

THE ICONOGRAPHICAL PROGRAMME OF THE SANT APOLLINARE NUOVO BASILICA IN RAVENNA: AN EARLY BYZANTINE PALIMPSEST

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Abstract: The early VIth century parietal mosaics which decorate the interior of the ravennate basilica of Sant Apollinare Nuovo tell a complex story. Religion, politics and ideology intertwine against a rich historical background, to form a layered visual text. I endeavor to decode and interpret this “text”, where East and West, Byzantium and the *barbaricum* collide. I do so by drawing, in part, on the conceptual framework of deconstructivist philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Key words: iconography, Byzantine, difference, trace, text, palimpsest

1. A bit of history: the rise and fall of Theodoric's Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy

By the time king Theodoric the Great crosses the Isonzo bridge in August of 489 A.D., entering Italy, the Ostrogothic monarch and his people were nearing the conclusion of a long series of journeys, which had taken them from Pannonia, through the Balkan Peninsula, to Macedonia and Greece, and then, finally, through Dalmatia towards the Italian Peninsula. Throughout this long, odyssean journey, Theodoric had to contend with his cousin and great rival, Theodoric Strabo on the one hand, and on the other, with the perpetual scheming of the subversive and manipulative Eastern Roman Emperor, Zeno.

But despite all the obstacles set on his path, the doggedly perseverant Theodoric keeps pursuing a single goal. He wants to found his very own kingdom. A stable and durable state, built around a strong monarchy; a country for his people, where his dynastic bloodline might take root. Theodoric had already, on several occasions, tried to create such a kingdom: in Macedonia, on the Danube, in Epirus. All these previous attempts had failed – at best, they were precarious fiefdoms, lacking a stable socio-economical base.

When, in 488, the whily Zeno offered him Italy, Theodoric didn't hesitate to jump at the opportunity. It was the chance had been been waiting for. Once arrived in the Italian Peninsula and after having defeated the usurper Odoacer, Theodoric sets about organizing the durable and stable state he had always wanted. Learning from past failures and drawing on the ten years of Roman education he had received from ages 8 to 18, as a political prisoner in Constantinople, the Ostrogothic king understands that a strong barbarian kingdom can only be built by winning over the local Roman populace, and particularly the Roman elites.

The political, legal and administrative structures he conceives amount to a wondrous utopia, wherein Romans and barbarians are meant to coexist in peace and understanding, thanks to the generous concept of *civilitas* (for specifics see Wolfram, 1988, 296; Riché, 2003, 44; also *infra*, below) and to the rule of law: two legal

systems and two separate administrations, one Roman and the other Gothic, are set up and exercise their authority simultaneously over the same territory. Surprisingly, while Theodoric is alive this political fiction seems to work. Theodoric manages to accomplish, albeit briefly, the impossible dream of the late Roman world: a society where Romans and barbarians work and live together in peace. However, such a utopia can't last. The appearance of superficial concord belies an undercurrent of simmering tensions. Theodoric's regime is intensely personal in nature, and after the great king's demise, his successors preside over the gradual decay of the Ostrogothic state, leading up to its inevitable fall. Following a protracted military campaign against the Ostrogoths spanning almost 20 years (from 535 to 552 A.D.), the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian finally conquers Italy, thus putting an end to Gothic rule in the peninsula.

2. The Basilica of Sant Apollinare Nuovo: historical and architectural overview

The basilica now bearing the name Sant Apollinare Nuovo was erected during the first quarter of the 6th century, on the orders of King Theodoric. It is the most ambitious and most monumental still-standing structure constructed during his reign. There can be no doubt as to the strong propaganda overtones entailed by the erection of this edifice – a large Arian church, planted in the very heart of Ravenna. The new religious building originally stood next to the now vanished palace of the Gothic king, and was meant to serve as the palatial church of the Ostrogothic court. The edifice is initially consecrated to Christ the Saviour, and intended as the “flagship” building of the Arian Gothic religious community in Italy. However, after the byzantine conquest (in the year 561, in fact), Agnellus, the Catholic archbishop of Ravenna, repurposes the theodorian church to

Catholic/Orthodox¹ use, and reconsecrates it to Saint Martin of Tours, a tireless foe of heretics and heresy; the anti-Arian ideological statement implied by this consecration is more than obvious. Therefore, the new name of the basilica, now turned Catholic, is *Sant Martino in Coelo Aureo* (Saint Martin in Golden Sky). The monicker is due, it seems, to the richly decorated gold-gilded cassetons of the basilica's ceiling, and to the glittering golden background of the parietal mosaics (Bustacchini, 104). The famed palatial chapel of Theodoric would change its consecration one final time when, in the second half of the 9th century (perhaps in 856), the hallowed relics of Saint Apollinaris, first bishop of Ravenna, were transferred here on the orders of Bishop John the VIIth. They were brought hither from the basilica in the port-town of Classis, which had housed them up to that point, in an effort to protect them from frequent coastal raids perpetrated by Slavic pirates. On this occasion, the theodorian palatial basilica was re-consecrated to Ravenna's first bishop, thus receiving its present name, that of Sant Apollinare Nuovo. The qualifier of *Nuovo* (meaning “the New”) is meant to harken back to the church of Classis, first holder of the consecration to Saint Apollinaris, and of the hallowed ravennate bishop's relics.

