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Griffin Blood

College of the Holy Cross, gabloo26@g.holycross.edu

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Scholarly Debates Surrounding the Ravenna Mosaics
Griffin Blood '26

Mosaics are means of artistic expression and speak to the experience, history, and beliefs of their producers. Academic research on these topics ultimately serves the goal of preventing anachronisms from creeping into the public perception of art, including mosaics, hence scholarly reviews and research on art is a necessary endeavor. The mosaics of Ravenna are of particular interest to scholars because of their uniqueness, preservation, and grandness. A survey of Ravenna's tempestuous history unveils the context whence her mosaics emerge. This paper seeks to explore the current academic and scholarly debates that are emerging concerning the Ravenna mosaics. I will focus on whether to categorize Ravenna, as a whole, as belonging to an eastern or western artistic tradition, whether the Orthodox and Arian Baptistries are eastern or western, or the possibility of political messaging from the imperial mosaics.

Architecture

The architectural spaces which display the Ravenna mosaics are essential to understanding the significance of the mosaics and the tradition of Ravenna. In the Eastern Mediterranean, mosaics themselves were suitably fitted to the architectural design of the building. The ways in which mosaics conform to their space is best expressed through the unbroken flow of mosaics on the interior of a building.¹ Tesserae extend without end from one surface to another. Mosaics do not break at the corners of a building and are used to cover blunts and round sharp angles in the structure (Figure 1). Connectivity between architecture and mosaics also served aesthetic and practical purposes as well. In cathedrals and churches of the first half of the first millennium A.D, windows seldom provided a way for natural light to adequately illuminate the space. The mosaics themselves became desirable as a means of lighting. When any natural light hit the surface of a mosaic, its uneven and glittering face reflected the light within the space.² Thus, mosaics helped better light up the interior.³

Traditionally, Ravenna has been associated with eastern architecture, meaning the architecture of the Eastern Mediterranean and often of Constantinopolitan origin. Although, it must be noted that more recent scholarship is problematizing the binary way of viewing Ravenna's architecture as purely "eastern" as opposed to "western". The structural design of the Church of San Vitale serves as evidence of this eastern design.⁴ Its edifice maintains an octagonal floor plan. Many note that the octagonal central floor plan of San Vitale (Figure 2) is comparable to SS. Sergios and Bacchos or Hagios Polyeuktos in Constantinople.⁵ The tradition of brick found in the edifice is foreign to any local traditions and is much more characteristic of the Byzantine tradition: thin and broad bricks.⁶ The Proconnesian marble used in the interior of the church likewise points to eastern influence because Byzantine proconnesian marble had to be shipped from quarries of the Marmara Islands, not far from Constantinople.⁷ Interestingly, pagan basilica designs remained very popular in the

construction of new buildings in Ravenna (e.g. Theodoric's Arian Baptistry) which signifies an appreciation for western/Roman architecture.⁸ Not only does the architecture of Ravenna reveal heavy eastern influence, but it also informs us of how mosaics were properly situated in their environment.

East and West

Ravenna is traditionally characterized as possessing eastern architectural identity, but researchers are shifting their thinking on this subject. Academic discussions of Ravenna's mosaics ultimately grew into debates on when Byzantine art emerged as a distinct art. In the late 19th century, art historian Josef Strzygowski was the first to argue that rather than being of classical Greek or Roman origin, early Christian art is instead based on Near Eastern art, especially Semitic and Coptic art. Strzygowski also asserted that Christian art diverged from Roman art as early as the 4th century A.D.⁹ Following in the footsteps of Strzygowski, Charles Diehl interpreted the monuments and mosaics of Ravenna as being of near eastern origin. However, Diehl established an important understanding of Ravennate art as the "quintessential case study for early christian art/byzantine art."¹⁰ Because of Diehl, many scholars point to Ravenna as one of the most significant examples of early Christian art, thus shaping the way we define Christian art in antiquity entirely.

When entering into this debate, Giuseppe Galassi put forth his own unique theory that Ravenna's art belongs to a strict and distinct "Ravennate school" which synthesized both Eastern and Western art in the mid first millennium, borrowing from both traditions.¹¹ Along with asserting the existence of this distinct Ravennate school, Galassi argued against Strzygowski's dating of the birth of Christian art, instead claiming that this new tradition diverged from Roman art in the 6th century A.D.¹² This later date that Galassi offers coincides nicely with the construction of many of the Ravenna Mosaics and would likewise lend credence to Diehl's claim that Ravenna is early Christian art's "quintessential case study." Other scholars have contributed to this discussion as well. Art historian F.W Deichmann claims that the eastern model of art was the basis of early Christian art, but that Ravenna itself is the origin of a western "twist."¹³ In other words, the mere bones of Ravenna's art can be categorized as eastern, but their western influence makes them unique. Contrary to Deichmann's proposal, scholar Eugene Russo argues the position that western models of art were a stronger influence on Ravenna's art than eastern models.¹⁴ In the wake of this, Vladimir Crețulescu of the University of Bucharest suggests that rather than categorizing Ravenna as either east or west, each mosaic and iconographic programme ought to be categorized on an individual basis. Crețulescu positions his thinking in the tradition of Galassi. Whatever the case, the categorization of Ravennate art as either eastern, western, or both has been a subject of debate among art historians and other scholars for over a century.

