On the Trail of Frederick II
# The Rediscovery of Medieval Architecture in Southern Italy and 19th Century European Nationalism

In 1804, Karl Friedrich Schinkel takes his first trip to Italy, visiting the whole peninsula from the North to Sicily. In his letters to his friend Johann Friedrich Unger and to his master David Gilly, we don't find any trace of fascination for the ancient ruins – shared by generations of travelers and architects – or even any interest in ancient Greek and Roman architecture. By contrast, the most famous German neoclassical architect seems to direct his attention towards the "buildings from the early Medieval time and even from the Arab period, which show the true imprint of a philosophical sense for art and depth of character" [1].

Then, one might wonder what is happening to the rigorous neoclassical aesthetics and to Winckelmann's canons. Does Schinkel's statement express the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time, or is it instead the product of his personal artistic sensibility, curiosity and analytical skills? Probably both. Schinkel's work is extraordinarily original and pioneering, but it is true that the second half of the 18th century witnesses a big change both in the theory and in the perception of art. Indeed, between Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) and the publication of Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) – two cornerstones of the new artistic sensibility – a process happens that will ultimately bring to radically new aesthetic categories and expressive possibilities. The notion of the sublime and such values as asymmetry, polychromy and stylistic contamination reflect a new conception of beauty that lies at the heart of the European Gothic movement.

K. F. Schinkel, Palermo, Cathedral, 1804
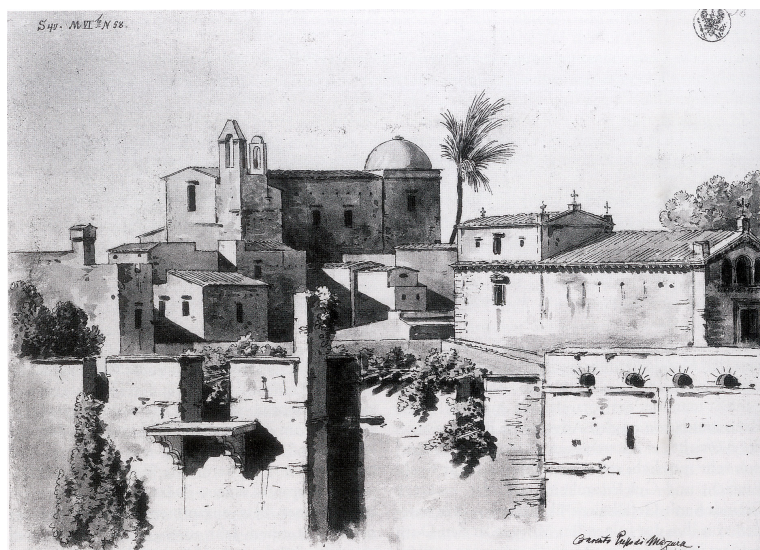
K. F. Schinkel, Sicilian Village, 1804

The Construction of National Identities: Romanticism, Nationalism and Historicism

In the 19th century, all over Europe, both the emergence of nationalism and the romantic criticism of the universalistic ideology of the Enlightenment pave the way to the revaluation of what Séroux D'Agincourt's called "the history of art's missing link", namely the forgotten Middle Ages, which for a long time have been considered a dark period of decadence and decline. After the great neoclassical utopia, every European nation – from France to Germany, from Finland to Hungary – goes in search of its own origins and its own cultural identity. In this process, a key role is played by the rediscovery of a proper, "national" architecture, by then mostly identified with the Gothic or other artistic expressions of the Middle Ages.

Largely driven by a patriotic and nationalistic agenda, this process of rediscovery of the Medieval art and architecture is part of a broader phenomenon, namely the construction of the nation-state. The nation is here understood not as a geographical and political reality, but as a wider and more elusive entity – historical, as well as cultural, artistic, mythological, and even imaginary – which had its roots in an ideal past, whether near or far (chronologically and geographically). As it is well known, the entire European Gothic movement (in its diffusion and variety of inflections, one of the most important and significant in the history of architecture between the 18th and the 20th century) acquires an explicitly political significance.

The importance of the arts in the construction of national identities has been extensively investigated . Among the arts, architecture has always had a special role in expressing each country's national character and image; and its use for political purposes, as an instrument to promote or legitimize particular nationalistic messages, can be observed during the whole 19th century and well into the 20th century. My approach is however quite different, as my main objective is to provide an analysis of the process which led some European countries to seek their roots outside their national borders, and to rediscover a piece of their "national" architecture in a foreign country.

