



This map of the known world at the time, "Tabula Rogeriana," as it is called in English, was commissioned by Roger II of Sicily around 1138. It was created by geographer Muhammad al-Idrisi and completed in 1154 nearly fifteen years in the making. —Album/Alamy

NORMAN SICILY circa 1061–1194

A culturally diverse society that worked

ONCE THERE WAS A KINGDOM in which Muslims, Jews, Roman Catholics, and Byzantine Orthodox Christians all lived together in peace. It was ruled by tolerant kings, the descendants of Viking raiders, who filled their administrations with talented Muslim, Jewish, Greek, and Latin officials. The land became a center of commerce, science, and geography. Their architecture borrowed from Ancient Greek, Roman, European, Byzantine, and Arabic traditions, blending them into an eclectic whole. The kingdom, based in Sicily and southern Italy, served as a regional breadbasket, growing grain for areas throughout the Mediter-

anean, and the country became rich on the gold and silver for which they traded their wheat and barley, citrus, sugar, and silks. For a time, it was one of the most prosperous and well-connected trading centers in the Mediterranean, rivalling Constantinople and Venice in importance. It ruled the central Mediterranean, with powerful warships propelled by 100 oarsmen and mounted with brass nozzles that spewed flaming oil the length of a ship. They demanded a toll for safe passage from ships carrying east-west trade and brought about the economic integration of Muslim North Africa with Christian Europe, even as the Crusades were going on.

The Norman kingdom of Sicily was founded by Norman warriors who were conquering Sicily (1061) at the same time that William the Conqueror (ca. 1028–1087) and his allies were bringing England under Norman rule (1066). Roger I (1031–1101), who took control of Sicily from Muslim emirs, was in fact related to William of Normandy, and born just after him in northwest France. The effects of Norman conquest are still present: the current king of England, Charles III, has a continuous line of descent from William the Conqueror stretching across twenty-eight generations.

The Normans were also trading and traveling down the rivers of

eastern Europe, seeking commerce with Constantinople and the Islamic world. They conquered a vast territory from Sweden to the Black Sea between 882 and 1240. The Norman Rurikid dynasty established their capital at Kiev, and the Rurikids eventually combined their power and legitimacy with the emerging House of Romanov in 1598. (King Charles III is also a descendant of the Romanovs and Norman Rurikids.)

The extension of Norman control across western Europe and the Mediterranean helped stimulate great change in Europe. Dozens of small, self-contained kingdoms were merging into larger nation-states, and large cities began to emerge from regional trading centers. Populations were growing, and Europe was beginning to engage more with the Islamic states in the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, Portugal, and southern Italy. That interaction was accelerated by the Norman conquests of Sicily, southern Italy, Malta, Cyprus, and the coasts of what are today Syria, Lebanon, and Israel.

The kingdom that Roger I set up in Sicily was remarkable for its diverse cultural make-up, and for its economic success, which was built on this diversity. The Norman conquerors spoke Norman French, but Arabic remained the most-spoken language on the island, and most official records of administration and commerce were kept in Arabic. Greek was also widely spoken because the Byzantine empire had controlled Sicily between 535 and 827. One of Roger I's most prominent advisors was the Greek leader Christodoulos, who rose to be his chief administrator, known as the "Emir of Emirs." While the religion of the Norman elite was Roman Catholicism, they had a policy of religious tolerance within which people could practice their own religion. This extended to jurisprudence, where Muslims could be judged in Muslim courts, with the practice extending to Jews and Christians. The Norman rulers had



Qur'anic inscription on the left pillar of the entrance to the Cathedral of Palermo
—Matthias Süßen/Wikimedia Commons

a position of "Apostolic Legate" that had overarching religious authority but typically stayed out of religious affairs. There were mosques, synagogues, and Christian churches all over Sicily, as well as religious schools associated with each of these faiths. The Norman rulers and their children were tutored by Greek, Muslim, and Christian teachers.

