

# Object study—The Tombstone of Anne: A case study on multilingualism in twelfth-century Sicily<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *In 1149 a Christian cleric by the name of Grisandus erected a small funerary headstone in honour of his mother at the Church of St Michael in Palermo, the capital of Norman Sicily. Often known as the Tombstone of Anne, the funerary headstone offers unexpected insight into the competing religious and cultural ideologies of twelfth-century Sicily. The four inscriptions are not, as some scholars have assumed, exact translations of the same text. In particular, the differences between the Arabic and Latin texts hint at some of the tensions underscoring Sicily's multicultural aspirations by proclaiming Christian superiority, affirming King Roger II's authority as a defender of the Pope of Rome and in the case of the Arabic texts, encouraging readers to convert to Christianity. Roger II's authority as king derived from the Pope of Rome, creating a complex political environment between cultural tolerance and Christian superiority. As is argued in this article, the Tombstone was a political tool, encouraging the dominance of Christianity in Sicily and the legitimacy of King Roger II's kingdom.*

Sicily in the twelfth century, under the reign of Roger II (1130–54 AD), was a place of cultural and religious exchange. Appreciation for Arabic, Byzantine and Latin art and architecture ran deep within the society, encouraging cultural and linguistic interaction between different groups of people and ways of life.<sup>2</sup> The Tombstone of Anne (see Figure 1),

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1 This article is an extended version of a source analysis task written for HIST2243: Vikings, Crusaders and Mongols: Shaping Medieval Europe, c. 850–1300, at The Australian National University (ANU), convened by Dr Tania Colwell.

2 Joanna Drell, 'Cultural Syncretism and Ethnic Identity: The Norman "Conquest" of Southern Italy and Sicily', *Journal of Medieval History* 25, no. 3 (1999), 187–88: doi.org/10.1016/S0304-4181(99)00002-0.

a funerary headstone erected by the cleric Grisandus for his mother in 1149, represents something of Sicily's unique multicultural aspirations. It also, on closer inspection, highlights the social division and political agenda that existed in Sicily at the time (see Figure 1). Although the four inscriptions on the Tombstone—Arabic, Latin, Greek and Hebrew—might initially suggest an unusual degree of religious and cultural tolerance, when they are compared, they also reveal a clear effort to promote and legitimise Christian authority. This object study will first contextualise the artefact and then, with particular focus on the Arabic and Latin inscriptions translated by historian Hubert Houben, it will argue that the purpose of the Tombstone was not merely to honour and remember the death of Anne, but also to promote the conversion of 'heathens' to Christianity and further support King Roger II's loyalty to the Catholic Church.



Figure 1: The Tombstone of Anne, sometimes known as the 'Tombstone in four languages'.

Source: Dipartimento regionale dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana. Soprintendenza per i beni culturali ed ambientali di Palermo. Archivio fotografico. [Regional Department of Cultural Heritage and Sicilian Identity, Supervisor for the Environmental and Cultural Heritage of Palermo. Photograph archive.]

The Norman conquest of Sicily in 1060, then under Arab control, was coordinated by Robert Guiscard and his youngest brother Roger, who would later become known as Roger I.<sup>3</sup> The conquest of Sicily ended in 1091 with the victory of the Norman armies and the instalment of Roger I as the Count of Sicily.<sup>4</sup> The Norman conquest, although sanctioned by the Pope of Rome, was not a crusade. Roger I's army was made up of a mixture of Latin Christians, Greek Christians and Muslims.<sup>5</sup> During the eleventh century the Normans and Latin Christians were minorities on the island of Sicily and after his conquest, in an effort to consolidate his rule and establish peace, Roger I recognised the need for cultural accommodation and sought to promote Sicily as a region of religious and linguistic tolerance.<sup>6</sup> It is out of this policy for cultural tolerance that Roger II, Roger I's second son, would also build his kingdom.

During Roger II's reign (1130–54), Sicily remained a place of cultural exchange, where Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic communities formed a multiethnic and multilingual society, acting as an important cultural bridge between the East and the West.<sup>7</sup> Sicily promoted cultural tolerance by adopting three official languages of administration: Latin, Greek and Arabic.<sup>8</sup>

The Tombstone of Anne was produced in 1149 at Palermo in Sicily, where Roger II's palace and court resided.<sup>9</sup> It was made as a funeral inscription documenting Anne's date of death and the transfer of her body to an alternative burial site. The Tombstone is relatively small, only 32 cm in width, with the base of the stone created from marble and decorated with multicoloured glass fragments, which also form the central cross. Grisandus, Anne's son and apparently a cleric belonging to the court of Roger II, ordered the production of the artefact.<sup>10</sup> Little appears to

3 Steven Runciman, *The Sicilian Vespers: A History of the Mediterranean World in the Late Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 5.