1. Before the great schism of 1054, which marks the separation between the western (Catholic) and eastern (Orthodox) versions of christianity, the terms “Catholic” and “Orthodox” can be used interchangeably, with both signifying the same thing: namely, adherence to the Christian dogma agreed upon at the Synod of Nicea, in 325 A.D.;



Fig. 1
Ravenna, Basilica of Sant
Apollinare Nuovo
(woodcut by G. Mantellio)
1900

From an architectural standpoint, Sant Apollinare Nuovo is a three-naved basilica with a semi-circular apse on its eastern extremity, featuring a gabled roof of plain, rakes-on-rafters construction, and bereft of galleries over the two collateral naves (*see fig. 1*). The edifice's extremely simple structure and floorplan are typical of the streamlined basilical style popular in northern Italy at the time. But Sant Apollinare Nuovo doesn't owe its fame to its architecture, which is, after all, extremely conservative – it is, in fact, the interior mosaic decoration which grants this basilica its exceptional prestige. Unfortunately, a great proportion of the original décor has been lost. The mosaics which used to cover the apse were destroyed, apparently as early as the 8th century, when an earthquake devastated the absidal decoration (Bustacchini, 105). We therefore have no idea what was originally portrayed in the basilica's apse (Lawden, 2001, 124). However, given the fact that the church was initially consecrated to Christ the Saviour, the half-dome of the apse must have, in all likelihood, borne a representation of Christ enthroned, as Lord of the Heavens. In fact, according to some authors, this were quite certain (Delvoye, 1976, 122). Originally, not only the apse, but also the triumphal arch² which framed it, as well as the inner western wall of the basilica, all used to be covered in mosaics. Out of all this, only one small fragment of heavily restored mosaic remains – namely a representation of the emperor Justinian, situated on the inner western wall (*see Bustacchini, 105*). In stark contrast, the mosaic representations on the lateral (North and South) walls of the central nave are very

2. Triumphal arch – in ecclesiastical architecture, the eastern wall of the church, broken by the opening of the altar's apse, which gives the wall the appearance of a triumphal arch;

well preserved. A detailed analysis of those rich mosaics will follow shortly; but first, a few words on the analytical framework to be used.

3. Methodological considerations: a derridean perspective

Our reading of the mosaic registers of Sant Apollinare Nuovo hinges on our borrowing and adapting several concepts put forward by the French deconstructivist philosopher Jacques Derrida.

According to Derrida, the basic, necessary condition for the creation of any and all meaning is the manifestation of *difference*. Because if everything is the same, then there is no opening for the creation of meaning and interpretation. Difference is instituted through *traces*. The traces open the field of human subjectivity (which Derrida calls *l'apparaître*, or *le vécu*) and initiate the process of signification (the creation of meaning). Derrida calls these kinds of openings “traces”, on account of the fact that they are never fully present. They are always imprints, marks left behind in the ever-elusive presence of the present. In this sense, whenever constructing meaning (whether it is expressed in speech, ideograms, images, written text, etc.), we are only ever working with traces, because the present instance causing the trace is always already gone (passed into the past) by the time we engage in meaning-building. Complex meanings emerge as *texts* in the broadest sense of the term, where texts are “chains and systems of traces”, because “*These chains and these systems can only be drawn in the fabric of this trace or imprint.*” (Derrida, 2011, 91)

My methodological proposition shall be to read the mosaic representations of Sant Apollinare Nuovo as text, in this derridean sense – that is to say, as a system of traces created in certain artistic, historical and socio-political circumstances. Furthermore, these varied circumstances are not to be seen as mere contexts in relation to the “actual” text of the mosaics, but as belonging to the mosaic text itself. This is in line with Derrida’s assertion that “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Derrida, 2011, 220) – in translation, “there is no beyond-text / extra-text”. Derrida means by this that texts have no definite “edges” – they constantly “spill over”, and intertwine with each other, forming ever-changing networks of continuous text – continuous, fluctuating webs of meaning, which are, themselves, ever being mutually enmeshed and re-enmeshed, incorporating and transcending all conflicts and contradictions.

It this view, there is never, and there never was, such a thing as context. Each and every possible, associated strand of signification, however contingently and strenuously connected, is a part of the text being “read”. It is precisely in this interpretative light that I propose to read the continuous, ever-expanding “text” of Sant Apollinare Nuovo’s mosaics.

Furthermore, throughout my analysis it shall become clear that the mosaic “text” in question is, in its present form, a partial *palimpsest*. According to Merriam-Webster, a palimpsest is, by definition: 1. writing material (such as parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased; or 2. something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface³. My use of the term “palimpsest” in the context of the present paper is more akin to the first meaning listed, as I intend to use it to account for the fact that parts of the Sant Apollinare Nuovo’s original mosaics have been “deleted” and “written over”.

3. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/palimpsest>, visited on april 21st 2018;



Fig. 2
Sant'Apollinare Nuovo
central nave,
North wall mosaic bands

4. San Apollinare Nuovo: the mosaic palimpsest

The decoration of the inner lateral walls of the central nave is organized into three vertically superimposed bands of mosaic “text” (see fig. 2). The first, uppermost band, is laid out along the edges of the ceiling; the next one occupies the spaces between the windows; finally, the lower band unfolds in the space above the arches surmounting the two – northern and southern – colonnades. All this parietal decoration dates back to Theodoric’s time, with the notable exception of the middle sections of the two lower bands – sections which are crafted after Justinian’s conquest of Italy, most likely on the orders of archbishop Agnellus (Lawden, 2001, 124).

The upper bands comprise a total of twenty-six New Testament scenes – episodes from the life of Jesus (with thirteen scenes on the southern wall, and thirteen on the northern one). These narrative portrayals alternate with identical decorative panes (fourteen on each of the two walls), which render the same abstract representation: a conch in the shape of an inverted seashell surmounted by a cross flanked by two doves; inside the conch there is a crown of martyrdom (see fig. 3).

Given the fact that the present church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo was, initially, consecrated to the Saviour, the choice of portraying moments of Christ’s life in these theodorician-era mosaic bands of pictorial narrative “text” makes perfect sense. Moreover, the distribution of the narrative episodes between the two upper mosaic bands is anything but haphazard. The band on the northern wall shows Jesus’ miracles, beginning with the wedding of Cana (poorly restored in the 19th century, with its being given the erroneous form of the multiplication of the breads and fishes), and ending with the healing of the paralysed man at Bethesda; the scenes on the southern wall depict the passions of Christ, from the Last Supper, to Jesus revealing Himself to the apostles on the road to Emmaus and Thomas’ doubt. On the northern mosaic band – the one depicting miracles – Christ is portrayed as young and beardless, wearing the imperial purple⁴ and with a golden halo circumscribing a cross around His head; this type of image falls squarely within the realm of typical portrayals of Christ in paleochristian iconography (Bustacchini, 108). On the southern mosaic band – the one adorned with Jesus’ passions – the

4. And thus we already see elements of imperial iconography being discretely, insidiously inserted into portrayals of Christ;

Fig. 3
Upper mosaic bands -
selection of metopae



Seashell decorative metope



The Last Supper (instituting Eucharist)



Multiplying the breads and fishes

and



Turning water into wine

(prefiguring the Eucharist)

Saviour is represented in a similar manner, with one exception: here He is wearing a beard. It is an older, suffering Christ, redeeming the world's sins only to emerge victorious in the end: the conqueror of Death.

It is also worth noting that on the northern wall, the cycle of the miracles starts at the eastern extremity, right by the altar, with the wedding of Cana (the transformation of water into wine being a prefiguration of Christ's blood being spilled in hallowed sacrifice), followed by the multiplication of the breads and fishes (a symbolic anticipation of Christ's body being sacrificed on the Cross). As such, the two miracles of Jesus which prefigure the sacrament of the Eucharist, symbolizing the body and blood of God's Son, are situated right next to the altar (Delvoye, 1976, 122). In symmetrical fashion, on the southern wall the cycle of the passions also begins on the wall's eastern extremity, near the altar, with the Last Supper – the very moment of Jesus' institution of the Eucharist (see fig. 3). One can also see that, in the cycle of the passions, the Resurrection follows immediately after the Way of the Cross; this is because 6th century Christians were still rather reluctant to portray the terrible moment of the Crucifixion (Delvoye, 1976, 122).

This emphasis on the miracles and passions of Jesus, and the very consecration of the basilica to the Saviour, appear quite surprising, given the fact that Theodoric and his goths are Arians. Arianism is a Christian heresy which specifically contests the consubstantiality of Christ with God the Father – that is to say, Arians see Jesus as a mere creation of God. In their eyes, He is not God, being inherently inferior to the Father.

But why, then, would Theodoric consecrate his palatial church to the Saviour? A possible answer is to be found in Theodoric's policy of *civilitas*: rather than pillaging and exploiting his new Roman subjects (as other contemporary germanic kings

were doing), the Gothic king seeks the willing collaboration of the Roman elites; his political project in Italy hinges on Goths and Romans peacefully and harmoniously working together. However, the Romans are nicean Christians, whereas the Goths are Arian. Since the Goths' beliefs (specifically their contestation of Christ's divinity) might be construed as insulting to the Romans, it would make sense for Theodoric to consecrate his palatial basilica to Christ: this somewhat ostentatious gesture was perhaps meant to allay the Romans' fears and worries about Gothic Arian domination in Italy, as part of Theodoric's policy of appeasement – *civilitas*.

