THE PAINTED CEILINGS OF THE CAPPPELLA PALATINA

Ernst J. Grube  Jeremy Johns

SUPPLEMENT I TO ISLAMIC ART

THE BRUSCHETTINI FOUNDATION FOR ISLAMIC AND ASIAN ART  GENOVA
THE EAST-WEST FOUNDATION  NEW YORK
2005
THE DATE OF THE CEILING OF THE CAPPELLA PALATINA IN PALERMO

Jeremy Johns

There is no doubt that the patron of the musqarnas ceiling over the nave of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo was King Roger II of Sicily, and that the date of the construction and painting of the ceiling must therefore fall within the period of twenty-two years that separates his coronation on Christmas Day 1130 from his death in February 1154. A more precise date for the ceiling depends upon the broader question of the date of the construction and decoration of the whole chapel. This has proved a stubbornly intractable problem. At first sight, it is difficult to see why this should be so, for there survive three independent records of the chapel’s inception: the foundation charter; the dated Greek inscription beneath the central dome; and the description of the Cappella Palatina which introduces a sermon by Philagathos Kerameós, delivered after the chapel’s encenia on a feast of St Peter and St Paul.

The foundation charter of the royal chapel, written on splendid purple parchment, and signed by a host of eminent courtiers and churchmen, “on the day of the dedication of the church, 28 April 1140 AD” is preserved in the Tabulario della Rea Cappella Palatina. This would seem straightforward; but, as the late Ernst Kitzinger observed, the phrase die dedicationis ecclesie could mean that the charter was issued on an anniversary of the dedication, not on the day of the ceremony itself.

The year 1140 might seem to be independently confirmed, however, by the following marginal note in the late thirteenth-century Martyrologium of the Cappella Palatina.

28 April. On this day, the church of St Peter, the royal chapel in Palermo, was dedicated in the days of the glorious and magnificent King Roger, in the year of the incarnation of our Lord 1140. All Christians coming to this church on the aforesaid day of dedication have been granted, every year, an indulgence of six years and six quarantines for all the sins which they have truly confessed.

Unfortunately, this note is a marginal interpolation in a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century hand, and the circumstantial details concerning indulgences must also date from the late middle ages. As Ernst Kitzinger observed, the chronological information that it contains could, therefore, be derived from the foundation charter itself, and so it does not necessarily provide independent evidence that 1140 was the year of the dedication of the chapel.

Be that as it may, it is quite clear from the fact that the foundation charter refers to the construction of the Cappella Palatina in the past tense, that either construction was well underway, or the building of the chapel was completed, by 28 April 1140. We do not know when work began. It has usually been assumed that, when Archbishop Peter of Palermo granted parochial status to the “chapel founded in honour of the Blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, in the Upper Castle in Palermo,” in the year 1132, he was favouring the Cappella Palatina. If so, then construction could have been ongoing for eight years or more before the chapel’s dedication. But, Vladimir Zorić has recently argued that Archbishop Peter’s grant was made not to the present Cappella Palatina, but to an earlier palace chapel located in the so-called “crypt” beneath it. If he is right, and I believe
that he is, then we have no indication when work began upon the Cappella Palatina, except that it is unlikely to antedate Roger’s coronation on Christmas Day 1130.

The second piece of dating evidence, the Greek verse mosaic inscription round the base of the rotunda, presents more complicated difficulties. The inscription is badly damaged and has been much restored. It was originally executed in black tesserae upon a ground of silver which, in time, became so badly tarnished as to make much of the inscription illegible. In 1783, Santo Cardini extensively restored the inscriptions of the eastern part of the rotunda, from the bust of Elisha to that of Jeremiah, replacing the silver ground with light blue tesserae. Cardini was clearly assisted by scholars competent in Greek, for, all things considered, the accuracy and quality of the restored text is admirable. Cardini did little, however, to the western side of the rotunda, and, there, oxidation, missing letters, and the incompetent work of earlier restorers have combined to render much of the inscription illegible.9

It was read and translated by Otto Demus as follows:

Other kings of old erected sanctuaries to other Saints; but I, Roger, mighty ruling king, (dedicate this church) to the foremost of the Lord’s disciples, the leader and the archpriest Peter, to whom Christ entrusted His church, which He Himself had consecrated by the sacrifice of His blood... The third indiction... the fifty-first year in the correct measurement after 6000 and 600 years had elapsed in an ever moving cycle.10

The difficulty with this reading is that 6651 AM does not accord with the third indictional year.

