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**Patrimoni culturali nell'era digitale.  
Memorie, culture umanistiche e tecnologia**

***Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age.  
Memory, Humanities and Technologies***

edited by Daria Spampinato

ASSOCIAZIONE PER  
L'INFORMATICA UMANISTICA  
E LA CULTURA DIGITALE



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# Historical Images and the Recovery of the Past. *The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT GOALS

South Italy was a site of artistic and architectural experimentation. This was particularly true in the Middle Ages, when this geographically disparate area was forged by its Norman conquerors into a kingdom (1130), which was subsequently ruled by Hohenstaufen, Angevin, and Aragonese dynasties. The multicultural heritage forged in the Kingdom of Sicily represents therefore a rich architectural and decorative patrimony for both Mediterranean and European cultures, and was in many ways unique in the history of art and architecture.

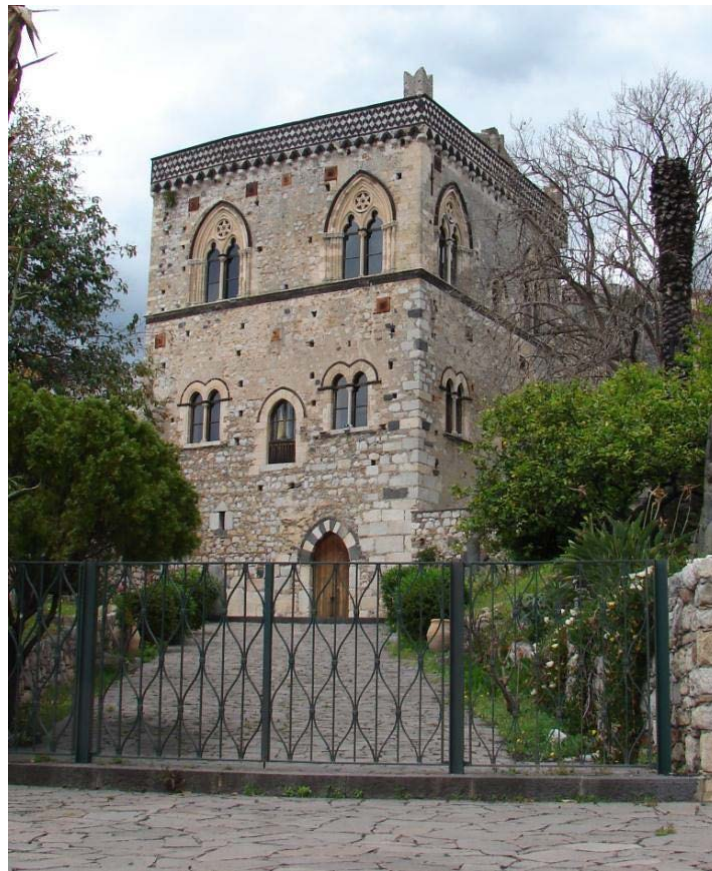


Fig.1. Taormina, Duchi di Santo Stefano Palace (14<sup>th</sup> century).

This artistic legacy comes down to us in profoundly modified form, however. The devastation of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, Baroque re-decoration, radical modern restoration, urban transformation and war destruction have led to huge losses.

In addition, urban expansion has changed the visual impact of the monuments on the urban landscape. As a result of so much devastation, we now see these important monuments through the filter of innumerable changes and modifications, many of which are re-interpretations of the original structures that were driven by post-war ideological or economic reasons. Nothing can compensate for the destruction of monuments. But historical images (photographs, drawings, maps, paintings...) produced as a visual record of travel, as practical exercises in professional training, or for documentary purposes by artists, architects, travellers, photographers and scholars of the past can to some extent mitigate the losses, permitting us to “see” monuments and urban or natural landscape prior to the profound changes of the last centuries.

*The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database*, online since October 2016, was therefore created to provide the users with as much information as possible on the original appearance of the important sites of South Italy, as well as to document the process of their rediscovery by scholars and travellers from the 18th up to the mid-20th centuries. Our database makes accessible to the community of a wide range of disciplines, as well as to the local residents and travellers, a large body of



information and knowledge that is dispersed in Italian, European and American collections, images that are for the most part unknown and unpublished.