4 Runciman, *The Sicilian Vespers*, 5–6.

5 Dirk Booms and Peter Higgs, *Sicily: Culture and Conquest* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2016), 174.

6 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 174.

7 Hubert Houben, 'Religious Toleration in South Italian Peninsula During the Norman and Staufen Periods', in *The Society of Norman Italy*, ed. G Loud and A Metcalfe (Brill: Leiden & Boston, 2002), 324; Hubert Houben, 'King of Sicily and Southern Italy', in *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler Between East and West* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 50.

8 Hubert Houben, 'Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures: Norman Sicily as a "Third Space"?', in *Norman Tradition and Transcultural Heritage*, ed. S Burkhardt and T Foerster (Farnham: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 21.

9 Drell, 'Cultural Syncretism and Ethnic Identity', 187.

10 Houben, 'Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures', 22.

be known about Grisandus, apart from his employment as a priest at the Church of St Michael in Palermo. It is clear, however, that he was a supporter of the multilingual approach adopted by Roger II.

According to the Arabic translation by Huber Houbens, a historian of Sicily during this period, the Tombstone states that Grisandus ‘transferred her with prayers of intercession to this church of St. Michaels’, while the Latin simply indicates the final location with ‘this chapel’ (see Appendix). It is important to note that Houbens’s conclusions are contested. The historian Wolfgang Kronig suggests that the use of the terms ‘church’ and ‘chapel’ are not so easily interpreted as parts of the Tombstone’s inscription were poorly preserved, leading to some confusion over its final resting place.<sup>11</sup> Was the Tombstone located in a private chapel called St Anne’s inside the Church of St Michael, or is the Church renamed St Anne’s in the memory of his mother?<sup>12</sup> The reference to the clerical order, the Pope of Rome and Mary, ‘mother of the Messiah [Jesus Christ]’, does point towards the artefact’s Latin origins (see Appendix). Whatever the resting place of the Tombstone of Anne, it was created to reside inside a Latin Christian building.

The Tombstone of Anne is an extraordinary artefact that provides strong evidence of Sicily’s multiethnic and multilingual society in the twelfth century. Four different languages are represented on its surface—Arabic, Latin, Greek and Hebrew—and are neatly divided into four separate sections.<sup>13</sup> The four languages inscribed on the funeral stone demonstrate that the communication between the different ethnic groups was important for the administrative functions of Sicilian society. Their content also reveal an understanding of different religious calendars. In the Hebrew inscription ‘Anne [...] died at the time of vespers on Friday 20 August in the year 4908’, while in the Greek inscription ‘Anne passed away peacefully on 20 August 6656’.<sup>14</sup> While the Tombstone was created in a Latin Christian context, the acknowledgement of individual religious calendars demonstrates the level of cross-cultural knowledge and tolerance between the different religious groups in Sicily in this period. The Tombstone of Anne reveals a high level of religious and cultural tolerance within Sicilian society during the twelfth century.

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11 Wolfgang Kronig, ‘Der Viersprachige Grabstein Von 1148 in Palermo’, *Zeitschrift Fur Kunstgeschichte*, 556.

12 Kronig, ‘Der Viersprachige Grabstein Von 1148 in Palermo’, 556.

13 Houbens, ‘Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures’, 23–24.

14 Houbens, ‘Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures’, 23.

Yet, the Tombstone of Anne also demonstrates a belief in Christian superiority. On closer inspection, although the inscriptions refer to the same event, the texts are altered according to what religion or language is being addressed.<sup>15</sup> From a visual point of view, the Arabic (bottom) and Hebrew (top) texts are longer than that of the Greek (right) and Latin (left) (see Figure 1). In his examination of the Tombstone, Wolfgang suggests that the content of the inscription was authored by Guirsudus’—his own ‘intellectual property’.<sup>16</sup> The inscriptions are of a personal nature, detailing the building of the ‘chapel’ was for God, himself and his mother. It might be that someone was commissioned to inscribe a set script in the different languages, but at the very least the words appear to have been first written by Grisandus.

