

*Landscape and Water in the Royal Parklands  
of the Twelfth-Century Norman Kingdom of Sicily*

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The book project I am working on at the Italian Academy studies a historical landscape in the medieval Mediterranean. Its primary focus is the circuit of parklands once surrounding twelfth-century Palermo when it was the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily. At that time, the island was in the hands of a dynasty of kings originating from Normandy, who ruled over a greatly varied local population of Arabs, Orthodox Greeks, Latin Christians, and Jews. For a short time, around mid-century, this dynasty would also control the littoral cities facing Sicily, corresponding to present-day Tunisia and parts of coastal Algeria and Libya. This monograph considers a wider historical background for understanding the creation of the immense terrestrial modifications that would radically alter the face of the landscape outside medieval Palermo. For the project, I will be incorporating a wider Mediterranean framework that expands the consideration beyond Sicily.

The book considers architecture and designed landscapes as embedded in a human-made environment with layered meaning that displayed royal power internally over a subject multifaith population, participating also in larger scholarly discourses on the Mediterranean.<sup>i</sup> The transformation of the Palermo plain took place on an unprecedented scale with the creation of an immense landscape project unequalled until modernity. Carving lakes into the terrain, the kings of Sicily introduced specific species of animals and plants into their curated parks. The modifications carried out for them originated in the plans of elite Islamic estates and included the borrowing of hydraulic engineering for waterscapes and the introduction of botanical and agricultural techniques for the management of these greenspaces from this same sphere. Within these curated places, the royal park palaces were built in what we might call an Islamic “mode,” in terms of their axial plans, interior ornamentation, and extensive use of monumental

inscriptions in Arabic. The buildings that form part of this project include La Favara (better known as Castello di Maredolce in Palermo), La Zisa, La Cuba, the two smaller pavilions of La Cubula and La Cubula Soprana (now part of a seventeenth-century villa), and the structures of the medieval hunting park at modern-day Altofonte. Apart from this last site located in the mountains above Palermo in the Sicilian interior, all these palaces and smaller pavilions are situated on the plain outside the historical city. The larger purpose of this book is to restore meaning and significance to the royal parklands of twelfth-century Palermo, by weaving the discussion of landscape, architecture, and interfaith relations into a cohesive narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> This project came out of extensive fieldwork and archival work carried out in Palermo over a four-year period. The documentation I have collected includes published medieval descriptions, in addition to early modern sketches, topographical maps, as well as modern architectural plans and elevations from archives in Palermo and Rome that are mostly unpublished. Many sites that form the focus of my study (namely La Favara, L'Uscibene, and Parco) were either still under active restoration or entirely abandoned and thus have been hardly studied. Completing this fieldwork entailed also repeatedly visiting these sites, measuring, photographing, and otherwise recording their remains.