In particular, the visual emphasis on the Eucharist – on Christ's sacrifice and its theological and liturgical significance – may have been showcased in Sant Apollinare Nuovo with the specific goal of placating anxious Roman Christians: the intended message seems to have been that Arians and nicean Christians were not all that different, after all: that Arians too honoured Jesus' body and blood, despite any and all theological differences as to His nature.

The twenty-six panels showing the life and deeds of the Saviour unfold in cursive visual "text", chronologically, from East to West: a visual synthesis of the New Testament. "Synthesis" is, in fact, also the key-word when it comes to the artistic rendition of the scenes. The restricted space available has forced the mosaic craftsman to develop an extremely abbreviated iconographical language, featuring only the main characters of the scene and any indispensable accessories, to the exclusion of all non-essential details (Grabar, 1966, 152). Moreover, although the story of Christ's life unfolds in history, in historical time, here it is presented against the background of an atemporal, transcendent, golden sky – a clear influence of Constantinopolitan art. The presence of this eastern Roman artistic influence is hardly surprising, given the fact that Theodoric spent much of his childhood (from the age of 8 to that of 18) as a political prisoner in Constantinople (Wolfram, 1988, 262). Having had his artistic tastes informed by exposure, as a child, to the peerless mosaic artistry of the byzantine craftsmen, it stands to reason that Theodoric would have his ravennate palatial church decorated in a manner similar to the Constantinopolitan style.

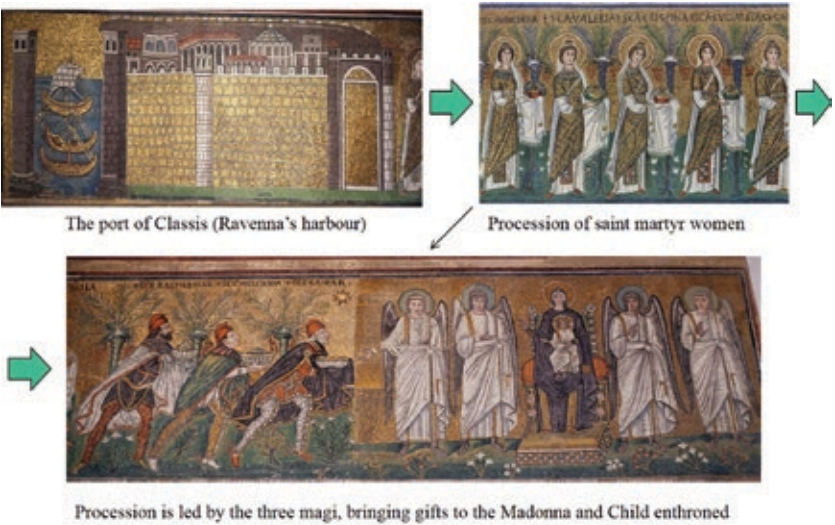
The middle mosaic band occupies the spaces between the windows and the corresponding eastern and western extremities of the central nave's North and South walls. On each of the two opposing walls, sixteen frontal portrayals of biblical prophets or patriarchs confront the viewer – thirty-two figures in total, draped in white *palliae*⁵ and set against golden backgrounds. Each character carries in his hands a book or a roll of parchment. The intervals between the windows, bearing the portrayals of priestly and prophetic figures, are situated directly below the decorative panels of the upper band, featuring oyster-shaped conchs (see fig. 4). This detail, combined with the effect of isolation created by placing the individual figures between the windows, generates the impression of the figures being placed in a succession of niches dug into the thickness of the wall, like statues. Based on this observation, André Grabar hypothesizes that the portrayals of patriarchs and prophets at Sant Apollinare Nuovo may have been inspired by classical Roman

5. *Pallium*, -ae – nowadays, a type of priestly vestment used in the Catholic church, but reserved exclusively to the Pope; however, the ravennate figures in question are draped in ancient Roman *palliae* – long mantles which were artfully draped around the body;

Fig. 4
Middle mosaic bands,
Old Testament
patriarchs and prophets



Fig. 5
The lower mosaic band of
the North wall – selection
of details in sequence,
from W to E



statues displayed in niches, on the facades of ancient buildings (Grabar, 1966, 152). Grabar's theory is supported by the unusual sense of volume demonstrated here by the mosaic craftsman: the silhouettes between the windows of the theodorician basilica are placed on virtual, mosaic plinths and treated in perspective, with shadow effects imitating those produced by direct sunlight on *ronde-bosse* statues (Delvoye, 1976, 123). It is also noteworthy that the rhythmical succession of vertical bodies – prophets and patriarchs – enhances the verticality of the building's interior (Mango, 1993, 74).