The final dating clause falls almost entirely within the western and northern parts of the inscription which were not restored by Cardini. Following a long lacuna of two indecipherable verses, the date begins on the western arch of the crossing, between the representation of the Temple and the figure of Simeon, with the words ΕΝΑΙΚΤΙΩΝΟΣ ΤΡΙΚ, literally “… of indiction thrice…”. The word ΕΝΑΙΚΤΙΩΝΟΣ seems to be preceded by the letters ΨΗΨΙΜΩΝ, and Demus suggested that this might indicate either ΨΗΨΙΜΟΝ or ΨΗΨΙΜΩΝ, from the verb ψηψιμεῖν; here, presumably, in the standard medieval sense of “to count” or “to reckon” (not “to make mosaics”). After ΤΡΙΚ, the letters ΑΙΚΟΥ may be discerned. Perhaps the phrase may have read... ψηψιμεῖν (οτ εψηψιμεῖν) ἐνδικτιώνος τρις αἴσιον..., and meant something like ‘... reckoned [the] thrice auspicious indiction...’ – in which case, ‘thrice’ would not refer to the number of the indictional year. Alternatively, Buscemi may be right that the phrase originally read ‘thrice doubled’, a circumlocution for ‘sixth’ – although the letters now legible do not support this attractive solution.

The convoluted dating clause continues from the western corner of the northern arch:

ΕΤΟΥΣ ΠΑΡΑΡΕΧΟΝΤΟΣ ΑΚΡΙΒΕΙ ΑΛΟΓΩ
ΤΟΥ ΠΕΝΤΗΚΟΣΤΟΥ ΠΡΟΣ ΔΕ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΩΤΟΥ ΜΟΝΟΥ
ΠΑΡΑΔΡΑΜΟΥΧΟΗ ΧΙΛΙΑΔΩΝ ΕΓΚΑΦΩ
ΣΥΝΤΩΝ ΕΚΑΤΩΝ ΕΖΑΚΟΝ ΜΕΤΡΟΥΜΕΝΟΙ
(literally “... the passing, with precise reason, of the fiftieth year, plus one more year, in the course of the sixth millennium, with the sixth century computed.”)

The passage in square brackets is entirely Cardini’s restoration, but the crucial words “sixth millennium” and “sixth century” are the only possible reading. The rest of the inscription on this northern wall, moreover, is both original and legible, so that the year 6651 AM is secure. It follows that, whatever the original reading of the lacunose phrase giving the indiction, it must once have conveyed the sixth indictional year.11 The date of this inscription is therefore 6651 AM, indiction [VI], corresponding to 1143 AD, between 1 January and 31 August.

The third and most controversial piece of evidence for the inauguration of the Cappella Palatina is the sermon preached by Philagathos Kerameōs.12 The sermon is undated, but the introductory
rubric in two of the most reliable manuscripts reports that it was “Delivered in the chapel of the palace of Palermo for the feast of the Holy Apostles” (29 June, the Feast of St Peter and St Paul). 13 Most of the sermon is an exegesis of the Gospel (Matthew 16:13-19), but it opens with a long and detailed description (ἐκφρασις) of the Cappella Palatina. This has been translated into Latin by Francesco Scorzo and into Italian by Bruno Lavagnini, but I believe that the Appendix to this note includes the first full translation into English, in parallel with the Greek text in Rossi Taibbi’s edition. 14

It has generally been accepted that Philagathos preached this sermon in the same year as the dedication of the Cappella Palatina, on 29 June 1140. But, in 1975, Ernst Kitzinger questioned this assumption, and argued that it is more likely to have been written in the late 1140s or early ’50s. Kitzinger began by analysing the final words of the ekfrasis: “But time presses [me] to direct my discourse to the explanation of the Divine Gospels. Since we have dealt with the particulars [scil., of the building and its fittings] on the feast of the dedication, let us listen to the holy sayings’. In other words, Philagathos did deliver a speech celebrating the dedication (ἐγκαυματια), but on another and earlier date”. This sermon “must thus be dissociated from any consecration ceremony”. 15

In a translation of this passage into Italian, the late Bruno Lavagnini gave almost the opposite sense to the same words, and interpreted them as meaning that further discussion of the buildings and fittings was to be put off until after an encenia that was yet to happen; 16 in this, he followed Francesco Scorzo’s Latin translation of the editio princeps. 17 This reading cannot be justified: Philagathos’s grammar is distinctly classical, and there can be no reasonable doubt that his use of the aorist participle is intended to convey that the encenia had already happened.

