

Article

Framing the Calendar of the Sacramentary of Messina (BNE, Ms. 52): Patronage and Byzantine Topics in Late 12th-Century Sicilian Art

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Abstract: For the Norman kings of Sicily and the ecclesiastical authorities who ruled their dioceses, Byzantine art served as both a symbol of luxury and a model of prestige. Similarly to the mosaics of Palermo, Monreale, and Cefalù, as well as textiles and goldsmithing, the manuscripts preserved in the National Library of Madrid stand as prime examples of the fascination that the dignitaries of the Kingdom of Sicily had for Byzantine esthetics. Among these manuscripts, the Sacramentary of Messina (Madrid, BNE Ms. 52) is perhaps the most striking. This Latin sacramentary, comprising 303 folios, features illuminated initials, a calendar with depictions of classical topics, such as the *Spinario* and a compelling depiction of August inspired by the Byzantine Koimesis, the months and zodiac, and two full-page illustrations depicting the Virgin Glykophilousa, the Crucifixion, and the Deesis. This study has a dual focus. First, it aims to analyze the iconographic peculiarities of the monthly images in this Latin calendar. Second, it seeks to provide new insights into the manuscript's patronage and its place of origin. In this context, one of the most striking and significant aspects of the sacramentary's iconography is the prominent role of the Virgin, a theme that will also be examined in this study. Archbishop Richard Palmer emerges as the leading candidate to have been the driving force in the patronage of the manuscript to the Royal scriptoria of Palermo.



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1. Introduction

The Messina Sacramentary (Madrid, BNE Ms. 52) is one of the most valued Greek codices preserved in Spain, where there is an important legacy of often-unknown manuscripts, distributed mainly between the National Library and the Royal Library of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. Certain manuscripts are notably inventive and original in their iconography.

Among the remarkable collection of works originating from Sicily, Ms. 52 has garnered significant scholarly attention. This manuscript comprises 303 folios and contains a complete Latin sacramentary, preceded by a calendar (fols. 4–9v) decorated with medallions: two for each month, depicting the zodiac signs and the Labors of the Months. Following the sacramentary is a Sanctorale (fol. 122v) and the Litany (fol. 272r). The Latin text, presented in two columns, is embellished with 336 illuminated initials and two full-page images (fols. 80r–v), depicting the Virgin and Child and the Crucifixion. These images, both featuring Greek inscriptions, are positioned immediately after the prefaces and just before the canon of the Mass.

Among the illuminated initials, the initial *T(e igitur)*, which opens the Canon of the Mass (fol. 81r), features the Byzantine theme of the Deesis with Christ positioned between the Virgin and John the Baptist in medallions, each bearing their Greek names. On the vertical shaft, aligned with the bust of Christ, an archangel is depicted at the center while, below, a female figure is portrayed, the identity of whom remains a subject of scholarly debate.

The manuscript is kept at the National Library of Madrid, an institution at which it arrived from the library of the Duke of Uceda.¹ Juan Francisco Pacheco Téllez-Girón Pacheco, IV Duke of Uceda (1649–1718), was named viceroy of Sicily in 1687. His predecessor, viceroy Count of Santiesteban, seized the books of the chapter of the Cathedral of Messina as punishment for the popular revolt which was held in the city in 1674. When the Duke of Uceda arrived in Sicily in 1687, he found these manuscripts and incorporated them into his private library. In 1711, the Duke of Uceda came to support the Archduke Charles in the context of the War of the Spanish Succession. This decision resulted in the seizure of his assets in Spain, including his library. The manuscripts were first incorporated into the Royal Library of Philip V in 1711, following the expropriation of the assets of the nobles who had supported his rival during the war.

With that in mind, the origin, dating, and patronage of Madrid Ms. 52 has fueled controversy between scholars since the mid-20th century. In this context, Hugo Buchthal was one of the first scholars to study the manuscript in depth. According to Buchthal, the manuscript was written and illuminated in a scriptorium in Messina in the last 10–15 years of Norman domination, that is, between 1182 and 1195 (Buchthal 1955, 1956). This proposal was accepted by Angela Daneu Lattanzi (Daneu Lattanzi [1965] 1966) and, more recently, by other scholars (Arcidiacono 2023).²

On the contrary, based on iconographic issues and the repeated appearance of Saint Christina—the ancient patron saint of Palermo—in the calendar, Sanctorale and Litany, Valentino Pace has suggested that Madrid Ms. 52 was produced in a scriptorium of Palermo in the early 13th century (Pace 1977; Pace 1979, I, cat. no. 813, pp. 649–50; Pace 1979, 1998–1999, 2024). Recently, Mauro Travagliato placed the creation of the manuscript around 1230, also drawing on the Monreale mosaic cycle (Travagliato 2019); however, scholars have returned to the earlier chronology proposed by Buchthal, in part based on aspects of paleography (Pratesi 1972; Owens 1977, p. 17; Caldelli and De Fraja 2018).

These contributions are proof that the Messina Sacramentary has been at the center of historiographical discussion. However, despite this attention, a number of questions concerning the selection of episodes and the patronage of the manuscripts remain unresolved. In my opinion, the analysis of the manuscript's decorative apparatus raises a further set of questions. First, how did the iconographic repertoire of images that adorn it come to be, highlighting the striking presence of Byzantine themes within a Latin calendar and the unusual prominence given to the Virgin? Second, what was the patron's aim in commissioning such a luxurious work?

2. The Calendar

The images of the Ms. 52 calendar can be classified into two types of representations, following the most common order found in Western calendars (Le Sénécal 1921–1923; Webster 1938; Levi 1941; Frugoni 1980; Gandolfo 1983; Fachechi and Castiñeiras 2019). On one hand, the calendar shows the images of agricultural laborers, characterized by their active and narrative nature. On the other hand, there are so-called 'personifications', defined by their allegorical character. In this case, we observe the survival of ancient themes, such as the Thorn Extractor (known as the *Spinario* in Italian), which was used to represent months without any agricultural activity. The Messina Calendar is also notable for its

depiction of the signs of the zodiac, which adhere to the typical iconographic conventions for such scenes (Cohen 1990, pp. 43–54; Hourihane 2006). This is not unusual, as similar associations appear in various medieval works across different media, including sculpture (e.g., the portals of Autun and Vézelay), painting (e.g., the Royal Pantheon of San Isidoro de León and the crypt of the former cathedral of Roda de Isábena), and mosaic (e.g., the pavement of Saint Philibert de Tournus or the mosaic of Otranto). One last aspect that is worth emphasizing is that, alongside the images, the calendar pages provide the names of saints whose feast days are observed on each successive day of the month.

