

THE PALEOCHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND MOSAICS OF RAVENNA: EXAMPLES OF BYZANTINE OR LATE ROMAN ART?

Vladimir Crețulescu*

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Abstract: In the following paragraphs, I investigate the inclusion of Ravenna's 5th and 6th century mosaics and architecture in the category of Byzantine art, as opposed to their labelling as late Roman art. Without any claim to solve this very complex issue, I nonetheless approach it tentatively. I start by situating the ravennate churches in the late Antique political context which catalyzed their construction. I then give a brief account of the ongoing debate in art historiography, on the Levantine or Roman inspiration behind ravennate art. I subsequently proceed to approach this controversial issue myself, from two distinct perspectives: as far as architecture is concerned, I list the general features of ravennate edifices, in order to determine how the 5th and 6th century churches in Ravenna relate to Roman models, and especially to the Constantinopolitan ones put forward by the architects of emperor Justinian. Then, regarding the mosaic decoration, I attempt to highlight, using two small case studies, the coexistence and partial interweaving, in Ravenna, of two distinct traditions of mosaic art: one being late Roman, the other, early Byzantine.

Rezumat: În rândurile ce urmează, ridicăm problema includerii mozaicurilor și arhitecturii din Ravenna secolelor al V-lea și al VI-lea în categoria artei bizantine, în opoziție cu etichetarea lor ca artă romană târzie. Fără a avea pretenția de a rezolva această problemă foarte complexă, o abordăm totuși, în mod tentativ. Începem prin situarea bisericilor ravennate în contextul politic antic târziu care a catalizat construirea lor. Apoi prezentăm pe scurt dezbaterile nesoluționate din istoriografia artei, cu privire la inspirația levantină sau romană ce a stat la baza artei ravennate. Purcedem apoi să abordăm noi înșine această problemă controversată, din două perspective distincte: în ceea ce privește arhitectura, inventariem trăsăturile generale ale edificiilor ravennate, pentru a vedea cum se raportează bisericile din Ravenna secolelor V-VI la modelele romane și mai ales la cele constantinopolitane propuse de arhitecții împăratului Iustinian. Apoi, în ceea ce privește decorația mozaicală, încercăm să punem în lumină, prin intermediul a două mici studii de caz, coexistența și parțiala întrepătrundere, la Ravenna, a două tradiții de artă mozaicală distincte: una, romană târzie, cealaltă, bizantină timpurie.

Ravenna from the early 5th to the mid-6th century: architecture and politics

*"[...] gladness unspeakable, and a divine joy blossomed in the hearts of us all as we beheld every place, which a short time before had been laid in ruins by the tyrants' evil deeds, now reviving as if after a long and deadly destruction, and temples rising once more from their foundations to a boundless height, and receiving in far greater measure the magnificence of those that formerly had been destroyed.[...] After this there was brought about that spectacle for which we all prayed and longed: festivals of dedication in the cities and consecrations of the newly-built houses of prayer, assemblages of bishops, comings together of those from far off foreign lands, unions between the members of Christ's body as they met together in complete harmony."*¹

This is the enthusiastic manner in which Eusebius of Caesarea describes the impetus gained by Christianity in the Roman world under the tutelage of emperor Constantine, who, by way of his edict of Milan of 313, had turned the religion of Christ's apostles into an officially accepted worship. However, as Eusebius' words suggest, the swell of Christian fervour which follows the edict of 313 is owed, in no small measure, to the intense building activity promoted by the emperor: the Roman state is soon dotted with Constantinian basilicas – new and imposing places of worship, meant for the newly-accepted religion.

The intense building activity which starts under Constantine the Great (in the 4th century) persists until the middle of the 6th century. In the opinion of Charles Delvoye, "Greco-Roman antiquity doesn't seem to have known a similar moment neither in length, nor in the breadth of efforts".²

This architectural diligence of the late Roman world manifests itself fully in Ravenna. From the beginning of the 5th century to the middle of the 6th, this humble marsh-surrounded town turned imperial

* Bucharest Municipality Museum, University of Bucharest, Romania, e-mail: vladimir_cretulescu@yahoo.com

¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Ecclesiastical History*, X, II, 1 and III, 1, in Eusebius 1932, pp. 395, 397.

² Delvoye 1976, p. 56.