Fig. 2. Messina Cathedral destroyed in the earthquake of 1908

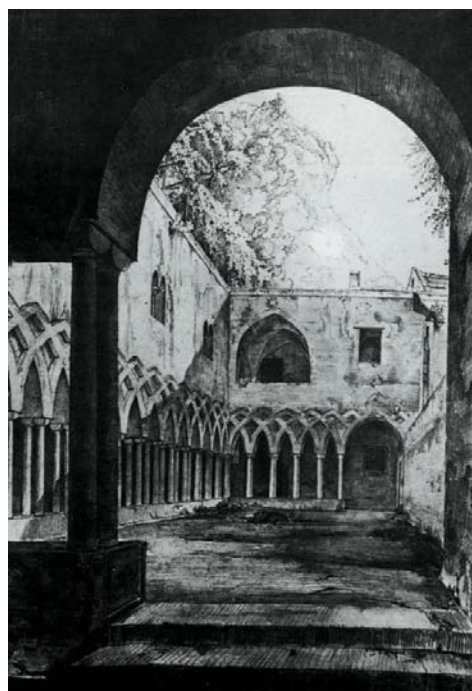


Fig. 3. Johann Heinrich Schilbach, *Amalfi, Capuchin convent (San Pietro a Toczolo)*, 1825. Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum

## 2. PROJECT STORY AND STRUCTURE

This project was initiated in 2011 by Caroline Bruzelius with funding from a National Endowment for the Humanities (USA), and now forms part of the activities of the Duke University (NC, USA) Wired! Lab. It is presently directed by Bruzelius and Paola Vitolo (University “Federico II” of Naples, Italy), with Joseph Williams (PhD researcher) as project manager, David Tremmel (Duke University) as data manager and database & web developer, William Broom (Duke University) as project coordinator, John Taormina (Duke University) as metadata and image management consultant. It has also involved numerous collaborators over the years at different stages of their academic career.

The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database  
A Visual Resource of Historical Sites c. 1100 - c. 1450

Home Browse & Search Map of the Kingdom Copyright and Reuse Contact Us English Italiano

### About

This database is a collection of historic images that represents the medieval monuments and cities of the Kingdom of Sicily collected from museums, libraries, archives and publications.

The historic Kingdom of Sicily encompassed the Island of Sicily and the areas of lower Lazio, Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria. The kingdom was created in the twelfth century by the Normans, was inherited by Frederick II of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, and conquered by the French in 1266. In the fifteenth century it came under Aragonese control. The rich and international artistic legacy of towns, castles, churches, monasteries and their decoration is a testament to the dynamic social and political history of South Italy. With its unique geographic position and multicultural heritage, the Kingdom of Sicily was a melting pot of artistic and architectural concepts.

Why are historic views particularly important for these monuments, and why have we created this database? Our repository gathers images created for the most part prior to the destruction or significant alteration of sites and monuments, as wars, earthquakes, extensive restoration, as well as simple neglect, have profoundly affected this rich artistic patrimony. Urban expansion has also often changed the landscape and transformed the role and meaning of monuments within cities or their periphery.

The database features historical images in a range of media, including drawing, painting, engraving and photography. The dates of the images range from the late-sixteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. These images and available descriptive information about their production can be found under the "Browse & Search" tab. Sites are organized topographically by location. Each record contains a list of associated Images: a brief description of the site, and details about its creation and relevant sources when known. More recent published images, including architectural plans, photographs and reconstructions, are collected within individual site entries under the "Visual Docs" tab.

This database is a work in progress and is by no means exhaustive or complete. There exist many more images produced by travelers, scholars, artists, architects, photographers, and soldiers, who traveled or studied in southern Italy that we have not been able to catalogue. The website editors will be grateful to receive information on collections and publications that can contribute to the project. To offer suggestions, use the "Contact Us" link above.

This web site is hosted by Trinity Technology Services (TTS) at Duke University. We are indebted to TTS for all of the support they have provided for this project.

Fig.4. *The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database* Homepage

At the outset of the project, the team created a master list of roughly 800 geo-referenced sites, developed a database structure, and established the criteria for the selection and cataloguing of images. The team was sent into libraries, museums and archives in Europe and USA and, as many images are now available online, also established links to the digital collections of Museums and cultural institutions.