Undoubtedly, calendars are the most authentic testimony to agricultural time, that is, the cyclical time that God promised Noah in the book of Genesis: ‘As long as the earth endures, there will be seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night’ (Gen 8:22). Following the most common typology in Western calendars, Ms. 52 illustrates the year through depictions of agricultural tasks alongside periods of leisure and rest (Figures 1 and 2).

January is depicted with a peasant pruning using a cutting tool. Pruning is a fundamental activity for the good development of a vineyard, which is carried out several times during the year. In contrast to the Italian calendars, which normally place the scene in February, both the Spanish and French cycles place pruning in the month of March (Castiñeiras 1996, pp. 194–96). Indeed, the representation of pruning in January is unusual, which would suggest that the calendar was made in a location with a warm climate, such as Sicily.

In February, as a personification of winter, a typical scene of a peasant sitting on a stool warming himself before a fire was chosen. In this case, the character brings his hands close to the fire of a brazier. In Ms. 52, the clothing of the figure, with his hands clasped together in front of the fire and dressed in a long tunic, recalls the figure of the stooping old man in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (8th century BC) (Pérez Jiménez 1981, p. 165).

From June onwards, agricultural work continues, typically taking place between March and November or December, including harvesting, grape-picking, plowing, and sowing. The harvest scenes do not have any particular features or characteristics that distinguish them from the usual iconography of medieval calendars. On one hand, June depicts the harvesting of grain, carried out by a peasant with a toothed sickle. On the other hand, in July, a peasant with flails is separating the grain from the chaff. Similarly to the calendar of San Isidoro de León, Ms. 52 features a stooped reaper wearing a short sackcloth, shown in the middle of his work. The figure, holding a bundle of ears of corn and a sickle in his hand, is ready to cut the harvest in half (Mane 1983). This harvesting method comes from the ancient *modus romanus* described by Varron, which was the most common in the Middle Ages and is extensively depicted in Hispanic calendars. In the Messina Sacramentary, the threshing occurs on an open-air threshing floor, where the ears of grain are spread out on the ground.

The month of September is depicted through the transfer of wine into a cask. This process, typically carried out using a leather wineskin and a funnel, involves filling partially emptied vats with wine after fermentation. Such activities are commonly featured in medieval calendars, particularly as representations of October. It is frequent to encounter scenes of grape harvesting in September, which, notably, are absent in the Messina calendar. Instead, October is illustrated by a scene of plowing in which a peasant, guiding a team of oxen, tills the land.



Figure 1. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52 fol. 4–9v. The calendar—work of the months.
© Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).



Figure 2. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52 fol. 4–9v. The calendar—zodiac signs. © Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).

Tillage typically occurs in October and November, marking the period of the agricultural year when the land is plowed and winter grain is sown. December features one of the most common scenes in medieval calendars: the slaughter of pigs. For the peasant,

this event signifies the conclusion of fieldwork. While French and Italian cycles depict this scene in December, Hispanic calendars often place it in November. In most representations, the scene is rendered simply, typically showing the slaughterer at the moment of striking the animal, as seen in a capital from the Romanesque cloister of Santa Maria de l'Estany. (Sánchez Márquez 2013, 2015) or in the cloister of Monreale (Fachechi and Castiñeiras 2019, pp. 143–45).

Following the tilling and sowing of the land (in October and November), the farmer must prepare for the onset of winter by stockpiling firewood and food. As Hesiod reminds us, 'when the cold drives men from their labors, the diligent man can bring great prosperity to his house'. The slaughter of pigs provides the fatty food necessary to endure the harsh winter, while the gathering of firewood from the forest ensures warmth and comfort in the home. Together, these activities serve as the conclusion to the year's agricultural work.

Conversely, in addition to depictions of agricultural labor, the Messina Calendar includes allegorical scenes unrelated to farm work. While some of these scenes—such as Spring Regeneration (April) and the Falconer (May)—are common in Western calendars (Stern 1953, 1955; Strzykowski 1888a, 1888b; Parodo 2017), others seem inspired by the tradition of Byzantine iconographies. Hence, as will be discussed later, the personification of the month of August, with the Virgin lying on her deathbed, appears to be an image inspired by the Byzantine Koimesis.

With this in mind, our focus is directed towards these images. March is represented by the *Spinario* (Figure 3), a theme that—while popular in Hellenistic art—is not particularly common in Western calendars.³ Notably, no Hispanic calendar features this representation as an illustration of a month. In contrast, it appears in several Italian calendars, including in the baptismal font of San Frediano di Lucca (c. 1170–80), the left stipite of the eastern portal of the Baptistry of Pisa (circa 1200), the mosaic of Otranto, and the central arch of the portico of the Cathedral of Sessa Aurunca, among other examples (Fachechi and Castiñeiras 2019, pp. 157–59; Castiñeiras 2000). In the iconography of the *Spinario*, it is necessary to distinguish between two typologies: on one hand, the Italian or Roman model depicts a young man removing the thorn, as observed in Ms. 52; on the other hand, in the Byzantine or Hellenistic model—as seen in Sessa Aurunca or Venice—a child examines the sole of the foot of a nude male figure who, in turn, rests his hand on the head of his helper. The depiction of the *Spinario* for the month of March may be interpreted as a symbol of desire and uncontrolled passion, thus alluding to lust, sin, and the Lenten prohibitions associated with the spring season. As Saint Isidore notes in his *Etymologies*, March signifies the awakening of animal fervor (*Etymologiae*, V, 33, 5). In medieval tradition, the *Spinario* was also regarded as a representation of physical illness and idolatry, among other negative qualities. In contrast, some scholars have suggested that the choice of the *Spinario* for March refers to a pause in agricultural activities, symbolizing the peasant taking a moment to clean his feet.

Similar ancient precedents can be found in the figure of Flora-Spring, commonly associated with the month of April. In the Sacramentary of Messina, a young man is depicted holding two flowers aloft with both hands, symbolizing the fertility of the earth, the renewal of the fields, and the awakening from winter's dormancy. This representation corresponds to an iconographic type known as the 'prince of spring'.



Figure 3. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52 fol. 5r. *Spinario*. © Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).

May is not linked to agricultural labor either; in this instance, the motif selected to represent this month is that of a knight with a falcon. This falconry scene—which references the physical exercise of the knight and his preparation for war—is the most commonly depicted hunting theme in the calendars of the Latin West. It eventually became a favored pastime in the royal courts of the Middle Ages. One of the earliest iconographic representations of this theme can be found in the panels of the pavement mosaic at the Villa of the Falconer in Argos, dating to the first half of the 6th century AD, which depict various stages of bird hunting with falcons. The emergence of this theme is relatively late, with the first depiction of May as a Falconer appearing in the calendars of the Winchester Psalter and the Saint Albans Psalter, both produced between the third and fourth decades of the 12th century. The precedents for the Messina Calendar, therefore, can be traced to the aforementioned Winchester Psalter, the calendars of MS 233 from St. John's College, Cambridge, MS Supp. 318 from the Leyden University Library, and MS Lansdowne 383 from the British Museum, among other examples.

