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Re-evaluating the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

Lisa Onontiyoh West

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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RE-EVALUATING THE MAUSOLEUM OF GALLA PLACIDIA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

by

Lisa Onontiyoh West
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1996
May, 2003

In memory of Wease and Mindy

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Abstract

The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia has generated a lengthy bibliography over the centuries but, in spite of repeated investigations, the north and south arm barrel vaults have received almost no attention. Commentary on these areas of the mosaic program is usually brief and limited to a comparison between the appearance of the barrel vaults and patterns found in various textiles, such as carpets.

This thesis seeks to fill the void in the body of scholarly research pertaining to the north and south arm barrel vaults by viewing their decorative motifs through the eyes of a fifth-century Christian. When seen from this perspective two distinct motifs rich in iconographical meaning emerge from the composition: concentric circles and flora. In the Early Christian period, concentric circles and mirrors were synonymous with one another and both were believed to possess apotropaic powers capable of warding off evil spirits. Flowers in art could be used to designate a space as a garden and, when shown in perpetual full bloom in a funerary context, mark the space as the Earthly Paradise.

Questions about the intended function, the patron, and the exact date of this building have long been subjects of lively debate. The issue of the intended function of the space is at the heart of this inquiry; this monograph accepts without argument the widely held view that Galla Placidia erected the edifice in the first half of the fifth century, most likely around 425 CE. I believe that the meaning behind the pattern of the north and south arm barrel vaults can be extrapolated to the mosaic program of the space as a whole in support of the

theory that the building was constructed with an expressly funerary function in mind.

Chapter I

Introduction

The topic of this thesis is the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia located in Ravenna, Italy.¹ Although this structure has been extensively investigated, many questions surrounding the building have yet to be conclusively answered, foremost among them: when, by whom, and for what purpose was this monument built?

Today the city of Ravenna is somewhat forgotten by tourists who flock to the more famous cities of Italy such as Rome, Florence, Venice, and Milan en masse each year. There was a time, however, in the fifth and sixth centuries, when Ravenna was a politically and economically important city at the forefront of artistic innovation. Ravenna had been a thriving seaport since ancient times but the city was catapulted to international importance in 404 CE when Emperor Honorius relocated the capital of the Western Roman Empire from Milan in the north to Ravenna along the Adriatic coast because the marshy lands of the coastal city offered superior fortifications that were easy to defend against barbarian encroachments.² Ravenna's location on the eastern coast of Italy also offered better access to the thriving eastern portion of the empire ruled by Honorius' brother, Arcadius, from Constantinople.

As the standard term for this building, "Mausoleum of Galla Placidia," implies, many scholars are willing to accept at least the possibility that Galla

¹ Ravenna is approximately 90 miles south of Venice.

² <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12662b.html>, search term: Ravenna. Stewart Irvin Oost, *Galla Placidia Augusta. A Biographical Essay* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 70. Stuart Cristo, "The Art of Ravenna in Late Antiquity," *The Classical Journal* 70 (1995): 17-29.

Placidia was the patron of the cruciform chapel. But who was Galla Placidia and what made her a likely candidate for sponsorship of the building? John Lowden sums up the colorful events of her life in the following words: “Galla Placidia’s eventful life...sounds like the synopsis for an improbable historical novel. She links the great cities of the time and the principle warring groups in a complex tale of aristocratic romance, intrigue, and bloodshed.”³

Galla Placidia was born sometime between 388 and 393 CE in either Constantinople or Thessalonica.⁴ She was the first child (and the only child to survive infancy) of Emperor Theodosius the Great and his second wife Galla, daughter of the Western Roman Emperor Valentinian I and Justina. Galla Placidia’s life was inextricably tied to the purple; she was the granddaughter, daughter, half-sister, wife, and mother of emperors. But Galla Placidia was more than just an anonymous female member of the imperial family; she was an important figure of Late Antiquity in her own right as the consort of the Visigothic king Athaulf, as an Augusta⁵, and as the regent of the Western Roman Empire on behalf of her son Valentinian III.

