

Basilica of S. Apollinare in Classe

Justification for the inclusion to the World Heritage List

Historical background

The basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe rises in all its solemnity and grandeur some 8 km from the centre of Ravenna. The earliest historical reference we have to it is contained in the Liber Pontificalis of the protohistorian A. Agnello: in his biography of Maximian, he quotes a dedicatory epigraph which was located in the now lost narthex of the basilica, stating thus:

"Beati Apolenaris sacerdotis basilica(m) mandante vero(=viro) beatissimo Ursicino Episcopo a fundamentis Julianus Argentarius edificavit ornavit atque dedicavit consecrante vero(=viro) beato Maximiano Episcopo die VIII Maiarum indictione XII octies Paci(fici Basilii V. C.)".

From this inscription we are able to deduce that it was built at the time of the bishop Ursicinus, who was the commissioner of works, that the edificator atque dedicator was Julian Argentarius, and that the bishop who consecrated it was Maximian: the consecration took place on May 9th in the 8th year following the Council of Basil, that is, in 549 AD.

The historian Agnello adds that no other church in Italy could compare with it in the lustre of its marble, that shone even by night.

In the second half of the 7th century, at the time of Archbishop Reparato (671-677), important restoration work was carried out on the mosaics of the triumphal arch and the conch in the apse. During the 9th century, further restoration was done on a large scale on the roof, the mosaics of the triumphal arch and the quadriportico. It was probably also in this century that an annular crypt was constructed under the presbitery and later, in the 10th and 11th centuries, the grand bell tower was most likely erected. The beginning of the 12th century saw the replacing of the mosaics on the pedestals of the triumphal arch (figures of Apostles). In 1138 the Monastery at Classe passed over from the Benedictines to the Camaldolensian order.

Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, from the noble family in Rimini, was responsible in 1450 for ordering all the precious marble linings to be taken out of the church.

1723-1725 were years in which substantial work was carried out on the presbitery and the two staircases connecting this area with the crypt were made into one. Between 1776 and 1778 portraits of Archbishops and Bishops of Ravenna were painted in decorative medallions; the remaining ones can still be seen in the central nave above the arches. Important restoration on the work of Corrado Ricci, including the vestibule, was carried out between 1897 and 1906. In the 20th century much architectural and decorative restoration has been accomplished by the Soprintendenza ai Beni Ambientali e Architettonici di Ravenna

Description

The basilica, which is 55.58 m. long and 30.30 m. wide, is majestic and imposing. Onto the central body of its façade, framed by two pilasters, is incorporated the narthex, terminated to the left by a quadrangular room with its own upper floor (a turret), which had its counterpart at the opposite end, though long since lost: traces of it, however, have come to light. The right-hand turret, similarly, is lost.

Without this quadrangular room to the right, the basilica appears, outwardly, somewhat unbalanced. Turrets such as these are to be considered as deriving from the influence of the Eastern Empire, more specifically, from Asia Minor.

The basilica would have had an even more grandiose aspect, originally, than it has today. In fact, apart from the lost right-hand turret, it lacks the quadriportico which ran in front of the narthex (itself largely rebuilt at the beginning of the century) and which, according to recent surveys, was wider than the basilica proper, extending over the north and south rooms (an expanded quadriportico).

The basilica, built out of the so-called 'Julian bricks' (each about 4 x 48 cm, divided by a layer of mortar of equal thickness), was built on an old burial ground, in use from the end of the 2nd - beginning of the 3rd century, up until the time of the basilica's erection (middle of the 6th century).

Therein, the first bishop, Apollinare himself, was interred, in a sarcophagus situated half way down the southern side of the basilica; at which point, there is an epigraph, believed to be of the 6th century, stating that the urn of Apollinare was transferred inside the church at the time of Maximian, (*in hoc loco stetit arca apolenaris sacerdotis et confessoris ...*).

From the outside, then, the building appears as a simple and neat involucrum, dressed with elegant brickwork, in its form, a faithful reflection of the interior space.

Inside, the basilica is characterized by a spaciousness that gives the feeling of entering a dimension which is both abstract and transcendent, imposing in its grandeur and majesty. It is divided into three naves by two rows of twelve columns, all of the same veined Greek marble, originating in the Sea of Marmara (A. Agnello), resting on dadi decorated with a lozenge motif, something very common in Constantinople and in the Eastern world generally.

The interior space is well-proportioned: the central nave being equal to twice that of the side naves. Apart from the priceless columns on their dadi, the fine capitals are worthy of attention for their motif - referred to as "acanthus leaves stirred by the wind", from the impression they give of the sculptured leaves being swollen as if by a breath of wind.

