

Neonian Baptistry

Justification for the inclusion to the World Heritage List

Historical background

The baptistery stands to the north of the present cathedral of Ravenna which, in the half of the 18th century replaced the ancient Ursian Basilica, the first cathedral commissioned by the bishop Ursus, from whom its name is derived in the 5th century.

It is quite probable that the baptistery is attributable to the same bishop, though no precise information has come down to us about its founding.

At the time of Bishop Neon (450 - 475 AD) it underwent important renovation work which, among other things, brought about the re-construction of the upper part, capped by a cupola, and the entire re-decoration of the interior. In the 7th century, at the time of Bishop Teodor (677 - 688 AD.) a great bronze cross (now kept inside the baptistery) was placed on the summit of the roof. The floor level was raised in the 12th century, with a sequent series of adjustments to the lower levels (for example, the truncating of the base of the arches).

Between 1566 and 1573, during the time of Cardinal Giulio Feltrio della Rovere, more work was done on the floor and the windows, from being walled up, were opened again, taking on a new, rectangular form.

The building of a new vicarage at the beginning of the 17th century next to the baptistery meant the demolition of the two apses on the south-east and south-west sides. Towards the middle of the 19th century, important restoration work was begun on the mosaics by the Roman restorer Felice Kibel, the end result of which is very much open to criticism.

The decade 1870 to 1880 was a period of archeological digs, research, projects and work undertaken by the architect Lanciani which led to the discovery of the original baptismal font, on the perimeter of which the present font stands. An elevation of the whole building was also proposed at that time but not carried out. Between 1899 and 1906, a new programme of restoration was begun on the mosaics as well as the marble and stucco decorations. In the 1960s and the 1980s also, new inspections and researches were made, with a view to studying and improving the state of conservation of the monument.

Description

The building, made out of brick and octagonal in form, cannot be properly admired in, its original proportions, inasmuch as it is now interred by some 3 meters. Its sides are variously rectilinear or rounded by apses, opened in the upper level by semi-circular arched windows.

Above the extrados of the arches, the brickwork is relieved by pilasters that join on high in a series of double, suspended arches. It is interesting to observe how in the north-west side a piece of sculpture from a Roman sarcophagus, representing a horseman brandishing a crown of victory, has been re-utilized.

The entrance is on the north-west side and the lintel, an architrave dating from the 16th century, bears the inscription: "En espoir Dieu". The interior, in which there are four apses, is articulated into two orders of arches, one above the other, as prelude to the great cupola,

itself made out of two concentric rings of terracotta piping, arranged in everdiminishing order towards the top, and thus characterized by a great lightness. The decoration of the interior is very rich, made of marble in the lower part, stucco in the middle section and of mosaic in the upper level.

In order to suit the architectural structure of the dome, the mosaic composition was divided up into three distinct zones: a medallion surrounded by two large concentric bands.

The large medallion at the top of the dome, immediately attracting the attention of the beholder, depicts the Baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist, a scene eminently suited to the function of the building.

The naked figure of the Saviour stands up to the waist in the waters of the Jordan. The river is also personified as an old man rising from the water, who holds a reed in his left hand and carries a cloth in his right one, which Christ will use to dry himself after the rite.

The Baptist, standing on the steep bank of the river administers the baptism by holding bowl in his right hand over the head of Christ. Above the head of Christ hovers the dove of the Holy Spirit. However, the lighter gleam of the gold ground in this area clearly shows that unsuccessful restoration work was carried out here shortly after the mid-19th century.

Originally the Baptist was shown with his hand laying on the head of Our Lord for, according to Early Christian iconography, baptism was administered by the so-called *impositio manus*.

The first inner band surrounding the medallion depicts, against a dark blue ground and line of looped curtains, a procession of the twelve Apostles, slowly advancing with the same rhythmic cadence and the same hieratic gesture. In their hands, covered by the *pallia*, they all carry a crown, which is an evident symbol of triumph.

