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Translating, Adapting, Co-Producing. Anna's Quadrilingual Tombstone in Norman Palermo



Four Languages for One Commemoration

Medieval Sicily is often portrayed as a peaceful "melting pot" in which Latin and Greek Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together and blended their cultures. This image captures something of the island's linguistic and cultural variety, but it can also obscure the political and religious asymmetries that structured relations among its communities. Under Islamic rule, Christians and Jews had enjoyed protected but subordinate status. After the Norman conquest, completed in 1091, Latin Christianity became closely connected to the ruling dynasty, while Muslim communities were gradually marginalised even as their linguistic, administrative, and artistic expertise remained important to the kingdom (Houben 2013).

Palermo was at the center of this multilingual society. In the *Lamentatio* for the death of King William I, preserved in Peter of Eboli's *Liber ad honorem Augusti* (see the case study *Co-Producing Love and Paradise*), the city is famously described as a "happy city endowed with a three-tongued people" (*urbs felix populo dotata trilingui*). The three languages evoked by Peter are Arabic, Greek, and Latin. Arabic had been inherited from the administration of the emirate and continued to be employed by the Norman court; Greek was used by an important part of Sicily's Christian population, particularly in the eastern regions of the island; and Latin was increasingly associated with a ruling dynasty whose political and ecclesiastical ties connected Sicily to Western Christendom

and the bishop of Rome. Palermo's linguistic landscape, however, also included the languages used by its Jewish communities: Hebrew, particularly in religious and written contexts, and Judaeo-Arabic, namely Arabic written in Hebrew characters. Jewish communities were present not only in Palermo but also in other Sicilian centres, such as Messina, and some of their members were connected to the Norman administration. This historical abundance of languages – three, or even four – has recently been evoked in Palermo itself: some street signs in the historic centre display place names in Italian, Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek – with Italian "replacing" Latin.

The presence of languages associated with different communities in the medieval Sicilian capital also found material expression in inscriptions produced at the time. The most famous example, precisely because it brings together all four languages, is the tombstone commissioned by Grisandus for his mother Anna, a Palermitan woman of probable Greek origin who belonged to an elite family connected to the royal court (MacAllan 2019). Grisandus was a cleric attached to the Norman court, while his father Drogo, Anna's husband, was probably a Norman member of the same courtly milieu. Anna died on 20 August 1148 and was initially buried in the great church of Palermo, the city's cathedral. Her original grave appears to have been marked by a Latin inscription alone. On 20 May 1149, Grisandus transferred her remains to a private chapel in the Church of Saint Michael. He built the chapel over her tomb and dedicated it to Saint Anna, the mother of the Virgin Mary. The new quadrilingual slab commemorated both Anna's death and the translation of her remains, transforming her family memorial into an object capable of addressing Palermo's different linguistic and religious communities. It originally formed part of her marble sarcophagus and is now preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art at the Zisa Palace in Palermo.



The slab is divided into five panels. At its centre, a Greek cross is surrounded by the abbreviated formula *IC XC NI KA*, "Jesus Christ triumphs". This emphatically Christian image provides the visual and religious centre of the monument. The formula was appropriate to a funerary setting because it proclaimed Christ's victory over death (Zeitler 1996, 137). It could also evoke imperial authority, particularly in Norman southern Italy and Sicily, where the motif was widely employed.

Around the cross, the Judaeo-Arabic inscription occupies the upper panel, the Latin the

left panel, the Greek the right panel, and the Arabic the lower panel. In English translation, the inscriptions read as follows:

> *Latin*
>
> On the thirteenth day before the Kalends of September, Anna, mother of Grisandus, died and was buried in the great Church of Saint Mary, in the year 1148; and on the thirteenth day before the Kalends of June, she was transferred to this chapel, which her son built for the Lord and for her, in the year 1149.
>
> *Greek*
>
> Anna fell asleep in blessed peace on the twentieth day of the month of August, in the year 6656, and was buried in the great catholic church. On the twentieth of May 6657, her son Grisantos raised her up, received her as an inheritance with Greek and Latin prayers, and removed her from there. He laid her in the place where he built this chapel over her. Pray for her.
>
> *Arabic*
>
> Anna, mother of the cleric Akrizant, cleric of the Royal Presence, the most royal, the exalted, the most exalted, the glorious, the splendid, the most holy, the magnificent, the one fortified by God, the one empowered by His power and supported by His strength, the one who reigns over Italy, Lombardy, Calabria, Sicily, and Africa, defender of the Imam of Rome and protector of the Christian community – may God preserve his kingdom – died on the evening of Friday, the twentieth of August, in the year five hundred and forty-three, and was buried in the great mosque. Then her son transferred her, with prayers of intercession, to this Church of Saint Michael, in the first hour of the evening of Friday, the twentieth of May, in the year five hundred and forty-four. He built over her this Chapel of Saint Anna, in honour of the name of the mother of Our Lady Mary, mother of the Messiah. May God have mercy upon whoever reads this and prays for mercy upon her. Amen, amen, amen.
>
> *Judaeo-Arabic*
>
> Anna, mother of the cleric Akrisant, cleric of the glorious king, lord of Italy, Lombardy, Calabria, Sicily, and Africa, died on the evening of Friday, the twentieth day of the month of August, in the year four thousand nine hundred and eight, and was buried in the great church. Then her son transferred her, with prayers, to this Church of Saint Michael, in the first hour of Friday, the twentieth of May, in the year four thousand nine hundred and nine. He built this chapel over her tomb and named it Saint Anna, in memory of the name of the mother of Our Lady Mary, mother of the Messiah. May God have mercy upon whoever reads this and prays for mercy upon her. Amen, amen.
>
> All four versions record the same sequence: Anna's death, her initial burial, the translation of her remains, and the construction of the chapel by Grisandus. Their differences, however, show that Grisandus did not simply have a single text translated word for word. The same commemoration was reformulated for different linguistic and religious audiences (Booms-Higgs 2016, 220-221).

Translating (and Co-Producing) Dating Systems, Spaces, and Royal Power

The Latin inscription is the shortest and most factual. It records the two events, their dates, and the construction of the chapel through a concise sequence of actions: Anna died, was buried, was transferred, and was placed in the chapel built by her son. The Greek version adopts a more explicitly Christian funerary register. Anna “fell asleep in blessed peace”; the transfer of her body was accompanied by Greek and Latin prayers; and the reader is directly invited to pray for her. The Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic inscriptions are much longer. They identify Grisandus through his service to Roger II, explain why the chapel was dedicated to Saint Anna, and conclude by asking God to show mercy both to the deceased and to those who read the inscription and pray for her.

The four dating systems provide the clearest evidence that these texts were culturally adapted rather than mechanically translated. The Latin version uses the Christian era and expresses the days through the Roman system of Kalends. The Greek text employs the Byzantine era of creation, dating Anna’s death and translation to the years 6656 and 6657. This system remained current in Norman Sicily and also appears in the Greek dedicatory inscription of the Cappella Palatina.



The Judaeo-Arabic version gives the years 4908 and 4909 according to the Jewish calendar. Like the Byzantine system, it reckons time from the creation of the world, but it follows a different calculation. The Arabic text dates the same events to 543 and 544 of the Hijri era.

The Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic inscriptions add that the events occurred on Friday and specify the hour of the translation of Anna’s relicts. In both Jewish and Islamic conventions, a new day began at sunset. The “first hour of Friday” therefore referred to an evening that a Latin reader would still have classified as Thursday. By incorporating four dating systems into a single object, the monument locates Anna’s death within

four conceptions of historical and ritual time. It creates a shared commemorative moment without suppressing the temporal practices of the communities it addresses. However, this “synchronisation” should not be mistaken for religious parity: all four calendars are arranged around the memory of a Christian woman and the dedication of a Christian chapel.

Even the place of Anna’s first burial is described through different institutional vocabularies. The Latin text refers simply to the “great Church of Saint Mary” (*ecclesia magna Sanctae Mariae*). For its Latin Christian audience, this formula was sufficient to identify Palermo Cathedral, whose place within the city’s Latin ecclesiastical order required no further explanation. The Greek inscription, by contrast, calls it the “great catholic church” (*katholikē kai megalē ekklēsia*). In Byzantine Greek, the term *katholikē* could refer to the “universal” Church, but it could also designate the principal or cathedral church of a city. Its inclusion therefore identifies the building through a specifically Greek ecclesiastical vocabulary, presenting it to Greek readers as Palermo’s chief Christian church even though it belonged to an ecclesiastical structure oriented towards Rome.

