and Christ.

data from her study, recording the spiritual patrons in the kingdom who had been honored by five or more dedications, a process that created a subset of 514 houses established between 1086–1216 (Orme 1996, 25). If Binns' parameters are applied to the Sicilian data – male, non-Cistercian monasteries – some 119 houses remain. This results in the removal of six Cistercian houses and one monastery whose subject of dedication is unknown. And when we extract from them the names of patrons who had five or more dedications, that number becomes 67, as shown in **Figure 12**.

§22 There were 101 subjects of dedication among the English houses during these years, with 24 of them honored by five or more foundations, revealing a relatively high concentration of dedications to approximately one quarter of the spiritual patrons identified (Orme 1996, 27). A similar trend is not found in the Sicilian data. Yet, England did not experience a dramatic rupture in its religious culture nor did it contend with such widely disparate cultural forces. As a result, the Sicilian sample offers a different picture, one that suggests a more diverse spiritual landscape. Just four of the island's spiritual patrons (9% of the total) had five or more monasteries dedicated to them. In other words, the vast majority of Sicily's monasteries shared a spiritual patron with four or fewer houses. Whereas its profile of religious orders was relatively small when compared to other areas of Europe at the time, the number

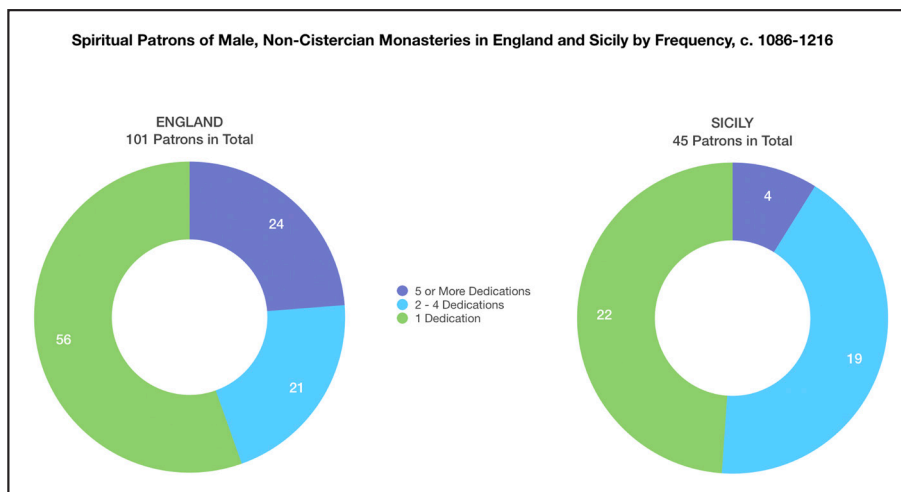


Figure 12: Spiritual Patrons of Male, Non-Cistercian Monasteries in England and Sicily by Frequency, c. 1086–1216.

of spiritual patrons reflects the diversity of the island's population. Like England, some Sicilian foundations bore the names of local saints, such as Agatha, Elias, Lucy, and Venera. But the subjects of its monastic dedications also betray a strong Greek Christian presence on the island; Sts. Barbarus, Basil, Constantine, Cosmas, Mercurius, Nicander, Onuphrius, Pantaleon, Philip of Thrace, and Theodore are some examples. It is noteworthy, though, that all four of the saints who were particularly popular in Sicily were also venerated enthusiastically in England and Wales. The celebrity of Peter, George and Nicholas extended across Europe as did devotion to the Virgin Mary who, in both lands, was the most popular spiritual patron by far (forty-six percent of the non-Cistercian male houses in England and 26% of the same subset in Sicily). If one looks at just the 63 male Basilian foundations so actively supported by the Norman rulers, the number of patrons becomes even more limited with just two saints – Nicholas and the Virgin Mary – having more than three dedications to their names (eight and 13, respectively; St. Mary of Pedale *may* have been a Basilian house and we have included it in the Basilian statistics).