The interest in the Southern Middle Ages: terminological and chronological clarification

First, a preliminary remark about the expression "Southern Gothic" and its stylistic definition, which is quite problematic. What is the meaning of this term and does it in fact identify a "style"? From the Normans to the Swabians, the Anjou to the Aragonese, successive dynasties in Southern Italy from the 11th to the 15th centuries made up a variegated and shifting political framework, and contributed to the flowering of an architectural culture extraordinarily rich in its influences. It is sufficient to recall Camillo Boito's expressive definition of Sicilian art, as "romano-bisantino-arabo-normanno-sicula".
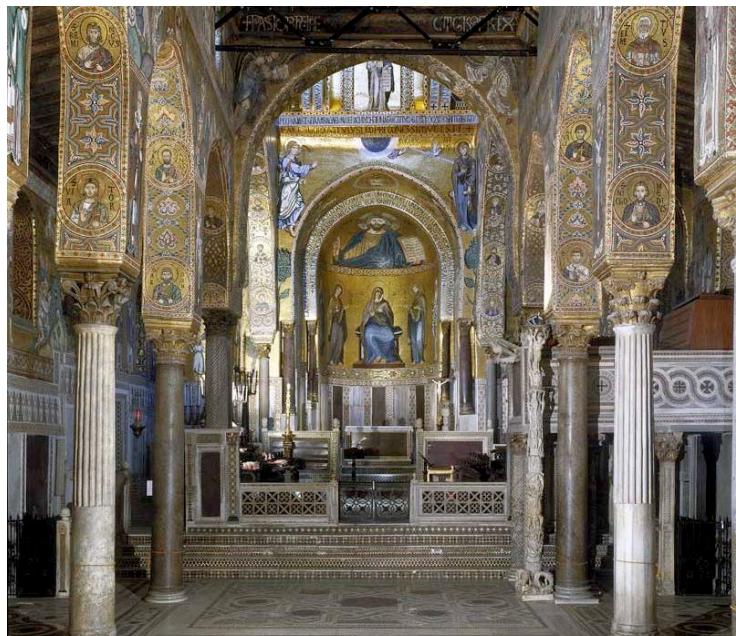This stylistic variety, together with the many Medieval artistic manifestations in Southern Italy, has dealt a blow to traditional interpretative schema, as well as to generic and

ambiguous concepts such as "Gothic", "Arabic", "Byzantine" and "Roman". This eventually led art historians to offer definitions that prioritized dynastic rather than stylistic periods: for instance, we still speak today of Medieval Southern Italian architecture using the terms "normanna", "federiciana", "chiaromontana", "angioina" and "aragonese"[3].

Despite the range of formal, constructive and decorative variations, there is a common denominator within the architectonical expressions of these different epochs: the role of architecture as medium of self-representation and as ideological statement. As pointed out by Beat Brenk, the Norman is a "purely dynastic government art, more than the Carolingian, Ottonian and Salian"[4]. This symbolism of power is also evident in the Swabian architecture and in Frederick II's building program; e.g. in the system of castles and fortifications disseminated in capillary fashion throughout the whole Italian Mezzogiorno, or in the intentional use of classical elements, which dominate the character of some Medieval fabrics (Castel del Monte is the most striking example, so that we can speak of a Renaissance *ante litteram*)[5]. In Norman religious architecture, moreover, the re-use of *spolia* has a clear ideological value (the Cappella Palatina in Palermo – a building fundamentally symbolic of Roger II's authority – is the most eloquent example). Equally significant is the presence of Sicilian builders, Byzantine mosaicists and Islamic painters in the Norman workshops and construction sites: an eclecticism that is the quintessential expression of the cultural syncretism of the Norman state, a young dynasty in search of its identity and ready to go beyond the traditional boundaries of Western culture. Similarly, the history of the Angevin monuments is bound up with the ambitions of the monarchs: the monumentalization of Angevin church architecture and the use of the forms of monastic orders as well as French traditions of building construction, along with an evocation of the antique, are the expression of a political message[6]. As we will see, the use of specific stylistic codes and imported architectural elements to reflect the prestige of those who commissioned buildings is not only a Medieval practice, but also – and perhaps even more so – a feature of the 19th century revival.

