

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, has been 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 that 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 occupied the scholars for a long time 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 that have been known from both 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, its orientation towards the east and not following the axis of the chapel reflect 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.

Statement of the problem:

Unveiling the mystery and finding out the purpose of the decorations of the central vault mosaic of Galla Placidia chapel in Ravenna, Italy.

Objectives:

The paper aims to describe and analyze the artistic composition of the central vault mosaics of the Galla Placidia chapel in Ravenna, Italy, in an attempt to understand the meanings of the composition elements, and to compare these elements with other similar decorative elements that later decorated other early Byzantine buildings in various sites in Italy. In addition to emphasizing old and even ancient roots of some elements of the composition, especially the decoration of the starry sky, which appeared before in both ancient Egyptian and Roman "pagan" civilizations.

Significance:

Enriching the field of studying Byzantine art and architecture due to the lack of Egyptian and even Arabian writings on this field, and contributing in enhancement of the Arabian Library with specialized researches.

Research limits:

Objective limits: decorations of the central vault mosaic of Galla Placidia chapel.

Place limits: Galla Placidia chapel – Ravenna – Italy.

Chronological limits: 5th century AD.

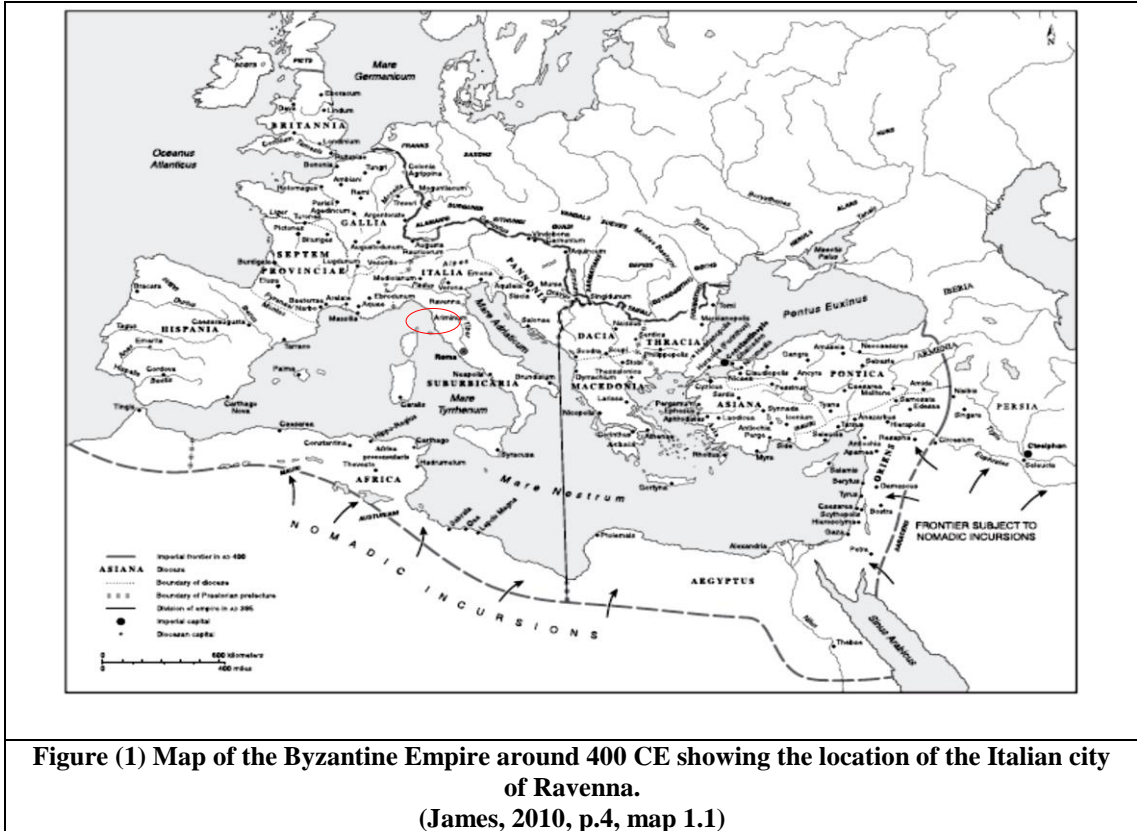
Methodology:

The paper followed the descriptive - analytical approach.

