The city of Ravenna in northeastern Italy contains some of the most spectacular works of art and architecture to have survived from Late Antiquity. These monuments were set up between 400 and 600 ce, at a time when Ravenna was one of the most important cities in the Mediterranean world. After 600 Ravenna experienced both economic and political downturns, but the artistic and architectural monuments remained as a testament to the splendor of the Christian Roman Empire in its early centuries, an inspiration both to later generations of the city’s inhabitants and to visitors. Thus, Ravenna and its monuments are of critical importance to historians and art historians of the late antique world.

Ravenna’s mosaics have always been fundamental to studies of early Christian art because Ravenna’s surviving mosaics from the fifth and sixth centuries outnumber those of any other city, while Ravenna’s political and cultural links with Constantinople and the East meant that her artists and architects were influenced by a very wide range of styles. Ravenna thus occupies an important place in every chronological narrative of medieval and/or Byzantine art, and Ravenna’s monuments are cited in analyses of style, technique, iconography, viewer reception, color theory, and many other subjects of art historical interest.

By the ninth century, Ravenna and its suburbs (including the port city of Classe) had almost 60 church buildings, ranging from small chapels to large basilicas. Of the buildings that survive, eight contain some of their original mosaics. We know something about the decoration of the ones that are not extant from descriptions written by local historians, particularly the history of its bishops written by Agnellus in the early ninth century, and the history of Ravenna published by Girolamo Rossi in 1572. In addition, in some cases mosaic tesserae have been found in archaeological excavations of destroyed churches. Altogether, it is clear that most churches built in Ravenna from the early fourth to the late seventh centuries were decorated with mosaics, which implies an aesthetic that demanded this kind of decoration, and a persistence of mosaic workshops in the city throughout the period.

The surviving mosaic programs are briefly described in Table 21.1. The buildings include three basilicas and five centrally planned structures. Only two retain their full mosaic programs; all the rest underwent loss and/or modification at some point in their history. The remains include two apses, one set of nave wall mosaics, four domes or groin-vaults, and three triumphal arches.
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<tr>
<td>Orthodox Baptistery</td>
<td>450s–460s</td>
<td>Octagonal baptistery: dome, lower zone of walls</td>
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<td>Sant’Apollinare Nuovo</td>
<td>c. 500 and 560s</td>
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<td>Arian Baptistery</td>
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<td>Capella arcivescovile</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Michele in Africisco</td>
<td>c. 545</td>
<td>(19th-century reconstruction) Basilica: apse semi-dome, triumphal arch</td>
<td>Beardless Christ enthroned flanked by archangels, holding book and cross; Saints Cosmas and Damian; bearded Christ enthroned holding book, flanked by archangels, seven angels blowing trumpets</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Vitale</td>
<td>c. 540s</td>
<td>Octagon with ambulatory: presbytery upper walls, lunettes, and groin vault; apse upper walls, semi-dome, and triumphal arch</td>
<td>Beardless seated Christ holding scroll, angels, St Vitalis and Bishop Ecclesius, Justinian and Theodora and their courts, medallions with twelve apostles (labeled), bearded Christ, Sts Gervase and Protase, Abel and Melchisedek, life of Abraham, life of Moses, four evangelist portraits, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, vine scrolls, urns and birds, Lamb of God, angels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sant’Apollinare in Classe</td>
<td>c. 540s, 670s</td>
<td>Basilica: apse walls, semi-dome, and triumphal arch</td>
<td>Early phase: Transfiguration, St Apollinarius with sheep/flock, landscape, four bishops of Ravenna (labeled), archangels Michael and Gabriel. Later phase: emperors give privileges to bishop, Abraham/Abel/Melchisedek, bearded Christ in medallion, four evangelist symbols, sheep, Jerusalem and Bethlehem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The mosaics of Ravenna

Ravenna’s mosaics span a century and a half. Only Rome has a similar sequence of surviving mosaics, and it is at Ravenna that we can best trace developments in mosaic art by seeing the ways in which patrons and mosaic artists adopted and adapted both techniques and iconographic motifs in response to each other. Moreover, we know a considerable amount about political, ethnic, and religious developments in Ravenna during this period, which has led scholars to identify stylistic changes with political, cultural, or theological programs. Some of these ideas are speculative; even at Ravenna the surviving mosaics are not sufficient in number to allow for overly broad generalizations about style or iconography. However, taken together, we can trace patterns of taste, artistic practice, and belief across two centuries of dramatic change.