The theme selected for August is arguably one of the most exceptional in the entire Ms. 52 calendar (Figure 4). The *tondo* depicts the Virgin Mary on her bed, holding a fan (*flabellum*). In my opinion, we are faced with an image inspired by the Byzantine tradition of the Koimesis, in which Mary appears on her deathbed. While it is true that Mary lies in the bed in a similar position in Latin West Nativity scenes, in this case, it is worth considering that the scene alludes to the celebration of the Koimesis, as this festival was commemorated in Byzantine *menologia* on August 15th. Hence, it would not be unreasonable to think that the Byzantine Koimesis served also as an iconographic model.

In any case, it is a synoptic scene resulting from a sacred and holy tradition. On one hand, the scene references the Koimesis festival. On the other hand, it also serves as a reflection of the secular motifs associated with August's heat, which have their origins in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the earliest document of the Greek calendar. In this work, Hesiod emphasizes the fatigue and thirst brought on by the heat in the countryside (Peréz Jiménez 1981, p. 168). As a result, August—being a particularly hot month—is occasionally represented in some medieval calendars by scenes in which figures rest and cool themselves, either by drinking or with the aid of a fan (Castiñeiras 1994, 1997, 2002). These representations allude to the intense heat typical of this time of year. For this reason, Mary is holding a fan and is trying to protect herself from the heat. It is important to underline that the theme of the Koimesis is prominently featured in the monumental plastic art of Sicily, as exemplified by the Martorana mosaic or the icon preserved in Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia (inv. n.520; end of the 12th century).

The Virgin of the Messinian Sacramentary recalls the so-called *Dominus Iulius* mosaic, dated to the late 4th or early 5th century AD, which was discovered in Carthage and is now housed in the Bardo Museum in Tunis. The seated figure in the upper register of the mosaic represents the *domina*, who holds a *flabellum* in her right hand, similar to the one held by the figure in the Messinian calendar. The fan also appears in the personification of the month of August in the mosaic from the Villa of the Falconer in Argos (6th century AD), a set that can be regarded as the origin of the Greco-Byzantine calendar (Castiñeiras 1997). This tradition is clearly distinct from the Western medieval tradition, although both share late antique origins. The rural inspiration of the Argos series and the selection of subjects—such as the warrior for March, the cryophorus for April, the thirsty man with the *flabellum* and melon for August, the sower and the man with the falcon for December, and the duck hunter for February—anticipate the repertoire of months in the Byzantine *menologia*, which became prevalent from the 9th century onwards, particularly in miniatures.

Scenes of summer refreshment featuring half-naked figures resting, fanning themselves, cooling off, or drinking from a cup were common in Byzantine calendars depicting the month of August (e.g., Octateuchos Vat. Gr.747, f.27r, ca. 1070–1080, and Vat. Gr.746, f.48v, ca. 1150). This motif has its roots in the ancient Greek–Hellenistic calendar repertoire, which was preserved within the Byzantine tradition and later re-emerged strongly in Italian calendars between the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Notable surviving examples include a depiction of August resting in a capital at Santa Maria Maggiore in Monte Sant'Angelo (Apulia, ca. 1198) and another at the second arch of the main portal of St. Mark's in Venice (1235–1245), where August is shown resting and cooling himself with a fan (Fachechi and Castiñeiras 2019, pp. 159–62). In both cases, there is no doubt about the Byzantine sources of their iconography.

At the end of the 12th century, scenes of summer refreshment featuring half-naked figures were incorporated into Italian calendars as a result of the growing influence of Byzantine models, which characterized the art of the period. As will be discussed later, the presence of scenes inspired by the Koimesis and other themes such as the Glykophilousa Virgin and the Deesis implies that the miniaturist had deep knowledge of the Byzantine tradition. However, the miniaturist chose to omit other motifs from the Byzantine *menologia*, such as the February fisherman (e.g., Florence, Laur., Acq. e doni 181, f.1v; Parma, Cathedral; Sessa Aurunca), the March–Mars warrior, and the April cryophoros. These latter two themes appear on the main portal of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, dating from around 1230.

In summary, some of the iconographic models of Ms. 52 are rooted in the Byzantine tradition, drawing on elements inherited from antiquity and repertoires predominantly found in medieval Italian calendars. While it is a Latin calendar, it incorporates elements

from the Byzantine iconographic tradition, reflecting the miniaturist's Byzantine background. This influence allowed the artist to adapt the model to Italian conventions, making the cycle more familiar and recognizable to its audience.



Figure 4. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52 fol.7v. Koimesis. © Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).

3. A Greek Painter Trained in Constantinople?

One of the most striking aspects of Ms. 52 is the strong prominence given to the figure of the Virgin, who appears not only in the aforementioned scene that alludes to the Koimesis of the calendar but also on folios 80r, 80v, and 81r of the manuscript.

Particularly evocative is the image on fol. 80r, which features a full-page depiction of the Virgin and Child. This represents a Glykophilousa Virgin, a typology of which we have notable examples in the Byzantine context ([Vassilaki 2005](#); [Pentcheva 2021](#)).⁴

The Virgin's expression is profoundly emotional and recalls the Virgin in the Nerezi paintings (1164) or the paintings of Saint George in Kurbinovo (1192). Similarly, the composition and dramatic sense of the Crucifixion scene bear resemblance to the religious imagery of the Comnenese period, particularly the depiction of Solomon's bed in the Homilies of the Virgin by the monk Jacob of Kokkinobaphos (Paris, BnF, gr.1208, ol.109 r), the Koimesis in the mosaics of the Martorana (1143–1151) in Palermo (Figure 5), and of the icon preserved in the Galleria Regionale della Sicilia (the end of the 12th century; Figure 6). Other examples include the church of the Panagia Arakiotissa (Panagia tou Arakos) in Lagoudera (Cyprus), painted in 1192, or the use of Byzantine formula of the Koimesis in the burial of Emperor Michael II the Stammerer in the Skylitses Matritensis (fol. 42 r) ([Castiñeiras 2024](#); [Boeck 2015](#)). In the Messina manuscript, we encounter figures filled with

a palpable sense of agitation and vitality, conveying an emotional explosion and dizzying dynamism characteristic of Comnenian art.