It is significant that the upper mosaic band, portraying the life and miracles of Christ (therefore, the New Testament), is placed above the sacerdotal figures of the Old Testament. This is, ostensibly, meant to show – visually – that the New Testament Gospels have at their foundation the Old Testament, the connection and continuity between the two parts of the Bible being manifest in the perpetuation of Abraham's covenant with God, in an unbroken line, from Abraham's descendants, through Moses and King David, all the way to Jesus (see Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38 traces Jesus' lineage even further back, all the way to Adam). Furthermore, several of the Old Testament prophets (portrayed in the middle mosaic band) had prophesied the coming of the Messiah and His sacrifice (see Isaiah 9:6, 7:14, 50:6, 53:3-7; Micah 5:2; Zechariah 12:10), which adds an additional layer of meaning to the miracles and passions of Christ being portrayed just above representations of the very Hebrew prophets who foretold the central events of the Gospels.

The lower decorative bands of Sant Apollinare Nuovo are the widest, and certainly the most interesting of the church's mosaic bands. They feature a complex iconography, including theodorician-era images, and also parts added later, after the byzantine conquest. Let us first describe the general layout of these two lower bands.

On the northern wall (see fig. 5), a procession of twenty-two female saint martyrs led by the three magi are heading from a portrayal of the port of Classis (at the western end of the wall), towards the Holy Virgin enthroned with the infant Jesus, flanked by four angels (at the eastern extremity of the wall, next to the altar). On the southern wall (see fig. 6) one sees a similar procession, featuring twenty-six male christian martyrs, which are going from an imposing edifice portrayed at the western end of the wall (and widely considered as representing Theodoric's palace) towards the figure of Jesus enthroned, flanked by four angels (an image situated at the eastern end of the wall, in the vicinity of the altar).

As previously stated, the representations of these two decorative bands belong to two different time periods. The mosaics on the extremities of the walls – the port of Classis and the portrayal of Theodoric's palace on the western end, the Virgin enthroned with the Holy Infant and adult Jesus enthroned at the eastern end – date back to Theodoric's time. However, the two processions – that of the saintly martyr women and that of the saintly martyr men – are from the time when the emperor Justinian ruled in Ravenna. This determination is based on stylistic grounds: firstly, in the case of the Justinian-era processions, the golden background has a softer glow and is more nuanced than that of the theodorician mosaics. This subtle effect was produced by interspersing small green, yellow or rose-coloured cubes in the mass of golden tessellae (Delvoye, 1976, 124; Bustacchini, 118). Which is more, some tessellae were placed with the golden leaf against the mortar, thereby giving

the golden glow a diffuse character, as it has to traverse the mass of glass paste in front of it before it reaches the observer's eye (Delvoye, 1976, 124). Such subtleties are entirely absent from the theodorician-era golden backgrounds, which present a strong, monotonous and uniform glow. Furthermore, a careful examination of the saintly martyr women reveals that these figures are draped in sumptuous clothing and luxurious jewellery, similar to that worn by the patrician women attending on the Byzantine empress (Delvoye, 1976, 124). This bears clear witness to the presence of a Constantinopolitan artistic influence. It is also worth mentioning that the silhouettes of saintly martyr women and men are alternated with fruit-laden date palm-trees (a symbolic attribute of martyrdom), which serves to accentuate the musical rhythmicity of the two rows of figures (see fig. 7). The rhythm conferred by the repetitiveness of similar figures is a fundamental esthetical trait of the two processions. They take on, enhance and reinterpret the regular cadence of the basilica's columns (Mango, 1993, 74). The anonymity of the similar faces in succession is offset by the fact that each character in the processions has his/her name spelled out above his/her head. Certain specialists have likened the rhythmic quality of succeeding names and figures to the monotonous psalmody of litanies which was a part of Byzantine religious service (Bovini, 1997, 97; Delvoye, 1976, 125). In a more pragmatic vein, André Grabar sees the two ravennate processions as an iteration of the theme of the procession-frieze, which traces its illustrious ascendance all the way back to the Ionian frieze of the Parthenon (Grabar, 1966, 153).

Although they largely conform to the same iconographical pattern, the two mosaic processions do possess some characteristics which set them apart from each other. For instance, the procession of male martyrs is somewhat less dynamic than that of the martyr women, with the men being more austere than their female counterparts: most of the male figures are draped in simple, white *palliae* (see fig. 7). Only two figures stray from this rule: Saint Martin, the procession's leader, is wearing a mantle of imperial purple – one must keep in mind that, after the Byzantine conquest, the basilica is re-consecrated to him; and Saint Lawrence, much beloved in Italy, also enjoys special treatment, as a golden tunic is clearly visible underneath his white *pallium*.

That said, the differences between the two parallel processions are superficial – in essence, their message is the same. The protagonists of both processions carry in their covered hands crowns of glory and martyrdom, which they are bringing to present as gifts to the divine personages seated at the eastern extremities of the two walls, on either side of the altar.