What is not clear from the ekfrasis, however, is exactly what the encenia was, nor how long was the interval between it and Philagathos’s sermon. It is, as Kitzinger admits, tempting to assume that the encenia was the feast of the dedication referred to in the foundation charter, which, in all probability, occurred on 28 April 1140. In support of this, is Philagathos’s statement, elsewhere, that the word ‘encenia’ properly means the first consecration of a recently completed building. 18 If so, then the final phrase of the ekfrasis would refer to a longer description of the church and its fittings delivered on that occasion, only two months earlier; a description that would have been still fresh in the minds of the listeners to Philagathos’s sermon, two months later, on 29 June.

Ernst Kitzinger did not, however, succumb to this tempting solution. On the contrary, he argued that so early a date did not accord well with Philagathos’s description of the mosaics. These are mentioned twice: first, in general terms— the chapel is “glittering with mosaics”— but then in a more detailed and circumstantial passage: “Every wall is entirely covered with many-coloured marbles; the upper parts are occupied with gold mosaic, wherever they are not crowded with the host of holy images”. 19

There is, for once, unanimity that the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina were not the work of a single, intensive campaign. There is general agreement that those of the western part date from the reign of William I (1154-1166) or later; 20 and there is no doubt that Roger II was the patron of the mosaics of the dome and the drum, above the Greek inscription of 1143 already discussed. But, the date of the mosaics of the east end of the chapel is further complicated by stylistic considerations. The influence of the school of mosaicists which completed the apse mosaic at Cefalù in 1148 has been discerned in the Cappella Palatina; most extensively in the bust of Christ in the east end of the Pentecost vault in the south transept, and in that of St Paul in the southern side apse. 21 In his articles of 1949 and 1975, Kitzinger was inclined to see the same influence in the half-figures of some of the prophets in the drum of the dome. 22 He therefore concluded that the only mosaics which undoubtedly predate this influence from Cefalù are the Pantokrator and angels in the dome, and the seated evangelists and standing prophets and forerunners in the drum. 23 If only some of the latter were in place in June 1140, one would have to assume “a very slow progress in the execution of the rest of them”. Alternatively, if they were all completed by June 1140, there must have been “an interruption of several years followed by a new phase whose beginning— already overshadowed by the work at Cefalù—would be marked by the half-length figures of prophets and the inscription of 1143. Progress from here on, first into the crossing and then into the transept wings, would be continuous if still curiously slow”. 24
This chronological reconstruction would mean, that, if Philagathos’s sermon were to have been delivered in June 1140, it could have referred only to the mosaics of the dome and to some of the figures of the drum. Kitzinger thought this improbable, and therefore proposed that we take “the mosaic inscription of 1143 as a terminus post quem for Philagathos’ description. If we assume that the famous piece was written some time in the late ’40s or the early ’50s, the reference to mosaic becomes entirely natural and a more comfortable time span is gained also for the execution of all the other decorative features of which Philagathos speaks.”

The encomia to which Philagathos refers in the final phrase of the ekfrasis would have been either a second consecration of the chapel after its decoration was substantially complete, or, more probably, an anniversarium of the original dedication. Kitzinger concludes with the following words:

I submit, then, that it was ... towards the end of Roger’s reign, that Philagathos composed a detailed ekphrasis of the church; and that, having recited that piece on April 28, he then used an abridgement of his description as an introduction to a homily in honour of St. Peter, delivered in the same church on June 29 of the same year. ... The latest possible year for the two orations is 1153, for Roger died in February 1154.