Introduction:

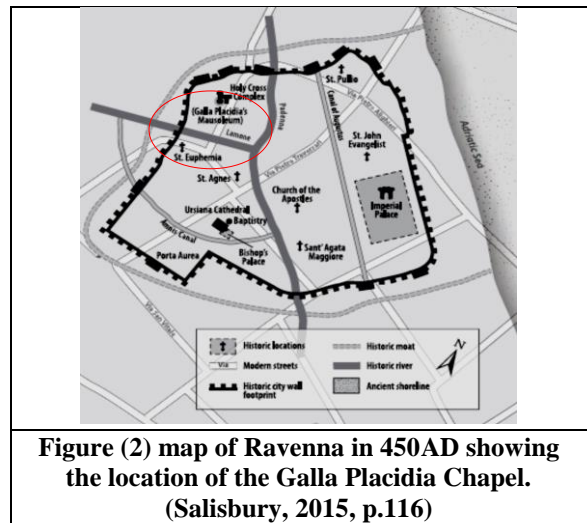
The small chapel, located next to the Church of the Holy Cross (Santa Croce) and the Church of St. Vitale in Ravenna, is attributed to the Empress Aelia Galla Placidia, who was born between 388 and 393 and died in 450 A.D. she was the daughter of the Emperor Theodosius the 1st from his second wife Galla. As such, she is the half-sister of Emperors Honorius (Emperor of the West) and Arcadius (Emperor of the East). After the death of Honorius, his successor in the reign of the West, Valentinian III (424 -455AD), the son of Galla Placidia, was six years old, so he remained under the tutelage of his mother, who established her court in Ravenna (fig. 1).

Peter Chrysologus, the bishop of Ravenna, describes Galla Placidia in impressive terms as "the mother of the Christian empire, the immortal, the pious." As the "mother of the Christian empire", its task of decorating Ravenna, the new political center in the West, with churches and chapels dedicated to the apostles and saints, is perhaps the highest form of Christian duty that Placidia could perform. So she built many structures, including the Church of the Holy Cross (Santa Croce) (about 417 – 420AD) to which this chapel belongs. The chapel takes the layout of the Latin cross, and is decorated from the interior with brilliant mosaic ornaments that reflect the utmost imperial care. Although the chapel is a common subject of many researches, it still presents many questions that are difficult to answer in absolute terms, such as the patron of the building, its function, the identification of some mosaic figures represented inside it, and finally the meaning of the mosaics of the central vault, which is the subject of this paper.



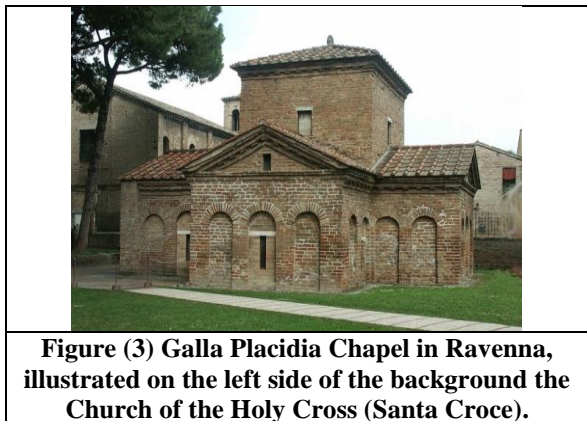
Location of the Chapel:

Galla Placidia Chapel, this small compressed building, sometimes also called the St. Lawrence Chapel, is located next to the Church of the Holy Cross (Santa Croce) and the Church of St. Vitale, in the northwestern part of Ravenna (fig. 2). The chapel is now freestanding, but was originally connected to the southern end of the Narthex of the Holy Cross (fig. 3).



Foundation and Establishment Date:

The Galla Placidia Chapel in Ravenna still presents some of the essential problems regarding the foundation or patron of the building. These problems arose from the complete lack of any contemporary documentation of the building. In fact, there is no mention of the chapel in any document or inscription until half a millennium after its



construction. Andreas Agnellus, the Bishop of Ravenna in the 9th century, claimed in Chapter 42 of his LPR that Empress Galla Placidia was buried in the monasterium, or chapel, of St. Nazarius, who appears to be the person to whom her "mausoleum" was dedicated in the later Middle Ages. However, this attribution is unreliable as it is dated back almost five centuries after the death of the Empress (450), and is based solely on the oral tradition. The monasterium seems to refer to a chapel in the church of St. Vitale, that was built only in the middle of the sixth century, and thus this building was not the original burial place.