Andria, Castel del Monte

Palermo, Cappella Palatina

As testified by both historical evidence and scholarship, the rediscovery of the Medieval art and architecture of Southern Italy is a process that takes place gradually during the 19th century: from the thirties of that century in particular, publications about Medieval Italian architecture, rediscovered in all its fascinating and heterogeneous variations, increase noticeably. This rediscovery takes place, however, through the perceptive and investigative gazes of non-Italian scholars (travelers, art historians, architects). In particular, British, French and Germans are responsible for the milestones of Italian Medieval studies: volumes like J. I. Hittorff and L. Zanth's *Architecture moderne de la Sicile* (Paris 1835), H. Gally Knight's *The Normans in Sicily* (London 1838), or H. W. Schulz's *Denkmäler der Kunst des Mittelalters in Unteritalien* (Dresden 1860) make an enormous contribution to the scholarly knowledge of the history of Medieval art in Southern Italy, a topic which at this time was almost completely unknown.

Accompanied by a team of designers and engravers, Schulz for example travels the length and breadth of Southern Italy, from Abruzzo to Sicily, in search of architectural treasures of the Middle Ages. His *opus magnum*, impressive for its bulk and for the richness of its iconographical apparatus, is the first comprehensive collection of Medieval monuments in Southern Italy. It is an extraordinarily modern and pioneering work for the time it was conceived, and the starting point for all subsequent studies on the subject.

Well known by the time it was published, this volume was completely forgotten in 20th century historiography and, despite its importance, has rarely been considered outside of its local context. Yet there can be no better example of the richness of this subject, to which so little scholarly work has been devoted .

Therefore, it seems that the British are the first to turn their attention to Norman Sicilian monuments, the Germans to discover Hohenstaufen castles in Apulia, and the French to survey Angevin architecture in Naples. The particular interest of foreigners for certain styles and monuments of Medieval Southern Italy (especially from the Norman and Hohenstaufen periods) is not only motivated by aesthetic and planning needs, but is based on specific ideological issues as well. My concern is to examine this phenomenon, in order to investigate and explain the significance, the reception and the interpretation of Southern Gothic in the 19th century, also in the vast domain of its revival.

H.W. Schulz, *Denkmäler der Kunst…*, 1860   H.W. Schulz, *Denkmäler der Kunst…*, cit.   H.W. Schulz, *Denkmäler der Kunst…*, cit.

The rediscovery: local studies and foreign contributions

Over the course of the 19th century, Norman architecture becomes a symbol of Sicilian cultural identity. Likewise, the Romanesque churches and the castles of Frederick II come to be celebrated as the most authentic expression of art in Apulia. Naples, a city with a cosmopolitan identity, follows its own path, leading in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the rediscovery of the Catalan Quattrocento. Regardless of regional differences, once the exploration of the vast domain of the arts in the Southern Italian provinces at the time of the "Barbaric invasions" begins, scholars and architects discover a new field of research, with an inexhaustible repertory of sources and models. The artistic significance of the so-called period of "decadence" has been variously interpreted, but one constant lies behind the reassessment of the Middle Ages in all its forms and expressions: the quest for regional and national identities.

Campania, Apulia and Sicily, namely all regions previously relegated to the margins of European architectural histories, progressively acquire greater awareness of their own cultural *koine*, due in part to the argumentation of illustrious scholars like D'Agincourt and Cicognara. On the wave of new national liberal ideals, the animated process of constructing local identities begins, though not without localist tendentious interpretations that run parallel to the formation of a strong political opposition to the authoritarian and obscurantist regime of the Bourbon monarchy in Southern Italy. This flowering of studies on the Southern Gothic is therefore to be connected not only with the commonly acknowledged constructive and decorative qualities of this architecture, but most of all with their autochthonous and vernacular character. The seminal contributions of the duke of Serradifalco on Norman architecture in Sicily (1838) and of Demetrio Salazaro on the Romanesque in Puglia (1871-1872) give an idea of the breadth and scope of this phenomenon; and it is no coincidence that both Salazaro and Serradifalco are active revolutionaries in the Italian Risorgimento.

Parallel to the scholarship of this cultivated, liberal Italian elite, there exist a vast number of studies on Southern Italian Medieval architecture produced outside the country, principally by British, French, and German authors, such as J.-L.-Alphonse Huillard-Bréholles, Heinrich Wilhelm Schulz, François Lenormant, Jakob Ignaz Hittorff, Henry Gally Knight, Ferdinand Gregorovius, Émile Bertaux, Martin Wackernagel, Arthur Haseloff, Paul Schubring. But what compel these architects and art historians from beyond the Alps to travel South, undeterred by the hardships of journeys into what was considered an untamed and inhospitable territory?