The Arabic text is the most elaborate of all the inscriptions, detailing attributes of Roger II:

The ruling majesty, the august, the supreme, the sublime, the most holy, the magnificent, the powerful through God [...] he who reigns over Italy, Lombardy, Calabria, Sicily and Africa.<sup>17</sup>

The inscription attempts to validate Roger II’s authority and divine sovereignty over the Arabic reader, which is in striking contrast to the Latin text where the king is entirely absent from the inscription (see Appendix). During the 1140s a majority of the population in Sicily spoke Arabic. Portraying the Norman Christian king as a powerful and magisterial figure was likely a strategy to remind Arabic readers of Roger II’s current political authority.<sup>18</sup>

The Arabic text ends: ‘thus God may have mercy on him who reads this and pray for her [Mary’s] mercy. Amen. Amen. Amen’.<sup>19</sup> This inscription not only appears to be praising the reader’s conversion to Christianity, but also reaffirms that Arab peoples—like all Christians—were considered to be sinners and in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Furthermore, the Tombstone inscriptions are centred around an elaborately decorated Christian cross, featuring multicoloured glass fragments to form the shape of the cross (see Figure 1). The cross is offset by Greek

15 Kronig, ‘Der Viersprachige Grabstein Von 1148 in Palermo’, 556–57.

16 Kronig, ‘Der Viersprachige Grabstein Von 1148 in Palermo’, 556.

17 Houben, ‘Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures’, 23–24.

18 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 174.

19 Houben, ‘Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures’, 24.

symbols appearing in each corner of the cross. The symbols, according to historian Hubert Houben, translate to 'Jesus Christ is victorious'.<sup>20</sup> This inscription typically refers to Jesus conquering death; however, it could also be argued that they allude to Christianity's triumph over Islam and Judaism. The colourful description of the king in the Arabic inscription appear to be reminding the readers of the king's supremacy and, above all, loyalty to Rome and Christianity. The stark contrast between the Arabic and Latin inscriptions seems at first to suggest an underlying religious prejudice within medieval Sicily. However, let us consider for a moment the Tombstone in the broader context of Roger II's reign.

A spirit of cultural unity was a founding symbol of Roger II reign. His royal chapel Cappella Palatina, for example, is well documented as a symbol of Roger's diversified court.<sup>21</sup> The Cappella Palatina was completed in 1140, nine years prior to the production of the Tombstone, and highlights a unique mixture of architectural and artistic design inspired from Arabic, Greek and Latin cultures.<sup>22</sup> The dome painting is a unique example of Islamic styled influence within the Cappella Palatine. The ceiling is covered with panels in an elaborate muqarnas layout, which is a form of Islamic architecture that is seen through the 'geometric sub-divided' arrangement of the dome.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Roger II's coronation mantle is an elaborate red and gold silk robe with an Arabic inscription surrounding the hem of the garment, detailing the Arabic workshop and calling for a blessing upon the ruler.<sup>24</sup> Although it is suggested that the garment was created four years after Roger's official coronation in 1130, the intention of wearing a Arabic-styled robe to a coronation by a Catholic Pope is a bold statement of cross-culture interaction.<sup>25</sup> Sicily's mix of cultural artistic influence demonstrates a level of tolerant coexistence between the

20 Houben, 'Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures', 24.

21 Roberto Salvini, 'Monuments of Norman Art in Sicily and Southern Italy', in *The Normans in Sicily and Southern Italy*, Lincel Lectures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 65–66.

22 William Toronzo, *The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatine in Palermo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 134–52.

23 Wijdan Ali, *The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art: From the Seventh to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 161.

24 'Mantle of Roger II of Sicily', Textile Research Centre: TRC Needles, 2017, accessed at [www.trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/individual-textiles-and-textile-types/secular-ceremonies-and-rituals/mantle-of-roger-ii-of-sicily](http://www.trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/individual-textiles-and-textile-types/secular-ceremonies-and-rituals/mantle-of-roger-ii-of-sicily).

25 Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture and the Literary World* (New York: HN Abrams, 1997), 225–26.

multiethnic society. Roger II's open and visual display of religious unity, and the Christian-dominated ideology inscribed on the Tombstone of Anne demonstrates a complex coexistence of religious orthodoxies.