§23 As Paul Oldfield (2014) has noted, with the exception of St. Agatha, Sicily's Greek monks, Latin clerics and Norman rulers only revived in a limited way the cults of the Sicilian saints that pre-date the Muslim conquest of the island (147). It should be noted that although efforts were made to reawaken Agatha's cult during the Norman period, her name seems to appear in just one monastic dedication. And although a few new saints appeared during the Norman period, their influence was limited (165). In addition, although the Normans in Sicily appear to have favored some cross-cultural saints, cultivating devotion to one specific saint, a campaign that would have constructed a coherent historical narrative, would have been ill-advised in a kingdom with such a diverse population (177). In short, an examination of Siculo-Norman monasteries and their dedications reveals that although the Normans maintained control over the monastic orders – the “hard power” that could have strong political ramifications on the island – they were less focused on streamlining the softer power that was represented by the cults of the saints. Whereas it was in their interest to direct the former – presumably an attractive opportunity to exert real control over one of the kingdom's many intricate dynamics – the power of sanctity was left diffuse, a religious and cultural force largely

allowed to express the varied concerns and interests of the subjects of an up-and-coming state located in a crossroads of civilization. On the whole, cultivating spiritual patrons was not a concern to the Norman rulers of Sicily.⁹ But managing external political influences that could be exerted through monastic channels was.

5. Case study two: The Premonstratensian priory of St. George of Gratteri: A Norman gift to a bride and her family?

§24 Striking against the rolling hills of the Madonie Mountains, the isolated remains of the Premonstratensian Priory of St. George, represented in **Figure 13**, are a sight to behold. Approximately 2.5 miles southwest of Gratteri, they can be reached by foot, by horse or with a 4 × 4 vehicle. The walk from the town is fairly long and is best taken on cooler days as it provides little cover from the sun. There is a map posted at the beginning of the footpath, but beyond this, there are few other



Figure 13: Detail from the Western Portal of the Premonstratensian Priory of St. George, Gratteri.

⁹ It does seem, though, that Roger II had a personal attachment to Nicholas, a saint whose appeal transcended geographical bounds and whose cult had been focused in Norman-controlled lands since 1087. See Hayes 2016, 493–94 (a revised version will appear in her forthcoming *Roger II of Sicily: Family, Faith and Empire in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), Chapter Four) and Jones 1978, 220.

markers. Duke Roger of Apulia, presumed heir of Roger II, founded the house around 1140. It stands out as the only Premonstratensian foundation in Norman Sicily, leading to some speculation as to the motivation behind its establishment (White 1938, 205). The Order of Prémontré was one of the two most successful monastic orders of twelfth-century France (Hallam and Everard 2001, 192). Indeed, the French king, Louis VII, patronized the order's abbey at Dilo and made donations to the mother house itself (Hallam and Everard 2001, 249). Given that Duke Roger's father was keen on associating his family with the Capetians (Hayes 2013 and Hayes 2020), it might not surprise us, then, to witness the foundation of a Premonstratensian house around this time.

§25 Yet, if we turn our attention to another section of *The Norman Sicily Project*, the developing family tree, and look up Duke Roger's entry, the context for this foundation becomes much richer. We note that the presumed heir to the Kingdom of Sicily had been married to Elizabeth of Blois-Champagne (Houben 2002, 88). The bride was a daughter of Theobald II, Count of Champagne/IV, Count of Blois. According to the twelfth-century *Lives* of St. Norbert of Xanten, the order's founder, Theobald had himself wanted to join the Premonstratensians. Norbert, however, told the count that he should marry and continue his line (Antry 2013, *Vita A*, 15 and *Vita B*, 33). Theobald was obedient. And as a reward for his compliance, Norbert established the Premonstratensian Third Order and received Theobald as its first member. These types of important familial connections can be more easily discernible through the visual power of a genealogical tree and corresponding links in monastic records, an exercise which can be particularly fruitful for those who bring to the database wider historical context. In this case, the establishment of a seemingly random monastic house can be considered against Roger of Apulia's attempt to woo a bride and her very powerful father.

6. Concluding thoughts

§26 The rationale provided above is justification enough for a project of this kind. The cultural heritage of medieval Sicily does, indeed, face enormous challenges. The wealth of riches, combined with regional poverty and significant external economic

pressures at the national level and within the wider European Union, renders a project like this both timely and necessary. And although it is in no way a substitute for actual site management and preservation, the project is a way to document the past for current and future students of the Middle Ages. It makes people aware of the sites that once existed and of which ones survive in some form while providing opportunities for local residents to contribute to the reconstruction of their past. It also offers an assessment of some monuments' future sustainability. Finally, it facilitates travel to the sites, especially the more remote ones, by offering GPS coordinates.

§27 In addition to the access it provides to an elusive heritage, the site has the potential to enable people to better understand the information we have. The family tree as well as the visualizations facilitate comprehension of the data, including their spatial implications, in ways often not possible by simply reading records. It is our hope that by exploring the cultural landscape of the island, *The Norman Sicily Project* will inspire new research as well as provide a backdrop against which past, present, and future research – both digital and conventional – may be considered.

Additional File

The Additional File for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Field Survey Form. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/dm.68.s1>

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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