The concluding sentence of the *Reise-Eindrücke* (*Travel Impressions*) by the German art historian Paul Schubring, published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1900, furnishes a possible answer, one which might be summarized as the desire to find a part of oneself on foreign soil: "I have tried to attract the attention of the reader to places where tourists' feet rarely walk, and I believe I have shown that it is indeed worthwhile to travel to Apulia. The flourishing Middle Ages in this region is so closely tied to the destiny of the West, and in many cases to that of the German homeland, that its architectural evidence must also warm our hearts with affection". The patriotic spirit in the background of Schubring's *Impressions* is common to many other German reports of travel in Italy, and invites being read in

connection with a broad concept of nation, regarded as a spiritual principle, national feeling, and cultural unity: in a word, the *Volkstum* theorized by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn[8].

In France we see an analogous tendency to exalt the *génie national* and, at the same time, to search for traces of national history far beyond the borders of the state. The interpretation of Frederick II's *art impérial* proposed by Emile Bertaux in *L'art dans l'Italie méridionale* (Paris 1904) clearly shows the political dimension that architecture assumed at the turn of the century: political imperialism is tightly linked to what we can call "architectural colonialism", which is the result of a complex strategy (political, cultural and artistic) oriented towards the construction of a collective memory. It is no accident that architect Charles Garnier, during his[9] Italian trip, surveys the Angevin tombs in Naples – a strong symbol of monarchic power – and that the travel sketches and drawings of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, one of the greatest exponents of the French Gothic movement, testify author's great interest in Sicilian Norman architecture.

Viollet-le-Duc, Palermo, Cathedral, 1836
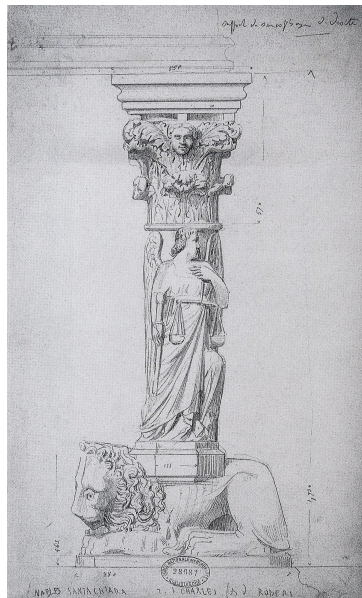
C. Garnier, Naples, Angevin Tomb, 1853
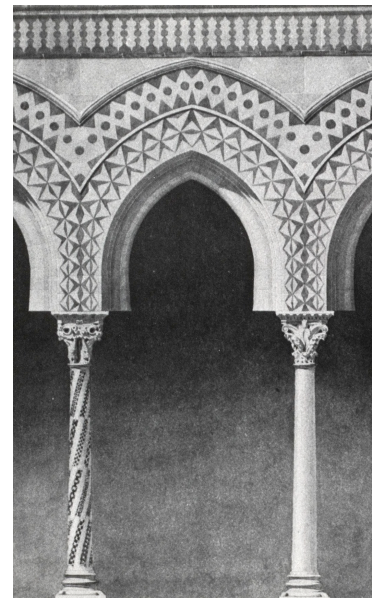
Viollet-le-Duc, Monreale, Cloister, 1836

Architect's question: *In welchem Style sollen wir bauen?*

Historians, then, are not alone in seeking the forgotten Middle Ages. Architects too discover the potential embedded in the revival of artistic expressions tied to a specific historical period and geographical territory. In this case we are dealing with an "operative" and elite form of rediscovery, a highly interesting and qualitatively exceptional phenomenon, as opposed to the trite historicism prevailing in late 19th century European architectural culture. The entire episode of European Eclecticism is characterized by the quest for a new style, synthesized by the title of Heinrich Hübsch's famous essay, *In welchem Style sollen wir bauen?* (1828). For many architects the answer lay in the recovery of a local identity, observable in the myriad Italian revivals ranging from that of the Normans in Sicily to the Sforza in Lombardy, invariably favoring the Medieval option and the local vernacular. After Italian unification in 1860, however, it is the Renaissance that is identified as the idiom capable of unifying, *sub specie architectonica*, the new nation.