History offers the best glance into the traditions that Ravenna's art, and ultimately its mosaics draw from. In the year 402 A.D, during his retreat from Rome to Milan, Emperor Honorius fortified himself in Ravenna. Having seen its decrepit state, Emperor

Honorius sought to rebuild the city of Ravenna and thus began a series of infrastructure, art, and civil projects. Because of the raging invasions of the Goths, Emperor Honorius was cut off from mainland Italy to import supplies and was forced to resort to the importation of supplies via the sea. At this time, all the supplies and contact from outside of the city came from the Byzantine Greeks. Eastern architects and artists were the primary workers who rebuilt Ravenna. They constructed a palace, administrative buildings, as well as, with the supervision of Archbishop Ursus, ecclesiastical buildings. The utilization of Greek artists is primarily regarded as the reason Ravenna's architecture and mosaics appear eastern.¹⁵ However, not all architecture at this time was Greek. In the early 6th century, after Ostrogothic king Theodoric seized Ravenna, he hired Roman architects to build his palace, known as the Palace of Theodoric, which stood until the city was sacked by Byzantines in 539 A.D. This history reveals how complicated the origin of Ravenna's art and architecture is and why debates on this are likely to continue for much longer.

Both the history of Ravenna and the scholarship on Ravennate art enrich our understanding of how both eastern and western traditions influence the Ravenna mosaics. Given this, two things are very clear: there is no consensus among scholars about how to categorize Ravenna's art most accurately, and the Ravenna mosaics represent some of the earliest forms of Christian art, also called "paleochristian" art.

Baptistries

The Orthodox and Arian baptistries are also a place for academic debates. Structurally set apart from the Cathedral stands Ravenna's Orthodox Baptistry (Figure 3). Although commonly referred to as the Orthodox Baptistry, it is also referred to as the "Baptistry of Ursus", or more commonly, "the Neonian Baptistry." For the sake of consistency and contrast with the Arian baptistry, I will refer to it as the Orthodox Baptistry. In 396 A.D, Bishop Ursus of Ravenna built the Baptistry of the Cathedral with an octagonal design. Later during the episcopate of Bishop Neon of Ravenna, 451-473 A.D, the Baptistry was decorated with elaborate mosaics that are still extant. The mosaics (Figure 4) in the center cupola depict St. John the Baptist baptizing Christ in a golden field and a figure representing the Jordan River.¹⁶ Then in a surrounding blue field rests mosaics of the 12 apostles. In the course of a century, the Baptistry's decoration had gone from the marble decoration of Bishop Ursus to the elaborate mosaics commissioned by Bishop Neon.

However, the dating of the mosaics in the baptistry is fertile ground for debate among scholars. The popular view, which I present in this paper, is that the mosaics in the Orthodox Baptistry were installed by Bishop Neon in the mid 5th century. This assertion is supported by the writings of Andreas Agnellus, a ninth century chronicler from Ravenna, who wrote in his work, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* that Bishop Neon is responsible for a mosaic of the 12 apostles.¹⁷ However, some scholars assert that the mosaic decorations actually date to 396 and were installed in the Baptistry by Bishop Ursus due to their style which they believe to be older.¹⁸ If the latter is true then serious implications might emerge regarding whether the baptistry or the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia housed the oldest mosaics in Ravenna. For over

1,500 years, despite numerous restoration projects, the baptistery is believed to have retained its original iconography in the mosaics in the present day.¹⁹

Importantly, the Orthodox Baptistery can also offer insight into the political landscape of Ravenna during the 5th and 6th century. In her article exploring the possible baptismal rites that could have been offered there, scholar Annabel Wharton identifies the significance of the bishop and the participation of the congregation as being of utmost importance in this space. In her article, Wharton then extracts two implications surrounding the baptismal of the Orthodox Baptistery: because tension between the Bishop and community was often high, the community tension could generate power from it, and the baptismal hall assumed power itself.²⁰ The power which one could extract from the baptismal itself likely contributed to the tone set for future mosaics in Ravenna.²¹ Power as a theme among the Ravenna mosaics will be discussed further in regards to the mosaics of the imperial court.

The Arian Baptistery (Figure 5) provides an excellent comparison for the Orthodox Baptistery, and so debates around its iconography, eastern and western influence are sources of scholarship. Having been built by Arian bishops and clerics at the turn of the 6th century A.D, the baptistery was seized by the Catholic Church in 561 A.D after the reconquest of Ravenna by the Byzantines and has since undergone many restorations.²² The Arian Baptistery depicts a similar scene (Figure 6) to the Orthodox Baptistery with the exception of the background color. Rather than the blue background behind a scene of the baptism of Christ, the Arian Baptistery has a golden background. The Baptistery used to be adorned with mosaics along all its walls; however, only the dome survives to this day.²³ In the midst of debates about Ravennate mosaics belonging to eastern or western traditions, the Arian Baptistery can serve as a reference for analysis.

