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The procession in these mosaics symbolizes not only the congregation's offering of the bread and wine for consecration but also Justinian and Theodora's generosity to the city of Ravenna.

Imperial Gifts

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Emperor Justinian, who reigned from 527 to 565, and his wife, the Empress Theodora, enabled the spread of the Eastern Church to its most Western point on the Italian peninsula. Their generous gifts established the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. The two mosaics discussed here honor and commemorate their achievements.

One mosaic shows Emperor Justinian carrying a gold paten while the mosaic on the opposite wall of the apse depicts Empress Theodora holding a gold chalice as they prepare to enter the church. The regents are about to participate in the offertory procession during the liturgical celebration. The paten and chalice, which hold the Eucharistic bread and wine that refer to Christ's sacrifice, will be placed on the altar, between the two mosaics, by the priest. Officials, local clergy, and ladies-in-waiting accompany them. This procession is symbolic not only of the congregation offering the bread and wine for consecration but also of the generosity of Justinian and Theodora to the city of Ravenna and the Byzantine Empire under their reign.

Under the patronage of Justinian, Constantinople became the artistic as well as political capital of the Eastern Empire. The Byzantine art that developed there grew from Early Christian styles. Because Constantinople was frequently ravaged by war over the centuries, much of this artwork has been destroyed. Consequently, the greatest number of surviving Byzantine monuments and mosaics is in Ravenna, which had become the capital of the Western Empire in the fifth century. Though the city fell to Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths (475–526), it was retaken for Justinian in 540. Ravenna then became the stronghold of Byzantine rule in Italy.

The church of San Vitale is an octagonal structure with a circular core and ambulatory. Like many Eastern churches, it is a domed, centrally-planned building. Large windows could be placed on each level of the building due to a new type of lighter vaulting that used hollow tubes. The altar, which is in the center of the apse, is flanked by these lavish and well-preserved Byzantine mosaics of Justinian and Theodora.

The large mosaic panels were probably created by an imperial workshop. The characteristics of the Imperial Byzantine style include tall, slim figures that have small feet and almond-shaped faces with exceptionally large eyes. This is a dramatic change from the squat figures with large heads found in

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EMPRESS THEODORA AND HER ATTENDANTS (547). Mosaic on the south wall of the apse, 8 1/2' x 12'. San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Photo: Album / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

the Late Roman styles. The bodies are elongated and flat. The striated drapery gives no indication of the body shapes beneath them. The tesserae, cut pieces of painted glass, are placed within black silhouettes to create the mosaic. The background is gold leaf and implies a regal, heavenly realm, while the green ground reminds us the patrons are part of an earthly dimension as well.

The Empress and Emperor, although they appear to be participating in the liturgy, were actually thousands of miles away. Theodora was notoriously beautiful and self-confident. She had been a famous performer from a lower class of society before she captivated Justinian's eye while he was a young man.¹ Known for her charming personality, quick-wit, and excellent memory, the Empress appears self-confident in the mosaic. She is dressed in a purple imperial robe, which is a reminder of her speech to the people of Constantinople when she said she was willing to face death in a purple shroud rather than leave their city.² In a poststructuralist study of the panels, Charles Barber has maintained that "The privileging of the male as the performer of a public role is underlined in [Theodora's] panel by the way in which the male actors are showing the way into the darkened doorway to the female actors."³

Byzantine iconography is often subtle and appropriate. For example, the procession of the three Magi can be seen on the embroidery at the bottom of

Theodora's gown. Their bringing of gifts to the Christ Child is a natural association with the royal couple bringing gifts to the people of Ravenna. Twelve men to parallel Christ's twelve apostles accompany Justinian.⁴ The Chi Rho symbol (an early Christogram based on the first two Greek letters of *Kristos*) on the shield recalls Constantine, emperor from 306 to 337, who received a vision during the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in Rome to rule by this symbol. Constantine became the first Christian emperor and the victory in Rome ultimately led to his leaving Rome and founding Constantinople, the court to which Justinian was heir.⁵ The Archbishop Maximian holds a jewel-incrusted cross and the man behind him appears to be a wealthy banker, Julianus Argentarius, who oversaw the financing and building of the church of San Vitale.⁶

Whether we interpret the mosaics of Justinian and Theodora as imperial propaganda, a grateful portrayal of their beneficence, or a poststructuralist encoded meaning, their existence clearly marks the extension of the Eastern Christian Church onto Italian soil and into the city of Ravenna.

NOTES

1 Christina Giltzow, "Comparison between 'The Alexander Mosaic' in Pompeii and 'The Justinian and Attendants Mosaic' in Ravenna, Italy" (master's thesis, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2010), 48.

2 *Ibid.*, 57.

3 Charles Barber, "The Imperial Panels at San Vitale: A Reconsideration," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, XIV (1990), 35.

4 Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1987), 80.

5 Penelope J. E. Davies, et al., eds., *Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition*, eighth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004) 257.

6 Irina Andreescu-Treadgold and Warren Treadgold, "Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale," *The Art Bulletin*, 79:4 (December, 1997), 712.



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