The fundamental question is whether Norman, Swabian, or Angevin architecture or stylistic features become expressions not only of a Southern Italian cultural identity, but also of the French *génie national*, the German *Baukunst*, or the English "Medieval past", through the appropriation of formal and stylistic models that are geographically distant, but ideally linked to the country's historic memory, and aimed at the reconstruction (or invention) of an ideal past. For example, is Ludwig I of Bavaria's impulse to design the *Schlosskappelle* of his personal residence on the model of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo merely the caprice of an eccentric sovereign, or is it part of a broader phenomenon – a sort of "imported" eclecticism – that respond to a specific ideological agenda?

In my presentation, I shall try to answer this and other questions, with one assumption in mind: "Such historical *epochs* are not mere fictions", and the Medieval option is not a random choice in an undifferentiated panorama of 19th century revivals. "In the genesis of the thinking of modernity, the Middle Ages are the most important point of reference and, ultimately, the focal point of the very concept of modernity"[10].

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[1] "Auf einer Reise durch das feste Land Italiens und seine Inseln fand ich die Gelegenheit, eine Menge interessante Werke der Architektur zu sammeln, die bis jetzt weder betrachtet noch benutz worden. Man bemühte sich bisher, entweder die Monumente griechischer oder römischer Zeit oder die Gebäude aus den Zeiten der wiederauflebenden Künste zu Tausenden zu bearbeiten. Letzteres war für den ästhetischen Wert der Architektur von wenig Nutzen […] Ich habe daher auf diese Gegenstände um weniger meine Betrachtung zu richten, da sie mir vorher bekannt waren und zum Ideal, das ich mir vorgesetzt und dessen Prinzipien ich zur Zeit zu einem Ganzen füge, wenig näher führen. Eine Menge Anlagen aus früher Mittelalterzeit, selbst aus der Sarazenen, woran Sizilien vorzüglich reich ist, tragen das wahre Gepräge philosophischen Kunstsinns und Charakterfülle" (Karl Friedrich Schinkel, letter from Italy to Johann Friedrich Unger, 1804).

[2] *Architecture and national identities in Europe 1860-1919. Finland, Hungary, Romania, Catalonia*, ed by J.-Y. Andrieux, F. Chevallier, A. Kervanto Nevanlinna, Rennes 2006.

[3] C. Bruzelius, *The stones of Naples. Church building in the Angevin Kingdom, 1266-1343*, New Haven 2004.

[4] B. Brenk, *La simbologia del potere*, in *I Normanni popolo d'Europa 1030-1200*, a cura di M. D'Onofrio, Venezia 1994.

[5] H. Geymüller, *Friedrich II von Hohenstaufen und die Anfänge der Architektur der Renaissance in Italien*, München 1908.

[6] C. Freigang, *Kathedralen als Mendikantenkirchen. Zur politischen Ikonographie der Sakralarchitektur unter Karl I., Karl II. Und Robert dem Weisen*, in *Medien der Macht. Kunst zur Zeit der Anjous in Italien*, ed. T. Michalsky, Berlin 2001, pp. 33-60.

[7] V. Lucherini, *Esplorazione del territorio, critica delle fonti, riproduzione dei monumenti: il Medioevo meridionale secondo Heinrich Wilhelm Schulz (1832-1842)*, in *L'Europa delle cattedrali,* a cura di A. C. Quintavalle, Milano 2007, pp. 537-553.

[8] F. L. Jahn, *Deutsches Volkstum*, Lübeck 1810.

[9] T. Michalsky, *Dia Räpresentation einer* Beata Stirps*: Darstellung und Ausdruck an der Grabmonumenten der Anjous*, in *Die Räpresentation der Gruppen: Texte, Bilder, Objecte*, ed. O. G. Oexle, A. von Hülsen-Esch, Göttingen 1998, pp. 187-224.

[10] "Solche historische Epochen sind keineswegs blosse Fiktionen... es sich vor allem um Denkstrukturen, Zuschreibungen und Sinnformationen haldelt, mit denen die geschichtiliche Zeit zu mentalen Bildern gedeuteter Geschichte geordnet und als solche vermittelt wird. Im Zentrum der Untersuchungen steht das *Mittelalter*, das in der Genese des Denkens der Moderne der wichtigste Bezugspunkt ist und an dem sich schließlich auch der Begriff der Moderne selbst ausrichtet" (*Bilder gedeuteter Geschichte. Das Mittelalter in der Kunst und Architektur der Moderne,* ed. O. G. Oexle, A. Petneki, L. Zygner, Göttingen 2004).