The Arabic version calls the same building *al-jāmiʿ al-aʿẓam*, an expression modelled on the Islamic designation of a principal congregational mosque. In Norman Sicilian Arabic, however, *jāmiʿ* could also be used for a Christian cathedral or even a synagogue. The application of this term to a cathedral reshaped its meaning within the multilingual environment of Norman Sicily. The resulting expression is thus co-produced, since it combines an Islamic conception of urban religious space with the new Christian function of the building. This terminology may also have carried a more specific local resonance connected to Palermo’s religious topography. The building in which Anna was buried had served as the city’s congregational mosque when Palermo was the capital of the Sicilian emirate, before being converted to Christian worship after the Norman conquest. A later parallel can be found in Córdoba, where the Great Mosque became the city’s cathedral after its conquest by Ferdinand III in 1236. Although the political and architectural histories of the two sites differed, both cases show how Christian rulers appropriated the principal Islamic place of worship, while its earlier structure continued to shape the perception of the site. Anna’s inscription preserves an Arabic way of naming a major urban religious space while simultaneously proclaiming its transformation into Palermo’s Christian cathedral.

The representation of Roger II and his relation to Grisandus is equally differentiated. Neither the Latin nor the Greek text names him. Their Christian readers may not have required an explanation of Grisandus’s social position or of the political order in which the commemoration took place. The Judaeo-Arabic inscription, by contrast, calls Grisandus the “cleric of the glorious king” and identifies that king as ruler of Italy, Lombardy, Calabria, Sicily, and Africa. The Arabic version develops this connection much more fully. Grisandus becomes the “cleric of the Royal Presence”, and the sovereign is praised through a long series of honorific titles. As Johns has shown, these formulas draw upon the language of contemporary Islamic diplomacy. After Roger’s coronation in 1130, the Norman chancery adopted an Arabic titulature partly derived from Fatimid practice. The impersonal expression *al-ḥaḍra*, “the Presence”, could stand for the sovereign, while the accumulation of honorific titles, or *alqāb*, resembled the sequences used for Fatimid viziers, great lords, and foreign rulers. Some of the titles on Anna’s tombstone – “fortified by God”, “empowered by His power”, and “supported by His strength” – also recall established Abbasid caliphal formulas. They do not turn Roger into a Muslim caliph, but they “interpret” the authority of the Christian king through an Arabic-Islamic language of rulership.

This process is especially clear in two further titles. Roger is described as the “defender of the Imam of Rome” (*muʿizz imāmi Rūmiyya*) and the “protector of the Christian community” (*al-nāṣir li-l-millati l-naṣrāniyya*). The first formula renders the bishop of Rome as an *imām*. As Isabelle Dolezalek has noted, Fatimid diplomatic thought could describe the pope as occupying among Christians a position functionally comparable to that of the imam among Muslims: he was the religious authority who legitimised Christian rulers (Dolezalek 2017). The title “defender of the imam of Rome” was particularly appropriate for Roger II, whose kingship had been authorised by Anacletus II in 1130 and recognised by Innocent II in 1139. The Arabic inscription thus presents Roger as the supporter of the Roman authority from which his Christian royal title derived part of its legitimacy. This is more than translation: papal authority is recast through an Islamic category that, in turn, articulates the legitimacy of a Christian king. The resulting formula is thus a co-production of Christian and Islamic political vocabularies.

The term *milla* presents a similar dynamic in the translation. In Qurʾānic and Islamic usage, it could designate a creed or confessional tradition, as in the expression “the religion of Abraham” (*millat Ibrāhīm*). By describing Christianity as *al-milla al-naṣrāniyya*, the inscription situates it within a familiar Islamic classification of religious communities. At the same time, it appropriates this category to make a Christian political claim: Roger is the sovereign who protects the Christian faith and its adherents. His authority is constructed through the combination of Islamic modes of representing rulership and a Western Christian conception of royal legitimacy.

Shared Words, Unequal Frameworks

The naming of Mary and Jesus reveals the same combination of accommodation and confessional assertion. Both the Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic inscriptions explain the chapel’s dedication by identifying Saint Anna as the mother of “Our Lady Mary, mother of the Messiah”: *umm al-sayyida Maryam, wālidat al-Masīḥ* in the Arabic text, and *ummi l-sayyidati Maryama wālidati l-Masīḥi* in the Judaeo-Arabic one. Mary and Jesus were familiar figures to Christian, Muslim, and Jewish readers, although their religious significance differed sharply. For Muslim readers, *al-Masīḥ* was a recognised Qurʾānic title for Jesus, but it did not carry the Christological implications it possessed in Christianity. For Jewish readers, identifying Jesus as the Messiah articulated an explicitly Christian claim. The formula therefore shows that adaptation did not require the monument to neutralise its confession; on the contrary, language familiar to its intended audience became a means of communicating and asserting its Christian interpretation of these shared figures. The inscriptions address Muslim and Jewish readers through familiar languages and categories, but they present Anna, Mary, and Jesus in a Christian perspective. Similar strategies could operate in the opposite direction. The Arabic inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem call Jesus “the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary”, God’s messenger and Word, but place those shared designations within an explicitly Islamic framework by rejecting both the Trinity and divine sonship. In both cases, a language intelligible across confessional boundaries is used to assert a particular understanding of shared figures.

