

Book Reviews

Les bains de Cefalà (Xe–XIXe siècle) : pratiques thermales d’origine islamique dans la Sicile médiévale / I bagni di Cefalà (secoli X–XIX) : pratiche termali d’origine islamica nella Sicilia medievale, by A. Bagnera and A. Nef (eds.). Collection de l’École Française de Rome 538, Rome: École Française de Rome, 2018, 640pp., €90. ISBN-13: 9782728312504

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This substantial volume is the collective output of a long project, “*Les bains de Cefalà et leur contexte historique et territorial*” [The Cefalà baths and their historical and territorial context] (2003–2008), the product of a convention and collaboration between the École Française of Rome and the Archaeological Heritage Office of Palermo (Superintendence BB.CC.AA. of Palermo).

The Cefalà complex, located in an inland area near Palermo in western Sicily, is a medieval thermal bath complex that is unique in the panorama of Sicily’s archaeological heritage. The study of this site aimed to delineate and clarify the diachronic vicissitudes of the building and, in particular, to settle the question of whether its origins are Islamic or Norman.

This work is the result of a collaboration among various specialists and is divided into two parts: one is dedicated to historical, archaeological and architectural investigations of the building and its territorial context, and the other is focused on studying all types of materials (ceramics, metals, glass, sculpture fragments, archaeozoological findings) and presenting related archaeometric analyses carried out on mortars, bricks, calcarenites, pigments, clay deposits and ceramics. In addition, valuable tools for understanding, analysis and study are appended to the volume, including the entire collection of plans, perspective studies, and graphic and photographic documentation of the epigraphic frieze.

The primary value of this work is that it proposes a detailed sequence of the historical and construction events related to the complex during its long duration from the 10th to the 19th centuries. This is an achievement that required the careful integration of archival historical documentation, interpretations of the stratigraphic data from all the archaeological surveys carried out between 1992 and 2001 and in 2006, a reading of the architectural features, and the typological and archaeometric study of archaeological materials.

Keywords: Islamic/Norman Sicily, medieval thermal baths, architecture, excavation

The question of the Islamic origins of the baths is the book's greatest point of innovation as it demonstrates that the effective exploitation of the hot spring had already begun in the first half of the 10th century, attested in this phase by the presence of water uptake and channelling works. The book advances the interpretation that this marked the development of an Islamic *ḥāmma*: a bath that used the natural source of hot water mainly for healing purposes.

The construction of a fully developed thermal bath facility took place during the emirate of the Kalbids (second half the 10th—early 11th century) with a function strictly connected to the therapeutic properties of the water that characterized the site as a place of public and charitable nature (*waqf*), probably at the initiative of the elites or the government. The reconstructive hypothesis of this Islamic structure remains open to two well-argued possibilities: one, based on archaeological data, which dates the existence of this bath facility, with a vaulted ceiling and planimetric extension equal to that preserved today, to the Islamic period; the other, based on analysis of the architectural evidence, leans towards the interpretation of the Islamic *ḥāmma* as an uncovered structure which was subsequently incorporated into the Norman building.

Notwithstanding these two contrasting interpretations, it is clear that the origin of the use of the thermal waters of Cefalà can be traced to the Islamic period. To this evidence, other structures must be added, such as the very interesting building (so-called “structure A”), partially investigated archaeologically, located in the west courtyard and with a southern orientation, different from other contemporary Islamic structures, which would seem compatible with the direction of the *qibla* and therefore conceivable, according to the authors, as a mosque that was in use until the great transformation of the Norman age.

Another very important contribution of this work concerns the bath facility's coherence with the monumental configuration of the Norman period (first half of the 12th century). It was commissioned by Roger II, as attested by the Arabic inscription on the external epigraphic frieze that, on the basis of a new proposed reading, dates back to the year 535/1140–1141, thus representing the earliest example of the patronage of the Hauteville dynasty. A key element of the interpretation of the medieval complex is also the hypothesis of identifying it as the *hospitalis Sancti Laurentii* (mentioned in a document of 1242), in continuity with the Islamic legacy of the medical and therapeutic character of the hot mineral water of the spring.

Subsequently, from the 14th century, the complex was documented in the sources as a *fondaco* (a place for welcoming travellers and merchants) that, after various changes of ownership (Chiaramonte, Abatellis, Bologna, Scavuzzo), passed to the Diana family. This family introduced the last important construction phase in the late 18th century, including, according to the reading proposed by the authors, the consolidation of the inner wall with three arches (from the 12th century) following the partial collapse of the brick vault. This reparation was made with underpinning work which involved the use of recycled materials (capitals, columns, bases). Only this particular type of intervention would explain the use of an attic-type base with four corner leaves dating back to the second half of the 15th century (comparable to similar exemplars of the portico of Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo). Finally, the most recent evidence of internal reorganization dates to the 19th century.

This volume, in addition to the important historiographical implications of the “non-invisibility” of Islamic material evidence and the relationship with the architectural dynamics of the Norman era, demonstrates and underlines the extraordinary importance (and necessity) of

implementing multi-year interdisciplinary research programmes on layered architectural palimpsests (the same approach recently utilized for studying suburban complexes in Palermo, such as Mare Dolce and San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi) aimed at a holistic reading of the many transitions, between breaks and continuities, that occurred during the long history of Sicily between medieval and modern times.