Although a number of scholars now attribute patronage of the building, to a greater or lesser degree of certainty, to Empress Galla Placidia, the matter is still open to some debate. Gillian Mackie, in her work on early medieval funerary chapels, employs the noncommittal phrase “...the mausoleum’s presumed

³ John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 106.

⁴ Gillian Mackie, “The Early Medieval Chapel: Decoration, Form and Function: A Study of Chapels in Italy and Istria in the Period Between 313 and 741 AD” (University of Victoria: PhD Diss. 1991), 151, for the broad time frame. Oost offers a more exact time frame of 388-389 CE and the probable geographic locations of Galla Placidia’s birthplace. Oost, *Galla Placidia*, 1.

⁵ The term Augusta was the feminine word for Augustus, a Roman title meaning “senior ruler.” Not all emperors or empresses were Augustus or Augusta.

patron, the empress Galla Placidia,”⁶ at the beginning of her chapter dedicated to the mausoleum but proceeds from this point on to assume that the empress was indeed the patron. Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann is more cautious in his assessment of the structure’s patronage, concluding that Galla Placidia’s sponsorship cannot be ruled out⁷; at the opposite end of the spectrum, William Seston concludes that Galla Placidia is the universally accepted patron.⁸ Irrefutably establishing the identity of the monument’s patron as the empress is complicated by a lack of inscriptions or extant contemporary writings citing her as the building’s benefactor. Local oral tradition, recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* by Andrea Agnellus, held that the empress’ corporeal remains were contained within the cruciform chapel, but this attribution is unreliable because it dates to almost five centuries after the empress’ death.⁹

Dating the monument is an equally inexact and enigmatic proposition as securely identifying the structure’s patron. Construction has been placed at various points in the first half of the fifth century, again depending on the opinion of the author. A *terminus post quem* of 404 is a safe assumption because it is highly doubtful that the building was begun prior to Ravenna becoming the capital of the West. A *terminus ante quem* of 450 is necessary if Galla Placidia was in fact the person who commissioned the structure because the empress

⁶ Mackie, “Early Medieval Chapel,” 151.

⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, *Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1989), 65.

⁸ William Seston, “Le Jugement Dernier au Mausolee de Galla Placidia à Ravenne,” *Cahiers Archéologiques* 1 (1945): 37-50.

⁹ Andrea Agnellus, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*, as referenced in Mackie, “Early Medieval Chapel,” 154.

died in November of 450.¹⁰ During this forty-six year window, Mackie believes that there are two time periods when construction was most likely: between 417 (when Galla Placidia entered her second marriage) and 421 (when her second husband, Constantius III, died) or after 425 when the empress returned from Constantinople to Ravenna.¹¹ This thesis favors a date of circa 425 for the mausoleum, endorsing the hypothesis that construction was begun once Galla Placidia returned to Ravenna from temporary exile in Constantinople to rule the West.

In addition to the questions of patronage and dating, the thorny issue of the intended function of the space remains open to debate. The term “mausoleum” is often included in the name of this structure, implying an expressly funerary overtone to the space. This funerary purpose is reinforced by frequent allusions in modern literature to the space as a mausoleum.¹² Even if scholarship favors a connection between the intended use of the space and a funerary function, irrefutable proof is still lacking. This monograph will not decide the issue of original intent of the building once and for all but it does address the old question of function from a new perspective, interpreting elements of a specific area of the mosaics from the perspective of the fifth-century Christian.

¹⁰ Mackie, “Early Medieval Chapel,” 154.

¹¹ Ibid., 159. Marion Lawrence favors a later date, one closer to the empress’ death in 450. Marion Lawrence, *The Sarcophagi of Ravenna* (New York: College Art Association of America in conjunction with the Art Bulletin, 1945), 32. Giuseppe Bovini is vague on the issue of dating, approximating the date of construction as “...towards the end of the first quarter of the fifth century...” Giuseppe Bovini, *The Churches of Ravenna* (Novara, Italy: Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 1960), 3.