They are also referred to as "butterfly-form" from the way the leaves are counterpoised two-by-two, reminiscent of the wings of a butterfly. These leaves are characterized by a minutia of perforations which create chromatic and chiaroscuro effects: rows of flowers bring out the lines of the leaves and the vein patterns. Similar capitals are known in Greece and Constantinople.

Between the arches and the side walls of the central nave are to be seen cameo portraits from the 18th century representing the bishops and archbishops of Ravenna.

The original floor was a mosaic of geometric motifs: fragments of it have been uncovered at the end of the left nave, in the middle of the central nave (now placed on the right-hand wall of the church) and at the beginning of the right nave: in this last, an inscription commemorates 'Gaudentia' and 'Felix', the names of two benefactors of the church who contributed with their own money to the laying of the floor.

These fragments are found at the depth of 30-35cm - the basilica, in fact, in distinction from many other buildings in Ravenna, has not been elevated to the point where its vertical proportions are altered.

The opulence of its interior must have been magnified by the precious marble that dressed its side walls - until it was removed by Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta at the beginning of the 15th century to adorn the temple he was having built in Rimini. Originally, on the side walls, there were three doorways.

The basilica ends in a semi-circular apse which has a polygonal form on the outside, flanked by two square rooms, each with its own little polygonal apse (pastophoria), an oriental usage which became part of the Ravenna tradition.

The presbytery of the church now appears as raised considerably (1.88 m.) above floor level, being reached by a flight of twelve steps which are due to the addition of the crypt.

The presbyterial area was originally demarcated by a bema, a square space reserved for the clergy, closed off by choir-screens, the foundations of which were discovered in 1953 some 30cm beneath the present floor level: they extended as far as the third pair of columns from the apse.

The mosaic decoration covers the apse and the triumphal arch. The whole mosaic in the apse was made shortly before the middle of the 6th century whereas the decoration on the triumphal arch which is divided into five horizontal zones according to a typical byzantine layout, was carried out at different periods of time between the 6th and the 12 centuries.

In the centre of the uppermost, dating back to the 9th century, is a medallion with the bust of Christ. He is bearded, with his eyes wide open and is wearing a severe expression while imparting his blessing. To the right and left, on a blue ground with clouds are the Evangelists' symbols in the form of winged half figures holding books.

In the second zone (7th century), on a gold ground, twelve white sheep which symbolize the Apostles come out from the doors of Jerusalem and Bethlehem and move upwards toward the portrait of Christ. The two cities with jewelled walls represent respectively the Church borne out of Judaism and the Church borne out of paganism.

In the middle bands, on an indigo ground, are two palm-trees (7th century) and below on the pilasters are the figures of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel shown as celestial guards standing out against a golden background. Robed in white tunics and purple mantles, typical of court ceremonies, in their right hands they hold labara with a Greek inscription, thrice repeated, praising the thrice Holy Lord (6th century). In the small panels below are the busts of St. Matthew and St Luke dating back to the 12th century.

The wide mosaic decoration of the apse consists of two distinct figurative scenes: at the top, on a gold background, appears the hand of the Almighty issuing from stylized clouds; lower down also emerging from clouds are the half figures of Moses and Elias in white garments both young and beardless. They stand at either side of a great medallion bearing a jewelled cross on a blue nocturnal sky strewn with 99 golden and silver stars.

In the centre of the cross is depicted the image of Christ, bearded. At the ends of the arms are the letters Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet which are the symbol of God as the beginning and the end of all things; above the vertical limb is the Greek word for fish whose letters form the initials of the words Jesus/Christ/of God/the Son/Saviour in Greek, below it are the words in Latin Salus Mundi (salvation of mankind).

This composition clearly symbolizes the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, the occasion when, according to the Gospels, Christ manifested his divine nature to the disciples Peter, James and John, who are here represented by the three sheep standing below with their heads raised towards the jewelled cross.

In the lower part of the apse is a green landscape strewn with shrubs, flowers rocks and trees, particularly pine-trees which are still typical of the area. The whole scene is arranged in a simple and well balanced composition which alternates decorated and bare areas according to the "vertical" perspective, typical of Byzantine art. Right in the centre of this landscape is the imposing figure of S. Apollinare, who came from far-away Antioch, founded the Church of Ravenna and was its first Bishop. He is robed in a

white dalmatic and a chasuble with golden bees symbolizing eloquence and is shown with his arms outstretched in the act of praying to God asking him to welcome the worshippers who had been entrusted to him to the heavenly realm of eternal bliss. Twelve lambs, symbolizing the faithful of the church converge on the feet of the Saint.