But, the first direct statement claiming that Galla Placidia was the patron of the building which is dated back only to the 13th century, specifically to 1279AD, when Tommaso Tusco wrote that it was Empress Gala Placidia who constructed this "capella pulcherrima". Shortly thereafter, in 1317AD, Rinaldo da Concorrezzo, then the Archbishop of Ravenna, stated that Gala Placidia was buried in this chapel, which was identified as the one that was built by Galla Placidia in the Church of the Holy Cross and was dedicated to Sts. Nazarius and Celsus. However, because the chapel belonged to the imperial area of Ravenna at the time, which strongly demonstrates the imperial patronage, G. Mackie believes that Galla Placidia is the most likely patron of this building. D. Deliyannis also felt that it was good to attribute the chapel to the patronage of Placidia because it originally had contact with the Holy Cross Narthex, the church which was established by Placidia herself. F. Deichmann was more cautious in his appreciation, and concluded that the care of Galla Placidia could not be ruled out. At the other end of the spectrum, W. Seston concluded that Placidia was the "universally accepted" patron, although it was still open for some discussion.

Though the date of construction and building has differed views, but the most likely and accounted by most researchers is the second quarter of the fifth century, namely the period after 425.

Architectural Planning:

Contrary to what is seen today, the chapel was not free or isolated, but was originally attached to the southern end of Holy Cross Narthex (fig. 4, 5). This small brick building, measuring 12.75 m x 10.25 m, took the layout of the Latin Cross (fig. 4, 7), topped by a dome enclosed by a rectangular tower with a sloping roof.

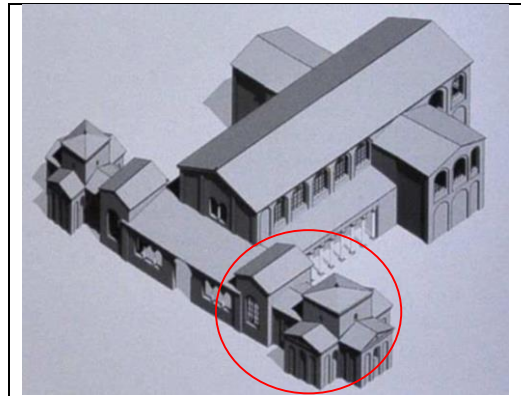


Figure (5) Reconstruction of the Holy Cross complex in Ravenna, showing the Galla Placidia Chapel at the southern end of Narthex.
(Mikloš, 2014, p.37, fig.1)

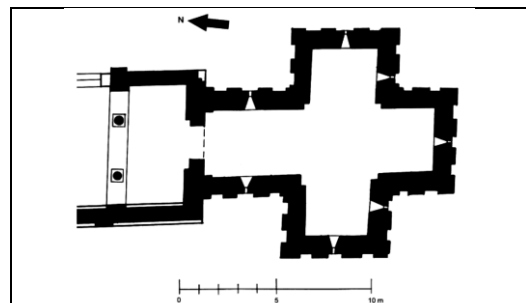
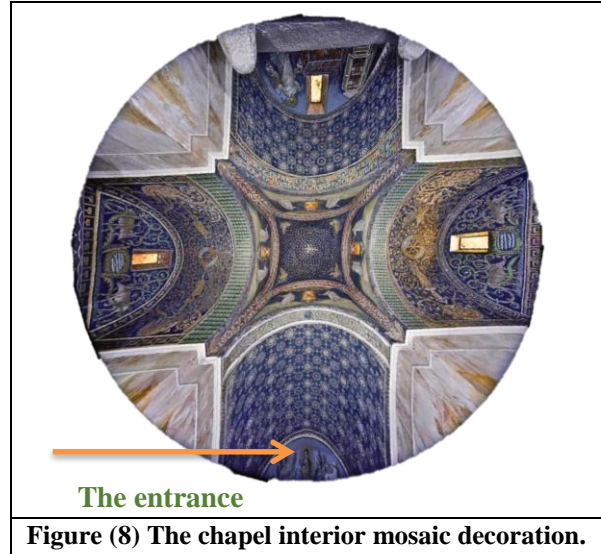


Figure (7) The ground plan of the Galla Placidia Chapel in Ravenna.
(Deliyannis, 2010, p.75, fig.16.)