By 1992, however, Kitzinger had come to revise his opinion as to the influence of the mosaicists of Cefalù upon the mosaics in the drum of the Cappella Palatina. Now, he discerned it only in the busts of Habakkuk, Hosea, and Malachi, in the arches of the crossing, below the inscription of 1143. Moreover, presumably because of the chronological implications of his conclusions as to the relationship between the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina and those of S. Maria dell’Ammiraglio, he also edged earlier the date of the influence from Cefalù. In 1990, he stated plainly that the mosaics in which the influence of Cefalù is apparent “can hardly be earlier than 1146 or 1147”; and, in 1992, he assigned them to the mid 1140s, or immediately thereafter. Moreover, in a footnote upon the date of Philagathos’s sermon, Kitzinger seemed less convinced by the late date he had proposed in 1975, and was even willing to entertain a new solution proposed by Bruno Lavagnini.

Lavagnini had sought to assign the sermon to 29 June 1140. His argument hung upon the significance of the silken curtains described by Philagathos:

Those present could clearly see the stalactite ceiling and the mosaic decoration of the walls, but what is missing is any reference to the mosaics of the dome in which the bust of the Pantokrator is enthroned, and to the mosaic which is above the royal throne on the west wall showing Christ enthroned and flanked by the apostles Peter and Paul. It might be permissible to suppose that the decoration was not entirely complete at the moment when the sermon was recited, and that the silken veils were hung to hide those parts of the chapel from which the mosaic decoration was still missing.

As Lavagnini implies, the more detailed and circumstantial of Philagathos’s two descriptions of the mosaics clearly locates them on the upper parts of the walls of the chapel, above the multi-coloured marble decoration of the lower walls. This excludes the possibility that Philagathos is referring to the mosaics of the dome and the drum, and strongly supports Kitzinger’s contention that the inscription of 1143 must constitute a terminus post quem for the ekfrasis.

We have already seen that there is general agreement that the mosaics of the nave and the aisles date from the reign of William I; we may therefore leave these aside, and concentrate upon those of the sanctuary. About these, there have been essentially two different views. On the one hand, Otto Demus argued that the break between the styles of Roger II and William I ran right through the mosaics of the sanctuary. He explained this breach by arguing that it was William I who opened a royal box in the north wall of the north transept, and accordingly altered his father’s programme.
to suit this new perspective. On the other hand, Ernst Kitzinger attributed the royal box to Roger II as part of the original, unified design for the decoration of the sanctuary. With the exception of the mosaics of the central apse, which were reworked at the same time as the nave and aisles were decorated, and discounting later repairs and restorations, Kitzinger ascribed all the mosaics of the sanctuary to the reign of Roger II. His interpretation has survived the test of half a century without any successful challenge, and has recently been used as one of the foundation stones of William Tronzo’s new study of the Cappella Palatina under Roger II.

The mosaics of the dome and the drum may be dated with some confidence to before the Greek inscription of 1143; but, as we have seen, these are clearly not the mosaics to which Philagathos refers. The dating evidence for the other mosaics of the sanctuary is primarily stylistic. Figures in the south transept and on the inner faces of the north and south arches of the crossing all clearly show the influence of the school of mosaicists which completed the decoration of the apse at Cefalù in 1148. It is not known precisely when they began their work; the foundation stone of Cefalù was laid in June 1131, and the construction of the east end must have been completed by April 1145, when Roger II gave the cathedral two porphyry sarcophagi to be placed in the choir. Perhaps the great apse may have taken as long as five years to decorate, and so a date of c.1143-1148 for its mosaics is not an unreasonable supposition. There is no good cause, however, to conclude that the influences from Cefalù should have reached the Cappella Palatina only after the decoration of the apse of the cathedral was completed. Indeed, there are strong indications in the mosaics of S. Maria dell’Ammiraglio that this could not have been so.

The mosaic decoration of S. Maria dell’Ammiraglio, the personal foundation of Roger II’s chief minister, George of Antioch, was undoubtedly completed before his death in the summer of 1151. Much of that decoration was modelled upon the mosaics of the sanctuary of the Cappella Palatina, including the scene of the Nativity which, in the royal chapel, is situated between the busts of Christ and St Paul, two of the figures most evidently influenced by Cefalù. There are also direct links between S. Maria and Cefalù, such as the figures of the apostles in the vaults of the lateral cross, which were modelled directly upon the apostles in the lower registers of the apse of the cathedral. On these grounds, Kitzinger assigns the mosaic decoration of S. Maria to the years c.1146-1151.

