

Roger's reign and its impact on the society

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



Impact on the society

Throughout most parts of Roger's reign, Sicilian non-Christian communities were allowed to retain their traditions and worship rights in a tolerant atmosphere. Regarding Palermitan Muslims, contemporary chroniclers were especially affirmative of the existence of religious tolerance. Although the Norman historian Geoffrey Maleterra may be exaggerating Norman generosity, he was mostly accurate in saying: " Muslims were not only to keep their faith, but also their culture after the [Norman conquest]". Ibn Jubayr in 1185 described similarly that Muslims went to mosques, prayed in public, practised as merchants and retained Muslim jurisdictional practices. Nevertheless, Ibn Jubayr's account does not reflect Roger's reign as he travelled in 1187 specifically along the north coast. Both accounts, nevertheless, imply the continuation of Muslim traditions and features in the Sicilian societies, the government's approval, and the Latins' acceptance. Moreover, Muslims were not obliged to convert. It was even forbidden in military as Muslim soldiers brought substantial advantages compared to a Christian, given their physical qualities suitable for mercenary work. For the Greeks, freedom to continue practising Christian Orthodox was allowed in the start of Roger's reign.

According to Herde, " The papacy [had] never sought systematically to enforce Latinisation [on] Greek Church[es]", as Greek rites were preserved in exchange for the acknowledgement of the papacy's " primatial position". Roger also used Greek churches to " counter-balance" both the papal influence in Sicily, leading to many Norman nobles patronising " Orthodox

foundations in Calabria" during Roger's reign, and also the Muslim population. As Donald Matthew puts it, Roger could not disregard "the advantage the [previous Greek dominance] gave him", since traditionally the Greeks had approved the Norman conquest for ending Muslim rule in Sicily. Roger would likely use the Sicilian Norman-Greek alliance to insert his dominance upon the large Muslim population. Therefore, as long as the Muslim population remained dominant in Sicilian administration, language and economic activities, they would be tolerated and protected for their usefulness to the Norman rulers. Apart from religious freedom, the professions of non-Christian were maintained, also due to their large population and the convenience of governing them. Metcalfe notes that "Muslims continued to play an important role in the socio-economic life of the island as merchants, craftsmen and farmers". Sicily provided many trading opportunities for Jewish and Muslim, and later Christian merchants; Muslims and Greeks were needed for their language and diplomatic skills to trade with Byzantium and other Islamic countries from Sicily. Moreover, occupations such as farmers and craftsmen could only be beneficial to the Sicilian economy, therefore there is no reason to thwart them from doing so.

Overall there was a general continuation of occupation and status for Muslims, Christians and Jews as long as they were needed for the economy to function effectively. Changes in timeDespite the general religious tolerant policies established in the first decade of his reign, it was very likely that Roger's attitude towards non-Latin-Christians in his later years changed in the opposite direction. He reduced the freedom of the non-Christians, as Romuald mentioned in Chronicon, by "work[ing] in every way to convert

Muslims and Jews whom he richly rewarded with gifts". Although this account does not depict Roger as rejecting all of the existing tolerant atmosphere, there is still a striking and abrupt change in his attitude towards the non-Christians as he wanted them to recognise Christianity as superior. This could be due to Roger's attempt to present himself as a pious Christian monarch before his death so his reputation would be better received by Christendom. The conversion process moreover seems strategically planned out, as Roger targeted the non-Christians first, because converting them posed greater challenges than converting the Greeks who later would have no choice but to submit.

Nevertheless, this account must be scrutinised as no records proved the converts receiving large amounts of wealth as promised; also, as Donald Matthew points out, " the idea that a king should die piously could be read as a religious and literary topos.", which makes sense as Romuald would glorify Roger's loyalty to Christianity in his later years. Romuald noted Roger who had " zeal for God" ordered Philip of Mahdiyya to be executed for allegedly practising Islam, showing Roger's realisation of the importance of Christian faith and the standard of being a " Celestial King". However, Romuald as the Christian archbishop of Salerno would emphasise Philip's unfaithfulness and Roger's loyalty to Christianity retrospectively. It would be more accurate to see the execution of Philip as the " first blow point that befell", as stated by al-Athīr, the Palace Saracens became " politically vulnerable". It implies that over time other administrators became jealous of Philip's and other Palace Saracens' success and became increasingly intolerant towards them while Roger had diminishing influence over the court. An evidence for Roger's

change in attitude lies in his gradual effort to diminish the importance of Arabic influence through royal iconography, in order to initially establish authority and legitimise his reign.

The design of tari coins before 1130 showed Arabic inscriptions, symbolising the legitimisation of Arab rule in Sicily. Yet after 1130, Roger's reign saw a diminishing number of these coins, as Roger replaced them with tari with Byzantine-Christian imagery, portraying Roger as the protector of Christianity with a Latin legend ' IC XC / NI KA' (Jesus Christ Conquers). Furthermore, in 1140 Roger commissioned the ducalis, which were purely Byzantine in design with '+IC XC RG' and ' IN AETERN' (Jesus Christ reigns forever) engraved. A new Byzantine-style copper coinage, follaro, was also newly introduced. Peter Higgs and Dirk Booms believe the emergence of Byzantine-style coinage " reflect[s] the continuing Byzantine presence and influence in trade and economy". Adding to this, the combination of Byzantine and Latin influences to create one Christian iconography also demonstrates the decline of Arab influence as Roger tried to counter pre-Norman Sicily Arab-dominant influences in order to establish a new Norman Sicily. Although coin design changes have been present in every change of monarch, Roger's decision symbolised a widespread, official and decisive transit from Islamic to Christian iconography.

