

Notes on the decorations of central vault mosaic of Galla Placidia chapel in Ravenna, Italy

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Abstract:

The Galla Placidia Chapel in Ravenna, or globally known as the "Mausoleum" of Galla Placidia, is renowned for its exceptional mosaic decorations covering the surfaces of its interior walls. The entrance of the chapel represents a dramatic transition from the humble exterior to the grandeur and majesty of the interior; the chapel has retained its entire interior decoration program, which is uncommon for buildings from late antiquity. This cross-planned chapel still raises many issues and questions that are difficult to answer decisively as a result of the lack of any contemporary documentation, so it remains purely hypothetical. The interpretation of central vault mosaics of the chapel is one of the most important issues that have long occupied the scholars over the years due to the ambiguity and distinctiveness of its elements with regard to the iconographic traditions of the time, as it is the predecessor of a decorative subject that will continue over time in the early Christian structures. The central vault mosaic consists of 567 golden stars arranged in concentric circles against a dark blue background, all orbiting a Latin gold cross represented at the vault apex, while floating, over the heap of the clouds, in the pendentives area, winged bust-figures represent the four living creatures around the celestial throne. Although the blue dome covered with stars is a decorative element known both from Roman art and even from ancient Egyptian art before it, but its significance here with the inclusion of the golden cross in the middle of the vault was not clear, especially since the meaning of the cross itself is disputed and its orientation to the east and non-following the axis of the chapel reflects many meanings. Therefore, this paper aims to describe and analyze the artistic composition of the central vault mosaics, try to understand the meanings of its elements, and comparing it with other similar decorative elements, whether earlier from the old Egyptian and Roman times or later from the early Byzantine era.

Keywords:

Ravenna – Galla Placidia – chapel – central vault – mosaic.