Stylistically, it seems evident to me that the manuscript housed in the Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid employs a Byzantine model, particularly in the depictions of the Virgin, the Deesis, the Crucifixion, and the Virgin–August in the calendar, which are likely derived from late Comnenian work. The miniaturist of both the calendar and the narrative images clearly demonstrates a familiarity with Comnenian miniature art, likely influenced by the artistic production of the Byzantine capital at the time. He preserves the three-dimensional sensibility of the Hellenistic tradition in the figures, compositions, and architectural backgrounds, while also emphasizing light and subtle variations in both clothing and facial expressions. Further evidence of the manuscript’s Eastern influence can be found in the halo decoration of the Virgin (fol. 80r). The halo motifs used by the Messina miniaturist, characterized by lotus and palmette designs, are among the most common decorative elements in Byzantine paintings (Corrie 1997).

Therefore, the miniaturist was likely from Constantinople and possessed a thorough familiarity with Byzantine illustration techniques and representational conventions. In other words, the miniaturist responsible for the calendar and narrative images was well-acquainted with the vast collection of illuminated manuscripts housed in the libraries of Constantinople during this period.



Figure 5. Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio (La Martorana), Palermo, Sicilia. A mosaic with the Koimesis (1143–1151). © Arcidiocesi di Palermo (with kind permission).

It is also important to emphasize that the scenes depicting the Enthroned Virgin (Figure 7) and the Crucifixion appear to be directly derived from a Byzantine icon. While their style evokes Comnenian art and recalls the Madonna of the Nerezi paintings (1164; Figure 8), their iconography and composition—featuring a Crucifixion on the reverse—mirror the characteristics of Eastern icons. A notable example of this is the double-sided icon with the Virgin Hodegetria (obverse) and the Man of Sorrows (reverse) from the Byzantine Museum in Kastoria, Greece (the second half of the 12th century). In this icon, the Virgin gazes beyond the Child in her arms, looking toward the suffering Christ on the reverse (Figure 9).

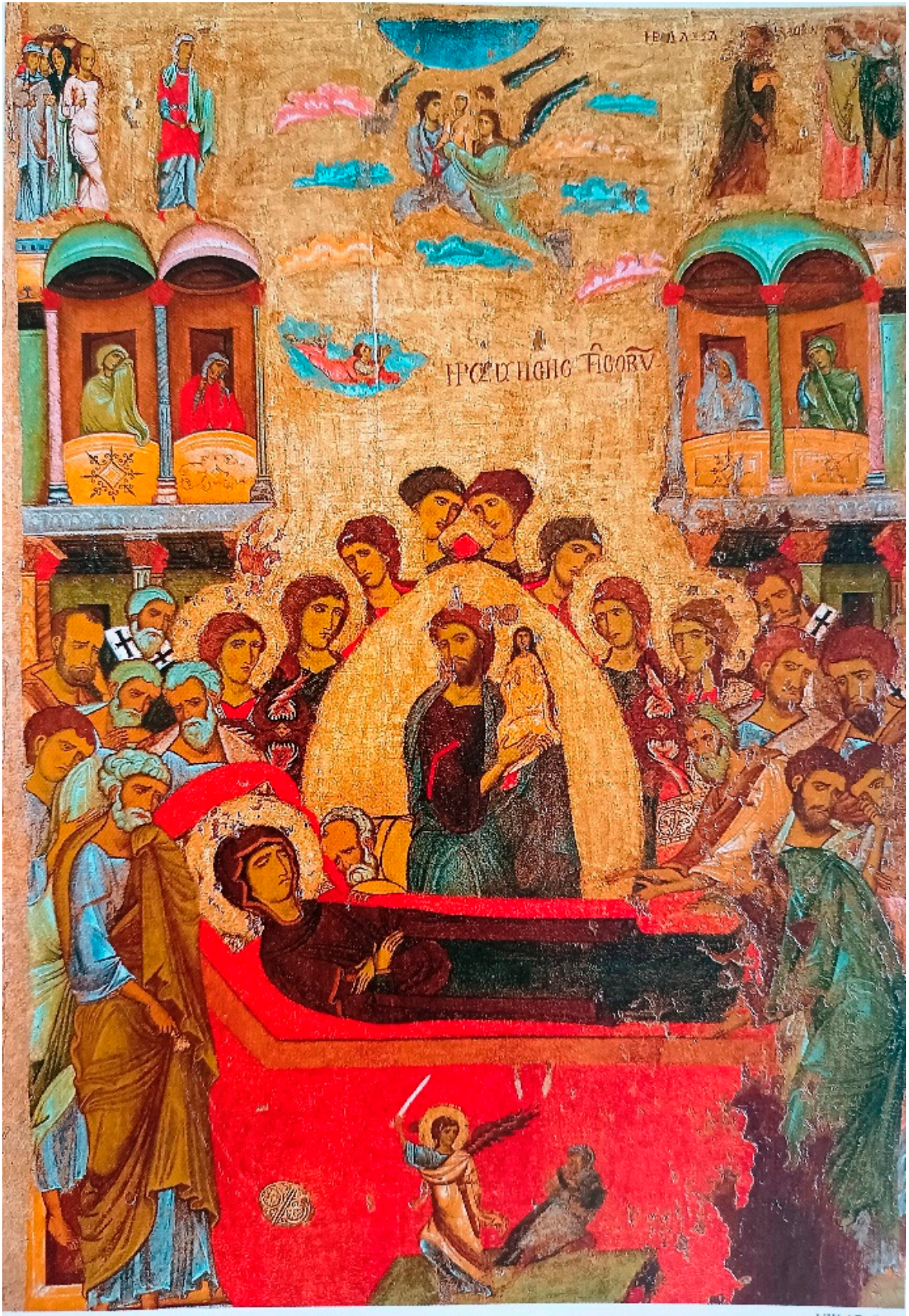


Figure 6. Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, inv. n.520. An icon with the Koimesis, the end of the 12th century. © Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana (with kind permission).



Figure 7. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52 (a) fol. 80r: the Enthroned Virgin with the Child; fol. 80v: the Crucifixion. © Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).

The miniaturist responsible for the calendar and narrative scenes in Ms. 52 was thoroughly familiar with Comnenian art from the Byzantine capital and was likely recruited during one of the diplomatic missions to Constantinople. Upon arriving in Palermo, the scale of the project necessitated the involvement of a diverse and multi-cultural team of scribes and miniaturists, a collaboration that would have been difficult to envision within the confines of a monastic scriptorium.

The involvement of both a Greek miniaturist and other Latin miniaturists in the creation of the manuscript would explain the differences in the treatment of the initials and the narrative scenes in Ms. 52. On one hand, the initials feature plant, animal, and occasionally anthropomorphic motifs (Figure 10), sometimes set against gold backgrounds. These initials reach their apex of grandeur and monumentality on folio 76 (Figure 11) where, in addition to the vegetal and animal decorations, including a lion, a bearded human head is depicted, with stalks emerging from the mouth.