In his analysis of the baptisteries' artistic qualities, Vladimir Crețulescu asserts the Arian Baptistery is mostly eastern in its tradition while the Orthodox Baptistery is clearly a mix of the eastern and western tradition.²⁴ The accentuated uniformity of attitudes among the figures, more rigid folds on the apostles' robes, use of cooler and less varied colors are all indicative of the eastern tradition.²⁵ Furthermore, the uniform gold background suggests a Constantinopolitan origin.²⁶ For comparison, Crețulescu is descriptive of what makes the Orthodox Baptistery mixed eastern and western in its style. The dome of the baptistery combines an eastern concentric band decoration scheme with the more 'radical' decorative scheme of the western tradition and the blue background landscape is derived from an Italian tradition.²⁷ This evidence supports the case that Ravennate art, especially mosaics, do not belong to either eastern or western traditions, but rather, a synthesis of the traditions occurred over the centuries in the city.

Imperial Court

As one of the most famous mosaics to come from Ravenna, the mosaic of the Imperial Court (Figure 7) found in the basilica of San Vitale has raised questions for scholars. The mosaics include on one panel Emperor Justinian and his court and on the other panel, Empress Theodora. The construction of San Vitale was finished by Bishop Maximian of Ravenna around

the mid 6th century. Its architecture closely resembles the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, both of which were built by Justinian in the city of Constantinople around the year 527 A.D.²⁸ Although, italic features are prevalent as well.²⁹ The Church is obviously Byzantine in its style from its columns which resemble Byzantine Capitals to the portrait of Justinian.³⁰ The subject of debate and disagreement among academics revolves around not its categorization as eastern or western but its political messaging.

A popular assertion is that the Imperial Court mosaic panels are supposed to communicate the authority of Justinian over his subjects in the west. Crețulescu defends this position by stating that the panels represent “the affirmation of the Empire’s political and religious authority over the recently founded exarchate of Ravenna.”³¹ The political and religious context of Ravenna here is key to understanding this claim. The reconquest of the west was one of Justinian’s most pertinent goals as emperor. Justinian needed to affirm the legitimacy of his rule over the west and so art was an important means of doing this.³² The panel also serves to showcase Justinian’s religiosity through the religious context of the mosaic and his strength through the depiction of soldiers with the Chi-Rho on their shields. An important matter of discussion is the role of Bishop Maximian in the mosaics. Maximian had been appointed to Ravenna by religious authorities in Constantinople, this move proved unpopular with the locals. Crețulescu argues that since Bishop Maximian was deeply unpopular at the time, by giving himself a near prime of placement in the mosaic, directly next to Justinian, as well as labeling himself contributes to the message that the Bishop has the backing of the Royal court and so he carries respect and authority.³³ In this way, Crețulescu argues that the mosaic panels communicate both the authority of the emperor and the authority of the new unpopular bishop. Other academics have argued against these interpretations of the panels. Jutta Dresken-Weiland pushes back against these claims of the panels representing Maximian’s authority. She asserts that the labeling of Maximians being of any significant importance may be an overstatement.³⁴ Dresken-Weiland also argues that since Maximian is not depicted idealistic, unlike Justinian, it speaks to his perception and the intention of the mosaic builder.³⁵ Although he is detailed, Maximian’s non-ideal traits are emphasized such as the fact that he is the baldest of all the figures, has a very wrinkled face, bushy eyebrows, and thin lips.³⁶ Due to these reasons, some scholars are skeptical of whether the Imperial Court Panels were intended to bolster the popularity and authority of Bishop Maximian.

Conclusion

Scholarship on the Ravenna mosaics encompasses a diverse range of subjects and topics. How we understand where they fit within the divide of the east and west is still hotly debated, all that we can say for certain is that mosaics must be judged on an individual basis within the context of the building their houses and that these mosaics represent some of the earliest forms of “paleochristian art.” Regarding the Orthodox and Arian Baptistries, they serve as great references to more fully understand eastern and western influences in the Ravenna Mosaics. Scholarship is not just limited to questions of cultural influence but also political and religious

power as evident by the Imperial Mosaic panels and the Orthodox Baptismal rite. Taken together, this abundance of scholarship serves to further our understanding with art in the world and more fully explore artistic expression.

Appendix

Figure 1. Interior of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. Photo from Wikicommons.

Figure 2. Floor plan of San Vitale. Image from wikicommons, originally published in *Nordisk Familjebok* in 1887.

Figure 3. Orthodox Baptistry. Photo by Nicola de' Grandi.

Figure 4. Mosaics of the dome of the Orthodox Baptistry. Photo by Nicola de' Grandi.

Figure 5. Arian Baptistry. Photo by Georges Jansoone.

Figure 6. Arian Baptistry mosaic. Photo by Petar Milosevic

Figure 7. Imperial Court panel 1. Photo by Roger Pulos.

Endnotes

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