Style and workshop practice

Mosaic workshops existed in Ravenna from the second century BCE, as attested by floor mosaics found in Ravenna’s Roman houses. The oldest surviving wall mosaics date to the early fifth century, which is when the western Roman emperors moved their residence to Ravenna. The sudden change in the city’s political status led to the construction of large churches sponsored by emperors, prominent laymen, and the city’s bishops, and these were decorated in the most up-to-date styles with wall mosaics. These mosaics were made of glass and stone tesserae, using techniques and styles whose influence can be traced throughout the Mediterranean. Ravenna’s mosaic workshops were very long-lived, producing both floor and wall mosaics as late as the twelfth century. Each of the buildings in which wall mosaics survive show evidence of replacement and repair, and, as we will see, the mosaic artists were very aware of the existing tradition and imitated or modified it.

Most of Ravenna’s mosaics have been subject to detailed scientific analysis over the past seventy years. Examination of the chemical composition of tesserae can help to explain the origins of materials: while some of the earlier glass tesserae were made in southern Italy, most of the glass was probably imported from the eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, close examination of the materials in the mosaics shows that, starting in the early sixth century, glass tesserae were supplemented with tesserae of marble and limestone, perhaps because the supply of opaque glass had been interrupted; moreover, there was a shift in the makeup of gold tesserae between the early and middle sixth centuries. Likewise, studies of the composition of the mortar beds into which the tesserae were set have allowed a precise recognition of repairs and replacements. For example, at Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, we can visually see, in the mosaic of the palatium, that some parts of the original mosaic had been erased (most notably by the presence of hands in front of the columns, indicating that human figures had once stood in the intercolumniations where now we see curtains) (Figure 21.1). Detailed study of the mortar beneath all the mosaics show that in addition to these figures, the complete processions of saints on both sides of the church were additions made at the same time as the modifications to the palatium. Similarly at San Vitale, we now know that in the mosaic of Justinian’s procession, the original head of the bishop was replaced and an additional head and the name Maximian were inserted at a second phase of work. We cannot know in either case what was originally there, but that has not stopped scholars from speculating on whether the changes were religiously or politically motivated.

In some cases, examination of the mortar has revealed interesting things about the design of the mosaic program. At Sant’Apollinare in Classe, restorations of the mosaics in 1948–1949 and 1970–1972 revealed the sinope, or underdrawings that represent the original design of these mosaics, painted directly on the bricks (today on display at the Museo Nazionale in Ravenna). Presumably this is how most mosaic programs were originally sketched out. Interestingly, these drawings differ from the mosaics that now exist; the original design of birds and fountains was
changed to a procession of twelve sheep with Ravenna’s founding bishop, St Apollinaris, at the center. Obviously the plan was changed, perhaps by Bishop Victor or Maximian, both of whom recognized the potential for visually enhancing the episcopal ideology of this church.  

It has been shown that in many of the surviving buildings, different groups of craftsmen executed the mosaic work, or the same craftsmen used different techniques, even though they did not necessarily alter the program. For example, in the Arian Baptistery, the color of the haloes and the shade of green used for the groundline differs between Sts Peter, Paul, and the apostle behind Paul and the rest, and there is a preference for marble tesserae and checkerboard shading in the central medallion and St Peter, while glass was primarily used for the other apostles (Figure 21.2). Thus, it seems that different craftsmen did the work in two or three different phases.  

Similar conclusions are reached for individual craftsmen or workshops in the “mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, and San Vitale, based on the types of tesserae used and the style of the imagery. Some have tried to argue that these differences are related to the origin of the artists (from Italy or from the East), or that stylistic differences represent different modes of representation for the Old and New Testament subjects, but they may also have to do with the availability of supplies, or with interruptions (perhaps of significant amounts of time) during the creation of the program.

