
EUGENIO RUSSO, *La scultura bizantina in Sicilia*. Monte Compatri (Roma): Edizioni Espera 2023. 239 pp. – ISBN 978-8-899-84764-7

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EUGENIO RUSSO's *La scultura bizantina in Sicilia*, published in December 2023, offers a detailed analysis of sculptural artefacts – either imported or produced locally – found in Sicily and produced between the sixth and twelfth centuries. The author develops several lines of inquiry concerning the island's role within the Byzantine *oikoumene* from Late Antiquity to the Norman period, emphasizing the continuous movement of artists, workshops, and sculptural materials across the Mediterranean sea, even in the aftermath of the Muslim conquests.

The opening chapter, 'Il problema generale e quello specifico: il carico di Marzamemi' (pp. 25–45), examines the finds from the shipwreck discovered in the late 1950s off the coast of Marzamemi (south of Syracuse). The cargo consisted of semi-finished and 'standardized' products (p. 41): parts of chancel-screen panels and columns, thirty-two column bases, thirty-five capitals, and fragments of an altar table, all made of Proconnesian marble. As RUSSO notes, the cargo may have travelled together with highly specialized Constantinopolitan craftsmen, whose task at their final destination (North Africa or Syracuse) would have been to apply the finishing touches and install the architectural decorations. This hypothesis is supported by the presence among the finds of an ambo carved from Thessalian green marble – fully finished though now fragmentary – whose exceptionally high-quality workmanship cannot be attributed to local artisans (p. 38). The author then addresses the chronology of the Marzamemi shipwreck. For a long time, scholars dated the material between the late fifth and early sixth century, based primarily on the well-known study of the capitals published by RUDOLF KAUTZSCH in 1936.¹ RUSSO instead proposes a date after Justinian's reconquest of Sicily in 535, grounding his argument mainly in stylistic criteria. He also notes that the extraction of Thessalian green marble – the material of the ambo – required imperial authorization from the

1. RUDOLF KAUTZSCH, *Kapitellstudien: Beiträge zu einer Geschichte des spätantiken Kapitells im Osten vom vierten bis ins siebente Jahrhundert* (Studien zur spätantiken Kunstgeschichte 9). Berlin 1936.

fifth century onward, and that Sicily returned to Byzantine control only in 535 (p. 41).

The second chapter, ‘Il VI secolo giustinianeo’ (pp. 47–73), begins by examining several architectural elements that are certainly imported: a basket capital reused in the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, four capitals kept at the Museo regionale Accascina of Messina, and numerous pieces from various churches of Syracuse, today preserved in the Museo archeologico regionale Paolo Orsi and in the Museo di Palazzo Bellomo in Syracuse. The quality of the Proconnesian marble and the refinement of the pieces suggest that they were produced locally but by highly specialized Constantinopolitan craftsmen. RUSSO offers precise comparisons with material from the Campanopetra basilica in Salamis (Cyprus), the complex of St John in Ephesus, and the church of St Philip in Hierapolis (Phrygia), all documented in the volume’s extensive black-and-white photographic appendix. Alongside these non-local workshops – active especially in the area of Syracuse – RUSSO demonstrates that local sculptural ateliers already existed in Sicily by the mid-sixth century. Their production, however, appears more modest. To them he attributes several fragments of slabs and marble decorations from the Syracuse hinterland, preserved in the Museo di Palazzo Bellomo. These pieces, often characterized by simplified ornamentation, have numerous parallels across the Mediterranean, all from the reign of Justinian I (527–565).

Chapter three, ‘L’VIII secolo’ (pp. 75–97), begins by examining the sculptural decorations and the fragments of local limestone chancel-screen panels from the crypt of St Marcian in Syracuse, today preserved in that city’s Museo archeologico regionale. These are executed with remarkable precision and feature strong chromatic contrasts, geometric patterns, and vegetal and floral motifs. Their decorative models point not to the Aegean-Constantinopolitan area but rather to the Syro-Palestinian one, and more specifically to the Umayyad palaces of the eighth century. Also dated to the eighth century is a fragmentary marble slab preserved in the Museo regionale of Messina, featuring an arch supported by a spiral column with base and small capital, beneath which stands a Latin cross on a double pedestal. Although not a high-quality work, it nonetheless reveals a deliberate search for chromatic effects, similar to the Syracusan fragments mentioned above. RUSSO concludes the chapter by describing the heterogeneous material (p. 87) recovered in 1952 from the Porto Piccolo of Syracuse, which he divides into four stylistic groups:

– one dates to the sixth century and includes altar-table colonnettes with

capitals, chancel-screen columns, and fragment of two marble colonettes from a window;

- another group, from the early eighth century, consists of colonnettes with capitals carved from a single block, an impost block with crosses, and a small pillar;
- a third group, from the later eighth century, is formed of several impost blocks;
- a fourth one, dated to the early or mid-ninth century, comprises only an impost block with crosses and an impost block with a horse and a rider holding a bird.

According to RUSSO, this assemblage of materials likely reflects the destruction wrought by Muslim forces after the conquest of Syracuse in 877 (pp. 87, 97).

The fourth chapter, ‘L’età mediobizantina’ (pp. 99–108), gathers evidence dating after the sack of Syracuse. These include: a decorated architrave fragment with an inscription paleographically dated to the tenth century; marble elements preserved in the Museo di Palazzo Bellomo dated to the eleventh (or possibly twelfth) century; a smooth-leaf capital with torch-shaped abacus flower kept at the Museo regionale of Messina; a late antique sarcophagus reused for the burial of Luca, archimandrite of the Patir of Rossano († 1149), whose decoration recalls that of the aforementioned capital. The autor attributes these works, on account of their high-quality workmanship, to Greek-Byzantine craftsmen active in eastern Sicily and the Strait area. By contrast, works produced by local workshops in the Middle Byzantine period appear cruder and more flattened. Examples include a limestone piece in Museo di Palazzo Bellomo, decorated with traditional motifs such as birds, half-leaves, and astragals, and the limestone sarcophagus lid in the Catanese church of Sant’Agata la Vetere, whose drapery is rendered in a summary manner.

The volume concludes with an appendix, ‘Il rilievo del museo archeologico regionale di Agrigento’ (pp. 109–117), describing a marble relief preserved in the Agrigento museum and originally belonging to the cathedral (formerly located in the Valley of the Temples). Scholars have dated the piece between the sixth century and 1093 (the establishment of the Norman diocese). Based on stylistic comparisons, RUSSO convincingly proposes a date between the eighth and early ninth century and attributes the work to western craftsmen.

A detailed bibliography (pp. 119–140) and a rich set of 235 high resolution black and white images complete the book.

Overall, *La scultura bizantina in Sicilia* offers a masterful synthesis of a complex and much-debated topic, providing readers with well-developed arguments supported by abundant visual documentation. The volume clarifies the fundamental role played by Sicily within the Byzantine world – geopolitically, but above all artistically – during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The evidence presented by RUSSO supports the persistence of commercial exchanges and the continuous, intense movement of craftsmen between the Aegean-Constantinopolitan area and the empire's western periphery, at least until the fall of Syracuse. After 878, the data indicate a decline in such contacts, followed by a gradual revival under Norman rule up to the mid-twelfth century.

Keywords

Byzantine Sicily; Byzantine sculpture; Byzantine art and archaeology