The conclusions of the inscriptions also turn reading into a religious act. The Greek text asks its readers to pray for Anna. The Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic versions ask God to show mercy to anyone who reads the epitaph and prays for her, before ending with repeated *āmīn*. A liturgical expression shared by several religious traditions is incorporated into a Christian funerary monument. The Greek inscription also records that the translation of Anna’s remains was accompanied by “Greek and Latin prayers” (*grikōs kai latinikōs meta litaneias*). This detail associates her commemoration with both of Palermo’s principal Christian traditions. It also echoes the Norman rulers’ effort

to secure recognition among Latin and Greek Christians while gradually incorporating Greek ecclesiastical institutions into a kingdom aligned with Rome. The monument presents a specifically “Sicilian vision” of Christian unity: Greek and Latin rites remain distinct, but both are coordinated within a common political and ecclesiastical framework.

As noted above, other examples of multilingual inscriptions are also attested in Sicily in this period. A closely related case is provided by the tombstone of Grisandus’s father, Drogo, who died in 1153 and was buried beside his wife in the same chapel. His monument again combined Latin, Greek, and Arabic inscriptions, employing both Christian and Hijri dating systems. In a different, non-funerary context, the trilingual inscription associated with the hydraulic clock installed in the Cappella Palatina in 1142 addresses readers in Greek, Latin, and Arabic while proclaiming the authority of Roger II.



These multilingual inscriptions were not unique to Norman Sicily: comparable strategies appeared in other regions of the medieval Mediterranean. After Ferdinand III of Castile died in 1252, his tomb in Seville bore epitaphs in Latin, Castilian, Arabic, and Hebrew.



These monuments belong to a broader epigraphic culture in which the display of several languages served both communicative and “ideological” objectives: it addressed linguistically differentiated audiences while constructing particular representations of authority. Anna’s tombstone is nevertheless distinctive because it transfers this practice beyond an explicitly royal monument. Members of Palermo’s ecclesiastical and urban elites, like Grisandus’ family, appropriate the same imagery of Norman rulers for their objectives (Gallini 2019). The slab demonstrates the wider circulation of a language of power that had been developed and displayed by the monarchy. Moreover, the inclusion of Judaeo-Arabic is noteworthy, because among the surviving multilingual inscriptions of Norman Sicily, Anna’s tombstone is one of the few to include Arabic written in Hebrew characters. Although Judaeo-Arabic was commonly used by Sicilian Jews, its appearance in a monumental Christian funerary inscription probably reflects an intention to address Palermo’s Jewish readers, perhaps also in connection with possible ties between Anna’s family and the city’s Jewish population (Johns 2021).

For the commemoration of his mother, Grisandus used Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Judaeo-Arabic to address Palermo’s different religious audiences. The four inscriptions do not simply translate the same text from one language into another, but they adapt Anna’s commemoration to their respective readers: they “synchronise” different calendars, describe religious institutions and royal titles through distinct political and religious vocabularies, and invite different communities to participate in Anna’s memory. These adaptation does not neutralise the monument’s religious character. The central cross, the identification of Jesus as the Messiah, the prominence accorded to Roger II as the protector of Christians, and the coordination of Greek and Latin prayers all express the Christian catholic framework within which Anna is commemorated. However, the concepts of time, sacred spaces, and royal authority articulated by the inscriptions emerge instead through the interaction and mutual adaptation of different vocabularies and ways of understanding the world, although in different ways. The use of different calendars translates and adapts Anna’s commemoration to different audiences, placing distinct systems of dating alongside one another without creating a new, shared conception of time. By contrast, the formulations concerning religious identities, sacred spaces, and royal authority do more than juxtapose existing traditions: expressions such as Jesus as the “Messiah,” Palermo Cathedral as the *al-jāmiʿ al-*

aʿẓam, and Roger II as the defender of the "imam of Rome" construct meaning by adapting and combining categories drawn from different religious and political vocabularies. It is in this stronger sense that Anna's tombstone constitutes an example of religious co-production: interactions across religious boundaries generated ideas and representations that could not be attributed exclusively to a single tradition, even as the monument preserved – and sometimes reinforced – the distinctions and hierarchies between the communities that produced and read it.

Further Reading

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