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Sicilian Domed Churches of the 11th–12th Centuries. The Architecture of Valdemone

In the chapter dedicated to Sicilian architecture, Kenneth John Conant notes that “the fantastic history of the island guarantees exotic architecture” [12, p.352]. Analyzing the Norman monuments of Sicily, Richard Krautheimer, being a byzantinist, categorically states that Sicilian architecture is not elegant enough. This possibility of a huge complex of radical judgments and opinions attracted scientists’ attention. Remarkably vivid and eclectic, the synthesized style of Norman kings became the only symbol of the island’s architecture of the time.

However, the history of Sicilian art at the early time of Norman conquests is much more complicated. First of all, there were centers that developed architecture very different from the well-known architecture of Palermo. Valdemone was such a region, with its own understanding of architectural form, space, decoration, and, importantly, special attention to domed churches.

The distinctively original monuments of the region are the subject of this article. For a long time these monuments were considered provincial and primitive in comparison with Palermo and Monreale cathedrals. Another significant difficulty, inevitably arising in the study of these churches, is that the monuments often can’t be dated properly and went through multiple changes and restorations. Considering this, the insufficient knowledge of this material is understandable.

The group of monuments discussed in this article includes three churches. Their ensembles are the only ones preserved well enough for analyzing the stylistic features of the architecture of the Valdemone region: Santa Maria in Mili (1090), San Pietro in Itala (1092–1093) and Santi Pietro and Paolo in Casalvecchio (1116–1172). More buildings in the region were preserved fragmentary or went through numerous reconstructions at later times; they can enhance our understanding of variability of the architectural forms in Valdemone.

However, it should be noted that even the three monuments mentioned above went through a lot of changes, such as: the rebuilding of the church in Mili in the 15th century, the restoration of the basilica in Casalvecchio and the unfortunate severe destruction of the Itala church, committed by an absurd mistake, which demanded reconstruction [10, p. 3–26].

In many ways, the uniqueness of the architectural form is determined by region’s distinctive history. During the Islamic rule, Valdemone was the only region of Sicily not fully occupied by Muslims — there were several centers with Byzantine population. These centers were well-fortified, and their citizens freely professed Christianity. Formal independence from the Sicilian emirate and equally formal connection with the Court of Constantinople were more contrib-

uting to the interaction of different cultures then to the preservation of Byzantine traditions. The Muslims lived on this territory side by side with local population, and, undoubtedly, this vicinity meant as much as the connection with Byzantium for cultural history of the region. The only indisputable fact is that the population of Valdemone existed throughout the time of Islamic domination and maintained its cultural identity.

By the end of the 11th century in the area at the northeast of the island that for a long time had been Byzantine, and by the time of the Norman conquest was in decline [18, p. 16], there were a number of new Basilian monasteries of the Byzantine rite. These Dioceses did not obey to Rome and also were not conditionally dependent on Constantinople. These were fairly well-secured autonomous and usually isolated monasteries.

The historical conditions of the region determined the formation of a specific style of architecture. The policy of Roger I clearly contributed to a significant increase in construction. It should be noted that in addition to the surviving ensembles, there are some buildings that have survived fragmentarily, and some historical evidence confirming the presence of other churches in Valdemone.

For a long time the historiography cultivated the idea of the Valdemone monuments as eclectic structures reflecting different influences. The characteristic feature of these monuments is the active use of domed composition. It is the artistic significance of the dome that holds a special place in the historiography of the Valdemone monuments. Most researchers preferred the approach according to which the dome was more or less a development of reworked Islamic heritage of the domed mosques in North Africa and Sicily [2, p. 3]. Particularly elegant and representative examples are the domes of the mosque in Susa and Al-Hakim Mosque that have similar multi-profile, linear-decorative design [6, p. 469–472].

The Islamic origin of this form is beyond any doubt. However, it seems important to pay attention to the composition of monuments and significance of the dome. In the context of such an integrated examination of the churches dome composition it becomes possible to highlight the features of this group of monuments.