The Jewish community on Sicily had existed for a thousand years by the time the Normans arrived, going back to the time of the Roman Empire. In fact, it is one of the oldest communities in the Jewish diaspora. They had maintained a continuous presence while under Roman control, then

under the Byzantines and Muslims. Benjamin de Tudela (flourished 1150), the renowned Jewish traveler of the twelfth century, visited Sicily around 1165 and made the following observations about the island:

It is a land full of everything good, with gardens and plantations. Here most of the [Christian] pilgrims assemble to cross over to Jerusalem, as this is the best crossing. [From Messina] it is about two days' journey to Palermo, which is a large city. Here is the palace of King William. Palermo contains about 1,500 Jews and a large number of



Interior of the Montreale Cathedral, Sicily
—Berthold Werner/Wikimedia Commons

Christians and Mohammedans.
It is in a district abounding in
springs and brooks of water, a land
of wheat and barley, likewise of
gardens and plantations.

Overall, de Tudela and other contemporaries reported around 4,000 to 5,000 Jewish families on the island.

Sicily was not unusual for having many Jews in a largely Muslim society. Until the last century, Jewish communities were common in nearly all Muslim lands. Benjamin de Tudela wrote that he felt more at home in Muslim-controlled areas than Christian kingdoms. When he travelled from Crusader-held Jerusalem to Damascus, he commented, “the air was heavy for me in Christian-ruled Jerusalem...I feel more comfortable now that I am again in this lush and Moslem land.” While in Messina on Sicily he said with some surprise that the town, “still sounds and behaves as though it were a Mohammadan city.”

Muslim traveler Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217) also passed through Sicily on his

pilgrimage to Mecca in 1183–5. He was surprised by the diversity of the king’s court: “The character of their king is surprising, for his decent conduct and his employment of Muslims . . . He puts a lot of trust in the Muslims, relying on them in his affairs, from important matters of business to the extent that even the supervisor of his kitchen is a Muslim.” At the same time, the Normans were careful to keep strong relations with the Pope and the Papal States to their north.

THE ARCHITECTURE of Norman Sicily reflects its cultural diversity. The Montreale Cathedral in Palermo, built in the later 1100s, appears in some aspects like a sturdy Romanesque building, and in other parts like Islamic architecture comparable to what one might find in Baghdad or al-Andalus. Inside, however, its elaborate glass and gold mosaics look like a Byzantine church from Constantinople. The beautiful stone cloisters are carved with complex Qur’anic-style arabesques. Norman-Arab buildings combined the rounded arches of Romanesque design with the pointed arches of Arab architecture. The pointed arches supported a building’s weight more efficiently, requiring less massive wall supports. This enabled wider spans and larger windows. The pointed arch was adopted for the great Gothic cathedrals of western Europe, giving them their characteristic well-lighted, graceful interior spaces.

Some of the Norman kingdoms’ greatest accomplishments were in science and geography. Muhammad al-Idrisi (1100–1165) was an advisor in Roger II (1095–1154)’s court and one of the most important geographers in the Islamic world. Commissioned by Roger, he created the most detailed map of the world available at the time. Researched and drawn between 1138 and 1154, the “Tabula Rogeriana” remained in use in Europe and the Islamic world for centuries. Al-Idrisi describes the work as a collaboration with Roger II, adding that his

patron was, “a man of vast intelligence, energy, and thirst for knowledge.” The map in all its detail did not have a big impact in Europe before the 1500s because it only existed in several copies in Arabic. The Latin version, kept by the Norman kings, was destroyed in a fire. Here is how al-Idrisi described the shape of the earth: “. . . [W]hat can be gleaned from the discussions of the philosophers, the leading scholars, and the experts in astronomy, is that the earth is round as a ball. The water cleaves to it, resting atop it in natural inertia, not leaving it. The earth and the water are fixed within the sphere like yoke in the belly of the egg.” He computed the circumference of the globe as 37,000 kilometers, only about 10 percent off from the planet’s actual size.

