

Basilica of S. Vitale

Justification for the inclusion to the World Heritage List

Historical background

The earliest historical information we have about this church is to be found in the *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* of A. Agnello, who, in his life of Maximian, records an epigraph which was located in the narthex of the church, with the following text:

"Beati Martiris Vitalis Basilica mandante Ecclesio vero (=viro) beatissimo Episcopo a fundamentis Iulianus Argentarius edificavit ornavit atque dedicavit consecrante vero reverendissimo Maximiano episcopo sud die XVI Kal. Iunii indictione X septies p.c. Pacifici Basilii iunioris V C. "

This inscription can be read as a veritable legal document, carefully worded, and from it we are able to deduce that:

1. The bishop Ecclesius was the *episcopus mandans*, that is the commissioner of works - it was he who ordered the building work to begin, after his return from Constantinople in the company of Pope John in 525 AD. It is quite probable that work began only in 526 AD, after the death of Theodoric, when Amalasantha, regent and tutor to her son Atalaric, showed herself to be well-disposed towards the Catholics. The portrait of Bishop Ecclesius is still to be admired in the absidal recess of the church, where he is depicted offering a model of the church itself to Our Lord.
2. Its construction was entrusted to Julian Argentarius;
3. It was consecrated by Maximian in 547 or 548.

The church was built on a 5th century temple in memory of the martyr San Vitale which was to be incorporated into the later structure.

A legend, dating most probably from the 6th century and intended as a way of ennobling the origins of the church, would have it that this was the site of the martyrdom of San Vitale: we know, in reality, that the body of San Vitale, together with that of Agricola, was found by St. Ambrose in Bologna in 393 AD. The church was fronted by a great quadriportico, discovered by Maioli at the beginning of this century. In the 10th century the annexation of a Benedictine monastery transformed the Byzantine quadriportico into a cloister.

It was perhaps in this period that the cupola was covered with Byzantine style picture and a bell tower erected on the staired tower to the right of the narthex which, like the left staircase, led to the *matroneum*. The present-day round tower dates from 11th for it was partly rebuilt after an earthquake in the 17th century.

The 16th century saw the old cloister replaced by a Renaissance cloister (by Andrea Della Valle) and the church floor was raised by 80 cm to avoid water infiltration due to subsidence and covered with marble (1538-1545). The cupola was once more frescoed, the work being performed by the Faenza artists, Bertuzzi and Tonduzzi. Again, between 1778 and 1782, the cupola was decorated with Baroque frescoes by artists S. Barozzi, U. Gandolfi and E. Guarana. Substantial restoration work was carried out at the turn of the 20th century under C. Ricci, renewing the North staired tower and the marble covering of the apse and presbytery, modelled on the similar example of the Basilica Eufrasiana at Parenzo (Istria). The choir floor was raised by 50 cm. at this time.

In 1932 work began on lowering the floor to its original level with the consequent discovery of two segments of mosaic dating back to the 6th century. Recent restoration has been conducted by the Soprintendenza ai Beni Ambientali e Architettonici di Ravenna.

Description

Ravenna's most impressive monument is certainly the basilica of S. Vitale. The church is octagonal and built of large flat bricks (48 x 4 cm), plastered together with thick layers of lime (4 cm), a type of brickwork typical of all the buildings erected by Justinian. It is constructed on two eight-sided storeys, of which the upper encircles the dome. Each upper storey face has a big arched window, but the windows in the bottom half of the building are smaller and form two orders separated by a slender cornice.

Each of the lower side walls is delineated by two pilasters that reach to the eaves of the roof, while strong buttresses rise up at the corners, ending in triangular tympani.

The apse, which is semi-circular inside and polygonal without, is flanked symmetrically by two small, rectangular rooms, terminated by niches, and two semicircular sacristies, the diaconicon and the prothesis, with rectangular additions, which once served for keeping the liturgical vestments and for the presentation of offerings.

On the opposite side of the church is the original, very imposing, "forceps-shaped" entrance, so called because it consists of a series of exedrae built in the form of a rounded lozenge, which was formerly preceded by an atrium. This narthex is set asymmetrically with respect to the building's main axis so that the whole length does not rest against one of the sides of the octagon, but against one of its corners.