We thus have three independent perspectives from which to assess the date of the mosaics of the walls of the east end of the Cappella Palatina, which, as we have seen, must be those described by Philagathos. First, they are extremely unlikely to predate the inscription of 1143, which separates them from the earlier mosaics of the dome and the drum. Second, they include figures which were clearly influenced by the mosaics of the apse at Cefalù, dated to c.1143-1148. And, third, they themselves served as models for much of the mosaic decoration of S. Maria dell’Ammiraglio, dated to c.1146-1151. This suggests that the mosaics of the sanctuary of the Cappella Palatina, below the rotunda, must date from the mid 1140s, perhaps from c.1143-c.1147.

We need, now, to return briefly to Lavagnini’s suggestion that the silken curtains described by Philagathos were employed on the occasion of the feast of St Peter and St Paul to conceal those parts of the mosaic decoration which were still under construction. If he is correct, this can only refer to the mosaics of the sanctuary, for, as we have already seen, those of the nave date to the reign of William I or later. William Tronzo, on the contrary, argues that these silken curtains were hung in the nave: “After orientating the listener by giving him a view of the chapel as a whole, Philagathos discusses first the sanctuary and then the nave, of which he says: ‘Many tapestries were also hung there...’”. However, a close reading of the ekfrasis does not support this assertion.

After a general impression of the chapel, Philagathos describes the church in greater detail, beginning with the nave and moving steadily eastwards into the sanctuary. He starts with the ceiling of the nave, and then moves down the columns, to the pavement. He proceeds to the marble decoration of the walls of the sanctuary, and then to the mosaics above. Next, he turns to the chancel screen, and passes behind it to the altar—after which, the rest is silence. He then draws back to consider “the whole church”: its cave-like echo, its silken curtains, its altar lamps, and, finally, its gold and silver vessels for the celebration of the Holy Rite.
In short, Philagathos places the silken curtains neither in the sanctuary, nor in the nave, but rather treats them, like the lamps and the gold and silver vessels, as part of the furnishings of the whole church. Indeed, no less than lamps and vessels, curtains would have been standard in the decoration of any prestigious church, and would have been hung primarily, but not exclusively, from rails stretched between the columns – as is shown in a late twelfth-century depiction of the Cappella Palatina⁴. For further evidence that curtains were normally hung in rich churches, one has only to think of the textiles that Robert Guiscard saw adorning Montecassino when he first visited the abbey in 1076,⁴¹ and of the countless gifts of curtains and hangings made to St Peter's in Rome that are recorded in the Liber Pontificalis.⁴² Pace Lavagnini and Tronzo, it follows that there is no reason to assume that the silken curtains described by Philagathos were hung in order to conceal the unfinished state of the mosaics. In any case, Philagathos would have passed over such imperfections without comment; his task was to give an idealised description of the chapel, praising it and its founder, not to report upon the progress of its decoration.

To return to the main point, the mosaics of the sanctuary were probably laid c.1143–c.1147, and Philagathos's sermon, which includes a description of the mosaics, cannot be earlier than the mosaics. In particular, it cannot have been delivered on 29 June 1140, when work on the mosaics is unlikely to have started. The Greek inscription beneath the rotunda implies that the chapel had been consecrated to St Peter at some point during the first eight months of 1143, perhaps on the anniversary of the foundation – 28 April 1143. By this date, as we have seen, the mosaic decoration of the sanctuary would have been well advanced. Philagathos's claim that 'every wall is entirely covered with gold-mosaics' cannot be taken literally – the mosaics of the nave were not yet begun – and, had the mosaics of the sanctuary been unfinished, he would not have drawn attention to such imperfection in his ekkfrasis. The encenia to which Philagathos refers in the final phrase of his ekkfrasis was very probably the consecration of 1143, and there is no need to follow Kittzinger and posit a third consecration in the late 1140s or early 50s. Philagathos refers to the encenia as if it had occurred recently, and implies that the full description of the whole building delivered on that occasion would still have been fresh in the minds of his audience. It is therefore probable that Philagathos delivered his sermon on 29 June 1143, two months after the reconsecration of the chapel celebrated in the inscription.

