

2023

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Recommended Citation

Whitney, Mary (2023) "The So-Called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia," *Parnassus: Classical Journal*: Vol. 10, Article 19.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j/vol10/iss1/19>

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INTRODUCTION

Ellen Swift and Anne Alwis aptly describe Christian buildings as “microcosm[s] of the world.”¹ Ravenna became the administrative capital of the Roman Empire in 402 AD,² bringing with that [maybe “taking on” instead of “bringing with that” for flow purposes] the responsibility of securing the religious and political prestige of the Theodosian dynasty. As an empress and patroness, Galla Placidia used her position to construct a building containing “[t]he earliest monumental mosaics dating to the fifth century”³: the so-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. Based largely on the shape of the building and the images depicted in the mosaics, it instead seems more likely that the building serves as a chapel for prayer or a repository for the relics of martyrs rather than an imperial mausoleum. This paper aims to provide a brief overview of the architecture and mosaics of the so-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia to glimpse [“glimpse” seems to give the paper the agency of seeing, maybe something like “illustrate” instead?] the artistic development of Ravenna in the fifth century AD.

NORTHERN LUNETTE MOSAIC OF CHRIST THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The mosaic above the door depicts Christ as the Good Shepherd holding a cross-shaped shepherd’s crook symmetrically surrounded by six sheep, a potential reference to the creation of mankind on the sixth day.⁴ By the first half of the fifth century, the iconography of the Good Shepherd largely disappears from Eastern and Western Christian art, reappearing in the Middle Ages.⁵ In the first four centuries of the Church’s history, the didactic and protective connotations of Christ as the Good Shepherd were appropriate for its status and developmental stage during that time. The threats Christians faced in the pre-Constantinian age necessitated an image of Christ as “an ethical figure, a symbol of love or *humanitas*, and also a symbol of salvation”⁶ that

would protect and guide His “flock” [does this need to be cited or is it quoted for emphasis?] through the world’s trials. With the rise of Arianism and the growing security of the Church’s authority, the fifth century signaled a movement away from the emphasis on Christ’s gentleness and instead toward His majesty.⁷ Notably, he is also seated rather than standing, recalling the iconography of the *Maiestas Domini*; with the rock as his throne, Christ simultaneously affirms St. Peter as the foundation of the Church as well as his own dominion over the earth through his sacrifice on the Cross.⁸ This particular depiction of Christ seated on a rock and flanked by the Apostles is also seen in the Basilica of San Lorenzo Maggiore in Milan, while the colors of Christ’s tunic recall the apse mosaic of Santa Pudenziana in Rome.⁹ The Good Shepherd of the “mausoleum” of Galla Placidia, therefore, is a reinterpreted typology: Christ, in a “gold tunic, sewn with blue bands, and with a purple mantle draped over one shoulder,”¹⁰ becomes a king or emperor rather than a mere shepherd.

SOUTHERN LUNETTE MOSAIC OF SAINT LAWRENCE OR SAINT VINCENT

On the opposite side of the entrance, the lunette mosaic depicts a male saint carrying a cross and an open book on the right running toward a flaming grill in the center; on the left, an open cupboard reveals the four Gospels, each labeled. Multiple scholars interpret the mosaic as an allegorical representation of St. Lawrence’s martyrdom on the gridiron and his role as a deacon, protector of the Word as contained in the Gospels.¹¹ Gillian Mackie, based on the depicted narrative elements, instead identifies the saint as St. Vincent of Saragossa, who was also martyred on a gridiron and depicted as a deacon, rather than the traditional interpretation as St. Lawrence. Mackie connects St. Vincent’s Spanish origin to Galla Placidia, citing the Spanish descent of the Theodosian family, her journey as a captive bride through Barcelona under the Visigoth king Athaulf in 414, and the deaths of Athaulf and her infant son Theodosius in Barcelona in 415.¹² Mackie notes evidence for St. Vincent’s cult in Rome through a sermon by

Pope Leo I (440-461), whom Galla Placidia kept in close contact with, as noted in surviving letters.¹³ This confusion and debate suggest that “the saint portrayed had not yet acquired a standard iconography,”¹⁴ corresponding to the Church’s development of official dogma and art, and thus comparable to the mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.¹⁵