Some scholars have associated these initials with manuscripts produced in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (Buchthal 1957; Corrie 2013; Arcidiacono 2023), specifically the Sacramentary of the Biblioteca Angelica (D.7.3) and the Missal of the National Library of Paris (ms.lat. 12056). However, in my view, the initials present a hybridization of styles and, in certain instances, one can also detect influences from northern European traditions—particularly English and French miniatures—as well as from the miniatures of central Italy. The miniaturists responsible for the manuscript's initials appear to be rooted in the local Sicilian context, incorporating Latin elements, which reflects the multi-cultural environment of the Kingdom of Sicily.



Figure 8. A detail of the Lamentation with Christ and the Virgin in Nerezi (photo: Byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

This multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment likely accounts for the manuscript's production in Palermo. Ms. 52 reflects a secular, Mediterranean Byzantium that aligns seamlessly with the cultural milieu of Palermo in the second half of the twelfth century.



Figure 9. Byzantine Museum, Kastoria. Processional icon of Virgin Hodegetria (front) and Man of Sorrow (back). Last quarter of 12th century. © Byzantine Museum, Kastoria (with kind permission).



Figure 10. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52, fol. 22r-23v. © Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).

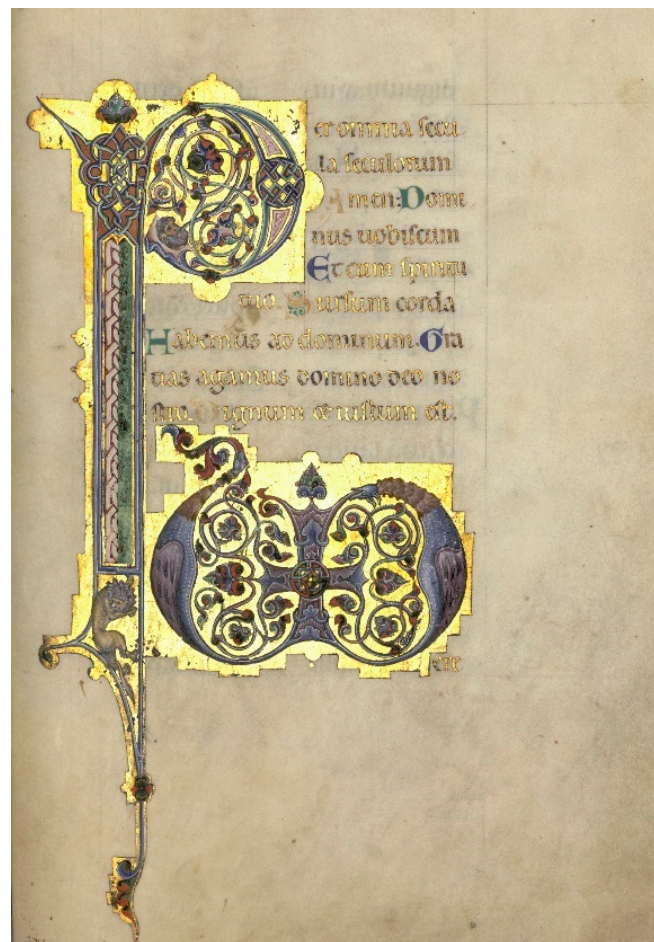


Figure 11. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52, fol. 76r, Initial P(er omnia). © Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).

4. The Patronage: Richard Palmer and the Royal Workshops of Palermo

The sacramentary housed in the Biblioteca Nacional has traditionally been classified among a distinguished group of manuscripts produced in the scriptorium of Messina during the last quarter of the 12th century. Several of these manuscripts are preserved in the BNE (Ms. 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 31–47, 194, 217), while others are held in various European collections, including the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence (Firenze, ms. 227), the Vatican Apostolic Library (Roma, BAV, Vat. lat. 42), the Bodleian Library in Oxford (Oxford, Bodl. Lib., Laud. Misc. 257), the Cathedral Museum in Mdina, Malta (Mdina, ms. 312), and the Biblioteca Painiana in Messina (Messina, mss. 10–11).

In my view, the sophistication of the illumination in Ms. 52, characterized by its rich use of gold and lapis lazuli and its monumental narrative images, which appear to be rooted in Byzantine painting, distinguishes it from other manuscripts associated with the scriptorium of the Monastery of San Salvador in Lingua Phari ([Tranchina 2023](#)). This sets it apart and points to the royal and aulic milieu of Palermo, the capital of the Kingdom. During the second half of the 12th century, Palermo emerged as the epicenter of political, economic, and cultural life. The court was populated by highly educated ministers and intellectuals, and the city's wealth and cultural vibrancy were pivotal to the broader Kingdom's identity.

Thanks to contemporary sources, we know that Royal Workshops were established within the Royal Palace for the production of silk fabrics, enamels, ivories, porphyry and other luxurious objects. In the *Epistola* of Hugo di Falcando, written in the spring of 1190, the *Nobiles Officinae* attached to the Palermo Palace are described as places 'where silk cocoons are spun into wefts of various colors and alternately adapted to different weaving techniques' ([Andaloro 2006](#), vol. I, p. 30). The Royal Workshops are also referenced by the Byzantine historian Nicetas Choniates, a contemporary of Hugo di Falcando, in his *Lettera a un tesoriere di Palermo*. Addressed to Peter, the treasurer of the Church of Palermo, this letter recounts the risks faced by the *nobiles illas palatio adherentes officinas*.

In addition to written sources, inscriptions found on several 12th-century Sicilian works provide confirmation that they were produced in the Royal Workshops of Palermo. A notable example is the *Hanover textile*, which bears the inscription *OPERATUM IN REGIO EGAST[ERIO]* (Wolfson in [D'Onofrio 1994](#); Varoli-Piazza in [Andaloro 2006](#), vol. I, cat. no. IV.1, p. 252). This inscription refers to the *ergasterio*, used in the medieval sense of 'workshop': a designated space for specific artistic and craft activities. The inclusion of the Greek term *ergasterion* further corroborates that the textile was created at the Palermitan court, likely by Greek weavers who arrived in Sicily following the Norman conquest of 1147–1148. Examples such as the *Hanover cloth* and the mantle of Roger II (c. 1133–1134) ([Tronzo 1997](#), pp. 60–61; [Tronzo 2001](#), pp. 241–53) demonstrate that the Royal Palace housed spaces dedicated to the production of textiles and other luxury crafts, akin to the *ergasteria* of the imperial court of Constantinople or the *tiraz* of the Islamic world.