Indeed, there must have been many mosaic workshops operating in Ravenna at any one time between the fifth and the seventh century, given how many churches (far more than the ones that survive) were being decorated simultaneously. With outbreaks of war and plague, it is likely that from time to time work ceased, craftsmen died, or supplies were limited; and new workers and new materials must have been continually arriving at the city. With each new
composition, the artists—designers and craftsmen—were familiar with the existing works, and could use motifs, techniques, and aesthetic effects borrowed from those earlier works. The result is a fascinating interplay between Ravenna’s mosaic monuments.

Iconography

All of Ravenna’s surviving wall mosaics are found in Christian religious buildings, although we have hints that there were also secular mosaics in the palace of Ravenna’s rulers. We know enough about political and religious history in this period to be able to understand the meaning of certain motifs, but some interpretations must necessarily remain speculative. Notably, many of the same motifs, symbols, and themes appear in stone and plaster sculpture designed for the same spaces as the mosaic.

By far the most commonly depicted figure is Christ, who appears in all of the buildings. However, Christ is not depicted in the same way each time. There are two different ways to depict Christ as a man, and often they are both found in the same building, implying that each depiction served a different theological or spiritual meaning. Sometimes, Christ is depicted as a beardless young man: in the “mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, the Arian Baptistery, the Cappella Arcivescovile, San Michele in Africisco, and San Vitale. At other times, Christ is a mature man with long dark hair and a beard: in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, San Michele in Africisco, San Vitale, and Sant’Apollinare in Classe. Because both versions are found in both fifth- and sixth-century mosaics in Ravenna, it does not seem as though the distinction was chronological. Indeed, in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, the north side of the nave contains 14 narrative scenes illustrating Christ’s miracles with a beardless youth, whereas the south side has 14 scenes of the Passion and Resurrection with a bearded Christ (Figure 21.3). Moreover, beneath
these scenes, the north wall features a depiction of the Virgin with infant Christ, while the south wall has a bearded, enthroned Christ in imperial robes. Thus, here, at least, the two versions serve to illustrate different facets of Christ’s story.

In addition to their physiognomy, Christ’s pose differs from church to church; indeed, none of the surviving examples is the same as any other. The closest are in the two baptisteries, where Christ is shown naked in the River Jordan, being baptized (Figure 21.2). In the “mausoleum

Figure 21.3  Mosaics of (a) Christ calling disciples, and (b) Christ being led to the cross. Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. Photos: Robin Jensen.
The mosaics of Ravenna

of Galla Placidia,” he is the Good Shepherd, dressed in imperial robes but seated in a landscape amid a flock of sheep (Figure 21.4). In the Cappella Arcivescovile, Christ is a young man dressed as standing warrior-emperor (the lower part of the image is almost entirely restored). In San Vitale, the apse contains Christ seated on a globe, holding a scroll with seven seals in one hand, and offering a crown (of martyrdom) to St Vitalis with the other (Figure 21.5). At the summit of the arch leading into the presbytery, however, a bust of a bearded Christ (mostly restored) appears in a medallion. In San Michele in Africisco, a beardless Christ in the apse stands, holding a processional cross in one hand and a book in the other, whereas on the triumphal arch just above, a bearded Christ sits on a throne holding a closed book (again mostly restored) (Figure 21.6). Finally, in Sant’Apollinare in Classe, the apse contains a version of the Transfiguration, but where we would expect a depiction of Christ, there is only a jeweled cross with a tiny medallion with a bust of bearded Christ in the center. On the triumphal arch of this church is a bearded Christ in a medallion, made in the seventh century or later (Figure 21.7).

