

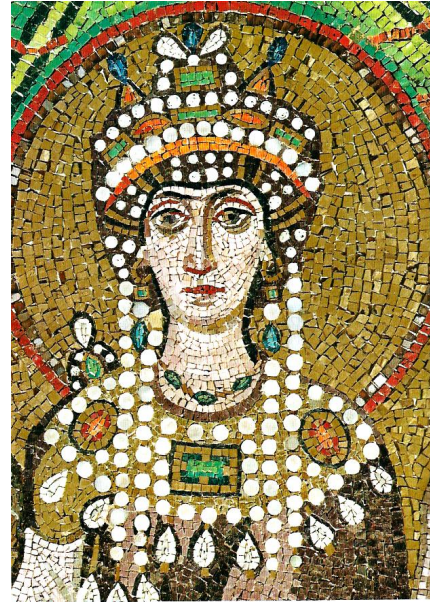
# The Creation of Images in the Byzantine Mosaics of Ravenna

*Background notes*

Hendrika Foster — 8 March 2023



The Roman Emperor, Justinian



The Roman Empress, Theodora

## CHRONOLOGY OF RAVENNA MOSAICS

**100-441 AD** The Patristic period of the Christian church - to the Council of Chalcedon.

**324** Constantine defeats Linus at the battle of Chrysopolis uniting the Roman Empire under his sole rule.

**325** Constantine gives Christianity its official status at the first Ecumenical Council (Nicea) which proclaims divinity of Christ.

**424** **Mausoleum of Galla Placidia** built in Ravenna.

**493-565** Justinian, emperor from 527. February 23rd 532, re-building of **Hagia Sophia** in Constantinople begins. Justinian fixes the date of Christmas Day and Epiphany.

**540** Ravenna under Byzantine rule. Buildings of the Arians re-dedicated and decorated for orthodox Christian use.

**493-526** **S. Apollinare Nuovo** built as an Arian church.

**525-548** **Basilica of S. Vitale**, consecrated 548.

**549** Consecration of **Basilica of S. Apollinare in Classe**.

## THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

The Byzantine Empire was for many centuries the most powerful, the richest, and the most civilised state in Europe and the Near East. Its influence radiated in all directions, sometimes determining the course of events and always influencing it. The influence of this wealthy and cultured society upon its neighbours can be traced from the political theory and practice of Tsarist Russia to the theology of the Anglican Church, from the administrative organisation of the Islamic world to the dedications of churches in Scotland. Modern place names too sometimes perpetuate long vanished features of the Byzantine World. The province of Romagna in Italy is so called because from the 560s to the mid 8th century it was a province of the Byzantine Empire and known by its citizens as Romania - the world of the Romans - and was thus sharply distinguished from the barbarous world of the Lombard duchies.

The Byzantines did not call themselves by that title but *Romaioi* - Romans. They were well aware of their role as heirs of the Roman Empire which for many centuries had united the whole Mediterranean world and much outside it under a single government. They were also conscious that it was within the framework of the Roman Empire that Christianity had come into being, spread and ultimately become the religion of most of its subjects. For the Byzantines, 'Roman' and 'Christian' were often synonymous terms, although there were always many other Christian societies and Christian states outside the Byzantine Empire. The Greek word *Byzantine* is a rather literary term for an inhabitant of the city of Constantinople, the more usual word being *Konstantinoupolites*. French scholars of the 17th century were the first to use the word 'Byzantine' with reference to the Empire rather than the city, and to speak of 'Byzantine history'. What the Byzantines do not call themselves for most of their long history, is *Hellenes*, though the dominant language and the dominant culture of the empire were always Greek. Byzantine rulers and officials were always deeply offended when western potentates called them Greeks - *Graeci*. The official title of Constantinople was always *Konstantinoupolis Nea Rome* - 'the City of Constantine which is the new Rome'.

