

# The Normans in Italy



Norman knights, returning from pilgrimages to Jerusalem, passed through southern Italy. They saw a desirable land and wanted to possess it. During the 11th century Norman adventurers battled with Moors and Byzantines to create a new Norman kingdom in Sicily and the heel of Italy.

Roger II, King of Sicily, may have expelled the Saracens from Sicily along with the Byzantines from Italy, but he retained an admiration for Arab culture and civilisation. His coronation cloak, **above**, woven in Palermo, incorporated Arabic inscriptions, as well as the Arabic *Hegira* date of 628.

At the start of the 11th century, the Italian peninsula south of Rome was split into a patchwork of small states; either administered by Lombard warlords (nominal suzerains of the German kingdom), by the Byzantine Empire, or by semi-independent city authorities owing alternating allegiances to the greater powers. Nearby Sicily was in Muslim hands, ruled by Arab emirs who owed their allegiance to beys in Egypt or Tunis. Norman knights are first mentioned in the region in 1017, when they acted as mercenaries, supporting Lombard separatists against Byzantine authority.

These freebooters included three brothers, the offspring of a Norman lord named Tancred de Hauteville. When the brothers started carving out petty fiefdoms in their own name, they sent representatives back to Normandy to recruit more adventurers to help them. Many younger sons of the less wealthy Norman noble families enlisted. These adventurers included two other Hauteville relatives, Robert and Roger.

By 1038 – the same year George Maniakes began the ill-fated Byzantine conquest of Sicily – Normans had occupied the area around Aversa near Naples. Maniakes, who had suffered

humiliation for the loss of Sicily, returned to Italy in 1042 to face the Normans who were rapidly mopping up the whole of the south. With the aid of a regiment of Varangians and Harald Hadrada, he unleashed a pitiless war on the towns, leaving a trail of smoking ruins in his wake. But palace intrigue was to stall Byzantine progress, when Constantine IX recalled him. In a terrible rage he had his troops proclaim him emperor and led them back across the Adriatic with every intention of attacking Constantinople. Fortunately for the feckless Constantine, Maniakes was mortally wounded in a battle with forces sent against him and died at Ostrovo in Bulgaria.

By the time Constantine died in 1055 the Normans were well on their way to finally eliminating the Byzantine presence in Italy. In 1059 Pope Nicholas II recognised the Norman knight Richard d'Aversa as the Lord of Capua, and Robert Guiscard de Hauteville as the Duke of Apulia. This was the climax of a decade of expansion by the Normans, who gained control of large segments of southern Italy by conquest, annexation and treaty with the popes.

### A successful Norman state

Within a year, other Norman adventurers extended their influence by capturing much of Calabria from Byzantium, and in 1071 the Apulian ports of Bari and Brindisi fell to Robert de Hauteville. These were the last Byzantine strongholds in Italy; by the end of the 11th

century southern Italy had become a Norman kingdom, distinct from the semi-independent Lombardic city-states of Naples and Amalfi.

In about 1060 Roger, the younger brother of Robert de Hauteville, succeeded where George Maniakes had failed, by invading Sicily and capturing Messina in 1061. He proclaimed himself Count of Sicily (r.1061–1101), and slowly pushed the Saracens back to the south and west. Palermo fell in 1072 and provided an administrative capital for the new Norman Kingdom of Sicily. The Norman conquest of the island was completed by 1091, and Roger set about reorganising his domains, which technically formed part of the lands of the Duke of Apulia.

Roger de Hauteville was succeeded by his son, who became Roger II, Count of Sicily (r.1103–54). When Robert's grandson died in 1127, Roger II seized control of the Duchy of Apulia, and three years later in 1130 Pope

### The Norman conquest of southern Italy and Sicily, 1038–1190



Innocent II granted him the title of King of Sicily. The kingdom grew to include the other small Norman states in southern Italy, and by 1154 it extended as far north as the border of the Papal State, providing the papacy with a loyal semi-independent vassal to the south of Rome, and a Christian bulwark against Arab or Byzantine invasion.

The Kingdom of Sicily was to remain a unified state until it became embroiled in the struggle between the German Empire and the papacy. In that time the kingdom's economy improved through trading links with the Muslims and, ironically, with Constantinople, and it became one of the richest of the feudal states. In 1194, Norman rule in Italy came to an end when the kingdom was occupied by the Hohenstaufen German Emperor Henry VI, but by that time Norman expansion into the Balkans and to the very heart of the Byzantine Empire was complete.

With typical Norman brashness, Roger II publicised his coronation as King of Sicily – which included all of southern Italy to the borders of the Papal State – in Byzantine style, as this image of Christ placing the crown on his head shows. It was a deliberately provocative picture that might have been viewed as a warning to the Byzantines to expect more of the Italian Normans... and there was indeed much more to come from this quarter.