Between the choir windows below the apse are the life-sized figures of the four first and more important bishops of Ravenna: Ursicinus, Ursus, Severus and Ecclesius. They are frontally shown in priestly garb and holding each a book. They add to the exaltation of the local Church and Orthodoxy in that they represent the historical development of the Church of Ravenna founded by S.Apollinare.

At the side of the apse two large panels complete the cycle: The right panel seems to summarize the scenes in the S. Vitale presbytery lunettes for round a white-clothed altar Abel, Melchizedec and Abraham offer sacrifices to the Lord.

The left panel, though heavily restored in tempera, depicts the bestowal of privileges on the Ravenna Church by the Emperor of Byzantium. Reparato, then a priest and later archbishop, sent by Archbishop Maurus and assisted by three priests with fire, incense and censer, receives the decrees from Costantine IV, flanked by his imperial brothers Heraclius and Tiberius.

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Sant'Apollinare in Classe has been described as the 'most impressive example of the Early Christian basilica.' In spite of the plundering to which it has been subjected over the centuries it has conserved all the beauty of the original concept: the generous proportions of the naves, the luminous interior bathed in light from the fifty-three windows of the nave and the lateral naves not counting another five in the apse, the arches of thirteen spans, the twenty-four shafts of columns in marble which were certainly imported, the simple decoration of the plinths of the columns, the capitals with acanthus leaves by the wind and the pulvini which rest upon them, finally the decoration in the apse in marble and mosaic. This mosaic signifies the point of arrival of Byzantine symbolism.

The mosaic composition in the apse, viewed in its entirety, is marked by a great symmetry and axuality: if, in fact, one were to extend the arms of the cross in a line along the whole recess of the apse, it would be divided into perfectly symmetrical areas. The division of sky and earth, that is, the divine and the human spheres is, moreover, emphasized by differing backgrounds - gold for the first, green for the second.

Iconographically, the decoration of the apse shows certain aspects of great originality and innovativeness: for the first time in the history of Christian art, instead of the customary *Maiestas Domini* in the apsidal recess, the eponymous saint of the church is portrayed. This choice of subject, made by the man who dedicated and consecrated the basilica, was a clear declaration of the will to glorify Sant'Apollinare. The decoration, it must be remembered, had to speak directly to the minds and souls of the faithful who came to Classe to venerate the tomb of the Martyr, patron and father of the church in Ravenna.

Surrounded by lambs which represent the fold of the elect and, as such, alluding to the sacrifice, the Redemption of sins and heavenly glory, the figure of Sant'Apollinare is identified with that of Christ himself. Just as Christ was transfigured and transformed through His humanity and through the cross, so the martyr, through his suffering, triumphs over the world. In this way, a perfect correspondence and fusion is made between the earthly dimension of the lower part of the recess and the heavenly, above, where the Theophany is represented, the customary image which is placed in the most honoured position in every basilica.

All the same, in Classe there is a new Theophany, never before represented, with the Transfiguration rendered in a completely symbolical way. The symbolism of this scene makes the Classense mosaic one of the most singular allegorical configurations that art has ever conceived, and moreover, distinguishes it from all other mosaic cycles on the same theme, for example, that of the church of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, commissioned by Justinian between 548 and 565, and other later ones (the Church of Daphni in Athens), where the moment of the Transfiguration is, without exception, represented in realistic terms.

In the apsidal recess, then, a triumphal theme is unfolded which unites heaven and earth in the glory of God and the whole church of Ravenna, represented by the figures of the four Bishops between the windows, in its titular saint. This theme demonstrates the determination, evident elsewhere, on the part of Maximian to render particular honour to the saints and bishops of Ravenna, with an end to strengthening their authority - something which, besides, was in strict line with Justinian's religious policy. It was Maximian, in fact, who, in the delicate moment of rupture between East and west over the Schism of the Three Chapters, anxious to follow the dictates of the Emperor, effectively became the primate of the church vera mater, vera Orthodoxa in Italy.

The Classense mosaic can equally be read in another light, one that is closely connected to this first, namely as a restatement of the dogma of the Catholic orthodox faith after the prevalence of the Arian heresy during the period of the Gothic domination. The scene of the Transfiguration thus re-asserted the concept of the divinity of Christ and of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son.

The exaltation of the church of Ravenna is also expressed in the left-hand panel of the apse, where, at the end of the 7th century, a moment of power and glory for the Church of Ravenna was depicted - an episode in its struggle with Rome to obtain metropolitan autonomy.