This conclusion to the discussion of the date of Philagathos's sermon provides us with a terminus ante quem for the muqarnas ceiling of the nave which it so unmistakably describes: it must have been completed before c.1143-c.1147, and, in all probability, was finished before 29 June 1143. But when was it begun? Only Lucio Trizzino has suggested that the ceiling may not have belonged to the original design of the building, arguing that “[the ceiling] of the central nave [is] so low that it might be thought an addition, or a later transformation”.⁴³ In his published work, Trizzino offers no evidence in support of this assertion, but, from an earlier typescript of the same work, Eve Borsook derived the statement that his “measurements of the nave show that the south wall splay outwards 22 cm. from a vertical plumb line, while the north wall is 18 cm. out of plumb”.⁴⁴ Borsook summarises Trizzino's unpublished conclusions as follows: “There may have been an unsuccessful attempt to vault the nave as well [as the two transepts], because the walls at the top of the arcade splay outwards and the wooden ceiling cuts off some of the original windows of the once higher walls”.⁴⁵

Along both sides of the nave, the moulding that forms the lower border of the ceiling does indeed overlap the points of the arches of the windows of the clerestory, so that the wooden boards of the moulding have been cut to fit the shape of the arches beneath (Fig.1).⁴⁶ What is more, the moulding clearly overlaps and very slightly obscures the topmost portions of some of the mosaic compositions, including the first day of the Creation and the construction of Noah's ark.⁴⁷ At first sight, this stratigraphy raises the possibility that the ceiling is not just an afterthought, but one that post-dates the mosaics of the nave which, we have already seen, belong to the reign of William I. If this were to be so, it would follow that the ceiling could not be earlier than 1154.

The moulding beneath the muqarnas ceiling consists of three elements (Figs 1 & 2): first, a very narrow moulding, flat or slightly concave and no more than 2-3 cm. high, that effects the
transition from the muqarnas ceiling above, which projects much further from the wall than does the moulding; next, a flat fillet, some 15 cm. high; and, below it, a second concave moulding that is approximately twice the height of the fillet. Together, these three elements form a zone of transition which carries the projecting surfaces of the muqarnas to the plane of the wall.

Along the length of the uppermost, very narrow, concave moulding there originally ran a single ribbon of decoration, painted in black on a gold ground, with a double reversed palmette motif (Fig. 2). This ribbon is carried across the fillet and onto the lower concave moulding, to which it originally formed the lower border (Figs 1 & 2). The effect of this ribbon-interlace is to unite the decoration of the three elements of the moulding into a single composition.9

Although the decoration of the fillet has been much damaged and repainted, sufficient of the painting survives to reconstruct its original appearance. The ribbon-interlace was carried from the upper hollow moulding on to the fillet, where it outlines long cartouches with pointed ends, separated by small rhombuses (Figs 1 & 2). The cartouches were emphasised by an inner border of “Sasanian pearl motif”.10 They were filled either with a running vine scroll, or with a version of egg-and-dart so stylized as to resemble pseudo-cufic.

The most conspicuous feature of the lower moulding is now the Latin inscription of 1478, which records the restoration of the ceiling of the nave begun by King John of Aragon, and completed by Ferdinand the Catholic (Fig. 2, lower right).11 The inscription is written in gold letters upon a dark blue ground, contained in cartouches with rounded ends, which occupy the full height of the moulding. The cartouches are outlined with the same ribbon-interlace that is carried down from the upper hollow moulding and across the fillet to form the lower border of the whole composition. In those medallions and cartouches which are not overpainted by the 15th-century inscription are busts of seated drinkers and pairs of peacocks (Fig.2, lower centre and left).

On the north and south sides of the nave, the cartouches which carry the inscription are separated by the arches which accommodate the windows of the clerestory (Fig.1). The same ribbon-interlace is employed to outline these arches; and is looped to form two oval medallions, each of which is filled with a peacock. Inside the ribbon-work, the line of the arches is further emphasised by a double band of pearl-border, framing a band of stylised egg-and-dart. At the point of each arch, the pearl-border is looped into a circular medallion, which is filled by a multi-rayed sun-burst with a human head at its centre. On the east and west sides of the nave, the original decoration, which was between the cartouches now filled by the Aragonese inscription, is missing.