One feature which distinguishes the Byzantine Empire from the world of the late Roman period is its Christianity. Not only was Christianity the religion of the state and that of the vast majority of its citizens, but Christian modes of thought, Christian ideals and Christian imagery dominated the political, intellectual and artistic life of the whole society and determined its peculiar quality. This did not happen suddenly. There was a long transitional period during which Christianity became a permitted religion, then a favoured religion then the only tolerated religion. During this period the urban upper classes who were the bearers of classical culture gradually adopted Christianity. When they did so they did not abandon all their previous intellectual baggage. Rather, they adapted it to Christianity and Christianity to it. The transitional period was marked by an extensive fusion of Christianity and classical culture. Revealed religion gained intellectual respectability by being fitted into the framework of the Greek philosophical tradition. The fit was not perfect, and sometimes alternative attitudes to Christian dogma - an Aristotelian and a Platonic view - were adopted. At the same time, much of

classical literature and art, and the techniques and skills associated with them, were adapted to the needs of a Christian society by allegorical interpretation.

## THE BYZANTINE CITY OF RAVENNA

When Rome first took possession of the city of Ravenna is not known. The city was well established as a vibrant commercial centre and had an extraordinarily fortuitous geographical position which made it almost impregnable. On one side it was separated from inland regions by the marshes which constituted excellent defence, while at the same time the city was in direct contact with the open sea to facilitate trade and the receipt of reinforcements and supplies. It seems that the first Roman fleet to appear in Ravenna was that of Metellus, Sulla's legate, who disembarked there in 82BC. The Emperor Augustus was mainly responsible for the development of the port because of its proximity to the seas of the near East and for the defence of the Adriatic.

Towards the last decade of the 5th century Theodoric led the mighty force of the Ostrogoths to lay siege to the city for three years before ousting Odoacer. He assumed the title of *Dominus* and later *Rex*, and, as Procopius writes, he was 'a wise and enlightened sovereign'. He erected a great Palatium as his residence. Theodoric was an Arian, and head of an Arian people who built their own churches and a Baptistery. The Arian bishops officiated, following the teaching of Arius and maintaining the heretical doctrine (already condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325 and later by the Council of Constantinople in 381). According to this, only God the Father is "not begotten", Christ the Logos is begotten, and he, being different from God, is God by adoption, and not by nature. Arians and Catholics mainly lived amicably together in Ravenna until almost the end of Theodoric's life when the Arians imprisoned the Pope resulting in his death, three months before Theodoric in 526.

In May 540, the Emperor Justinian's General Belisarius conquered Ravenna and the city was occupied by the Byzantines. In 554 the city became the seat of the Prefecture of Italy. The Byzantines brought into the city all the pomp and ostentation of oriental life, with buildings gloriously adorned with marbles and mosaics. It is these buildings which attract the art lover to Ravenna. The mosaics, probably executed by artists trained in Byzantium, are in a superb condition after 1400 years, with vibrant colours and elegant compositions which suggest the grandeur of the 6th century court of Justinian and Theodora, as well as the meticulous skill of the anonymous mosaicists.

The decline of the city after the surge of artistic creativity can be linked to the neglect of the great port of Classe and the silting up of the river. Trade and commerce declined, and the city, ill-governed for two centuries by the Exarchs, and then briefly in the middle of the 8th century by the Longobards and the Franks, was reduced in power. From the beginning of the 15th century, Ravenna was under the jurisdiction of the Venetian Republic which ruled directly from 1441-1509, in which year the city passed by treaty to the Church and the Holy League. It was besieged then taken by Louis XII of France on April 11th 1512, after which, for many centuries, the city fell into obscurity. After the fall

of Napoleon it was returned to the Church in 1815, and in 1859 became part of the United Kingdom of Italy.

### **GALLA PLACIDIA, born at Constantinople 392AD, died Rome 450AD**

Daughter of Galla, and Roman Emperor Theodosius. In 395 the Roman Empire was divided into the Western Empire, with its capital first at Milan then Ravenna, and the Eastern Empire with its capital at Constantinople. Galla Placidia was three when her father died, and her brother Honorius became Emperor of the Western Roman Empire. She was therefore a valuable hostage for Alaric, Chief of the Visigoths, who took her hostage in 410. She was taken to Marseille and married to Ataulf becoming queen with the Visigoth until he was assassinated two years later. She then married Constans, the Roman consul, in 417 and they had a son and a daughter before his death in 421. Cultured and refined, she was an active presence on the political scene with her brothers. In 421, Constans was made Co-regent of the Empire and Galla Placidia was given the title *Augusta*. Her son Valentinian III became Emperor aged six and his mother legally held all power in the name of her son as regent of the Empire. She ruled for ten years. Galla Placidia died in Rome on the 27th November 450.