Saints are frequently depicted in Ravenna’s churches. Often they are labeled by name, although occasionally they are not. The twelve Apostles are depicted the most frequently, in the Orthodox Baptistery, the Cappella Arcivescovile, the Arian Baptistery, and San Vitale (Figure 21.8).23 In all cases but the Arian Baptistery, they are labeled by name, but, interestingly, the lists differ slightly from one to the other: the Orthodox Baptistry includes Judah Zelotes, and the Cappella Arcivescovile and San Vitale instead have Thaddeus. In all of the examples Sts Peter and Paul have face-types corresponding to the portrait types for these apostles already established by the fifth century—Peter with white hair and a beard, Paul balding with a brown beard—and in most cases St Andrew is beardless with wild gray hair, but the rest of the apostles have no consistent type. Indeed, both in the groups of apostles and the group of male martyrs in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, there seems to be a deliberate attempt to render their appearance as different from one to the next.

![Figure 21.4](Image) Christ as the Good Shepherd. “Mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” Ravenna. Photo: © Petar Milošević.
Figure 21.5  Apse mosaic with Justinian mosaic. San Vitale, Ravenna. Photo: © Scott McDonough.

Figure 21.6  Mosaics of the apse and triumphal arch. San Michele in Africisco, Ravenna. Photo: Juergen Liepe, Art Resource.
Other saints also appear on Ravenna’s walls. In churches dedicated to particular saints, the saint is depicted in the apse or other prominent place—probably St Lawrence in the “mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” St Vitalis in San Vitale, and St Apollinaris in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo.
Sts Cosmas and Damian, doctor-saints, were placed on the walls of San Michele in Africisco, probably because it was a church dedicated in the wake of the plague. But other groups of saints were also placed on the walls of churches, and we do not know the reason for the choices of these saints. In particular, the Cappella Arcivescovile has medallions with the busts of twelve named saints, six male and six female, and in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, the walls were redone in the 560s with striking processions of saints, all labeled, 26 men on the south side and 22 women on the north. During a church service men stood on the south side of a church, and women on the north, thus the congregation mimicked the saints of the mosaic. The men’s procession was headed by St Martin, to whom the church was rededicated; the women’s procession was headed by the three Magi (Figure 21.9). All the richly dressed saints hold crowns, which they either offer to the enthroned Christ and the Virgin, or have just received from them. All the men and the women are dressed almost identically, with minor variations of details, and the women have the same hairstyle (albeit with different color hair). Scholars have speculated that both men and women were saints whose relics were found in the church, or whose names were mentioned in the litany read during the mass, but, in the absence of the relevant texts, this is only speculation.

Other figures also appear in Ravenna’s mosaic programs. Several include images of tunic-clad men holding scrolls or codices, but not identified by name: the “mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” the Orthodox Baptistery, and Sant’Apollinare Nuovo. They are usually assumed to represent prophets, evangelists, and/or patriarchs, or simply as biblical authors in a generic sort of way, reinforcing the primacy of the written Word of God. Angels appear prominently in the five buildings decorated after the year 500—the Cappella Arcivescovile, Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, San Vitale, San Michele in Africisco, and Sant’Apollinare in Classe—flanking an enthroned Christ or flying in the vault. Emperors and empresses were depicted in San Giovanni Evangelista (now lost), and memorably appear in the apse of San Vitale (Figure 21.5). And finally, Ravenna’s bishops were depicted in the churches that they founded or dedicated, often identified by name. In San Vitale, Bishop Ecclesius appears in the apse presenting a model of his church to Christ, one of the earliest such depictions of this motif, while Archbishop Maximian stands next to the emperor Justinian (Figure 21.5). In Sant’Apollinare in Classe, the burial place of Ravenna’s founding bishop Apollinaris, four of Ravenna’s most notable bishops appear between the windows of the apse. We also have descriptions of now-lost churches—San Giovanni Evangelista, Sant’Agata, and St Stephen—stating that the founding bishop appeared in the apse, often described as “as though performing the mass.” All of these images reflect the intersection of the earthly world with the divine, immortalized forever in glass.
The mosaics of Ravenna

Finally, other Christian symbols and images are found in several of Ravenna’s churches. The four beasts from Revelation 4:7—the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle—were interpreted in early Christian exegesis as symbolizing the four Gospels, and they are shown in the “mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” in the Cappella Arcivescovile, San Vitale (together with the four evangelists depicted as men holding books) and in Sant’Apollinare in Classe (in its 7th-century mosaics) (Figures 21.7–8). Scenes from the life of Christ decorate the nave walls of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo; scenes from the lives of Abraham and Moses are found in San Vitale.