It is connected to the two sides of the church that are nearest to it by two rectangular spaces and two circular towers, the stairs of which lead to the matroneum or women's gallery in the church itself.

Within the interior, the artists have created an architecture whose impressive volume and grandeur create, with the grace and elegance of line, a play of full and empty spaces, the light shining down from the great windows. Standing in the middle of the basilica, one is surrounded by eight massive pillars sheathed in veined Greek marble and reaching up to the drums of the dome, delimiting two storeys of hexedrae opening in trifora which, at the upper level, give onto the matroneum. Between the pillars on the east side, the presbytery stands two storeys high, ending in a semi-round apse and reached through a large arch.

The cupola, rising above the eight lower pillars, with a diameter of 16 meters is one of the church's most significant architectonic elements: it is made up of a number of horizontal, concentric rings of twin terracotta pipes, overlaid in an ever-diminishing order. The use of such material enabled the cupola to be raised without the need for side walls of inordinate thickness, (in San Vitale, in fact, they measure only 0.95 cm thick).

The cupola is decorated with baroque ftescoes done between 1778 and 1782 by Serafino Barozzi, U. Gandolfi and G.Guarana, in a style which is in strong contrast to the purity of the architectonic lines of the church. Never at any point in its history, was it covered with mosaic.

Also worthy of note are the columns and capitals of the trifora. The columns are tall and elegant, probably of Eastern importation. Those at groundfloor rest on octagonal bases and are surmounted by finely-worked impost-capitals in the form of lotus leaves, being, effectively, inverted and truncated pyramids, thereby creating an easy transition from the circular form of the column to the quadrangular form of the vaulting.

Similar capitals, with their decorative motifs done in a compressed bas-relief and rendered altogether abstract, are to be found in close parallel, in Constantinople. Almost certainly they were imported from there, for the impost-capital was an invention of Byzantium of the beginning of the 6th century, replacing those of the Corinthian or Composite model in most places.

Other impost-capitals are to be found in San Vitale. In the southern trifora of the presbytery, they are adorned with a border of laurel leaf and a stylized plant motif of great refinement on each of their four faces; the lower trifora are decorated with plant motifs of acanthus leaves which come together in orbs and are interwoven to form a cross, giving the overall effect of a rich lacework in marble. Another variation on the impost-capital theme is to be found in the northern trifora of the presbytery, at the level of the matroneum: at the corners and in the middle, they have cusps, the capital, as a whole, giving the idea of an exquisitely-worked marble basket. Similar examples can be found in the church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople and in the church of St. Demetrius in Thessalonika.

Out of the eight sections which make up the present flooring, six are datable to the Renaissance period and are of marble, whilst the remaining two go back to the 6th century,

The two original sections, in mosaic, have virtually identical designs: in the centre of the base of the triangle it forms is a cantharos (vase), out of which come vegetal fronds that fill the space with their convolutions and among which are little birds and bunches of grapes.

The richness and opulence of the church would have been heightened by the marble facing which originally covered all the lower walls.

Worthy of note is the 6th century stucco decoration which is to be seen on the intrados of the arches in the presbytery and still retains part of its original coloring.

One enters the presbytery through the great triumphal arch whose wide intrados fascia contains fifteen medallions of the image of Christ (top of the arch), the Twelve Apostles and SS. Gervasius and Protasius, the sons of S. Vitale, or so the legend goes.

The cross vaulting of the presbytery is divided into four triangles, richly ornamented with festoons of leaves, fruit and flowers which converge on the centre from each corner to meet a crown encircling the Holy Lamb. The crown is held in the uplifted arms of four white-robed angels surrounded by spirals of acanthus, blue, green or sometimes gold. Every surface is a profusion of flowers, stars, birds and wild beasts, and amongst this variety of figures a number of peacocks, an ancient symbol of eternal life, are conspicuous.