EAST AND WEST LUNETTE MOSAICS OF DEER DRINKING AT A POOL

The lunettes of the east and west axis each depict two deer entangled with golden scrolls of vines drinking from the waters of paradise. The vines carry multiple symbolic meanings, such as “the realm of paradise, the people of God, Christ himself, or the wine of the Eucharist.”¹⁶ This [which of the two?] particular image of the deer likely references the text of Psalm 42, which emphasizes “the Christian soul longing for God”¹⁷:

As the deer longs for streams of water,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, the living God.
When can I enter and see the face of God?¹⁸

Notably, despite both lunettes depicting the same subject matter, they vary slightly in both style and execution, suggesting the labor of different artists. This is manifested in the more abstract rendering of the deer and vines on the east lunette, as seen through the geometrical bodies and overabundance of flowers. In contrast, the mosaics of the west lunette have a more naturalistic rendering, depicting the deer with muted colors and more delicate proportions and the vines with fewer flowers and more leaves.¹⁹

THE STARRY SKY CENTRAL VAULT AND LUNETTES

The central vault mosaic is “a geometrically continuous design” achieved by “using infinite, exquisite gold *tesserae*, laid out to form a compact and clean image.”²⁰ It depicts a central gold cross surrounded by 567 eight-pointed gold stars with the Four Evangelists as the four living

creatures of the tetramorph in the four pendentives.²¹ Their shape also recalls that of an eight-petaled flower. The stars are not arranged in a naturalistic manner but instead radiate outward from the cross in a series of concentric circles. The size of the stars and the distance between them in their respective rings gradually decreases as they approach the cross, creating the simultaneous illusion of the dome being taller and the cross being closer to the viewer.²² Although invisible to the naked eye, the deep blue background consists of *tesserae* arranged in defined circles, contributing to the illusion of expansion.²³ Eight-pointed stars are also seen on the barrel-vaulted ceiling of the Dura Europos baptistery in the *Domus ecclesiae* and the Mithraeum.²⁴ The stars on the flat ceiling of the baptistery and in the intrados of the arch above the baptismal font, composed of eight points surrounded by smaller dots, are organized in a pattern that follows the plane of the arch.²⁵ In utilizing a generalized representation of cosmic order, the astrological aspect of Mithraism was often reflected in wall paintings of the cult image, where “the cloak of Mithras is often painted blue, with a decoration of gold stars.”²⁶

The Cross in the central vault echoes motifs in Constantine’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and Helena’s Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome.²⁷ The Cross set among the starry sky recalls both Constantine’s vision in 312 and the apparition of the Cross over Jerusalem in 351 under the reign of Constantius.²⁸ However, Galla Placidia is also credited with the mosaic decorations and structural alterations of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme,²⁹ suggesting her link to the cult of the True Cross established by Helena, and thus an association with the symbology of Christ’s triumph over death and the sacrifices of the martyrs.³⁰ The Cross’ long arm lies on the “mausoleum’s” east-west axis, forcing the viewer to face east to see the Cross in its proper orientation.³¹ This placement suggests the association between Christ and the rising sun, a symbology echoed in the mosaic of “Christ the Sun” in the Cappella di Sant’Aquilino in the Basilica of San Lorenzo Maggiore in Milan.³²

The four lunettes each depict two Apostles flanking an alabaster window; above the figures is a conch and below them are pairs of doves, commonly associated with the Holy Spirit, drinking from or surrounding a fountain.³³ Sts. Peter and Paul are the only figures definitively identified, decorating the eastern lunette. Both Apostles gesture to the left and direct their gaze upward toward the window, “equat[ing] the window and its light with the absent Christ.”³⁴

MOSAICS OF THE BARREL VAULTS

The east and west barrel vaults depict what are suggested to be prophets surrounded by vines that sprout from two large acanthus plants at the springers.³⁵ The Chi-Rho symbol within a victory wreath sits at the crown of the arch, forming an association with Constantine’s vision and subsequent conversion to Christianity.³⁶

The north and south barrel vaults depict a different starry sky pattern from the central vault. The extreme abstraction and symmetrical layout of this starry sky grant them the interpretation [would “impression” be a better word choice here maybe?] of being flowers scattered throughout a meadow.³⁷ These octagonal stars alternate between red and white flowers surrounded by dark or gold leaves and are interspersed with gold dots and smaller white flowers.³⁸ These designs recall silk textile patterns of the fifth century, and “could thus represent the plenitude of heaven [*sic*] through the imitation of this luxury textile.”³⁹ Like the stars in the central vault, these stars are organized symmetrically rather than naturalistically, with a row of eight of one type followed by a row of nine of the other type.⁴⁰