The style of the original painting of the moulding is extremely close to that of the muqarnas ceiling so that, if the two are not contemporary, they are close in time. It is significant, however, that no attempt has been made to interlace the framing borders of the ceiling with those of the moulding. More significant still is the fact that the characteristic ribbon-interlace of the moulding, with its distinctive double reversed palmette motif painted in fine black lines on a gold ground, is not to be found on the muqarnas ceiling itself. These observations suggest the following constructional sequence. First, in all probability before 29 June 1143, the muqarnas ceiling over the nave was built and painted: nothing is known of the decoration of the walls of the nave at this time.12 Next, during the reign of William I (1154-1166), the mosaics were set on the walls of the nave, beneath the muqarnas ceiling. And, finally, very shortly thereafter, the moulding was added to effect a smooth transition from the muqarnas to the mosaics.

This conclusion to the foregoing discussion of the moulding below the ceiling has returned us to the question with which it began: if the muqarnas ceiling was completed by c.1143-c.1147, at what date was it begun? We have already seen that the chapel must have been dedicated on or before the date of the foundation charter of 28 April 1140, and that its structure was already well advanced if not completed by that date. Although work upon the ceiling could have begun earlier than 1140, this now seems unlikely, particularly in view of Vladimir Zorić’s study of a putative predecessor to the Cappella Palatina.13 It therefore seems prudent to conclude that work upon the ceiling is unlikely to have begun before c.1140. In short, the construction and painting of the ceiling may be assigned to the years c.1140-c.1147, with a strong probability that it was already completed by 29 June 1143.
1. For the most recent attempt to resolve it, see Tronzo (1997), pp. 14-16, 28-96.


6. Brühl (1987), p. 136, ll. 12-16: Aspirante nobis stiataque septiformis Salvatoris gratia ad honorem Dei, causas nasci cordia nostra prosperatur in melius, et beate virgini Marie omniumque sanctorum, titulo beati Petri, apostolorum principis, intra nostrum regale palatinum, quod est in urbe Panormi, ecclesiam fabricari fecimus summam devotione. See, however, Kitzinger’s warning (Kitzinger [1975]), p. 304, n. 13), that a charter of 1132 also refers in the past tense to the construction of San Salvatore di Cefalu (Sparta [1862]), 2nd series, no. III, pp. 423-428, esp. p. 424, ll. 7-10, but only ten months after its foundation stone was laid (Pirri [1733], vol. 2, pp. 389, 798-799; Caspar [1904], p. 511; White [1938], p. 189, n. 4).


12. For Philagathos (who was once wrongly known as Theophanes Caramus), archbishop of Taormina—or, as Rossi Taibbi (1969), p. li, puts it, as “un fantomatico plurinome arcivescovo di Taormina [Teofane, Gregorio, Giovanni] sopranominato Cerame”); see Ehrhard (1939-1943), part 1, vol. 3/1, pp. 631-681; Rossi Taibbi (1965) pp. 20, 79-81; Rossi Taibbi (1969), pp. xvi-xvii, livi; Lavagnini (1992), Philagathos’ baptismal name was probably Philip, and it is far from certain that his cognomen was Keraimos (and not ὁ Κεραίμος οὗ τοῦ Κεραίμου). If it was indeed Κεραίμος, it need not indicate that he came from Cerami in Sicily; the name is a common one and generally derives from the profession of κεραίμος ‘a potter’. Philagathos is primarily associated with the Calabrian monastery of Rossano. Although the rubric of one sermon indicates that it was preached in the church of St Andrew in his native town – Rossi Taibbi (1969), Homily XVIII, p. 118 – the name of the town is not given, and no church dedicated to St Andrew is known at Cerami in the twelfth century.