From the side walls of the presbytery, open out two large storeyed trifora, the upper of which leads into the matroneum. Its supporting columns are surmounted by basket capitals and pulvini decorated with symbols: lambs, crosses and monograms. Round the trifora, and in the big lunettes, the surface is covered with mosaics with resplendent plant, animal and human motifs. The trifora is flanked by the four Evangelists under their symbols; dressed in white, each has a book on which he is about to inscribe the words of truth. To the left of the lunette, Abraham in the Mambré oak grove offers food to the angels, and on the right the Sacrifice of Isaac is depicted. In the middle, the three angels are seated at a table under a shady oak tree, while Abraham approaches with a dish of tender meat. God announces to Abraham through one of the angels that within the year he will have a son. Sarah is standing at the door of the hut with a smile on her lips, for she knows she is beyond childbearing age. The bible story is faithfully told in all its details, with stupendous realism. The Sacrifice of Isaac is shown at the crucial moment when Abraham, his knife raised to strike, is stayed by the Hand of God emerging from the clouds and by His Voice telling him not to harm the boy, for He knows that Abraham fears the Lord and would not deny Him even his only son. God then brings forth a ram to be offered in sacrifice.

Above the Abraham lunette, two angels in flight grasp a circlet with a cross. To the left, Jeremiah holds an open scroll and Moses, on the other side, receives the Tables of the Law from God on Mount Sinai. Underneath, Aaron stands in the midst of the Heads of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The same motif of angels with a circlet and cross is repeated under the upper trifora on the right wall, with the prophet Isaiah. To the left, God appears to Moses on Mount Oreb. Moses is depicted herding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law and, above, is unloosening his sandals to enter the Burning Bush. Moses and the flock are shown against a green background, strewn with flowers, and in the distance the rocky slopes of Oreb, where God appeared to him, which become even more rugged towards the summit. Among the rocks burns the bush with tiny spurts of flame.

The sacrifice motif is renewed in the right lunette, but here Abel and Melchizedek are the personages: Abel, in his short shepherd's tunic, comes from his hut carrying a sacrificial lamb while, from the clouds, the Hand of God imparts a blessing. There is a great white-clothed altar in the centre, to which Melchizedek in priestly robes is taking the Bread and Wine, eucharistic symbols, but while Abel has just left a lowly hut, Melchizedek, priest of God, sweeps out of a splendid temple.

On the extrados of the arch of the apse, two angels poised in flight hold a disk with the letter alpha at the centre of an eight-armed cross. On either side stands a city: Jerusalem and Bethlehem, symbolising the everlastingness of the faith from the ancient Jews to Christianity. Over the arch is a trifora surrounded by garlanded vines.

In the vault of the apse, high over the three large windows, the Redeemer appears in all His glory among white and red flowers, in a bright golden light, flanked by two Archangels, S. Vitale and Bishop Ecclesius.

The theophany is confined in a great gold fascia where twining flowers, birds and horns of plenty wind symmetrically to the centre where a great circle encloses the symbol of Christ. The Redeemer, in all His divine majesty, is seated on a blue globe in the summit of the vault.

Robed in purple with gold clavi (stripes), His left hand is resting on a sevensealed scroll, and with His right hand offers the martyr's crown to S. Vitale. On the left, Ecclesius advances, bearing a model of his church.

At the foot of the apse side walls are the two famous panels depicting the Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora, together with their splendid retinues, while offering a gift of sacred vessels to the new church. The purple-clad Emperor, with gold halo, advances holding a gold paten for the liturgical sacrifice. On his right stand court dignitaries and soldiers, and on the other side, Bishop Maximian, two deacons carrying the Gospels and a censer and a third figure, said to be Julian Argentarius, the banker-founder of the basilica. Every head and glance is fixed ahead and the colours are set in wide sweeps over a plain gilt background. Unlike the presbytery mosaics, where the clothes cover solid bodies and the surroundings are of this world, in the two panels of Justinian and Theodora, these backgrounds and landscapes have been replaced by a plain gold surface, and the figures all face the front, their robes falling in stiff folds, with no hint of an underlying form, as though they were shadows in a world without boundaries and beyond time. On the right wall, the Empress Theodora, with golden halo and splendid crown, moves forward with a precious chalice in her outstretched hands. She is heavily jewelled with necklaces, precious pendants studded with gems and mother-of-pearl, and the Three Magi are embroidered on the hem of her gown. She is preceded by two court dignitaries and followed by a train of ladies-in-waiting.

In the Justinian mosaic, almost the sole dominating colours are white and purple, together with the spreading carpet of green round the shield with Christ's symbol, while in the representation of Theodora, there is a surprising variety of colours. The ladies-in-waiting are richly dressed in heavily ornamented gowns. Gold, red and white cloaks, many-tinted robes, with a wealth of embroidery, delight the eye of the onlooker who feels as though in the presence of a parade of the most beautiful and elegant ladies at the fabulous court of Byzantium.

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The church of S. Vitale is a unique example of byzantine art; firstly because it blends in a most original way eastern and western styles into its architecture and secondly because its mosaics are complete and express with great clarity the ideology and religiosity of the Justinian era which has been defined by the historians as the First Golden Age of Byzantine Art.

Architecture was one of the means by which the Justinian autocracy tried to impress the nations outside as well as inside the empire and to unify the territory. Such a clear propagandist intention impelled Justinian architects to adapt a new style in the concept of churches which, breaking away from the tradition of the basilica, brought about a preference for buildings on the plan of a centre covered by a vault. This constituted a real development in architecture. If in the east, the Church of St. Sofia (532-537) in Constantinople is considered the masterpiece of byzantine art, the church of S. Vitale has been defined the only truly extraordinary building in the west in the 6th century.

In comparing the two most famous buildings of the Justinian era a very important fact should be mentioned which further testifies to the exceptional nature of S. Vitale. In its present layout St. Sofia does not in any way correspond to the building that was consecrated on 27 December 537, after the repeated collapses of the cupola, the numerous remodellings and above all the alterations by the Turks after 1453 which changed the appearance. As regards the mosaics of the Justinian era only a few fragments of a purely ornamental nature remain.

In the case of S. Vitale, the loss of political importance of Ravenna after the period of maximum splendour in the 5th-6th centuries contributed to the fact that the original structure was not extensively altered and so it is possible to appreciate its spaciousness and the original mosaics. S. Vitale, which expresses the official art of the Justinian era was an 'Imperial Church' or 'Palatine Chapel' and is the prototype of the analogous buildings. beginning with a carolingian church in Aachen, in the western countries during the Middle Ages and after.

Such an exceptional building could not have arisen as a martyrium nor as a normal church of worship, also because the site chosen for its construction was that of the regio Domus Augustae, full of courtly roman residences and imperial heirlooms such as the church of Santa Croce with the funerary chapel annex built by the empress Galla Placidia.

The area is furthermore characterized by the presence of other sacred buildings such as Santo Stefano Maggiore and Santa Maria Maggiore. The latter was built between 525 and 532, at the

same time as the first phase of construction of S. Vitale. It was not the need for ordinary worship services that gave rise to this nearby duplicate church.

If examined in the light of Byzantine ceremony the architecture of S. Vitale reveals an imperial purpose, in other words conceived for functions in the presence of the sovereign. According to a well-known expert, the gallery opposite the presbytery was certainly intended to be richly decorated as it was to host the imperial tribune. It was probably left unfinished because Justinian never actually came to Ravenna in person. Furthermore, such a magnificent concept of the building and its ideological decoration were intended to propitiate Byzantine penetration and reaffirm the divine origin of imperial power. This interpretation is also confirmed by the fact that the building is not on the plan of a basilica but on a central plan. In fact, in the West the timber-roofed long building was the prevailing form of assembly hall from the earliest times, and the only one accepted by the Church well into the Middle Ages; where we find the domed type of building we must ascribe it to the interference of temporal power, which introduced it from the East in order to gratify its desire for effect.

The most probable theory on the origin of the church on a central plan, which already existed at the time of Constantine, is that its form is derived from the palace audience chamber in which the monarchs were the object of veneration similar to that normally attributed to God.

Nothing was more natural because imperial art was older than Christian art and it is generally believed that in the field of iconography depicting triumph this had a decisive influence on Christianity.

The Byzantine mind imagined the dwelling place of God as a larger and more splendid version of the sacred imperial palace. It was logical that the house of the Lord on earth be built on the same model.

Regarding S. Vitale, the distant prototype of its two nested octagonal plans can be seen in the Gold Octagon (327-341), the church annexed to the imperial palace of Constantine at Antioch. For nearer examples one notices a certain similarity to the Church of SS Sergius and Bacchus at Constantinople, one of the first churches erected under Justinian's patronage between 537 and 536.

However, the churches in Ravenna present characteristics of great originality both in plan and construction with respect to other cities' examples.

The church's regular perimeter shows that the whole architectural complex is based on a clear, simple plan, the linearity of which is however interrupted in the area of the apse, whose polygonal form clearly betrays an oriental influence.

Here the varying heights of the roofs of the apse itself, and those above the circular spaces flanking it with their rectangular adjuncts, create a vivid impression of dynamic, vertical movement and a fine effect of moving line, volume and shade. This sense of volume is repeated towards the narthex by the body of the narthex itself and the two towers with their flight of steps.

Moreover, the peculiar disposition given to the narthex, set asymmetrically with respect to the building's main axis, is unparalleled in other monuments and, for this reason, has stimulated scholars into a search for an adequate explanation.

It is very probable that such a lay-out was dictated by the need to create a greater way of access into the church than would otherwise be offered, by means of entrances made in two adjoining sides, which, at the same time, left space for the stairway towers.

Another unique element to western church building is the upper gallery, known as the *matroneum* or *gynaeceum*.

Since, during the services in the early Christian churches, men and women occupied different parts of the building, in S. Vitale, the women attended in the *matroneum*, the men remaining on the floor area whereas, in the more widely spread basilica-shaped church, certain aisles were for the men and others reserved for women.

What mostly differentiates S. Vitale from all the other Byzantine churches is the proportions of internal space and architectural verve: the vertex of the cupola and the corresponding external points have the configuration of an equilateral triangle- in which the symbolic reference to the trinity can be discerned. This kind of harmonic relationship was completely unknown not only to the architects of Constantinople but also to those working in other centres of the peninsula such as Rome or Milan.

The aesthetic effect of the interior of San Vitale, with its architecture in perfect accord with the decorative elements of marble and mosaic, is astonishing especially if one looks from the centre of the octagon for one gets a feeling of entering a limitless space, opening up in every direction: it expands around us into the empty exedrae, spreading out like the crown of a flower, it soars up over us into the great round of the cupola.

The close alternation of solid and empty spaces, the playful rhythm of the arches., and the scenographic perspective of the ambulatory whose shadows form a contrast with the light in the centre of the church, all combine to produce an effect which is at once pictorial and fantastic.

There is, all the same, a strong vertical rhythm, by virtue of which the spatial restlessness of the lower levels is resolved into a dynamic upward thrust, moving on high. This dominant verticality is a hallmark of S. Vitale and sets it apart from the contemporary Justinian buildings St. Sofia and SS. Sergius and Bacchus where the space extends to infinity but is limited by the low cupola. made with bricks.

The architect of S. Vitale, probably from the west, has therefore translated in original terms the new Justinian architecture combining elements of eastern origin (the octagonal plan, type of walls, the apse with polygonal exterior and circular interior, the pastophoria, the women's gallery, the columns, the capitals and the pulvini) with others of western origin (the narthex in forceps form, the staired towers, the tambour, the constructional technique of the cupola in clay tubes and the system of round arches, the use of pilaster strips and buttresses).

With reason, therefore, could Ravenna's first historian Andreus Agnellus, write these words in reference to San Vitale: Nulla in Italia ecclesia similis est in aedificiis et in mechanicis operibus. (no church in Italy can compare with S. Vitale for audacity of structure and technical know-how).

As mentioned above, the exceptional characteristics of S. Vitale is the reason for it being chosen by Charlemagne as a model for his Palatine Chapel in Aachen which, consecrated in 805, is the most important monument on a central plan of the Carolingian period. The chapel consists of an octagon covered by vaults., divided by galleries into two levels and surmounted by a cupola. The overall effect however, is much weightier and does not have that sense of lightness and airiness to be appreciated in Ravenna. The link with S. Vitale, besides being formal is above all spiritual thus even at the time of Charlemagne the splendour of Ravenna as the last capital of the eastern empire in the west with S. Vitale as the Palatine Chapel had not yet been extinguished. For this reason Charlemagne chose an analogous form and had brought to Ravenna not only the marble columns and paving stones but also the equine statue of Theodoric to make his authority legitimate even by the traditional symbol.

Later, in the Renaissance, the architecture of S. Vitale attracted the attention of numerous artists because it was taken as a monument of classical origin due to its central plan.

Filippo Brunelleschi was inspired by it while working on the plans for the Rotonda di Santa Maria degli Angeli [1434-1436] in Florence, the construction of which unfortunately was never finished. In the frescoes of the Sala dello Zodiaco del Palazzo di Mantova, painted between 1525 and 1530, there appear views of Theodoric's tomb, Port'Aurea, the outside of S. Vitale and in vertical section, the interior of the church converted into a temple to Neptune.

Just as in the tomb of Galla Placidia the link between architecture and decoration is inseparable the same is true of the interior of S. Vitale which is unthinkable without the rich mosaics and marble. The interior spaces are given life by the play of light which in every hour of the day transfigures the architectural organism.

The aim of mosaic decoration, which was considered an integral part of the architectural effect, was that of enclosing the congregation in an atmosphere that was at once instructive and exciting. A symphony of shapes and symbols was to conduct the eye toward the triumphant truth of revealed religion.

To imagine the effect of the magnificence of a Byzantine church such as S. Vitale on the believers we can borrow a description of the interior of S. Sofia given by Procopio: "On entering the church to pray, one feels at once that this is the work, not of man's effort or industry but in truth the work of the Divine power; and the spirit, mounting to heaven, realizes that here God is very near and that He delights in this dwelling that He has chosen for Himself. In origin, in fact, S. Vitale must have been resplendent with the most precious materials, from the mosaic floor of the church, through the walls, embellished with marble and glass mosaics, and the vaults, decorated with polychrome stuccoes, up to the crown of the frescoed dome.

If imagination adds woven fabrics, the hanging and the like, the objects in gold and silver studded with gems, the other metal work, and the hanging lamps or candelabra which once completed the picture, we may form some conception of the magnificence attained by this Christian art whose aim was to seize the worshipper and transport him to a new and better world, the home of the Eternal.

The combination of eastern and western elements in the architecture can also be found in the mosaics where late Rome meets Byzantium.

While the presbytery mosaics, decorations, scenes and figures show a close stylistic link with the great tradition of late Roman art in Ravenna, finer examples of which have been seen in the Cathedral baptistry and the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, the Byzantine style of decoration comes to the fore in the apse vault.

The figures no longer have that diversity of pose, with soft gestures and flowing robes; they are motionless, rigid and formal, all facing rigorously towards the onlooker. Surrounding and scenery are no longer natural, but are replaced by a flat golden surface without atmosphere, abstract and unreal., beyond all sense of time, as in a metaphysical ecstasy.

It is strange to have the presence of two styles in the same series of mosaics created at the same time. Such diversity is explained by precise expressive needs and not by the fact that in the presbytery western artists worked while in the apse Byzantine artists worked. The mosaicists, who were from local schools and had consolidated experience, illustrated the scenes of the old testament in a more natural style linked to the terrestrial dimension whereas a more aulic and transcendental style was adopted for the apse where the Creator of the universe and His representative on earth appear.

The two famous scenes in which Justinian and Theodora appear in all their imperial pomp, are not only amongst the most precious creations of Byzantine art which we possess. but are absolutely unique in that they enable us to form an idea of the nature of profane art at Byzantium, where it held an important place beside religious art. These panels, together with that representing Constantine IV in S. Apollinare in Classe are the only examples from the 6th and 7th centuries to have survived.