Another perplexing issue surrounding the Tombstone of Anne is the fact that it was located inside a Christian church (although it is unclear which church exactly). The Latin inscription states that 'she was transferred to this chapel which her son built for the Lord and himself'. Unless this chapel was regularly visited by different religious peoples, why was a Tombstone with an Arabic inscription and clear rhetoric of conversion located inside a 'chapel', a place primarily visited by believers? Dirk Booms and Peter Higgs have suggested that the Tombstone was used for Muslims that had already converted to Christianity, but who still spoke and read Arabic.<sup>26</sup> This interpretation, however, fails to explain the striking differences between each inscription, including the elaborate promotion of Christianity and the superiority of King Roger II, found only in the Arabic text, if its purpose was simply to cater for Arabic speaking Christians.

Another explanation for the Tombstone's location would be that non-Christians were required to attend significant Christian events. Yet, we know that Muslims and Jews were able to freely practice their own religion, building and visiting mosques and cadis.<sup>27</sup> 'Forced' attendance in Christian churches does not fit with the policy of religious tolerance that existed throughout Roger II's reign. Despite the spirit of cultural unity, the Tombstone strongly emphasises the king's firm Christian faith.

The Arabic inscription states that the king is 'the defender of the Pope of Rome, the protector of the Christian faith'.<sup>28</sup> This is an interesting statement considering the strained relationship between Roger II and the Pope of Rome.<sup>29</sup> Roger II became the sole ruler of Sicily at 16, however, despite his young age he had a strong political vision for Sicily.<sup>30</sup> Historian Graham Loud suggests that one of the issues between Norman rulers and the Pope was whether to continue the tradition of rulers swearing an Oath of Fealty to each new Pope, which Robert Giscard had done in 1080.<sup>31</sup>

26 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 221.

27 Edmund Curtis, 'Two Counts of Sicily, 1085–1130', in *Roger of Sicily: And the Normans in Lower Italy* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1912), 94.

28 Houben, 'Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures', 23.

29 Drell, 'Cultural Syncretism and Ethnic Identity', 187.

30 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 178.

31 Graham A Loud, 'The Papacy and the Rulers of Southern Italy: 1058–1198', *The Society of Norman Italy*, ed. GA Loud and A Metcalfe (Boston: Brill, 2002), 158.

Over time, issues began to arise between the Papacy's view of the Norman rulers as temporary and replaceable and Roger II's belief of his inherited authority as the King of Sicily. Roger II's ambition for his kingdom—which did not properly acknowledge the Church's authority to legitimise Christian rulers—quickly turned into a display of defiance against the Church.<sup>32</sup> To Roger II's advantage, however, Rome during the year 1130 experienced a contested papal election among the College of Cardinals, against Pope Innocent II and the anti-Pope Anacletus II.<sup>33</sup>

The political turbulence within the Catholic Church weakened the authority of the Pope and created an opportunity for Roger II to ally himself with Anacletus II, in return for his official coronation as King of Sicily on Christmas day of 1130.<sup>34</sup> The ambiguous nature of Roger II's claim to kingship and the tense relation with the Church demonstrates the political complexity within medieval Sicily. Taking this context into account also helps scholars more critically interpret objects like the Tombstone of Anne.

One possible interpretation of the conflicting inscriptions on the Tombstone is that the inscriptions were used as a political tool in Roger II's agenda. It is possible that the artefact, tucked away in the 'chapel', was never meant to be read by anyone other than Christian eyes. The detail of Christian superiority in the Arabic inscription not only demonstrates that the king was loyal to the Christian faith, it also affirms his efforts to convert non-Christians to the Catholic Church. The Arabic inscription could have been part of an effort to eradicate any doubt that the King of Sicily, despite his perceived religious tolerance, was a sympathiser to the Arabic and Hebrew faiths.

The reference of Roger II being a 'defender of the Pope' is particularly interesting, as it suggests that the king was attempting to demonstrate his loyalty to the Pope of Rome, and subsequently his divine right to rule as monarch (see Appendix). Rogers II's entire kingdom was built on a fabricated claim of legitimacy, through the illusion of a kingdom having existed before the Norman conquest, and the support of that claim by the Pope of Rome.<sup>35</sup> Roger held no legitimate claim without the support, or at least perceived support, of the Pope of Rome, a fact that firmly tied Roger's authority to the Catholic Church. With the delicate balance of power

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32 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 178–79.