**Galla Placidia**

### **THE EMPEROR JUSTINIAN (493-532), reigned 527-65AD**

Flavius Annicianus Justinianus was born at Tauresium (Skolpje) in Illyricum c. AD483. His first language was Thracian. He was of peasant stock, adopted by his uncle Justinus or Emperor Justin. He was well educated in Latin, probably in Constantinople, and later described as a cultured man. His uncle Justin raised him to a Patrician and from that point Justinian became an important force behind the throne. The two healed the breach with Rome. Their policy, like that of Constantine, was that there must be one God, one Empire and one Church. Once Emperor, Justinian reconquered Italy to unite once again part of the Western Roman Empire, due largely to the superb military skills of

General Belisarius, the Emperor's commander in Italy. Justinian and Theodora, at his insistence, ruled together, shared responsibility, power and decision making.

His fame could easily rest upon three of his greatest projects. The first being the foundation, within weeks of his succession, of the church of S. Sergius and S. Bacchus, grand and sumptuous in concept, (the building is now a mosque known as Little Sophia). This was followed by the re-building of Constantine's church, the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, after its destruction by fire after the *Nika riots*. Building began on February 23rd 532 just thirty-nine days after its destruction. Justinian's church was to be the largest religious building in Christendom, a square building topped with the largest dome in the world. The two architects were Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus, both leading geometers, who no doubt, with Justinian, began their planning long before the fire made reconstruction a necessity. The criteria required by the Emperor were all possible speed and quintessential magnificence. Coloured marbles produced a rainbow of colour, reflecting light, as did the gold mosaic-covered vaulting. Until modern times, no other building contained so vast an open floor space under a single roof. The revered relics of the church included the True Cross found by the Empress Helena in Jerusalem, together with the other instruments of the Passion, Christ's swaddling clothes, and the table used at the Last Supper. Justinian entered the completed building for the first time on 17th December 537, and was apparently heard to comment "Solomon, I have surpassed thee". Like many other autocrats he believed that great buildings were a proper expression of greatness.

### **THE EMPRESS THEODORA, born 500AD or perhaps 497AD, died 548AD**

Her birthplace is unknown. Later her family settled in Constantinople, but shortly after, her father died. The eldest sister Comito became an actress and Theodora soon followed. She was beautiful, with a pale skin, very dark hair and big eyes. Her intelligence and her looks became her fortune and soon she was the most desirable courtesan of the city. Prostitution took her to Alexandria, then Antioch, as she developed her clientele among the nobility, and eventually she met Justinian. She was 27 he was 47. He became quite besotted with her and in 523 she was declared a Patrician. So that no-one could oppose Justinian's association with Theodora as his concubine, they were married in 524. Their coronation took place on April 1st 527 (just before Justin's death) and for the next 21 years, Theodora ruled as Empress, her intelligence and forcefulness a great asset as Justinian was indecisive and mercurial in character. Thanks to Theodora, fortunes were made at court. In 533 the second Roman Empire was established under their joint rule. Belisarius may have been Justinian's general of Imperial troops, but his wife Antonina (from the same background as Theodora) served to carry out the will of the Empress. The two even connived to have Pope Silverio exiled in the battle for acceptance of Monophysitism. Her image in S. Vitale in Ravenna was completed the year before she died in 548.

## BYZANTINE ART

Christianity was based on the written word of the New Testament, which was seen as a continuity of the Old Testament. The narrative character is dominant. Christian narrative was promulgated and its history was illustrated by the skills of the artists. Art for the Byzantines would include the skilled crafts of workers in silver, gold, wood, ivory and silk, and manuscript and miniaturist illustrators. All these media, as well as mosaic decoration, required meticulous precision to create artefacts and was extremely expensive. Expenditure of vast wealth was seen as the ultimate philanthropy of a Christian Emperor, firmly supported by the whole bureaucracy of the Imperial Christian government. Christianity was expressed as grandeur, writ large. The great male gods of antiquity all assumed the broad forehead, long hair and full beard that had characterised Zeus, the father of the gods. Christ could hardly be seen as less impressive or powerful than they. All the verist tricks of Roman portraiture were used to convey the powerful presence of Christ. Another form of Christ had short frizzy hair. Both types were used in the 6th century. Christ appeared as more than human in scale, and by implication, super-human in nature. Larger than life-scale remains the option throughout Byzantine painting whether on panels or in murals.

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