Unlike royal architecture, the ability for coinage to reach all Sicilian communities visually reminds them of Islam's diminishing recognition in royal iconography. Similarly, the painting of Roger blessed by St. Nicholas of Bari in the basilica of Bari and the mosaic of Roger crowned by Christ in

Santa Maria Palermo were used as tools to consolidate Roger's right to rule. The depiction of Roger wearing outdated Byzantine clothes and using Greek characters to convey a Latin message, *Rogerus Rex*, may be seen as an attempt to "undermine Byzantine culture and revamp it as something new". The idea of creating a new reign and new royal iconography was crucial for Roger, yet he couldn't establish an unfamiliar Latin-Christian image initially without using Byzantine elements to appeal to the Orthodox-Christian population. Moreover, Roger was indeed revamping Byzantine culture by adding Latin-Christian elements to it in order to emphasise his heritage and hence legitimacy in a subtle manner. For example, the portrayal of him crowned by Christ intended to prove that he received the divine to rule Sicily from the Christian God.

Overall, variations in royal iconography represent Roger's ambition to enforce Latin Christian imageries as a tool to establish a new reign descending from Latin-Christian origins. As the scale of Latinisation increased throughout Roger's reign, religious freedom granted to the non-Latin-Christians accordingly diminished. Although historian Donald Matthew acknowledged that regarding religious freedom Sicilian Muslims had an advantage over continental Muslims, he believes that the position of Sicilian Muslims was "actually precarious", since they were dependent on royal protection and vulnerable to Latin antipathy. This may not be true during the early 12th-century as Muslims and Islam remained the majority of Sicilian inhabitants and religion. Yet as Sicilian Latin immigrants accumulated over time, Muslims' dominance became threatened. Furthermore, since their occupations were replaceable, their usefulness as scribes and merchants

also diminished as Latinisation increased. Thus on a higher level, they became increasingly dependent on royal protection, while on a lower level their relative population size exposed them to Latin influences. For the Orthodox Church, the change of attitude occurred earlier. Religious freedom rapidly decreased after Roger unified the kingdom of Sicily, as “ the Greek churches [were] no longer needed to ‘ counter-balance papal claims’ . This statement is sound; Roger was struggling to handle Innocent III’s influence as his consequence of supporting Anacletus II, thus he needed a temporary ally to protect his kingdom from Innocent’s pressure. Once the Greek church had served its purpose and Roger tightened his control over the popes through the treaties of Mignano and Benevento, religious freedom for the Greek churches lost its strategic significance. The preservation of living standard and individual culture was also undermined as Latinisation continued. From a political view, some historians believe although “ Islamic community...continued to function relatively normally”, paying taxes only theoretically guaranteed preservation of Muslim and Jewish wealth and status. This statement correctly emphasised that the policy was spontaneously executed and received, therefore highlighting its fragility and Muslim and Jewish vulnerability under the Norman government.

Metcalf and Johns succinctly summarise that Muslims were “ reduced to the status of dhimmis” by paying the jizya. Similarly, Greeks would undergo the same marginalisation as Latinisation inevitably occurred along with emigration of Latin Christians. From the social perspective, Matthew thinks that Sicilian Muslims were “ distinctly unhappy [and]...suffered from the misfortune of living under the rule of unbelievers” and intermingled with

nearby Arab-speaking Christian communities. This piece of evidence should be used carefully as there was no direct connection between unhappiness and living under Norman rule. Nevertheless, it reasonably points out the difference in treatment between non-Christians in royal courts and in communities. Houben mentioned "only at the court of Roger II in Palermo did Greek and Arab-Muslim cultures continue to flourish", implying elsewhere it did not. This may be in most areas, as Ibn al-Athīr recorded many Sicilian Muslim elites immigrated to other Muslim countries, such as Egypt and Spain. It is logical for non-Latin-Christian religious and intellectual elites to leave Sicily out of self-protection and in search of a more compatible environment. Yet, most non-Latin-Christians of low social status remained, as practically they couldn't afford to leave and lacked a skill worth being employed by other rulers, and possibly they were not immensely influenced by the change of Sicilian rulers.

As Latinisation intensified, religious tolerance guaranteed to non-Latin-Christian communities diminished as they became restricted to their own religion and culture. Conclusion Hubert Houben concludes pragmatically that the nature of religious tolerance depended on the relative population size and "a continued need for... co-operation". Sicily during the earlier period of King Roger II's reign was tolerant of different cultures due to non-Christian communities' dominant influence and their usefulness to the efficiency of royal administrations and economy. Roger was also receptive to the multicultural nature of Sicily, in order to demonstrate power and stabilise his reign, and express genuine interest in co-existence of cultures. Metcalfe encapsulates that Roger's "ruling apparatus... characterised by [foreign]

administrative and artistic elements”, as shown through the architecture, royal policies and administrative employment, provided non-Latin-Christians “ the preservation of a ... consciousness, identity and sense of community”, especially for Muslims. However, as Latinisation intensified, non-Latin-Christian communities were no longer in a favourable position. Although some higher class non-Latin-Christians continued to contribute in political and economic activities, and thus theoretically were able to preserve wealth, title and religious belief, they and most lower class were still gradually marginalised as Roger attempted to establish an original and Latin-Christian inherited era in Sicily. Nevertheless, Norman Sicily under Roger II demonstrates its significance as a brief period of co-existence between Latin-Christians, Muslims and Orthodox Christians, a phenomenon which relied on a mixture of Roger's appreciation of multiculturalism and practical motives aiming to consolidate a new reign and maximise efficiency.