This abstraction of nature balances *kosmos* with *varietas*, combining rigid organization with the subtleties of color and shading that transform the worldly into the supernatural.⁴¹ The intrados of the northern arch supporting the central vault depicts a cross surrounded by an abundance of fruit from each of the four seasons, recalling the mosaic decorations of Santa Costanza in Rome. The location of the cross at the keystone suggests Christ’s dominion over the

seasons, just as the cross in the apex of the central vault asserts Christ's heavenly sovereignty.⁴² In contrast, the intrados of the southern arch supporting the central vault depicts an isometric multi-colored meander, which has sometimes been used to demarcate sacred spaces.⁴³

ARCHITECTURE

The ninth-century historian Andreas Agnellus is largely credited with associating the chapel with the function of an imperial mausoleum in his *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*, a popular myth of the Medieval and Renaissance periods that has persisted until today.⁴⁴ Agnellus writes that Galla Placidia died in Rome, but was buried "in what he terms the *monasterium* of Saint Nazarius," a potential reference to a chapel in the Basilica of San Vitale; by the thirteenth century, misinterpretations of Agnellus' text led to associations between that *monasterium* and the current "mausoleum."⁴⁵ Galla Placidia is also traditionally attributed by Agnellus to the construction of San Giovanni Evangelista, Galla Placidia's palace church, and the Basilica of Santa Croce, which the "mausoleum" was connected to at the southern end of the basilica's narthex.⁴⁶

The "mausoleum" has a cross-shaped floorplan⁴⁷ with four barrel-vaulted recesses that surround a central vault situated at the intersection. The upper halves of the walls are decorated with mosaics, while the lower halves are covered with marble veneers.⁴⁸ The "mausoleum" contains fourteen windows: "7 windows in the lower level (2 east, 3 south, 2 west); 3 windows in the lunettes (1 east, 1 south, 1 west); 4 windows in the tholobate (1 east, 1 south, 1 west, 1 north)."⁴⁹ The visual impact of the mosaics, already discussed, was enhanced by the integration of light and its association with Christ. The reflective quality of the gold *tesserae* stars, mimicking their defining light-giving characteristic, especially aided in the solemnity of worship by drawing the viewer's gaze toward the ceiling decorated to represent Heaven, in turn placing them in a position of reverent supplication.⁵⁰

Curiously, the “mausoleum” exhibits “a north-south bearing that is highly unusual compared to other sacred Byzantine buildings in Ravenna,” with a transept that is not perpendicular to the nave.⁵¹ The irregularity of the architecture is not ascribed to a lack of planning, but instead to coordinate the light of specific liturgical days with the pictorial programs of the building.⁵² At the time of the building’s construction, the azimuth of the transept aligned with the sunsets on the 26th and 27th of March and on the 13th and 14th of September. The former dates falls close to the Feast of the Annunciation, the commemoration of the Virgin Mary accepting her role as Christ’s mother from the angel Gabriel, while the latter date coincides with the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, further solidifying the building’s connection to the Basilica of Santa Croce.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Galla Placidia was an empress “well-aware of the political capital to be gained by showing wealth and artistic magnificence.”⁵⁴ By associating herself with her Constantinian predecessors, Galla Placidia used her imperial status and religious devotion to build a richly-ornamented building that responded to the highly-visual culture that developed in Ravenna. The mosaics, far from purely aesthetic, instead conveyed a developing religious language tied to symbology and the effect of natural light. The reception and subsequent reinterpretation of earlier motifs reveal not only the inherited artistic traditions from Rome and Milan, but also the production of new images as Ravenna embraced its role as “the dispenser of artistic fashion”⁵⁵ as the Church solidified its dogma and iconography.

Endnotes

1. Ellen Swift and Anne Alwis, “The Role of Late Antique Art in Early Christian Worship: A Reconsideration of the Iconography of the ‘Starry Sky’ in the ‘Mausoleum’ of Galla Placidia,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 78 (2010): 215, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41725294>.
2. Cecily Hennessy, “Patronage and Precedents: Galla Placidia’s Chapel in Ravenna and the Holy Apostles, Constantinople,” *Byzantinoslavica* 1-2 (2016): 27, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=526436>.