A detailed examination of the plans of all three buildings allows us to notice the variability within the framework of one typology of the domed basilica. The church in Mili — single-nave basilica with an implicit transept and three apses — is probably the simplest in its structure. The space of the church is not divided into the bays, it is more extended. On the plan it is clear that the complicated, developed altar space is characteristic feature of the church. Three domes (one above the presbytery, two others precede the prothesis and the diaconicon) form an axis that is much more meaningful than the classical basilica axis of the west-east. However, what appears on the plan as a complex elaborated composition is in fact an extremely concentrated, “squashed” space. It is interesting that multi-domed solutions are found in Norman Apulia (the Cathedral of Molfetta, the Cathedral of Canosa). It is important that this composition is seen in another Norman temple in Sicily — San Giovanni degli Eremiti in Palermo.

The church in Itala seems more complex: the proportions appear much more sophisticated and refined. The length of the structure is larger than the width less than for one-third. It is interesting that the interior of this church — the least extended of all basilicas of the region — is divided by an arcade on columns. This solution allows us to assume clear and logical differentiation of space. Three pairs of columns are replaced by a pair of piers in the presbytery, without

disturbing the general rhythm. The central nave is about twice as wide as the lateral aisles, the supports do not divide the space, but rather create a more complicated rhythm. The altar space with three apses and the implicit transept (a characteristic feature of the monuments of this group), unlike the church in Mili, are not separated from the main space of the church. The dome and two groin vaults logically form a semblance of a transept, not revealed outside. There is neither the constriction nor the cramping seen in Mili in this composition.

The Church of Santi Pietro e Paolo is not a particularly extended basilica with narthex — the length of the temple is approximately twice its width. On the main axis of the church there are other two domes, one after another. The domes allow us to perceive the church as consisting of two bays, each having the dome as its logical center. Probably it was not always like that. It is difficult to imagine how exactly the church looked originally, between 1116 and 1172. It is known that the monument was rebuilt and restored in 1172.

In comparison to other monuments of this time, the basilica in Casalvecchio seems too complicated — similar solutions of the composition of domes on the main nave appeared in Palermo later. However, if we proceed with the idea of assumed borrowed models from Calabria, such a composition does not seem alien to its time — many monuments had several domes along the main nave. And yet, it is logical enough to assume that the second dome belongs to the construction of 1172. This decision makes the church unique within its typology. The domed basilica of this time in Sicily, like this church, is a synthesis of architectural forms, but the temple in Casalvecchio differs from the most basilicas of the time in Mili, or Itala, or from the later multi-dome basilica of San Cataldo by repeating the same centric form twice. Thus, two opposite artistic impressions are achieved: the preservation of the axial composition with the retention of the typical proportions between the central nave and lateral side-aisles, and at the same time the creation of centric spaces, two bays with their own composition centers, which considerably complicate the appearance of the composition.

The trends seen on the plan are fully revealed in the interior of the churches.

The interior of the basilica in Mili is quite simple, almost primitive. The only decoration of this single-nave church is the masonry, the texture of which is intended to emphasize the light pouring from the windows of the clerestory. A distinctive feature is the very specific construction of the bema. Separated from the main space of the temple by the monumental arcade, leaning on profiled bays, the altar part and the space in front of it seem small and squeezed. A kind of transept is cut from the church by the arch. It has three domes with multi-profile squinches, in which Chiotta sees the legacy perceived by Sicilian architecture from the architecture of the Aghlabids [10, pp. 3–26]. The fact is that such a dome design with an open demonstration of the transition from one stiffener to another does not allow comparing such solutions with Byzantine ones — the transition from one form to another is not skimmed, but is emphasized. Thus, it probably creates the most complex form in this temple — three crystal clear light narrow spaces. F. Basile, considering this church, recognizes that it refers to the category of primitive buildings of this period, but says that the main value of this monument “is not so much that it is the earliest of the fairly well-preserved monuments of the example of the Norman architecture of the island or the first example of using crossed arches. The uniqueness of this decision, which fences the entire eastern part of the parishioners, and in such a way that the domes remain completely hidden” [2, p. 11]. Thus, within a small, hidden three-part space, a complex logical

composition scheme is formed with its own semantic centers — three light domes, the central one of which is much larger and higher than the lateral ones. In traditional historiography, this church is considered one of the first buildings of the Normans in Sicily, and more importantly, a church that demonstrates the strongest connection with Islamic architecture.