Among the production of the Royal Workshops in Palermo, particular attention should be given to the goldsmith's works which, in some cases, bear revealing similarities to the Madrid manuscript. Among the goldsmith's pieces produced by the Palermo Workshops, the Cosenza stauroteca (mid-12th century) is perhaps the most opulent and refined ([Di Dario Guida 1984](#); Di Dario Guida in [Andaloro 2006](#), vol. III.33, p. 227). From a compositional perspective, it is noteworthy that the four medallions on the reverse (depicting the Crucifixion) bear a marked resemblance to the *tondos* in the Messinian Calendar (Figure 12). This circular medallion composition also appears in other works from the Palermo Workshops, including the pontifical gloves preserved in the treasury of the Cathedral of Bressanone, as well as in goldsmithing pieces produced in the Workshops of Constantinople during the 12th century (Figure 13).

The stauroteca housed in the Musée du Louvre (inv. no. OA 3665, mid-12th century) (Durand in Andaloro (2006), vol. I, cat. no. IV.5, pp. 261–62) (Figure 14) along with the covers of the *Gospel Book of Bishop Alfano of Capua* (c. 1173–1182)—noted for their originality—serve as further examples of the artistic environment that flourished in Palermo, particularly within the Royal Workshops. In the case of the former, the Byzantine iconography, combined with the presence of both Latin and Greek inscriptions, indicates that it was likely produced in a Sicilian workshop—possibly in Palermo—toward the end of the 12th century.



Figure 12. Cosenza, Galleria Nazionale, stauroteca, mid-12th century. Palermo, opificio reale, c.1173–82. Reprinted from Andaloro 2006.



Figure 13. Metropolitan Museum of New York; a group of twelve that once surrounded an icon of the archangel Gabriel, ca. 1100. © Metropolitan Museum of New York (with kind permission).



Figure 14. Musée du Louvre, stauroteca, inv.n.OA 3665, middle of 12th century. © Musée du Louvre (with kind permission).

Compelling evidence of the Palermo Royal Workshops can be found in the *Capua Gospel Book* (Andaloro 2006, vol. I, cat. no. IV.5, pp. 261–62). The reverse side features a depiction of the Pantocrator, accompanied by the four Evangelists and saints, including Thomas Becket. The front contains a crucifixion scene that appears to be derived from the same prototype as the Crucifixion in Ms. 52 (Figure 15). Similarly, the Stauroteca of Velletri, Rome (Sansone 2000), dated to the late 12th century, is attributed to the Palermitan Workshops. The intricate filigree work of this stauroteca seems to have inspired the decorative motifs of the Virgin’s halo in Ms. 52 (Figures 16 and 17).



Figure 15. Capua (Caserta), Cattedrale, Tesoro, the cover of the *Gospel Book of Bishop Alfano di Capua*, Palermo, opificio reale, c. 1173–1182. Reprinted from Andaloro 2006.

Ms. 52 is deeply rooted in the artistic milieu of the Palermo court. Beyond the analogies already identified with goldsmithing works from the Royal Workshops, it is important to highlight the shared repertoire between the Messinese manuscript and the monumental art of the capital and its surrounding areas. In this regard, Hugo Buchthal previously observed that the drapery of the Virgin in Ms. 52 shows a composition of distinct and heterogeneous plastic qualities, reminiscent of those found in the mosaics of Monreale. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, the theme of the Koimesis is prominently featured in monumental plastic art, as exemplified by the Martorana mosaic. Additionally, attention should be drawn to the striking parallels between the two lions in the scrolls flanking the medallion with the angel in the ‘T’ (e igitur) of Messina (Figure 18), and those depicted in the mosaic on the east wall of the Norman Stanza in Palermo (Figure 19) (Knipp 2017). It is highly probable that the illuminator of Ms. 52 directly drew inspiration from this specific work.

In summary, textiles, staurotecas, gospel covers, and ivories all formed part of the same refined artistic tradition of aulic dignity cultivated in Palermo, reflecting an emulation of the Constantinopolitan court. If, during this period, the Royal Workshops were capable of producing textiles such as the alb of William II or gospel covers, it is reasonable to consider the possibility of the existence of a workshop for manuscript production as well.

All these considerations lead to the conclusion that the manuscript was created by a Greek miniaturist within a scriptorium in Palermo, likely associated with the Royal Palace, where Byzantine cultural influences remained deeply entrenched. This scriptorium or workshop appears to have been entrusted with a prestigious commission from a distinguished dignitary of the Kingdom, closely connected to the context of the Palatine court in Palermo. The patron aimed to produce a luxurious sacramentary, aligning with the tradition of similar opulent works associated with the great Sicilian monarchs and ecclesiastical figures.



Figure 16. Velletri, cathedral, Tesoro, stauroteca, mid-12th century. Reprinted from Rodríguez Rodríguez Viejo (2021).



Figure 17. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52 (a) fol. 80r: the Enthroned Virgin with the Child—detail. © Biblioteca Nacional de España (with kind permission).



Figure 18. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 52, fol. 81r—detail. Initial T(e igitur). © Biblioteca Nacional de España.

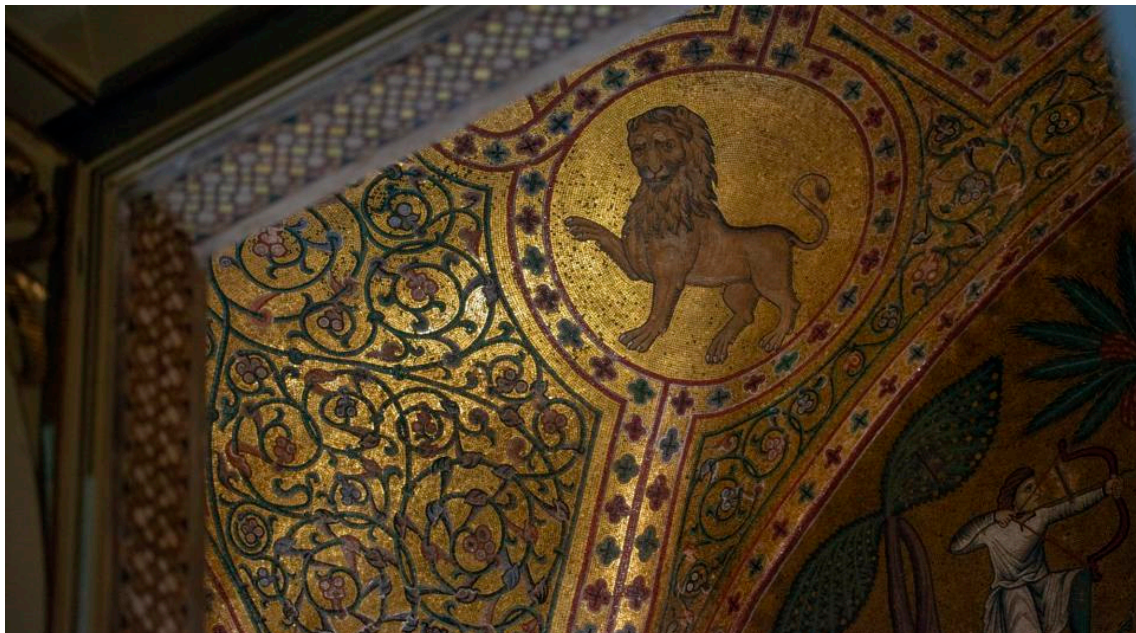


Figure 19. Palermo, Palazzo dei Normanni, Sala de Ruggero, 1154–66. Image: Author's own.