3. Maria Cristina Carile, "Production, Promotion and Reception: The Visual Culture of Ravenna Between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages," in *Ravenna: Its Role in Earlier Medieval Change and Exchange*, ed. Judith Herrin and Jinty Nelson (University of London Press, 2016): 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv512x7n.10>.
4. Genesis 1:24-31 (NABRE). Carile suggests that the six sheep are "an allegorical number for the twelve apostles" (57), but I could not find other sources that support such an analysis. Considering the context of the Good Shepherd as the "protector of the flock," I propose this possible interpretation, but as with many cases of Biblical numerology, other interpretations are highly plausible.
5. Boniface Ramsey, "A Note on the Disappearance of the Good Shepherd from Early Christian Art," *The Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 3 (1983): 375, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509531>.
6. Ibid., 376.
7. Ibid., 376.
8. "And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church..." (Matthew 16:18, NABRE).
9. Carile, 55-57.
10. Ramsey, 376.
11. Deichmann, *Kommentar*, 77-78 quoted in Gillian Mackie, "New Light on the So-Called Saint Lawrence Panel at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna," *Gesta* 29, no. 1 (1990): 55, doi: 10.2307/767100.
12. Mackie, 54.
13. Leo I, Sermo XIII, in *Natali S. Vincentii Martyris*, PL. LIV, cols. 501-504 and *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, XII, *Leo the Great*, 57 quoted in Mackie, "New Light on the So-Called Saint Lawrence Panel at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna," 55.
14. Mackie, 56.
15. Stuart Cristo, "The Art of Ravenna in Late Antiquity," *The Classical Journal* 70, no. 3 (1975): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3296444>.
16. Swift and Alwis, 202.
17. Swift and Alwis, 202.
18. Psalm 42:2-3 (NABRE).
19. Lisa Onontiyoh West, "Re-evaluating the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia," Master thesis, Louisiana State University, 2003: 23, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/1328.
20. M. Incerti, G. Lavoratti, S. D'Amico, and S. Giannetti, "Survey, Archaeoastronomy and Communication: The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (Italy)," *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* 18, no. 4 (2018): 184, 183, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.1478672.
21. Incerti et al., 182 and Hennessy, 32.
22. Swift and Alwis, 208.
23. Incerti et al., 183.
24. Carile, 58.
25. Swift and Alwis, 194.
26. Ibid., 193-195.
27. Hennessy, 42.
28. Swift and Alwis, 203.
29. Janet Charlotte Smith, "Form and Function of the Side Chambers of Fifth- and Sixth-Century Churches in Ravenna," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 49, no. 2 (1990): 195, doi: 10.2307/990476. Smith claims Galla Placidia's connection to Santa Croce in Gerusalemme is "attested by an inscription," but does not include any citation.
30. Swift and Alwis, 203.
31. Incerti et al., 184-185.
32. Incerti et al., 185.
33. Cristo, 19. Incerti et al. (185) say that the alabaster slabs are not original, but were donated by King Victor Emmanuel II in 1911.
34. Kirsten Ataoguz, "The Role of Light-Shadow Hierophanies in Early Medieval Art," in *The Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy*, ed. Clive L.N. Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2015): 1735-36, doi: 10.1007/978-1-4614-6141-8_177.
35. Swift and Alwis, 202.
36. Incerti et al., 185.
37. Bente Kiilerich, "Abstraction in Late Antique Art," in *Envisioning Worlds in Late Antique Art: New*

Perspectives on Abstraction and Symbolism in Late-Roman and Early-Byzantine Visual Culture (c. 300-600), ed. Cecilia Olovsson (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018): 78, doi: 10.1515/9783110546842-005.

38. Carile, 60.
39. Swift and Alwis, 205.
40. Incerti et al., 183.
41. Kiilerich, 82-83.
42. Carile, 62.
43. Kiilerich, 81.
44. Hennessy, 28.
45. Ibid., 29.
46. Smith, 202.
47. Hennessy (37-39) argues that it is because of this floorplan that it is unlikely Galla Placidia was buried in the “mausoleum.” Emperors and empresses were traditionally buried in circular (or even octagonal) mausoleums, such as Augustus and Hadrian in the first and second century. Imperial mausolea continued to follow this trend, as seen in the circular mausoleum of Theodoric, built in the sixth century. It is instead believed she was buried in the Mausoleum of Honorius, where she buried her first son Theodosius.
48. Swift and Alwis, 199-201.
49. Incerti et al., 185.
50. Swift and Alwis, 209.
51. Incerti et al., 185.
52. Ataoguz, 1734.
53. It al., 185.
54. Smith, 201.
55. Cristo, 17.

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