The interior of San Pietro in Itala must be analyzed with caution because the church was almost completely destroyed and then rebuilt. However, the original plan and proportions were maintained. Divided into three naves by an arcade with a wide intercolumnar, the basilica is the least extended of all the churches of this group. It gives the impression of an entire space much larger than that in the church in Mili. The lancet arcade with a wide gap between the columns creates an open and visible space, evenly flooded with light.

However, the center of the composition is the dome. This feature, together with other characteristics of the church, such as its moderate extension, proportional to its height, seems to be some kind of compromise between the calm “classical” basilica (column arcade, vertical development, semantic accents in the altar) and the desire for maximum monumentality in a small-scale structure, expressed in a tower-like dome composition. San Pietro marks a crossing of several traditions — after all, the line between different styles of design here is particularly clear.

The interior of the Church of Santi Pietro e Paolo continues the theme of monumentality. Aisles are separated by four pairs of arches, supported by two pairs of columns and a pair of piers. The fairly wide intercolumnar and the small length of the building make the temple visible and do not create a sense of strict clear division. The zone in front of the altar is distinguished by a change in the type of supports. The bays have projections, most likely for non-preserved thin columns, marking the change of spaces. In addition, the altar zone is marked with a small eight-pointed umbrella dome, resting on an octagonal drum, turning into pendentives, hidden behind a decoration reminiscent of the decor of Islamic Muqarnas. Such a selection allows us to perceive the pre-altar space with three apses as a separate bay. At the same time, this makes the three bays of the nave together with the second, larger umbrella dome to look as a unified centric space. Thus, both on the plan and physically the church is partly perceived as consisting of two bays. However, this impression is disturbed by the significant difference in altitude between the central nave and lateral aisles, and the main sense accent still remains the west-east axis, which is typical of the basilica. It is this that does not allow us to regard the domes as logical centers. However, not only the spatial solution is not in compliance with the Byzantine tradition. The design of domes is extremely interesting. The intention to create a thin, linear, crystalline decoration led to the use of Islamic motifs in the small dome and the application of an unusual variation of squinches in the large one. Such decisions indicate a preference for a graphic, strict image to the smoothed transitions of forms in Byzantine architecture.

Thus, summing up the analysis of three churches, it should be noted that the domes in Mili are the most striking feature of the composition. Three domes in the pre-altar space form a clenched composition. The domes are hidden and separated from the church interior main part, and here the complex composition of domes cannot be fully revealed in such a narrow space. It is not so important that the design of the domes was actually borrowed from the Islamic world. It is much more important that the dome does not hold a central place in the composition of the church, which is not subordinate to it, despite the fact that it is the most complicated part of the structure.

The dome of the church in Itala seems more balanced and mature. Here we can see the step-by-step development of the composition that compels the use of rising arches. Together with such a composition of squinches, it creates a gradual increase in shape. Thus, a light space is formed, which makes the vertical of the church more acute. The place and the value of the dome in the composition of the structure are not central or paramount — the dome is given a significant semantic emphasis, while at the same time it is fully subordinate to the image of the church — a compact light building, developed vertically, in which there is a subordination of the rhythmic pattern inherent in mature Romanesque architecture.

The most complex composition is formed by the domes of Santi Pietro e Paolo. Two domes, different in size and shape, are extremely decorative, which, together with the effect of combining two domes with a rafter ceiling, makes us assume that the dome was partly perceived in Santi Pietro e Paolo as a decorative element designed to once again place the accents and complete the impression. The effect of splendor is enhanced by another detail: the arches and the visible parts of the other elements create rhythmic accents, certain boundaries that introduce another kind of division between spatial units much more mature and complex than simple division into bays.

Thus, at the stage of considering the place and meaning of the dome in the composition of the churches it becomes obvious that the Sicilian architecture was extremely experimental. All three churches of Valdemone considered above are examples not only of completely different artistic images of the structure, but also of completely different compositions. And these decisions are not so much subordinated to the dome, as they demonstrate a different understanding of its significance in the composition of the churches.