Originality and imitation

The rich collection of images just described presents a coherent, evolving system of Christian representation and symbolism, but at the same time displays innovation in the way that these images and symbols were combined in each building. We have to assume that the many lost mosaics of Ravenna might have had similar iconography to those that survive, but it is quite striking that originality of depiction seems to have been prized.

We can see that in some cases mosaic designers were looking at earlier examples for ways to do things. For example, in three depictions, Christ holds a book with words written on the pages, and the words must have been chosen to convey particular messages. In the lost apse mosaic from San Giovanni Evangelista, there was a large image of an enthroned Christ holding a book that contained, “Blessed are the merciful, for God will show mercy to them” (Matt. 5:7). In the Cappella Arcivescovile’s narthex, the book says, “I am the way, the truth, the life” (John 14:6). In San Michele in Africisco (restored), the book bears the inscription, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father: I and the Father are one” (a conflation of John 14:9 and 10:30).

The later we go in time, the more derivative, in some ways, the mosaic programs appear. For example, many aspects of the mosaics from San Michele in Africisco are similar to other examples from Ravenna. A triumphal Christ holding a book and processional cross also appears in the narthex of the Cappella Arcivescovile. The angels flanking Christ are similar to those found in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo from the Ostrogothic period, and also to those in the apse of San Vitale. The archangels Gabriel and Michael are also found in Sant’Apollinare in Classe. The presence of a beardless Christ, a lamb, and a bearded Christ likewise reflects imagery in San Vitale. The landscape in the apse, representing paradise, is very similar to that of the apses of San Vitale and Sant’Apollinare in Classe. Sts Cosmas and Damian, whose cult was introduced into Italy in the early sixth century, are also found in the mosaics of the Cappella Arcivescovile. Most of these models are contemporary with San Michele, or nearly so, and imply a visual repertoire that could be used to create a desired effect.

Even more striking are the seventh-century (and later) mosaics from Sant’Apollinare in Classe. We do not know what happened to the mosaics of the triumphal arch and the outer apse walls in Sant’Apollinare, whether they were damaged or deliberately replaced, nor, of course, do we know what was originally there. However, what we see today directly imitates, and even conflates, the program of mosaics in earlier churches, especially San Vitale. On Sant’Apollinare’s triumphal arch, in the top zone, a bearded Christ, in a medallion, is flanked by the four beasts of the apocalypse, holding books (Cappella Arcivescovile), amid red and blue clouds (San Michele and San Vitale). Beneath them, six sheep on each side process out of the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, with palm trees beneath (San Vitale). In the apse at the window level, the leftmost panel depicts two archbishops and three emperors, the latter giving a scroll labeled “privileges” to one of the archbishops, flanked by soldiers and clergy. The scene is laid out very similarly to the Justinian panel in San Vitale (Figure 21.10), although the act taking place is quite different. Facing this scene we see (very heavily restored) Abel, Melchisedek, and
Abraham presenting their offerings at an altar, which is a conflation of the lunette mosaics from San Vitale. Possibly scenes like this were part of Sant’Apollinare’s original decoration, which was contemporary with the mosaics in San Vitale, but it is also likely that later mosaicists were looking back to notable monuments from Ravenna’s past for inspiration.

In addition to looking at Ravenna’s mosaics for inspiration, there has been much speculation about external influences, usually identified as non-local origins for the artists who created the mosaics and their programs. Stylistic affinities with mosaics in Milan (“mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” Orthodox Baptistery) and Rome (San Vitale) have been noted.31 Iconographical motifs are also known from elsewhere; for example, the Transfiguration appears in other contemporary apse mosaics, such as the one at the monastery of St Catherine at Sinai in Egypt (where it is represented very differently from the one at Classe). Busts of saints and apostles in medallions are found at Sinai, and also at the church of Panagia Kanakaria in Lythrannomi, Cyprus (sixth century). A bishop offering a model of the church to Christ and a parade of sheep are found at Sts Cosmas and Damian in Rome (c. 520s) (see Figure 6.4).