Mosaic decorations (Fig. 8):

The exterior of the chapel is decorated with minimal decorations and is simple, while the interior is covered with rich mosaics and marvelous marble cladding. The chapel retained its entire interior decorative program, and each program register, has met a logical division of the interior space.

**Central vault mosaic (Fig. 9):****1- Mosaics description:**

In a simulation of the sky, on a dark blue background, 567 golden stars are harmoniously scattered, which, besides being arranged in concentric circles, are of contrasting sizes. These stars appear to revolve around the golden Latin cross represented at the apex of the vault, which is oriented eastward, inconsistent with the layout of the chapel itself. Between the cross arms there are seven stars, distributed as three stars in the lower right, three in the lower left, and one in the upper left of it.

At the corners of the central vault, in the pendentives area, floating above the rubble of the striped clouds there are red, light blue, orange and white, winged busts, represented in plain gold, and were executed in white. These busts are depicted starting from the south-east: the lion, the calf, the human, the eagle. They are in the same order as the four living creatures around the divine throne recorded in Revelation 4: 7.

2- Mosaics Analysis:

The vault mosaics represented the celestial world; the dominant colors in the elements of depiction are blue and gold celestial colors, as well as the inspired location. Stars covering the blue dome was a well-known decorative element of Roman art, but its significance here with the cross is unclear, and its interpretation is limited to purely cosmological interpretation.



Figure (9) Central vault of the Galla Placidia Chapel, Ravenna.

a. The Cross:

The cross basically symbolizes the existence of the Christ himself. This is in addition to another more specific connotation that the cross in heaven proclaims the second coming of the Christ awaiting for the final judgment, according to Matthew (24:30). This content was confirmed by the orientation of the cross itself. Instead of following the north-south axis of the chapel, it appears to be directed the east, towards Jerusalem, which was believed to be the expected direction of the Christ's return in the 4th and 5th centuries.

As for A. Graber, he suggested that the picture inevitably could be linked to the worship of the true cross discovered by Helena, and is supposed to be interpreted as a picture of victory over death and a symbol of the sufferings of the Christ. The martyrs. O. Von Simson proposed the dream of the cross in 312 AD and the subsequent rites of glorifying the cross as one of the important points in the interpretation of this picture. He considers that the incorporation of the representation of the cross in the stellar sky, especially as in the Basilica of St. Apollinare in Classe, is undoubtedly a representation of Christ's transfiguration. C.

Rizzardi believes that this representation aims to emphasize the divine nature of Christ, and calls for similar Western depictions such as the apse vault of Santa Pudenziana in Rome (c. 402 - 417) and many other examples. The cross can also be linked to the concept of Christ the Sun, especially since its direction greatly enhances its solar importance and the idea of divinity. This concept is illustrated in the vault mosaic of the Aureli Mausoleum of Basilica St. Peter in Rome (early in the 4th century) and many other examples.

b. The seven stars around the cross:

F. Deichmann attributed their number simply to chance. C. O. Nordström interpreted them as the seven planets mentioned in the book of Revelation. C. Rizzardi interpreted them as representing the chorus of angels in Revelation (1:20).

c. The starry sky:

The ornamentation of the starry sky had an ancient significance, the first of which dates back to the ancient Egyptian civilization. The ancient Egyptians used the ornament of the starry sky to decorate the roofs of their tombs and temples, as in the roof of the burial chamber of the pyramid of King Unas (the last king of the Fifth Dynasty 2420 BC), the shrine of the goddess Hathor in the temple of Queen Hatshepsut (1505- 1483 BC), and many other examples. The ancient Egyptian believed that the stars were the souls of the dead, and that the polar star was the end of the deceased pharaoh.