The Apostles form a double procession headed by their respective duces, St. Peter and Paul who are the "pillars" of the Church. They are dressed in tunics and *pallia* alternately white and gold and are flanked by tall and slender gold floral candelabra rising from a green ground signifying that the scene is laid in Paradise.

The outer, wider band is divided into eight architectural sectors, with niches, occupied alternately by a throne and an altar, alluding to the heavenly city. On either side of the four thrones are chancel-screens with flowers and plants behind, whereas the four altars are each flanked by two empty chairs.

Like the images of thrones which appear on late Roman coins, symbolizing imperial power, the thrones depicted in this mosaic band allude to the sovereignty of Christ. However, they may also recall the eschatological vision of the *Etimasia* or "preparation of God's throne for the Day of Judgement" described in the Apocalypse. The altars too have a symbolic meaning in that they allude to Christ and in particular to his sanctity for, on each of them, lies a Book of the Gospel, the *verbum Domini*.

The "*viridaria*" at the sides of the thrones evoke the heavenly gardens, while the empty chairs at either side of each altar represent the chairs which Christ reserves for the chosen.

The upper drum supporting the dome has an imitation gallery of short columns protruding slightly from the wall running round the whole wall. Here the columns frame the eight windows and sixteen small stucco niches each occupied by a figure of a prophet holding a book or scroll whose colours have almost vanished.

Above the figures are pairs of confronted animals and birds alternating in four cases with representations of scenes from the Old and the New Testament: the *Traditio Legis*, Daniel,

Jonah, and a youthful figure of Christ without nimbus and carrying a book, walking upon a lion and a serpent. This stucco decoration dates back to the times of Bishop Neon (451 - 475).

In the lower zone between the arches, white robed figures (probably prophets) surrounded by gilded arabesques stand on a blue background. In four of the arches are niches which were originally decorated with mosaic scenes depicting respectively the Good Shepherd, Christ walking upon the waves, Christ washing the disciples' feet, the healing of the paralytic of Capernaum as can be inferred from the inscriptions which, although remade in the 19th century, are still to be read above the arches.

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The Orthodox Baptistery is the only one of its kind in the ambit of Early Christian art because no other baptismal building of Late Antiquity has conserved so perfectly its architectonic form and internal decoration in marble, stucco and mosaic.

As regards architecture, the baptistery is renowned for being on an octagonal plan, something common in all the baptismal buildings of southern Italy and the area along the Adriatic coast. An unusual feature is the great cupola with clay tubes which became part of western constructional method and which foreshadows the larger version in S. Vitale.

As corroboration of the singularity of this monument one only has to consider some of the oldest baptisteries of the 4th and 5th centuries built at Antioch, Constantinople, Ephesus, Trier, Aquileia, Milan, Rome and many other centres where the only surviving remains are the foundations or the peripheral walls.

Of the mosaics which decorated these buildings what remains is only a part of those in the Baptistery of Naples dating from 400 AD. The remnant consists of a great monogrammatic cross in gold at the centre of the calotte on a background of blue which is brightened by gold stars. In addition a few figurative scenes, mostly fragmentary, can be seen on the walls and in the pendentives (Apostles, symbol of the Evangelists, the Marriage at Cana, the Good Shepherd, and other subjects).

Of a later age, 5th-6th centuries, there are the remains of the vault decorations in the Baptistery of Albenga, in the north-west of Italy, where again we find in the centre of the a great monogrammatic cross of Christ, this time surrounded by twelve doves on a blue vault background sprinkled with white stars, all embellished with lambs, festoons and decorative 'themes. However, a certain monotony pervades the scene since the fundamental colours are prevalently blue and white. A comparison of these examples with the Neonian Baptistery reveals the exceptional nature of the latter.

The theme of the composition is the oldest example of a mosaic representation in a monument of Christ's baptism which has come down to us. Earlier examples of this are only to be found in third century pictures in the catacombs and in few sarcophagi of the 4th century.

Bearing in mind that the decoration was executed in the second half of the 5th century, it is quite unusual in iconography still to find influence from pagan art in the figure of the old man who personifies the river Jordan seen handing to Christ a cloth with which to dry Himself even less that a clear legacy of classical art should portray the nudity of Christ in such a realistic way.

In all the mosaic of the cupola the influence of Greco-Roman art is, however, substantially felt, not only in the band of mosaics with mock architecture which openly recall the frescoes of

Pompeii, but in particular in the retinue of twelve Apostles where the sense of plasticity in the human figure is united with the style almost of a painted portrait in the rendering of the faces.

According to an expert authority this is "the most pompous presentation of the Twelve Apostles in all the history of Christian art". Their figures are very large with a foreshortened

perspective: the feet are relatively oversized and the heads small. Their statuesque pose recalls Classical sculpture, their bodies stand out under the vestments and appear plastic while the features of their faces have been rendered with analytical precision so as to be counted among the best examples of Roman portraiture.

The mosaics which embellish the interior are among the most accomplished works of art of late antiquity. The standard of quality demonstrates that, at the time of Bishop Neon, artists and craftsmen of the highest order were active in Ravenna, their presence due, undoubtedly, to its having become the residence of the court.

The iconography of the Apostles is inspired by imperial models in the offering of the crowns with veiled hands. This recalls the offering of the "aurum coronarium" made by the defeated to the victor, a rite which was often portrayed in Roman imperial art.

Another singular element which characterizes the mosaics of the cupola is the extraordinary richness of nuance and a degree of refinement in the tones of red, the purples, the greys and whites, blended with a painterly eye, which were never to be seen again, in Ravenna or anywhere else in the West.

Overall the tone of the colours is bright and the light, which is almost night in the tomb of Galla Placidia, here is of the morning. In such a realm of pure light and vivid colours catechumens received the illuminatio (enlightenment of the Spirit) by means of which they became "neophytes" and as such were ready to become members of the Church.

One should note, moreover, the perfect integration of the mosaic decoration with the space as it is architectonically defined which is a particular feature of the monuments in Ravenna. The mosaics integrate and in part substitute the architectural articulation. The floral candlesticks constitute imaginary ribs in the calotte of the cupola while the perspective architecture in mosaic almost conceals the walls. One has the impression of an unreal space, where the walls seem to dematerialize under the effect of the colours and light of the mosaics which cover the whole interior surface.

Regarding the composition, the decoration of the cupola recaptures a layout which had already been employed more than a century earlier in the dome of the Mausoleum of Centelles, near Tarragona, in Spain, as well as in the cupola of the famous Rotunda at Salonika in Greece dating from the first half of the 5th century.

Observing the decoration of the cupola as a whole, its compositional scheme becomes evidently that of a great wheel irradiating outwards, turning about a fixed point which is elaborated in the form of a medallion. This rotary movement, principally suggested by elements such as the floral candelabra, the drapery around the medallion and the alternation of colours in the vestments of the Apostles gives the impression that the dome is expanding and also suggest the idea of a continuum, or motion which, to quote Dante (Par. XIV, 1), goes "from the centre to the circle" and "from the circle to the centre", like the endless rotation of celestial bodies.

There is a masterly band guiding the composition of such complex, interwoven themes: along with the theophanic significance which must be given to the apparition in the baptismal scene, a sense of the glorification of the Apostles, each with the golden crown of martyrdom and victory which makes them entrants into the blessed realm of paradise, the symbolical City of God (represented by the band of thrones and altars) is fused together with the prophets. All of

which induces one to think that there is a unifying conception, that it is the work of a single master who was well acquainted with the language of glorification, a language dense with doctrinal meanings, expressing a full adherence to the strict principles of orthodox faith.

Finally there is one further unique feature which distinguishes the Neonian Baptistery from all the other Early Christian buildings in both the East and the West, and that is the decoration in stucco which, even it bears only traces of its original colours, has been preserved completely intact until today.