Among the prominent ecclesiastical figures and Norman court dignitaries of the late 12th century, the Englishman Richard Palmer emerges as the most plausible candidate for the patronage of the manuscript now held in the National Library.⁵ Serving as Bishop of

Syracuse from 1157 (formally consecrated in 1169), and later as Bishop of Messina from 1182, Palmer was a man of exceptional culture and eloquence (Gandolfo 2011). He maintained close ties with the leading dignitaries of the Kingdom of Sicily, ultimately becoming one of its most influential figures during the last quarter of the 12th century.

Richard Palmer gained considerable prominence as a member of the triumvirate of advisors to King William I of Sicily (1154–1166), alongside Silvester of Marsico (an Anglo-Norman baron) and Henry Aristippus (a scholar and Archdeacon of Catania). Serving as one of William I's principal counselors, Palmer played a leading role in the governance of the Kingdom. Upon the king's untimely death in 1166, he was named in William I's will as one of the chief advisors to his successor, William II, known as William the Good.

Palmer held the distinguished title of *familiares regis*, a term reserved during the 12th century to designate only the most influential individuals within the Royal Palace (Takayama 1989, 1990, 2009). The *familiares regis* were not merely close confidants or counselors to the king; rather, they constituted a formally recognized royal inner council entrusted with significant administrative authority. This elite group collaborated to deliberate on critical matters and authenticate royal diplomas. Most notably, the *familiares regis* assumed primary responsibility for managing state affairs and overseeing royal governance.

In 1161, King William I entrusted the governance of the Kingdom to men who had been trained under the tutelage of one of Sicily's most prominent figures, the Great Admiral Maio of Bari.⁶ Serving as Royal Chancellor, Maio was among the most influential personalities in the Kingdom of Sicily until his assassination in Palermo in 1160 by Matteo Bonello. Maio's unwavering determination and his resolute policies against the Sicilian barons, who resented and envied his power, ultimately led to his demise at the hands of one of these barons. This event bears a striking resemblance to the murder of Thomas Becket in England, carried out by followers of Henry II.

The day following Maio of Bari's assassination, King William I summoned Henry Aristippus, Archdeacon of Catania, appointing him as *familiares regis* to assume Maio's role and responsibilities in managing the Kingdom's affairs. By March 1161, Count Silvester of Marsico (an elderly cousin of the king) and Richard Palmer (the Bishop-elect of Syracuse and an Englishman) had also been appointed as *familiares regis*.⁷ This marked the formation of a new triumvirate consisting of Bishop-elect Richard Palmer, Matthew the Notary, and Peter the Qaid (a eunuch), who served as the Kingdom's most influential policymakers. Under both William I and William II, this triumvirate held unparalleled authority in determining policy and overseeing matters of the state.

Although Palmer ceased to be part of the triumvirate from 1169 after Offamil's election as Archbishop of Palermo, he remained within the royal circle, as his name appears among the *familiares regis* in documents dated to 1177 and 1183 (Takayama 1989, p. 366).

In 1177, Palmer was part of the royal court that escorted Joan Plantagenet, the daughter of Henry II, to Sicily for her marriage to William II. He also officiated at her coronation as Queen and maintained a close relationship with other prominent English figures of the period, including Thomas Becket. When Joan arrived in Sicily in 1177, Palmer was among the envoys dispatched to meet her with the fleet at St. Gilles, actively participating in her coronation ceremony.

In my view, by commissioning the Sacramentary of Messina, Palmer sought to position himself alongside the great Sicilian patrons who played leading roles in shaping the visual arts. Roger II of Sicily was responsible for the construction of Cefalù and the Palatine Chapel, while Monreale was the personal creation of William II. However, the mosaics in Palermo Cathedral were not solely a royal initiative; they were also the result of the patronage of another Englishman, Archbishop Walter Offamil (1168–1191), a cousin of Queen Regent

Margaret of Navarre and a rival of Palmer ([Loewenthal 1972](#)). It is well documented that the appointment of Offamil as Archbishop of Palermo caused significant disappointment to Palmer, who had aspired to the position. In fact, he expressed his frustration in a letter to Thomas Becket. Indeed, Palmer was keenly eager to secure Archbishopric of Palermo, which was vacant at the time. In 1168, Becket responded, thanking him for his letters and recommending his nephew Geoffrey for consideration.

Offamil, Palmer, and other ecclesiastical leaders—many of whom were closely associated with the court—sought to emulate the monarchs by commissioning prestigious works. Notably, it is documented that, prior to his appointment to the see of Messina, Palmer undertook the patronage of an arm-reliquary and the apse decoration in Syracuse, which featured either paintings or possibly mosaics ([Arcidiacono 2023](#)).

It is highly probable that the English prelate commissioned this opulent and luxurious sacramentary for his new see in Messina, where he was consecrated Archbishop in 1182. For this purpose, he likely turned to a scriptorium associated with the royal court, an institution that he was intimately familiar with during his tenure as an advisor to Kings William I and William II. Given that the Virgin Mary is the patron saint of Messina and that her veneration was deeply ingrained in the city during the Middle Ages, it is unsurprising that Palmer commissioned a sacramentary with a distinctly Marian message.

This would account for the replacement, in the illustration of the Canon of the Mass, of the traditional *Maiestas Domini* with a full-page miniature of the Virgin, as well as the selection of the Koimesis for the month of August. Furthermore, it is worth noting the particular emphasis on the Virgin not only through the Koimesis but also via the inclusion of the zodiacal sign *Virgo*, represented as a female figure with arms raised, in accordance with Byzantine iconographic traditions associated with the Virgin of the Assumption. In the context of Messina, the zodiacal sign should also be interpreted in a Marian key, further underscoring the significance of the Virgin in this commission.

Scholars have also pointed out that the Virgin appears twice in the T(e igitur) that opens the Canon of the Mass, providing clear evidence of the special honors accorded to her in the place in which the Missal was written. Moreover, the iconography of the narrative folios within the manuscript is unmistakably Marian, with its thematic focus centered on the Incarnation. This strongly suggests that the manuscript was commissioned specifically for a center dedicated to the Virgin.