33 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 178.

34 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 178.

35 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 178–79.

during medieval Sicily it makes sense that Roger would have promoted his connection to the Pope of Rome, even if the ‘real’ relationship appeared strained.

But, what of Anne’s son, the cleric Grisandus? Why would a personal artefact that he erected to remember his mother be entangled so deeply in efforts to legitimise Roger’s reign? The role of the cleric in this conclusion is unclear. There are limited sources surrounding Grisandus and the use of tombstones as political tools, which leaves it open to interpretation. Perhaps Grisandus was attempting to gain favour with Roger II, and through this gain control over the Catholic Church in Sicily. Roger II took control over church matters early in his reign, which added to the turmoil between the Pope and the king.<sup>36</sup> Grisandus also appears to be closely tied to the Palermo Court. The historian Thomas Brown has identified him as the head of the Palatine Chapel during Roger II’s reign.<sup>37</sup> Grisandus’ references to himself as the ‘priest of the ruling majesty’ suggest that he might have held a political relationship with Roger II, or at least the want of one (see Appendix). Might Grisandus have been demonstrating his loyalty, even friendship, to Roger II and his kingdom?

The location of the Tombstone in the city of Palermo is important. As Roger II’s kingdom became a recognised political power in the region, Palermo attracted scholars and guests from all over medieval Europe to visit the king’s court and palace. The placement of the Tombstone, in a city designed to legitimise and promote Roger II’s authority, provided ample opportunity to display Roger II’s ‘strong’ connection to the Pope of Rome, and serves as but one object in a complex political campaign of cultural unity and monarchical authority. It demonstrates Roger II’s detailed political agenda and the careful construction of medieval Sicily as a dominant political influence in the twelfth century. The Tombstone survives as a piece of Sicilian propaganda, which promotes conversion to Christianity and demonstrates the politically derived illusion of King Roger II’s loyalty to the Catholic Church; therefore, it provides a legitimate foundation for his kingdom and his right to rule as king.

The Tombstone of Anne is part of Roger II’s legacy, and allows historians unique insight into the way competing religious and cultural ideologies persisted—sometimes beneath the fabric of daily life—in Sicily’s medieval

36 Booms and Higgs, *Sicily*, 178.

37 Houben, ‘Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures’, 28.

multilingual society. Beyond honouring Grisandus's mother Anne, the Tombstone was a political tool, helping to encourage the conversion of heathens and the dominance of Christianity in Sicily and the legitimacy of King Roger II's kingdom. The artefact demonstrates a general tolerance of different cultural traditions through the appreciation of language and religious customs; however, the striking contrast between the Arabic and Latin inscriptions reflect a political strategy to maintain the power of cultural unity, while ensuring a display of loyalty to the Church of Rome.

## Appendix: Translations

Translations reproduced in Hubert Houben, 'Between Occidental and Oriental Cultures: Norman Sicily as a 'Third Space'?' in *Norman Tradition and Transcultural Heritage*, ed. S Burkhardt and T Foerster (Farnham: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 23–24.

The Latin inscription reads:

On the thirteenth calends of September [20 August] died Anne, the mother of Grisandus, and was buried in the great church of St. Mary in the year 1148,  
in the eleventh indiction. On the thirteenth calends of June [20 May] she was transferred to this chapel which her son built for the Lord and himself in the year 1149, in the twelfth indiction.

The Arabic inscription reads:

Anne, the mother of the priest Akrisant, priest of the ruling majesty, the august, the supreme, the sublime, the elevated, the most holy, the magnificent, the powerful through God, the potent through His omnipotence, the mighty through His strength, he who reigns over Italy, Lombardy, Calabria, Sicily and Africa, the defender of the pope of Rome, the protector of the Christian faith—may God prolong his reign!—died on Friday, at the time of Vespers, on 20 August 543

[1148 AD] and was buried in the great cathedral (jami). From there her son transferred her with prayers of intercession to this church of St. Michael on Friday

at the first hour of the evening of 20 May of the year 544 [1149 AD], and built

over her tomb this church and named it the church of St Anne, after the name

of Anne, mother of [our lady] Mary [, the mother of the Messiah. Thus God may have mercy on him who reads this] and pray for her mercy. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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