Especially in the sixth century, however, it seems that Ravenna itself was exporting mosaic craftsmen; there are so many similarities between Ravenna’s mosaics and the ones set up across the Adriatic Sea at Poreč that we assume that the latter had imported workers (and also marble decorative elements) from Ravenna (see Figure 6.6). The similarities include a bishop offering a model of a church, angels presenting the saints, saints in medallions, Christ seated on a blue globe, red and blue clouds, and more.32 Costume and landscape details are also extremely similar. And yet, as usual, they are arranged differently from the Ravennate examples, thus preserving the uniqueness of Poreč’s east end while linking it with common themes.

**Arianism and Ravenna’s mosaics**

The proposition that Christ was a creation of God the Father, and hence a subordinate being, is attributed to Arius, a priest of Alexandria (d. 336). While many church leaders accepted
Arius’s formulation, others vehemently opposed it, and Arianism was condemned at the ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. However, many important people, including emperors and church patriarchs, continued to profess Arian Christianity, and one result was that several of the “barbarian” tribes who took over the western Roman empire in the fifth century were led by Arian kings. This included the Ostrogoths, who conquered Italy in 489–492, led by their king, Theoderic (r. 489–526). As the capital of Theoderic’s kingdom, Ravenna became a center of Arian Christianity in the sixth century, and Ravenna contains the only two Arian churches with surviving decoration, namely Sant’Apollinare Nuovo and the Arian Baptistry. Moreover, Theoderic famously had a policy of tolerance toward all branches of Christianity (and also Judaism!), and the orthodox bishops of Ravenna were allowed to keep their cathedral and to build new churches. One of these is the Cappella Arcivescovile, and San Vitale and Sant’Apollinare in Classe were founded under Ostrogothic rule, although probably decorated after the Byzantine empire had reconquered Ravenna.

Because we know that Arian Christians professed some beliefs that were anathema to the orthodox, and that debates about the nature of Christ were going on, albeit at a low level, in Theoderic’s kingdom, many scholars have attempted to read Ravenna’s Arian and orthodox mosaics from this period for evidence of belief and even propaganda against the other side. Such evidence is particularly important because almost no texts written by Arians survive, so, in some ways, Ravenna’s Arian mosaics are our only source for what Ostrogothic Arians were thinking. At the same time, the very fact that the surviving mosaics were allowed to remain in place indicates that they could be read as depicting perfectly orthodox Christian belief.

On the Arian side, the mosaics in question are those in the Arian Baptistery and in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo. The baptistery’s dome mosaics are clearly a copy of those in the Orthodox Baptistery, but with several twists. For example, unlike in the Orthodox Baptistery, in the Arian, John the Baptist is on the right side of the mosaic, and the personification of the River Jordan is the same size as Christ and John (Figure 21.2; compare Figure 6.10). In the Arian Baptistery the apostles are not labeled by name. And, whereas in the Orthodox Baptistery the apostles’ procession meets beneath the feet of Christ, to whom they offer their crowns, in the Arian Baptistery the medallion with the baptism has the opposite orientation to the procession, so that the apostles offer their crowns to an empty throne at the opposite side from the feet of Christ. Do these differences reflect theology? It has been suggested that the Arians did not want the apostles to offer their crowns to Jesus at the moment when he was being pronounced the Son of God, and thus the different orientation becomes an anti-Trinitarian statement. There is no particular evidence for this, however, and whether any of the differences has theological meaning, as opposed to reflecting the skill of the artists or the desire to copy while making something fresh and different as an aesthetic choice, is unknown.