In conclusion we would like to note that considering the architecture of Valdemone clarifies the reasons for the appearance of domed architectural forms in Sicily, their comprehension and decoration. These monuments allow us to trace the line of development of the architectural form, in which the dome has a key role, often without being the actual or metaphorical center of the church. A number of solutions that can be seen in Valdemone allow one to understand some of the controversial moments in the monuments of Palermo, and the process of development of Sicily architecture as a whole. These monuments are examples of buildings that appeared on the crossing of many cultures, none of which became their basis.

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Title. Sicilian Domed Churches of the 11th–12th Centuries. The Architecture of Valdemone.

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Abstract. The study is dedicated to the development of domed buildings in Sicily. This subject has been poorly studied until recently. It has a number of prospects: the study of prominent features of Romanesque architecture, the Islamic and Byzantine influences on the architecture of the island, and the interplay with the culture of southern Italy — in the first instance, Calabria. Norman Sicily is often believed to be a separate region with its own architectural style. Nevertheless, in Sicily, there were a considerable number of schools, which were beyond the understanding of the Norman style. Except Palermo and the cities directly related to the court, there were areas where different architectural schools evolved. Such areas were Valdemone and Trapani surroundings. These centers have been studied to varying degrees.

The study is concentrated on the architecture of Valdemone (Mili S. Pietro (Messina); S. Maria, Itala (Messina); S. Pietro (1092–1093); Casalvecchio (Vallata d'Agro) Messina, SS. Pietro e Paolo (between 1116 and 1172)), where during the Islamic rule there were several centers with a Byzantine population. Formal independence from the Emirate of Sicily and a formal link with the court of Constantinople contributed not so much to the preservation of the Byzantine tradition, as to the close interaction of different cultures. We discuss some extant monuments that make a regional stylistic group and analyze them in conjunction with buildings in Calabria, southern Italy Norman monuments. Special attention has been devoted to the place and importance of the dome in the composition of the churches' ensemble.

Keywords: architecture; medieval architecture of Sicily; Norman Sicily; domed churches.

Название статьи. Купольные храмы Сицилии XI–XII веков. Архитектура Вальдемонэ.

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Аннотация. В статье рассмотрена малоизученная на данный момент тема развития купольных построек на Сицилии. Она находится на стыке ряда направлений: изучения характерных черт романской архитектуры, исламских и византийских влияний на архитектуру острова и взаимодействие с культурой южной Италии, в первую очередь Калабрии. Норманнская Сицилия часто представляется обособленным регионом с собственным архитектурным стилем. Однако внутри самой Сицилии существовало значительное количество течений, которые не укладывались в рамки представления о едином норманнском стиле. Помимо Палермо и непосредственно связанных с двором городов, существовали

районы, в которых по ряду причин развивались отличные от школы Палермо архитектурные принципы. Такими районами были Вальдемонте и окрестности Трапани. Эти центры изучены неравномерно.

В данной статье особое внимание уделено архитектуре Вальдемонте (церкви Мили-Сан-Пьетро (Мессина); Санта-Мария, Итала (Мессина); Сан-Пьетро (1092–1093); Казалвеккио (Валлата д'Агро), Санти-Пьетро-е-Паоло (между 1116 и 1172 г.), где во время исламского владычества существовало несколько центров с византийским населением. Формальная независимость от Сицилийского эмирата и столь же формальная связь с константинопольским двором способствовали не столько сохранению византийских традиций, сколько максимально плотному взаимодействию культур. Ряд сохранившихся монументов позволяет выделить в особенную стилистическую группу памятники этой территории и рассматривать их во взаимодействии с постройками Калабрии, норманнскими памятниками Южной Италии.

Автор отделяет собственно заимствуемые исламские или византийские мотивы от композиционных схем, которые, по ее мнению, были достаточно самобытными. Отдельная часть посвящена месту и значению купола в композиции храмов данной группы. Не концентрируясь исключительно на теории о его исламском происхождении, автор предпринимает попытку сопоставить данные архитектурные формы с композиционными схемами Южной Италии и памятниками Византийской провинции.

Ключевые слова: архитектура; средневековая архитектура Сицилии; норманнская Сицилия; купольные церкви.