21. Kitzinger (1992), pp. 11-12; respectively figs 253-256 (cf. Demus [1949], pl. 2), and figs 117, 119-120 (cf. Demus [1949], pl. 4B).
27. See below.
32. See above, note 19. For a full discussion of this marble decoration, see Tronzo (1997), pp. 38-43.
37. See note 6, above.
42. Peter of Eboli (1994), p. 43 (f. 97*).
44. Liber Pontificalis (1884-92), passim. See also the intercolumnar hangings depicted above the altar of St Peter’s in Peter of Eboli (1994), p. 75 (f. 105*).
50. This is not well illustrated in publications of the ceiling: see, for example, Monneret de Villard (1950), figs 45, 54 & 63. I have benefited immensely from the excellent photographic survey of the ceiling, made under the direction of Prof. Robert Hillenbrand of the University of Edinburgh, and financed by The Barakat Trust, a copy of which is held in the slide collection of the Centre for Islamic Art and Archaeology at Oxford. See slide nos 16100-16102, 16104, 16105, 16112, 16119, 16123, 16135, 16139, 16143.
51. Three dots, one dash, three dots, in white, with red centres, on a dark blue ground, with red borders above and below.
52. Monneret de Villard (1950), pp. 21-22. Tronzo (1997), pp. 52, 61, 166, is nodding when he refers to this as an “Angevin inscription”.
53. Tronzo (1997), pp. 41-43; but see also the discussion, above, of the silken curtains.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Figure 1: Cappella Palatina, ceiling: detail of the moulding on the south wall of the nave, showing how it is shaped to accommodate the windows of the clerestory. (© University of Edinburgh.)

Figure 2: Cappella Palatina, ceiling: detail of the moulding on the north wall of the nave, showing both the original decoration with peacocks (left) and seated drinker (centre), and the Aragonese inscription (right). (© University of Edinburgh.)
APPENDIX

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE CAPPELLA PALATINA BY PHILAGATHOS OF KERAMEOS

Delivered in the church of the palace of Palermo on the Feast of the Holy Apostles

1. O city, I rejoice with you, and with you, sacred church of the palaces, that all ages have flocked to you today, that all who are respected for their rank, and so many priests, have honoured this festival with their presence. The first cause of all these events is God, from whom arise and originate all the blessings of mankind, but the second is a pious ruler; a benevolent guardian when he regards his subjects, who reserves his anger for his enemies. Now, he, having provided us with many, great benefits, and having surpassed all his contemporaries and predecessors in piety and magnanimity, just as the blazing sun overshines the splendour of the stars, has given another proof of that truly great and kindly spirit, in this delightful church of the Apostles, which he has built as if a foundation and a protection for his palaces; large, most lovely, and distinguished by a fresh beauty; brilliant with lights, shining with gold, glittering with mosaics, and bright with paintings. He who has seen it many times, marvels when he sees it again, and is as astonished as if he were seeing it for the first time, his gaze wandering everywhere.

2. As to the ceiling, one can never see enough of it; it is wonderful to look at and to hear about. It is decorated with delicate carvings, variously formed like little coffers; all flashing with gold, it imitates the heavens when, through the clear air, the host of stars shines everywhere. Most beautiful columns support the arches, raising the ceiling to an extraordinary height. The most holy floor of the church actually resembles a spring meadow because of the many-coloured marbles of the mosaics, as if it were adorned with flowers; except that flowers wither and change, while this meadow is never-fading and everlasting, and within itself maintains eternal spring. Every wall is entirely covered with many-coloured marbles; the upper parts are occupied with gold mosaics, wherever they are not crowned with the host of holy images. As to the place of the inexpressible holy mysteries, a screen of marbles surrounds the presbytery on all sides. Within this, one can linger and stay with safety, gazing the eye with the spectacle. This is also a bannet, lest anyone rash and unconsecrated should attempt to cross into the innermost sanctuaries.

3. The sacred altar, which flashes with the sparkling of silver and gold, amazes the beholder; but whatever else is there shall be honoured by our silence. The whole church, just like a cave, softly joins in the singing of the sacred hymns with its own voice, because the echo causes the sound to return upon itself. A great many curtains are
hung, the fabric of which is threads of silk, woven with gold and various dyes, that the Phoenicians have embroidered with wonderful skill and elaborate artistry. A mass of lamps vie with each other, so to speak, to illuminate the church with their never-sleeping flames, making the night as bright as the day. Who has words for the number and the beauty of the gold and silver vessels destined for the holy rite? But time presses me to direct my discourse to the explanation of the Divine Gospels. Since we have dealt with the particulars on the encenia, let us listen to the holy sayings.