Likewise, in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, some scholars have read elements of Arian theology or liturgy into the choice of scenes from the life of Christ, and the way that they are depicted. For example, the beardless Christ in the miracles and the bearded Christ of the Passion scenes may indicate the transformation of Christ from miracle-working Son of Man to a glorified Son of God, possibly an Arian theological belief. There is also the question of what was originally in the mosaics that were replaced with the processions of male and female martyrs. The very fact that some parts of the mosaic had to be replaced indicates that there was something objectionable about the content; while some propose that it was Theoderic’s court, it is equally possible that it was a series of Arian saints. One problem with these interpretations is that we do not really know enough to be able to reconstruct sixth-century Arian theology or liturgy. Moreover, all of the scenes of the Life of Christ come from the Gospels, which were accepted by all theological factions; and as such, all were subject to interpretation by every faction.
When it comes to anti-Arian imagery in orthodox churches, we are on slightly firmer ground. In the first place, the mosaics in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo that were inserted in the 560s, at the time the church was converted from Arian to orthodox worship, have good reason to express orthodox ideas, and so do the images in other churches erected during or after the Byzantine reconquest of Ravenna, namely the Cappella Arcivescovile, San Vitale, and San Michele in Africisco. So, for example, the Three Magi are depicted in both Sant’Apollinare Nuovo and San Vitale, and can represent the concept of the Trinity. Indeed, in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo the Magi are prominently placed at the head of the procession of virgins, followed by St Euphemia of Chalcedon, a symbol of anti-Arian orthodoxy as expressed at the Council of Chalcedon. St Euphemia is also one of six women saints depicted in the Cappella Arcivescovile, and the quote “I am the way, the truth, the life,” one of the key biblical passages used by Orthodox theologians against Arianism, was depicted on the book held by Christ in the narthex of that chapel. Likewise, the inscription on the book in San Michele conflates two passages from John that were used by Orthodox theologians to argue for the consubstantiality of the Son and the Father. Many elements of the decoration of San Vitale seem to reflect an anti-Arian agenda, including the fact that the mosaics in the presbytery can all be connected to the Epistle to the Hebrews, a text that was rejected by some Arians because it says that the Son is “the expression of the substance” of the Father. And, as with the other churches, some motifs in Sant’Apollinare in Classe’s mosaics may represent a specifically anti-Arian theology, although here this theme seems more muted than in some of the other churches.

**Aesthetics and meaning**

Mosaics began to be used to decorate churches at the same time as large candelabra with oil lamps were invented, and a theological aesthetic developed in which light and brilliance were seen as metaphors for religious truth and meaning. Ravenna’s mosaics provide evidence of this, because in Ravenna, as elsewhere (see the chapter by Sean Leatherbury in this volume), poems were written to accompany the mosaics and to celebrate the donors, and many survive because they were recorded by Agnellus in the ninth century. For example, the inscription commemorating the redecoration of the Orthodox Baptistery (c. 450s) says, “Behold the glory of the renewed font shines more beautifully.” And more famous is the beginning of the inscription in the Cappella Arcivescovile:

Either light was born here, or captured here it reigns free; it is the law, from whence the current glory of heaven excels. The roofs, deprived [of light], have produced gleaming day, and the enclosed radiance gleams forth as if from secluded Olympus.

Given the brilliance of the gold mosaics in the chapel, this poem offers a remarkable insight into its meaning as intended by the patron, Bishop Peter.

The color scheme for Ravenna’s mosaics changes from the fifth to the sixth century, in line with similar changes elsewhere in the Mediterranean. In the fifth-century mosaics, namely the Orthodox Baptistery and the “mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” the predominant background color is dark blue, with brighter blue for highlights. In the sixth century, there is a dramatic change to gold backgrounds, seen in the Arian baptistery, Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, the Cappella Arcivescovile, and the later monuments. This shift in taste may correspond to improvements in the manufacture of gold tesserae, or to a desire for greater brilliance. Dark colors were still used, for example in the presbytery vault at San Vitale and probably in the apse of the Cappella Arcivescovile (although what is there now is a modern reconstruction). Indeed, the motif of
stars against a blue sky, seen first at the “mausoleum of Galla Placidia,” is repeated in smaller areas in San Vitale and Sant’Apollinare in Classe.