As aforementioned, the images which flank the altar – Christ enthroned as well as the Virgin and child – date from Theodoric's time. Looking beyond the craftsmanship and artistic qualities of these two mosaic panels, one notices to what extent these images contain elements borrowed from imperial iconography. The four angels which flank the Virgin's throne, and also that of Christ, each hold in their hands a long golden rod, similar to that held by the *silentarii*⁶ which stood on either side of the emperor, during official audiences (Delvoye, 1976, 124). And the image of Christ enthroned also exhibits other elements taken from imperial

6. The *silentarii* were the formal guards of the imperial palace; they were thirty in number, and under the command of three decurions; they were tasked with guarding the palace, with preserving order and

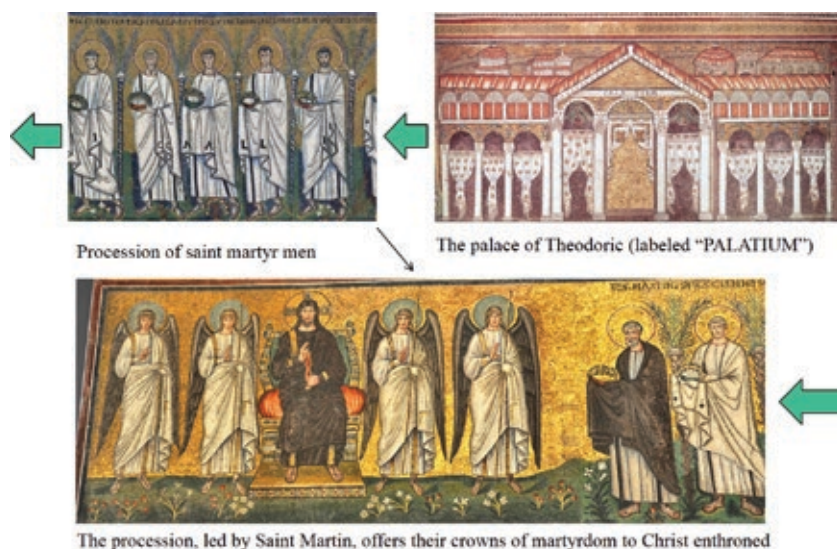


Fig. 6
The lower mosaic band of the South Wall – selection of details in sequence, from W to E



Fig. 7
The two procession friezes of the lower mosaic bands – Byzantine rhythm and grace

iconography. For instance, Jesus is portrayed wearing a purple *pallium*, this being a colour reserved exclusively to the emperor; furthermore, He is holding a scepter, and even the gesture of benediction which He is making with his right hand could be construed as a rendition of the imperial gesture of *adlocutio*⁷. Even Christ's halo, commonly viewed as a typical element of Christian iconography, had previously enveloped the heads of many a Roman emperor (such as Trajan, Aurelian or Constantine), often serving as an iconographical expression of the divine sovereign's identification with the Sun (Tristan, 2002, 349).

Such is the broad outline of the lower mosaic band of Sant Apollinare Nuovo.

maintaining silence in the proximity of the imperial apartments and during meetings of the imperial council; it seems that they were so zealous in maintaining and imposing silence at such gatherings that they got the monicker *silentiarii*, derived from the latin word *silentium*, meaning "quiet";

7. In ancient Rome, emperors would raise their right hand, with the index and middle finger extended, whenever they were making a speech or public address; we see this gesture clearly displayed in the famed statue of *Augustus della Prima Porta*; known as the gesture of *adlocutio*, the hand motion had been in use by Roman orators since the days of the Republic, if not earlier;

Fig. 8
The Port of Classis –
lower mosaic band,
western extremity of
North wall



At first glance, the visual sequences involved seem coherent enough, unfolding in logical succession. The saintly martyr men and women are leaving their earthly lodgings, heading towards the divinity (Jesus, the Holy Virgin). The road traveled by the processions of the chosen, from the basilica's entrance to the altar, is a path of spiritual enlightenment, of godliness. But if that is the case, why do the earthly domiciles left behind by the Lord's chosen need to be endowed with specific identities? For indeed, the port of Classis as well as the palace portrayed on the opposite wall (being the two structures from whence the two saintly processions start) are identified through specific inscriptions. The name of the port of Classis lies written just above its portrayal in mosaic (see fig. 8), while its symmetrically corresponding edifice on the opposite wall bears on its frontispice the inscription *Palatium*. Given the proximity of Sant Apollinare Nuovo to Theodoric's palace and in light of the basilica's original function as a palatial chapel, the enigmatic edifice bearing the inscription *Palatium* is almost certainly a mosaic representation of the theodorian royal residence (Lawden, 2001, 123-124). Its identification by means of an inscription proves both necessary and opportune, since the architecture portrayed in the mosaic seems to be entirely fanciful, being unsupported by descriptions of Theodoric's palace found in contemporary historical sources (Adani, Bentini, 286). This strange incongruence can only stoke one's curiosity, leading one to take a closer look at the mosaic portrayal of Theodoric's palace (see fig. 9).

One is not disappointed. A careful study of the mosaic displaying the mysterious edifice yields a surprise: the inexplicable presence of disembodied hands against the white background of the building's columns. Looking at the palace's columns from West to East, one notices that in front of the first, third, fifth and eleventh columns there are hands, fingers and a forearm (Bustacchini, 123) – limbs suspended in the air, bereft of a body. Seen in the light of this discovery, the drapes occupying the intercolumnal spaces appear artificial, out of place... indeed, the covering of a building's intercolumnal spaces with drapes is a very strange practice, which is not reflected in 6th century realities. What could all this mean?