The evidence strongly suggests that Palmer undertook a prestigious commission comparable to the psalters and aristocratic manuscripts produced in the scriptoria of Constantinople, numerous examples of which are well documented ([Cutler 1984](#); [Parpulov 2014](#)). The imagery of the Messinian manuscript bears significant parallels to the illustrations found in manuscripts created within the scriptoria of the Great Palace of Constantinople. These works often feature illustrations set against a gold background, occasionally occupying an entire page. Notable examples include the Bibles of John II Comnenus, such as MS Urbinate Gr. 2 (Vatican Library) and the *Gospel Book of Theophanes* (Gregory-Aland 662, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne: NGV Ms. Felton 710-5) (Figure 20), both of which were produced during the first half of the 12th century.



Figure 20. National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, *Gospel Book of Theophanes* (Gregory-Aland 662. NGV Ms. Felton 710-5), mid-12th century. © National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (with kind permission).

5. Conclusions

The Sacramentary of Messina stands as a remarkable example of the artistic exchange that occurred in Norman Sicily during the last quarter of the 12th century. It embodies a dialog between Byzantine, Latin, and Anglo-Norman artistic traditions.

The manuscript project involved miniaturists from diverse artistic backgrounds and styles. While the illuminator of the calendar and narrative scenes is unmistakably Byzantine, likely hailing from Constantinople, the miniaturists of the initials are rooted in the local Sicilian artistic tradition. The calendar and other images reflect the dynamic Comnenian style, characterized by a naturalism that can only be attributed to a Greek miniaturist familiar with manuscripts produced in Constantinople during the latter half of the 12th century. This miniaturist of Greek origin adapted the calendar to the Latin tradition while retaining key Byzantine elements, such as the Koimesis. From an iconographic perspective, the calendar combines themes from the Byzantine (Koimesis), Italian (*Spinario*), and English (knight with falcon) calendars.

It is probable that, within the context of the embassies and diplomatic relations between Palermo and the imperial court, the Sicilians gained access to an illuminated Byzantine codex in Constantinople, which may have served as a model for some of the images in Ms. 52. In fact, there are records of books from the library of Manuel I Comnenus arriving in Palermo, including Ptolemy's *Almagest* and the book of the prophecy of the *Eritrean Sibyl*. These works were brought to the Sicilian monarch by the Greek translator and Calabrian intellectual Henricus Aristippus—then Archdeacon of Catania and later a prominent figure in the Kingdom during 1161–1162—on the occasion of the peace negotiations of 1157 ([Mandalari 1939](#)).

The foremost ecclesiastical dignitaries such as Richard Palmer—who were predominantly courtiers themselves and highly educated individuals accustomed to a refined

standard of living—sought to emulate their monarchs. These *familiares regis* were the most powerful ministers in the Kingdom. However, they were not merely high-status ministers or counselors who acted independently, serving the kings individually. Ecclesiastical leaders of the 12th century were called upon to emulate the Sicilian monarchs as patrons, often sponsoring similar cultural and artistic works of their own, sometimes in regions distant from the capital and the direct influence of the court.

The folios of Ms. 52 show art that is in accordance with the mosaics of the capital, as well as the textiles, enamels, and goldsmiths' work produced in Palermo. In my view, the Sacramentary of Messina can be better understood within the broader context of the art produced by the Royal Workshops of Palermo. Thus, the manuscripts housed in the National Library of Madrid are embedded within a much wider artistic milieu than has hitherto been considered.

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Notes

- ¹ Madrid Ms. 52 is mentioned in several catalogs of the illuminated manuscripts of the Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid (Domínguez Bordona 1933, p. 377, n. 934; Anglés and Subirá 1946, vol. I, pp. 91–92; Janini and Serrano 1969, cat. no. 3, p. 2; Inventario General de Manuscritos de la Biblioteca Nacional 1953, vol. I, pp. 47–48). On the Duke of Uceda's book collection, see (De Andrés 1975; Fernández Pomar 1976, pp. 475–518; Velasco 2009; Rodríguez 2013). Furthermore, the manuscript was part of various exhibitions (El Arte Románico 1961, cat. no. 22; Cortés Arrese and Martín 2008, cat. no. 26, pp. 122–23; Pace (Pace 1977, I, cat. no. 813, pp. 649–50); Menna in Andaloro, (Menna 1995, cat. n. 100, pp. 365–67); Byzantine Art 1964, cat. no. 377, pp. 352–53; Corrie 1997, cat. no. 316, pp. 479–80).
- ² Buchthal's chronological hypothesis was followed, among other authors, by (Santucci 1981, pp. 143–47; Menna 1995, cat. no. 100, pp. 365–67; Di Natale 1995, pp. 357–58; Cortés Arrese and Martín 2008, cat. no. 26, pp. 122–23; Campagna Cicala 2020, pp. 49–53).
- ³ On the iconography of the *Spinario*: (Fossi 1982; 1970–1972; Pasquini 2008; Fachechi and Castiñeiras 2019, pp. 44–45).
- ⁴ The Glykophilousa Virgin (Virgin of the Sweet Kiss), which originated from Constantinople, is a version of the Eleusa Virgin (Virgin of Compassion). One of the earliest representations of which I am aware is found in the celebrated 11th-century hexaptych in Sinai (Kalopissi-Verti 2005, p. 311). The same iconographic type is found in a 13th-century marble relief icon built into St Mark's, Venice, and in a late 12th-century icon from Thessaloniki, Hypapante church, today at the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens (Weyl Carr 1997).
- ⁵ The presence of Saint Marcian in Ms. 52 and Palmer's deep devotion to the saint—evidenced by his commission of a silver reliquary which he brought to Messina in 1182—led Buchthal to attribute the manuscript in the National Library of Madrid to the English prelate.
- ⁶ Maio of Bari was one of the most prominent high-ranking ministers in the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. Serving under King Roger I, he held the position of scriniarius or notarius in the Latin chancery (c. 1144–1148) before being appointed Vice-Chancellor by 1151. Under King William I, Maio rose to the ranks of Chancellor, Admiral of Admirals (ammiratus ammiratorum), and chief minister, serving in this capacity from 1154 to 1160.
- ⁷ Although the triumvirate of the three *familiares regis* remained intact until the death of William I in 1166, two of its original members were replaced during this period. First, Henry Aristippus lost the king's favor during the baronial revolts of 1161 and was succeeded by Matthew the notary, who had long served Maio of Bari and would later compile a comprehensive land register.

Subsequently, after the death of Count Silvester of Marsico, the converted Muslim Qa'id Peter the eunuch, master chamberlain of the palace, was inducted into the inner council.

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