An interesting aspect of the spaces in which mosaics were set up in Ravenna is the difference in the amount of natural light that would have illuminated them. The “mausoleum of Galla Placidia” has only fourteen very small windows, which would have allowed in little light, so any effects on the interior must have come from candles or lamps; the night-time effect of the dark blue backgrounds was thus enhanced by the actual darkness. The Cappella Arcivescovile likewise has a window only on one side. However, most of the other structures have much larger windows. The surviving apses have three or five large windows beneath the semidome, the basilicas have large windows all along the upper part of their length, and the baptisteries also have large windows below the dome. Of course, baptism was a ritual performed at night so, again, the rich mosaics in those locations must have been designed to look good by lamplight also. It should be noted that in many of Ravenna’s churches today the windows are filled with alabaster, but this is a nineteenth-century restoration; evidence indicates that originally they would have been glass.

The mosaic aesthetic also prioritizes richness of abstract decoration, which is in full view in all of Ravenna’s mosaics. Indeed, although they usually gain less attention than the figural and symbolic representations, the borders and abstract decorative fields show perhaps the most virtuosity, creativity, and brilliant use of color, and, like the figural motifs, are repeated in building after building. Birds facing urns, scallop-shell cupolas, vine-scrolls populated by birds and animals, lush foliage, jeweled thrones, rocky landscapes with flowers, palm trees, and trompe l’œil architectural elements with jewel-inset columns, all testify to the skill and creativity of Ravenna’s mosaic artists, and the desire to produce beauty in the service of God.

Notes

2 Ibid., 88–100.
3 Ibid., 146–74.
4 Ibid., 177–87.
5 Ibid., 188–96.
6 Ibid., 250–54.
7 Ibid., 223–50.
8 Ibid., 259–74.
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22 Today also in the Orthodox Baptistry, but that head is a 19th-century reconstruction, and we do not know what was originally there; Deichmann, 1974, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes, Vol. II.1, Die Bauten bis zum Tode Theoderichs des Großen, 38, and C. Rizzardi, “La decorazione musiva del battistero degli ortodossi e degli ariani a Ravenna: Alcune considerazioni,” in L’Edifico Battesimale in Italia, aspetti e problemi. Atti del VII Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Cristiana Genova, Sarzana, Albogna, Rinale Ligure, Vertemiglia, 21–28 Settembre 1998, Vol. 2. (Bordighera: Istituto internazionale di studi liguri, 2001), 915–30, agree that originally the Christ in the baptism was beardless.
23 Eight apostles, not labelled but, based on their appearance, including Sts Peter and Paul, are found in the central tower of the “mausoleum of Gallà Placidia.”
25 Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity, 252–4.
28 Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity, 66–7, 103, and 255.
31 Rizzardi, Il mosaico a Ravenna: ideologia e arte, 177–98.
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34 Cummins, The Arian Baptistery of Ravenna, 142.
35 Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity, 184. Note that the heads, dove, and hands of the Baptist in the Orthodox Baptistery are a modern reconstruction.
38 Jensen, Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity, 162–70.
39 Von Simson, Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna, 81; Deichmann, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes, Vol. II.1, Die Bauten bis zum Tode Theoderichs des Großen, 144–5; Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity, 171–2.
41 Deichmann, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes, Vol. II.1, Die Bauten bis zum Tode Theoderichs des Großen, 203.
43 Charakter tēs hypostaseōs autou / figura substantiae eius; Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity, 248–50.
46 Ibid., Ch. 50.

Further reading

There are many recent studies of Ravenna and its mosaics; these include Deborah M. Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Clementina Rizzardi, Il mosaico a Ravenna: ideologia e arte (Bologna: Ante Quem, 2012); Carola Jäggi, Ravenna: Kunst und Kultur einer spätantiken Residenzstadt (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2013); Massimiliano David, Eternal Ravenna: from the Etruscans to the Venetians, trans. Christina Cawthra and Jo–Ann Titmarsh (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); and Jutta Dresken-Weiland, Die frühchristliche Mosaiken von Ravenna: Bild und Bedeutung (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2015).