Let us recapitulate. It is known that around 561 A.D., the emperor Justinian gave an edict which decreed the confiscation of all Arian churches, and their re-consecration to the Nicean creed (Lawden, 2001, 123). The enactment of the

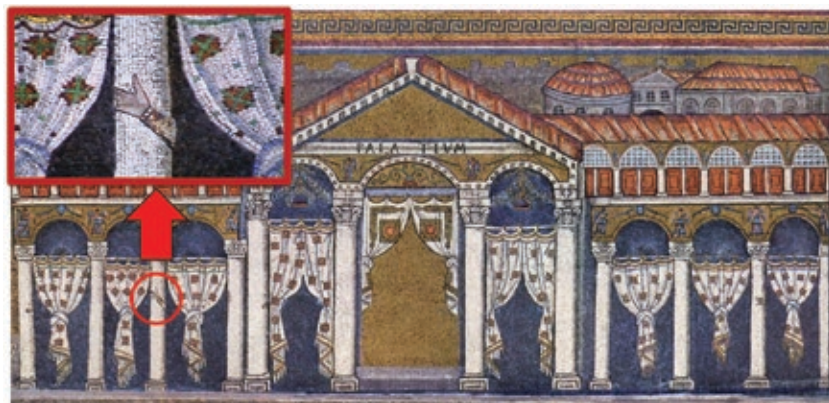


Fig. 9
The Palatium – lower
mosaic band, western
extremity of South wall:
deleted figures and
disembody hands

imperial decree fell to Agnellus, archbishop of Ravenna⁸. He took the basilica of Sant Apollinare Nuovo from the Arian faithful, dedicating it to the Nicean Saint Martin of Tours, a tireless foe of heretics. On the basis of stylistic analysis, it has also been established that the two parallel processions of Sant Apollinare Nuovo, representing saintly martyr women and men, date from the time of Justinian's rule over Ravenna. The processions were, most likely, crafted during the mandate of archbishop Agnellus, and on the latter's orders (Lawden, 2001, 124) – let's not forget that the male martyrs' procession is led by none other than Saint Martin, to whom Agnellus had consecrated the church. Therefore Agnellus is, in all likelihood, the one who had commissioned the creation of new mosaic scenes at Sant Apollinare Nuovo.

Let us now redirect our attention to the strange suspended hands in the mosaic of Theodoric's palace. It is obvious that originally, under the arches of the palace were portrayed several standing figures; these have been removed and replaced with drapes, probably on the orders of Agnellus. The eliminated figures must have vexed in some way the new Nicean vocation of the formerly Arian palatial church; or perhaps, they defied the recently established byzantine sovereignty. Given that the offending silhouettes used to stand under the arches of Theodoric's palace, they must have portrayed the Ostrogothic king and members of his family or court. Such representations would not have been to Justinian's liking – which is why Agnellus probably had them removed. Which is more, it seems that on the frontispice of the palace mosaic there had, originally, existed a small equestrian statue; this must have portrayed Theodoric – which is why it too was eliminated (Bustacchini, 123).

Of course, these are only presuppositions based on logical inferences. We will never know for sure what the removed characters looked like, who they were, or the exact reasons that lead to their erasure. It is clear, however, that certain figures deemed undesirable have been eliminated from the basilica's iconographical programme. This deliberate erasure and re-writing of the mosaic "text" allows for its reading as a two-layered palimpsest.

8. One shouldn't confuse Agnellus, Justinian's archbishop in VIth century Ravenna (that is, the one being talked about here), with Agnellus, the ravennate bishop from the IXth century who has authored the *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae ravennatis*; despite the coinciding names, the personages concerned are two distinct people;

Fig. 10
The mosaic boundary – a
trace marking difference
in Europe's cultural text



Furthermore, the mosaic of Theodoric's palace isn't the only one to have been modified in this manner: originally, the mosaic representation of the port of Classis (see fig. 8) also included human figures – five silhouettes once stood in front of the port-city's walls. These too have been removed, and the resulting holes in the mosaic wall have been filled in; however, the original tessellae, made of glass paste, have been replaced with cubes of marble (Bustacchini, 118) – a detail which clearly underscores Agnellus' alteration of the original, theodorician mosaic. Moreover, the parts of the Classis city wall added later still preserve, discreetly but unmistakably, the memory of the silhouettes which have been removed – just as a re-written piece of parchment still exhibits shadowy traces of the lines having been erased. The missing figures may have portrayed King Theodoric and members of his inner circle, or perhaps even some saints of the Arian church.

All the modifications made after 540 A.D. to the basilica's theodorician-era mosaics beg the question of what was originally represented in the space occupied today by the famous justinian-era processions of saintly martyr men and women. What did the deleted sections of this mosaic palimpsest once show? One can hardly imagine that when he commissioned the extant procession friezes, Agnellus had at his disposal two bare walls. It is obvious that here, the agnellian mosaics replace the theodorician ones entirely. One can speculate abundantly on the nature of the removed images. They might have originally represented two processions of Arian male and female saints (Lawden, 2001, 124), which might have directly inspired the processions commissioned by Agnellus. However, Theodoric and his wife at the head of their respective retinues of Gothic courtiers provide a far more seductive mental image (Lawden, 2001, 124).

In light of this latter hypothesis, the initial iconographical system of Sant Apollinare Nuovo's lower mosaic bands would have looked as follows: two processions of courtiers, heading from the earthly realm towards Heaven: from the royal palace and the port of Classis towards Christ and the Virgin, both enthroned in glory. Such a scenario is not entirely unlikely. In fact, the iconography of sovereigns

bringing offerings to God in solemn procession appears to be of Constantinopolitan descent (Delvoye, 1976, 123); consequently, a young Theodoric may have encountered iterations of this iconographical theme, during his time as a captive in Constantinople. However, the possibility of a reverse influence cannot be discounted either – the famous panels of Justinian and Theodora found in the ravennate church of Sant Vitale might have been inspired by the royal processions supposed to have been originally portrayed in Theodoric's palatial church (Lawden, 2001, 134).

The hypothesis of theodorian royal processions having once decorated the inner walls of Sant Apollinare Nuovo seems, therefore, quite plausible. If such images existed, they would have entailed strong political connotations, in line with the idea of a Gothic monarchy legitimized by divine right (as signified by the image of the king and his court bringing offerings to Christ). It is obvious that Justinian couldn't have allowed such representations to endure. In this context, one should admire the exemplary cunning demonstrated by the designer of the new, Byzantine, martyrs' frieze. The latter would, by in large, have retained the esthetic principles of the supposed theodorian procession (succession, rhythmicity, movement from East to West), while radically transforming the images' meaning and interpretation (Grabar, 1966, 153). Instead of the gothic king and queen leading the members of their court towards Christ, starting from the royal palace, and respectively towards the Holy Virgin and Child, starting from the port of Classis, one sees processions of Nicean saint martyrs, solemnly pacing towards the same Christ and Holy Virgin, but starting from two anonymous urban locations, devoid of identity and bereft of any and all political undertones: just two symbolic portrayals of the Celestial City, nothing more (Crippa, Zibawi, 1998, 398). One manages, thus, to preserve as much as possible of the original, theodorian mosaic "text", while replacing the Gothic political propaganda message with a purely religious one – and an Orthodox, Nicean message, at that.

5. Conclusions: *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*

However, all these ruminations belong to the realm of pure speculation. Given that one cannot know what the middle sections of the lower mosaic bands looked like back in Theodoric's time, it is impossible to make confident assertions as to the changes in connotation brought by the new, Justinian-era mosaics, which have been layered on to produce the mosaic palimpsest that we are left with today.

It is, nonetheless, possible to make one interesting observation. Theodoric and Justinian are waging a silent and insidious propaganda war, with the iconographical programme of Sant Apollinare Nuovo serving as the battlefield. It is believed that after 540 A.D., the byzantine emperor may have endowed the church's interior with portraits and portrayals of himself (Bustacchini, 105). Sadly, nowadays the basilica doesn't preserve any mosaics portraying Justinian. It is certain, however, that the emperor had endeavoured, via the offices of his servant Agnellus, to delete all memory of Ostrogothic Italy's first king from the walls of Sant Apollinare Nuovo. Thus, the rivalry opposing Theodoric to Justinian runs through the centuries, reaching us in mosaic form.

But this rivalry, though punctual and clearly determined in space and time, actually articulates together a much broader body of "text": at the hinge-points

where the theodorician and justinian-era mosaics meet, a line is formed, subtly, yet clearly visible (see fig. 10). It is, of course, the boundary, the *difference* which separates Justinian's richly modulated golden background from Theodoric's much plainer gilded backdrop. However, when reading this tiny bit of *text*, this *trace* – just one vertical “crease” – in light of Derrida's theory and assertion that “*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*”, a fresh and vast avenue of interpretation opens up. It suddenly becomes apparent that this one line, the *difference* marked by this one *trace*, in fact articulates together two bodies of diverging, ever-expanding text: on one side of the line lies late Roman art; on the other, early Byzantine artistic endeavor. In a broader sense, to the left of the line there is the entire heritage of classical antiquity, while to the right emerge the Middle Ages, with their plethora of possibilities, still-to-come. And if one takes a still broader view, to the right of the line Theodoric's mosaic text expands to encompass the entire story of whole western civilization, while to the left Justinian's martyr processions unfurl and branch out to cover all the “text” of the Orthodox East, of Islam, the Middle East, etc.

Indeed, such is the vista that presents itself, when one commits (as I have in the present case-study) to taking Derrida's assertion – that there is no beyond-text – to its ultimate, logical conclusion.

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