Norman Sicily’s great advantage over other trading centers like Pisa, Genoa, and even Venice, was its connection to Islamic markets. While Venice controlled a lot of trade in exotic goods from south and east Asia, it did not have a large permanent Muslim population. Venice, like Genoa and Pisa, did not allow the building of mosques. On Sicily, Ibn Jubayr described the mosques as “countless.” This led to strong trade connections with the Levant and northern Africa, from Egypt to the straits of Gibraltar. The island’s location placed it at the center of trade involving Europe, the Byzantine Empire, North Africa, and Islamic Spain (al-Andalus), as well as a port and staging ground for maritime Crusades to the eastern Mediterranean. The Norman kingdom controlled the central Mediterranean for much of its existence, enabling it to provide safe transit for Crusaders (as well as providing grain and livestock to those who opposed them.)

The bulk of Norman Sicily’s trade was in grain, textiles, livestock, and other agricultural goods. A smaller part of their trade economy was in goods such as spices and silk from east Asia, and gold from sub-Saharan Africa. Part of this trade involved the



Exterior of the Montreale Cathedral, Sicily –Holger Uwe Schmitt/Wikipedia

transshipment of slaves. The slaves included war captives from Byzantine, Islamic, and Christian raids, and also Slavs from eastern Europe (the source of the term *slave*, via the Byzantine Greek term *sklabos*), who were traded into the Islamic world. There was a demand for Slavs, called *saqaliba*, in Islamic countries in domestic or military roles, and particularly as guards in the courts of Caliphs. Slavery and the trade in enslaved people gradually faded in Sicily, but was not officially outlawed until the nineteenth century.

Descended from Norse raiders who fought from longboats, the Normans had a long tradition of seamanship, coastal raiding, trading, and conflict with other naval powers. In the Mediterranean they adopted the Byzantine warships called *dromons*—long, narrow ships powered by oars and sail, and heavily reinforced for ramming other ships. Hundreds were built

for the Normans in Arab shipyards in Messina, Palermo, and Trapani. Another advantage they adopted from the Greeks was the use of something called “Greek fire.” This was a terror weapon in the Middle Ages, probably more powerful in peoples’ imagination than in battle. “Greek fire” was made by heating pitch, petroleum, sulfur, and other volatile ingredients—the exact recipe for the concoction is not known—in a sealed copper boiler above a fire in the belly of the ship. The boiling combustible liquid built up its own pressure, and was additionally pressurized by human-driven pumps. When the bow of the warship drew near its adversary a valve was released and the boiling oil was sprayed out over a pilot fire attached to the nozzle and set ablaze in midair.

Descriptions of the use of this weapon say it could spew fire thirty meters, about the length of one of these ships, and of course do terrible

damage to a wooden ship and its crew. The oil remained burning on the surface of the water and could set fire to ships trying to pass through it. It was also incredibly dangerous for the ship carrying this device, since it was very sensitive to heat and pressure and given to exploding before it could be used, destroying its own ship and crew. There are descriptions of “Greek fire” going back to the seventh century and battles between Muslims and Byzantine forces, and references in Greek, Latin, and Arabic sources into the twelfth century.

THE NORMAN EXPERIMENT

in Sicily and southern Italy may have been a victim of its own success because its power and wealth attracted the envy of other European powers. The last of the powerful Norman rulers, William II (1154–1189), launched a series of disastrous military ventures, first against the powerful Egyptian Sultanate led by Saladin (1137–1193) in 1174 and then against the Byzantine empire (1185). Both ended in enormously expensive defeats, and then, in 1189, William II died at age thirty-five without naming an heir. In 1194, the German House of Hohenstaufen conquered the weakened Sicily and southern Italy almost without a fight and brought it into the orbit of the Holy Roman Empire. Over the next century of rule by the Germans, then the French, then the Spanish, the rich multicultural character of Sicily was ended. The government became more and more dominated by Christians of European descent, who pushed out Muslim, Greek, and Jewish officials. The religious freedom of the Norman kingdom was gradually extinguished, ending with the expulsion of Jews (and most Muslims) in 1492.

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