The database consists of two linked parts: Historical Images and Works/Sites. For each individual image, data records include five sections with specific types of information: Overview (description and basic information on chronology, title, image type, notes and analysis), Image (reproduction of the image with information on format and resolution), Creation (dates, technique, measurements, artist's name and dates), Location (Repository and link to online collections), Research (bibliography and links to Google search and Books), Cross reference to Works entries.

In the Works and Sites entries we provide information on chronology, creation, patronage, artistic and architectural feature, condition, restorations and refurbishment campaigns.

The database is a work in progress and was designed as an expandable resource that can be continuously added to, enlarged and improved as new resources, collections, as well as new types of scholarship, emerge.

The screenshot shows the website interface for 'The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database'. The main heading is 'The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database' with a subtitle 'A Visual Resource of Historical Sites c. 1100 - c. 1450'. There is a search bar in the top right corner. The navigation menu includes 'Home', 'Browse & Search', 'Map of the Kingdom', 'Copyright and Reuse', and 'Contact Us'. The sidebar on the left has options for 'Cities & Sites', 'Images by Artist/Creator', 'Images by Collection', and 'Advanced Image Search'. The main content area is titled 'Image Details' and shows the entry for 'Agrigento, Cathedral, Porta di Ponte'. Below the title are tabs for 'Overview', 'Image', 'Creation', 'Location', and 'Research'. A table of metadata is displayed, and a thumbnail image of the site is shown on the left.

Field Name	Contents
Image number	35074
Description	View of the western side of the town
Given Title	S. Pietro, Porta del Ponte
Site(s) Depicted	<a href="#">Agrigento, Cathedral (San Gerlando)</a>
Type	Drawing
View Type	Full View
Period	19th Century
Analysis	Western side of the town with apsidal view of the cathedral and the Porta del Ponte (destroyed).
Notes	From Leo von Klenze's series made during his 1823 trip to Rome and Sicily with King Ludwig I of Bavaria.
Cataloger	Gabriella Cianciolo

Fig.5. *The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database*. Image entry for “Agrigento, Cathedral, Porta di Ponte” (nr. 35074)

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Limits and problems related to the use of historical images have been clear from the very beginning to the creators of the database. In particular:

1. Each image must necessarily be approached critically, and cross-referenced with other kind of written and/or figurative sources. Individual views may not be reliable representations of the exact condition of places and buildings at a specific date depending on personal or artistic purposes.
2. As the creators of the website are not in a position to make judgments on the significance of each image for individual research, we have decided to be as inclusive as possible, gathering and cataloguing as many images of buildings and their decorative programs as seem relevant to us. It is our expectation that those whose work focuses on individual sites or topics will verify that an image is historically correct, as the cataloguers are not experts on all subjects.
3. This research initiative potentially has an endless duration and therefore has no claim of being exhaustive.
4. Since the acquisition of images proceeds through collections, the collection of material is not necessarily representative of the total work of an artist or a traveler, or of the places and monuments they depicted.

#### 4. FUTURE PLANS

The editors of the database, in looking towards the future, have in mind first of all to expand the image collection, as well as to enlarge the geographical representation and the typology of materials. At present the team is developing an interactive mapping function that will show the location of sites in relation to the roads and ports of the region. The new mapping component will be searchable by types of institutions as well as artistic styles. It will interact with the material on each specific site in the database, visualizing the itineraries of Grand Tour artists. Finally, the map will permit the integration of this type of inquiry with the study of the itineraries of artists, architects, scholars and travellers of modern periods so that we may be able to reflect upon the accumulated knowledge derived from travel and movement through space.

We hope and expect that this project will have a significant impact on research, restoration, and the appreciation of the historic patrimony of South Italy. We are deeply concerned with the issue of monuments in the transmission of memory and identity, and the importance of their continued preservation and for restorations informed by the full range of documentary resources.

#### 5. SITOGRAPHY

*The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database* (<http://kos.aahvs.duke.edu/index.php>)

Wired! Lab (<http://www.dukewired.org/>)

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