According to ancient Egyptian mythology, the goddess Nut was the goddess of heaven, represented by a long female body, bent on the ground in the form of an arc, studded with stars, and her skin is usually colored in blue. It was said that Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of heaven, were mated and had given birth to the sun god Re. Nut's, his mother Re was portrayed to receive him every night to hide in her cavity during the night to in order to reappear during the day. For this reason, Nut was considered the goddess associated with the resurrection and as such it was often depicted on coffins and in tombs, such as the roof of the burial chamber in the tomb of King Ramesses VI (1156- 1148 BC).

The first (Roman) examples of this decoration were adorned villas, palaces, baths and religious structures. The starry sky of the 2nd and 3rd centuries was often represented in a religious context, specifically within the mithraea. In the early Christian era, this decorative theme was adapted to the Christian context, and was borrowed to domed structures such as baptisteries and churches. The stars and the starry sky in Christianity portray the vision of the heavenly Paradise. The baptistery of Dura Europous is the earliest known Christian model of this decoration.

The decoration of the starry sky appeared in other later models of the Placidia Chapel as in the apse mosaic of Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica; the baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte in Naples; In the Archbishop's chapel, Ravenna; and in Salento, in the Basilica of Santa Maria della Crose in Casaranello; the Basilica of St. Apollinare in Classe; and finally, in the Church of St. Agnes in Rome (625 - 638).

E. Swift and A. Alwis, with the help of contemporary Christian evidences, attempted to focus on the analysis of the starry sky and how the viewer of the late antiquity realized the decoration of the vault. They have argued that the starry-sky vault mosaics, especially after their visual effects, may have been seen in a particular "mystical view" and, equally, in the viewer's mind as real stars, and have been brighten upon him with the light of heaven. Stars

are also the personification of saints in the sky and a manifestation of light in their tombs. The visual effects of mosaics have been transformed into clear brightness reflecting the power of the saints. Consequently, the image was used primarily for worshiping, rather than being seen in a purely aesthetic sense.

d. The four living creatures:

They appeared frequently in the fourth and fifth centuries art as in Rome, for example, in the apse mosaic of the church of Santa Pudenziana (about 390); in Naples: in the baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte (465), in Capua: in the church of St. Matrona in S. Prisco (first half of the 5th century); in Milan: in the church of San Vittore in the Golden Heaven (5th century), and in Vicenza: in the church of Santa Maria Mater Domini (5th century); and in Ravenna: in the vault of the Archbishop's chapel (494 - 519). The four living creatures later appeared in the sixth and seventh centuries in Ravenna itself: in the pre-sbyterium of the church of San Vitale (mid-sixth century), and on the triumphal arch of St. Apollinare Basilica in Classe (in the second half of the seventh century).

Indeed, at the beginning of the third century, Christian Theologians - including St. Irenaeus in particular - tried to connect these creatures with the four evangelists. It is noticeable that the creatures lack the sacred halos and evangelical books, which led some scholars such as F. Deichmann and C. Rizzardi, to assume that these creatures are only symbols of the book of Revelation. They also lack another common feature, the six wings which was described in the Revelation.

Conclusion:

- The purpose of the central vault mosaics decoration was not only an aesthetic purpose, but behind each element of the composition there is a specific meaning or symbolism.
- The starry-sky of the Galla Placidia chapel was not an innovative decorative element, but it has been used before at both ancient Egyptian and Roman civilizations within both religious and secular buildings. Although it carried special connotations in both of the "pagan" civilizations, it was borrowed by the Christian art and was adapted to the Christian context.
- After analyzing the starry- sky in the vault, it reveals that the image was used for worshiping at first place. The previous interpretation thus supports the theory that this cross-planned building was originally built to be a martyrium or chapel containing the remains of martyr saints and not as an imperial mausoleum. In view of the student's support for this theory, she deliberately intended to call the building in her research paper as "Chapel of Galla Placidia" not "Mausoleum of Galla Placidia", although the latter is the common designation.
- Lack of the four living creatures represented at the corners of the central vault of the Holy Halos, the Gospel books and the six wings mentioned in the Book of Revelation, contrary to the common iconographic traditions of their depiction in the early Byzantine era.

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Abbreviations:

- CARB: Corso di cultura sull'arte Ravennate e Bizantina.
- LPR: Agnellus, liber Pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis.