

Arian Baptistery

Justification for the inclusion to the World Heritage List

Historical background

This baptistery, built by Theodoric (493 - 526) next to the Arian Cathedral, was confiscated after the Byzantine reconquest together with all the other buildings dedicated to Arian worship, and was reconsecrated in the Orthodox cult (A. D. 561): it thus became an oratory dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

During the Exarchate, the monks of St. Basil were settled in a house alongside it and by virtue of this it acquired the name of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, for the beauty and opulence of its interior. In the 11th century, Benedictine monks inhabited the complex, remaining there till 1441, giving it, throughout that period, prestige by their presence.

From the middle of the 15th century, the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin was entrusted to the secular clergy and Pope Eugene IV (1431 -1447) placed it in the hands of Cardinal Bessarion of Trebisonde. Subsequently, it was looked after by a whole series of prelates or Abbots incumbent. In the 16th century, the brothers Baldassar and Corrado Grassi of Bologna were made the beneficiaries and important restoration work of that time is due to them.

In the second half of the 17th century, the westfacing side was built onto with the addition of a building referred to as 'The Oratory of the Cross', of which the ex-baptistery became the apse, thus altogether effacing its original physiognomy for many centuries. Once it had passed into private hands, acquired by a family in the 19th century, it was purchased by the State in 1914 and, since then, thanks to numerous restoration works undertaken by the Commission of Monuments for Ravenna, efforts have been made to restore it to its pristine dignity.

Description

The Baptistery, situated to the south-west of the Arian Cathedral but not in line with it, stands as a small, brick building of octagonal plan, composed of four flat sides and four sides with projecting apses, of which the one placed eastwards is the largest. We are unable to admire the building in its original proportions insofar as it has sunk by some 2.31 m. into the ground.

The building, outwardly, is divided into two by a cornice: in the upper part, finished with a brick cupola, each side is opened by a semi-circular arched window; in the lower half, the four apses project, each with a small, tiled roof, under the eaves of which there is a cornice of diagonally arranged dentils, and on the north-west side, the entrance way.

Originally, the Baptistery would have had a more articulated architecture, in that there was an ambulatory (or annular corridor), running around it, a fact which only came to light in the excavations made between 1916 and 1919 by Gerola: 1.9m. wide, it ran for seven of the eight sides, leaving the main eastern apse free. The visible remains of this today are nothing more than the junctures in the perimeter wall, to the right of the eastern apse, built by Gerola himself during the restoration work in order to indicate the presence of an ambulatory.

Within, the building presents only bare brickwork without plaster, marble or mosaic, remains of which, nonetheless, were uncovered beneath the present floor level in a dig of 1969.

Only the dome retains its mosaic decoration which was evidently inspired by the motifs of the Neonian Baptistery. These mosaics display however a much simpler composition: in the Neonian the decoration is in two wide fascia round a central disk with the baptism scene, whereas here,

probably due to insufficient space, the central medallion is enclosed by only one concentric band.

In the centre, Christ, portrayed young and beardless, stands up to his waist in the transparent water of the river Jordan, represented by a sober old man with flowing beard and hair who is depicted with red crabs' claws on his head while holding a reed in his hand in the manner of ancient marine deities, his left hand raised in wonder. He is seated near an overturned jug from which the water of the river is issuing.

Opposite to him stands Saint John the Baptist, dressed in a tunic of animals' skins, and placing his right hand over Christ's head while a white dove sprinkles water from above.

The overall composition is fairly well balanced, the figures seem to fill the circle more fully than in the other baptistery and their lines follow the curve of the disk although they are rendered with a rather crude design which is further stressed by the use of dark contour lines.

The large band surrounding the central medallion is occupied by the twelve Apostles divided, here too, into two groups and all carrying a crown in their veiled hands, the symbol of martyrdom and victory over death. One group is led by St. Peter holding the keys, the other by St. Paul with two rolled scrolls in his hands. St. Peter and St Paul are approaching a sumptuous throne, realistically treated, on which lies a large purple cushion supporting a jeweled cross.

Thanks to technical - scientific researches carried out on the mosaic it was possible to ascertain that the central medallion with the Baptism scene, the throne, the figures of St. Peter, St. Paul and the Apostle following him, date back to the age of Theodoric (493-526), whereas the remaining images were probably executed in the mid-6th century and show a different style as well as the use of different materials.

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No other city in the world with remains from late antiquity has managed to preserve a baptistery dedicated to the Arian cult with wall decorations: apart from being very similar to those of the Catholic baptistery, they enable us to come to a deeper understanding of Arianism and see in highlight those aspects which set it off from the Orthodox cult.

Along with the Arian cathedral, it is located in the "Gothic" quarter, in the north-eastern part of the city, physically separate from the catholic zone, a testimony to the clear line of separation between the Latins and the Gothic religious communities in the reign of Theodoric.

As far as the type of architecture is concerned, the monument constitutes something quite unique in all early Christian baptisteries with an octagonal plan, themselves very numerous in Italy of the 5th and 6th centuries, and this by virtue of its (lost) ambulatory: an architectural addition probably dictated by liturgical needs to do with the Arian cult, which, all the same, is difficult to re-construct, given the paucity of documentary sources. From the iconographic point of view the mosaic decoration is of the utmost interest because the figurative scene at the apex of the dome was never restored and retouched and therefore it shows clearly that the rite of baptism in the similar scene of the Catholic Baptistery -made approximately 50 years earlier but poorly restored and altered in the 19th century - had originally been conceived with the Baptist laying his right hand on the head of Christ, without holding a bowl.

The scene of the baptism of Christ is a clear interpretation of the Trinity. This is supported by a phrase of the Gospels which affirms that at the moment of the baptism of Jesus there was a

simultaneous theophany of the three persons: the voice of God the Father was heard descending from heaven; God the Son stood in the waters of the Jordan; and God the Holy Ghost appeared as a dove hovering above the Son.

Since the dogma of the Trinity was not accepted in Arian doctrine, it may appear as odd that in their own baptistery, the Goths did not hesitate to repeat the same iconographic type, modifying the style and laws of composition, as the Orthodox Baptistery. According to some authors, this was the best way to emphasize their belonging to the Christian faith and thus legitimize their presence in a local tradition.

The figure of the dove of the Holy Spirit, though, demonstrates great originality, with a beam of blue mosaic emanating from its beak, identical in colour with the blue of the water of the Jordan in which Christ is immersed. This has been variously interpreted as an effulgence of light, as lustral water or the Holy Spirit itself, without there ever being any one satisfying answer. Since the original mosaic of the dove in the Catholic Baptistery has since been lost, it is impossible for us to determine whether or not such a detail had a specific meaning in Arian doctrine.

The image of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove is attested by earlier mosaics dating from the beginning of the 5th century in examples from the chapel of San Prisco in Santa Maria Capua Vetere, where the dove rests on an empty throne; also in the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore, in the scene of the Annunciation of Mary - this particular representation, in a baptismal scene, is thus the oldest that has survived.

There are other iconographic elements which can be interpreted in the light of Arian religious ideas. Whereas in the baptistery of the Catholic Cathedral, the twelve Apostles with crowns in their hands acclaim Christ from the central medallion just as, at the moment of baptism, he is proclaimed the Son of God, recognizing thus the second person of the Trinity, in the Arian Baptistery, the Apostles make homage to the great gem-encrusted throne which is surmounted by a cross from the arms of which a purple drape hangs - images that, apparently, are similar to those of the throne depicted in the third band of mosaics in the Catholic Baptistery. But, here, it is important that the throne should not be seen as the apocalyptic 'Etimasia', the throne that is prepared for Christ on the Day of Judgement, or, even, as a generic image of Christ's sovereignty, or, again, as an apparition of the sign of the Son of Man in the eschatological sense. It is, rather, a pure expression of the corporeality of Christ and of his suffering on the cross as a human being; at the same time, an exaltation of this in the terms allowed by the Arian religion, opposed to the dogma of the Catholics which maintains the human and divine nature of Christ.

Moreover, with an eye to the dislocation of the elements in the composition it should be observed how the throne is, in fact, upside down for whoever looks at the scene from the central medallion and, likewise, viceversa. This opposition, disturbing as it is, can hardly be accidental but must stem from precise reasons. It is quite probable that the throne corresponds with that point in which the bishop's throne was placed, thus enabling the baptized, facing east, to look up on high and contemplate the throne of Christ surmounted by the cross of Resurrection. The theme of victory over death has a natural affinity with the baptism of Christ since the rite of initiation into the Christian Church was regarded as an act of purification and also of rebirth. Iconographically, the representation of Christ as nude, (as in the Orthodox baptistery), is of particular interest, if we wish to consider the unique aspects, of these mosaics. The anatomical details are rendered with great realism, attesting to the fact that in the 6th century, the influence of Classical art was still felt and that only in a later age was the biblical tradition to prevail whereby nudity was considered as dishonorable and inductive to sensuality. This change of attitude can be observed in the representations of the baptism of Christ in the Middle- and Late Byzantine period, in the mosaics of Monreale in Sicily (12th-13th c.), St. Mark's in Venice (14th c.), Hosios Lukas, Katholikon in Boetia, Greece (11th c.), Monastery of Daphni at Athens (12th c.), or even in the frescoes in the Baptistery at Parma (13th c.) and in the Scrovegni Chapel at Padua (14th c.).

With an eye to its stylistic aspects, a comparison between the two baptisteries shows the evolution of those characteristics of Theodorician Byzantine art which, in the course of a century, transformed the art of mosaic in Ravenna.

For the first time in the mosaics of Ravenna the Apostles are depicted with nimbi, their faces are almost always shown in a frontal posture and their bodies in half profile. In comparison with the images of the Apostles in the Catholic Baptistery, the figures here are less delicately wrought, the outlines are stiff, the shadows sharper and the colours less numerous and refined, the faces are no longer plastically treated and look less realistic as if they had already been transfigured into metaphysical beings.

Moreover, the figures do not seem to emerge like apparitions from a mysterious blue ground but rise from an expanse of shimmering gold. The scene is devoid of any spatial implication and the figures seem to be placed in an unreal and transcendental setting.

The twelve Apostles, separated from each other by a stylized palm-tree to indicate that the scene of the action is Paradise, slowly advance displaying the same pose and gesture and even the drapes of their garments are all identically treated. All these features give a perfect rhythm to the composition thereby endowing the whole mosaic decoration with coherent unity, even though not all the figures were executed by the same artist.