



## Palermo at Christmas

Art, archaeology and architecture in Palermo and its vicinity

20–27 December 2022 (MI 588)

8 days • £3,410

Lecturer: Luca Leoncini

Seven nights in Palermo, one of the most fascinating cities in Italy, richly stocked with a variety of outstanding art and architecture.

Excursions to the most interesting places in the vicinity: Cefalù, Monreale, Segesta, Agrigento.

Unique heritage of Norman-Byzantine-Saracenic buildings and mosaics.

Several ancient Greek temples survive in countryside locations; exceptionally lavish Baroque interiors are another striking feature.

Includes access to private palaces and to places outside public opening hours.

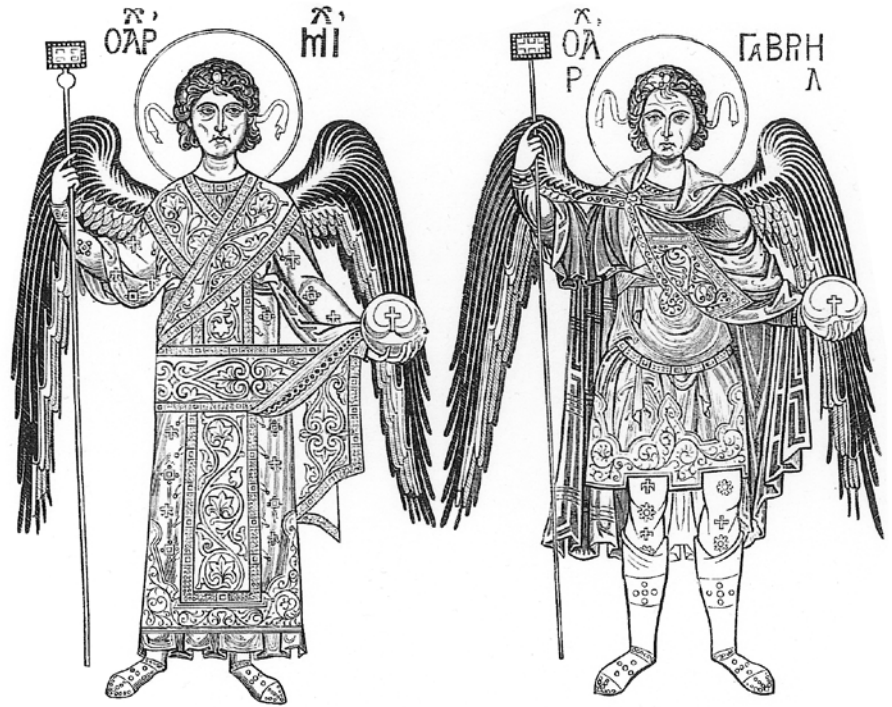
Palermo's status as the largest city on Sicily, and the one with by far the richest heritage of material culture, has its origins in the ninth-century AD invasion by Muslims from North Africa and the termination of Byzantine rule. Palermo soon gained fame for the beauty of its hillside position, the quality of its craftsmanship and its enlightened administration.

But in the 11th century, Arab rule – but not all their culture – was swept aside by conquering Normans. By succumbing to the luxuriant sophistication of their predecessors they distanced themselves as far as is imaginable from their rugged northern roots. From a Palermo-based cosmopolitan court they ruled an affluent and cultured nation with efficiency and tolerance.

The unique artistic blend of this golden age survives in the Romanesque churches with details of Norman, Saracenic, Levantine and Classical origin. Byzantine mosaicists were extensively employed, and more wall and vault mosaics survive here than in all of Byzantium. The tour visits not only the Norman buildings in Palermo but also the cathedrals at Cefalù and Monreale.

Further excursions outside the city reveal another major theme of the tour: the extraordinary heritage of Hellenic civilisation. The Greeks first came to Sicily in the eighth century BC and the island became for a while the most prosperous part of the Ancient World. Numerous well-preserved Doric temples constitute their greatest monument.

Lurching forward in time, a final artistic flourish was reached in the Age of Baroque



Palermo, detail from the mosaics in the Palatine Chapel, engraving c. 1880.

with the construction of churches and palaces which are as exuberant as anywhere in Europe.

Always a seething, vibrant city, in recent years enlightened local government has made Palermo cleaner, safer and altogether more enjoyable than even a few years ago. The tour includes a number of special arrangements to gain access to private palaces or to visit buildings outside of opening hours.

### Itinerary

**Day 1.** Fly at c. 8.30am (ITA Airways) from London City to Palermo, via Milan. First night in Palermo, where all seven nights are spent.

**Day 2: Palermo.** A morning walk includes two oratories with lavish interiors by the Rococo sculptor Giacomo Serpotta. There follows the Galleria Regionale in the 15th-century Palazzo Abatellis, the most important art gallery on the island. Two adjacent Norman churches, La Martorana and San Cataldo, reveal the extraordinary melting pot of cultures in 12th-century Sicily, with Arabic and Byzantine features as well as Italian and North European. For dinner we are guests at a private *palazzo*.

**Day 3: Cefalù.** Cefalù is charming small coastal town dominated by a massive Norman

cathedral on the slopes behind, which contains outstanding mosaics. The art gallery of the Museo Mandralisca has a painting by the enigmatic 15th-century Antonello da Messina. In the evening there is a private out-of-hours visit to the 12th-century chapel in the Palace of the Normans. The interior is entirely encrusted with mosaics, the finest assembly of Byzantine art to survive anywhere.

**Day 4: Agrigento.** Full-day excursion to the 'Valley of the Temples' at Agrigento. The remains of the Greek colony of Akragas constitute one of the greatest sites bequeathed by the ancient world. Founded in 580 BC, it rose rapidly to riches and was endowed with eight temples, the most numerous group in the Greek world. The one dedicated to Zeus was the largest of all Doric temples until reduced by Carthaginians and earthquakes; the Temple 'of Concord' is the best preserved.

**Day 5: Palermo.** Return to the Palazzo dei Normanni, of ninth-century Arab origin but extended in nearly every subsequent century, the secular mosaics (c. 1170) in the Hall of King Roger being the highlight. Also visited today are San Giovanni degli Eremiti, a church with five cupolas and a garden, the largely medieval cathedral with its royal and imperial tombs,

Palermo at Christmas  
continued

and the Chiesa del Gesù, an outstanding example of Palermitan Baroque with a profusion of marble inlay, stucco and sculpture.

**Day 6, Christmas Day: Segesta, Mondello.** The morning is spent in Segesta; set in an unspoilt landscape, this is one of the most evocative of ancient Greek sites. The almost complete but fascinatingly unfinished fifth-century temple was built by indigenous if thoroughly Hellenised Sicilians, and a theatre is sited on an adjacent hill with views out to sea. Adjourn to Mondello, a seaside town to the northwest of Palermo, for a special lunch in a Michelin-starred restaurant (*subject to confirmation*).

**Day 7: Monreale.** Drive out to Monreale, a small town which dominates a verdant valley southwest of Palermo. Its cathedral is one of the finest Norman churches on the island and possesses the largest scheme of mosaic decoration to survive from the Middle Ages. Back in Palermo, visit one of the richest collections of Punic and Ancient Greek art in Italy in the Archaeological Museum. Evening reception in a private *palazzo*, with astonishing Rococo interiors and original furnishings (used as a set in Visconti's film of *The Leopard*).

**Day 8: Palermo.** Some free time in the morning before flying from Palermo to London City, via Milan, arriving c. 6.30pm.

## Lecturer

**Dr Luca Leoncini.** Art historian with a speciality in 15th-century painting and a wide knowledge of Italian art and architecture. He obtained his degree and PhD at Rome University and studied at the Warburg Institute in London. He has also written on Mantegna and on Renaissance drawings. He is one of MRT's longest serving lecturers.

## Practicalities

**Price, per person.** Two sharing: £3,410 or £3,170 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,920 or £3,680 without flights.

**Included:** flights (economy class, Embraer 190) with ITA Airways; travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 2 lunches and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; admission charges, tips, taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

**Accommodation.** **Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa** ([piazaborsa.it](http://piazaborsa.it)): a 16th-century church and convent renovated to become a 4-star hotel in the centre of Palermo.

**How strenuous?** The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres, where coach access is restricted, and a lot of standing in museums and churches. Uneven ground and irregular paving are standard. A good level of fitness is necessary. It should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Average distance by coach per day: 48 miles.

**Indirect flights.** We opt to travel to and from Sicily with ITA Airways because the only direct flights to Palermo in this period are with low-cost airlines, with whom it is not currently viable for us to make a group booking. You may wish to choose our 'no flights' option and to book your own flights. Please contact us for advice or further information about this.

**Group size:** between 10 and 22 participants.