Particularly worthy of note, in the panel depicting the retinue of Justinian are the extraordinary portraits of Maximian and the presumed Argentarius (or perhaps a praetorian prefect) standing at the Emperor's left shoulder executed by master mosaicists imbued with Hellenistic-Roman naturalism. Maximian was a henchman of Justinian in Byzantine-occupied Italy. As head of a number of ecclesiastical provinces, he held the title of Archbishop and was the first of that long line of prelates who dominated Italy's political and religious scene for many hundreds of years. The historian Andrea Agnello described him exactly as he is depicted in the S. Vitale mosaic: tall, slender, thin-faced, with a high forehead, somewhat bald, with pale eyes and endowed with grace (*et omni gratia decoratus*).

The two ceremonial pictures either represent the symbolic participation of the imperial pair in the dedication of the church, for which there is, however, no historical evidence. or merely one of the ceremonial entries of the kind described by Constantine Porphyrogenitus: the imperial procession has halted in the narthex and the Emperor has been censured by the Archbishop Maximian. We know by the fact that the Emperor still wears his diadem that he has not actually entered the church, for within the sacred walls the crown was removed.

The decorative cycle of S. Vitale, though executed in many intermingling styles, is extraordinarily coherent. Each work, drawing inspiration from the Scriptures, reveals the continuity of the Laws of God, from biblical times to the Redemption. Moses receives the Law, the prophets foretell the coming of the Messiah, the Evangelists pass on to each generation the truths of Christianity: each event a step along a single ideal path.

Another theme that exists right from the start, is that of the sacrifice, of the eucharistic communion. Abraham is seen offering food to the angels and to God his only son; Abel offers the best lamb in the flock, Melchizedek the eucharistic bread and wine.

Even the imperial personages are portrayed bowing down before the greater dignity of God, to whom they do homage by offering vessels for the sacred rites to the new church.

In the iconographic programme of the mosaics of S. Vitale it is interesting to note that they have not only a didactic or liturgical character but also they express the political and religious vision of Justinian. The great prominence given to the figure of the bishop Maximian portrayed next to the emperor testifies to the perfect unity and maximum fusion reached between the state and the church in this period. Maximian was elected by will of Justinian and always fell in

line with imperial directives. In exchange for his valuable work as political-religious mediator with the aim of consolidating Byzantine government in Italy he was nominated archiepiscopus, so becoming a kind of papal vicar.

Besides their political message these mosaics express rigidly orthodox themes with a tendency to stress the human and divine nature of Christ as well as the dogma of the trinity in clear opposition to arianism. Christ the cosmocrator, or Lord of the universe, one with the Father, dominates in the conch of the apse. This image together with the apocalyptic vision of the sacrificial lamb at the centre of the vault of the presbytery affirms the christological dogma with exaltation of the return of Christ in the Second Coming and therefore affirms also His divine power.

The dogma of the trinity is expressed by three angels in the lunette of Abraham and in particular by the numerous christological monograms or by the crosses inscribed within three circles of different colours. One of them has the form of a radiant sun in which the sun represents the Father, the rays of light the Son and the heat the Holy Spirit.

The mosaics of S. Vitale are indeed a striking example of the dominion which theology now began to exercise over art as a consequence of the Christological disputes of the sixth century, in which the defenders of the Catholic faith crossed swords with the Monophysites and the Arians.

Justinian himself was a theologian and an ardent champion of Orthodoxy. He neglected no detail in questions which he regarded of capital religious importance, and where he contributed funds, was quite likely to dictate the lines which the decoration should follow.

The text of which these mosaics are a commentary should be sought in the works of S. Ambrose, the most prominent defender of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ in the Western Church.

The greatest of North Italian bishops was well versed in the writings of the Greek theologians and was their principal interpreter in his own country. Here then was the real source of inspiration, a source which made the pointed defence of dyophysitism on Italian soil perfectly natural, and would be entirely approved by the imperial patron of the church. The influence of Ambrose would further explain the presence of Gervasius and Protasius among the Apostles upon the arch, two saints held in special honour at Milan.