¹² Bovini, *Churches of Ravenna*, 7, explicitly states that Galla Placidia built the chapel to serve as her mausoleum. Mackie endorses the idea of the building being an imperial mausoleum built by Galla Placidia. Mackie, “Early Medieval Chapel,” 151.

A. Inspiration and Methodology

This thesis is a departure from the corpus of scholarly literature that presently exists on the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in that the figural and the obvious aspects of the mosaic program are not being investigated. Instead, attention is concentrated on the abstract and subtle aspects of a very small, specific, non-figural area: the north and south arm barrel vaults. What significance can these areas possibly possess if their entire decorative program is limited to a repetitive, non-figural pattern? To say that this thesis will focus on an in-depth examination of the abstract and subtle characteristics of a highly constrained section of the mosaic program does not mean that the topic is lacking in significance or that the compositional fields in question are interesting only as window dressing for the more prominent, figural aspects of the interior. Instead, the following pages will explore a long overlooked component of the decoration that is rich in iconographical meaning that can be extrapolated to the function and meaning of the structure as a whole.

The extensive bibliography of the mausoleum spans more than a millennium.¹³ Does this lengthy history of cataloguing and questioning mean that the edifice has no secrets left to reveal to the curious observer? Does the idea of gleaning new meaning from a well-researched source sound at best naïve, at worst presumptuous? Neither naiveté nor pretension is the motivating sentiment

¹³ Mackie notes that in 1924 the mausoleum's bibliography already contained over 200 entries. Mackie, "Early Medieval Chapel," 154. For the sake of clarity, one of the words that will be used from the beginning to refer to the space is "mausoleum," even before the correctness of the term has been fully discussed or defended. This is due to the widespread use of the word in connection to this building. Chapel, pendant chapel, oratory, and martyrium are also suitable terms to describe the space and will be used in reference to the space periodically throughout the text.

behind this monograph. The art of the mosaicist is a beautiful, ancient practice executed with consummate skill in the Early Christian buildings sprinkled throughout Ravenna. Love and admiration for this art form are what drew the attention of this author to Ravenna initially; the enigma of Galla Placidia and her legacy are the factors that led to the selection of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia as the topic for this thesis. Initially my purpose was broad: to re-evaluate the entire mosaic program of the edifice and hope that some special discovery would emerge. My labors bore fruit when I came across *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* by Eunice Dauterman Maguire, Henry P. Maguire, and Maggie Duncan-Flowers and the works of Gillian Mackie about early medieval funerary chapels.¹⁴ The findings of *Art and Holy Powers* proved to be a lens through which to view the familiar topic of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in a new way.

Having found a framework of thought, the next critical ingredient was a center, some aspect of the mosaic program to study using the concepts discussed in *Art and Holy Powers*. An innocent, seemingly unimportant line in an article by Mackie determined what the nexus for this thesis would be; ironically this pivotal statement was in an article about the San Zeno Chapel of Santa Prassede in Rome that mentioned the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia as a foil.

¹⁴ In addition to "Early Medieval Chapel," the following works by Mackie were invaluable inspirations and sources of information for this thesis: Gillian Mackie, "The Zeno Chapel: A Prayer for Salvation," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 57 (1989): 172-199; eadem, "New Light on the So-Called Saint Lawrence Panel at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna," *Gesta* 29 (1990): 54-60; eadem, "Symbolism and Purpose in an Early Christian Martyr Chapel: The Case of San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, Milan," *Gesta* 34 (1995): 91-101; eadem, "The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia: A Possible Occupant," *Byzantion* 65 (1995): 396-404; eadem, "Abstract and Vegetal Design in the San Zeno Chapel, Rome: The Ornamental Setting of an Early Medieval Funerary Program," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 63 (1995): 159-182.

Mackie, in drawing stylistic parallels between the floral imagery of the San Zeno Chapel and Ravennate mosaics said, "...in Ravenna and Porč, such flowers were almost universal among surviving early Christian mosaics: they are absent only at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia."¹⁵

This almost casual reference to the mausoleum's supposed lack of floral imagery on the part of Mackie gave birth to the concept of narrowly concentrating on the abstract pattern of the barrel vaults of the north and south arms using Mackie's own research to dispute her claim as to the mausoleum's lack of flora. The approach used here rediscovers and deciphers the hidden meaning of motifs that were popular in the Early Christian epoch and later dismissed by academics as simply decorative and inconsequential to the message of the mosaic program as a whole. These findings are then applied to the overall function and meaning of the unified space.

The purpose of this chapter, Chapter I, is to introduce the monument, outline the approach of this investigation, and briefly lay the foundation for the reader about the history, politics, and personalities that dominated the late fourth- and early fifth-centuries. Chapter II, called Physical Description, provides an account of the layout and appearance of the mausoleum, its setting, and its mosaic program. Chapter III, entitled Function and Meaning, focuses on the specific motifs of the north and south arm barrel vaults and how these motifs operated in an Early Christian context. The summation of these descriptions and findings is applied to the space as a whole in the conclusion, Chapter IV.

¹⁵ Mackie, "Abstract and Vegetal," 163.

Appendix A contains additional images omitted from the body of the work due to spatial considerations.

As the focus of art historical research has expanded to include non-figural and seemingly meaningless details, such as patterns and borders, the timing seems right to re-examine well-documented works of art and architecture, such as the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, to see how our perceptions change in light of the new angle of observation. I firmly believe that investing the time and effort in studying the abstract and the subtle components of a topic can enhance our understanding and appreciation of works and theories that may seem to have exhausted all of their secrets and hidden meanings.

B. Historical Overview

Before examining the physical content and layout of the mausoleum, a basic understanding of the Roman Empire as it existed during the period of the late fourth- and early fifth-centuries is useful.¹⁶ This final section of the Introduction is meant to acquaint the reader with a brief summary of the times that molded the patron, the mosaicist, and the contemporary visitor to the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia.

The Roman Empire, to the uncritical eye, still seemed to fulfill its pledge of being eternal during the reign of Galla Placidia's father, Theodosius the Great

¹⁶ Many of the problems of the fourth and fifth centuries have roots in the third century so references will be made, as needed, to the third century as well. The Empire of the third century was still fundamentally sound enough to continue on, outwardly as strong and vivacious as ever; only in the centuries to come would the depth and ramifications of the problems that emerged in the third century manifest themselves.

(ruled 379-395).¹⁷ At the time of Galla Placidia's birth Rome was still the undisputed mistress over parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa; Theodosius' death on January 17, 395 represented the last moment in history when men from Britain, the northern rim of Africa, the Balkans, and Judea would live under one common law. Stewart Irvin Oost, remarking on Theodosius' death, said: "...the last strong emperor who had ruled the whole of the Roman Empire...had gone to his reward."¹⁸ From this point on the Roman world would be permanently severed in two and centered on Rome, Milan, and Ravenna in the West and Constantinople in the East.

The Late Antique/Early Christian world was in the process of great changes. These developments occurring in the fourth and fifth centuries had been gaining ground for decades, so slowly and imperceptibly that contemporaries were unaware that life as they knew it was about to be irrevocably altered forever. The forces that would lead to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, however, were well under way. The factors that fueled this definitive break with the past were many, each with its own complex history of cause and effect.

A brief overview of some of the major centrifugal forces at work in the Late Empire of the West were: barbarian raids; the inability of the bureaucracy to stem the tide of the increasing loss of the best and brightest minds of the day to the church; the withdrawal from ancient societal norms that amounted to passive resistance and rejection of the Empire on the part of devout Christians; the self-

¹⁷ Oost, *Galla Placidia*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

serving, destructive policies pursued by the aristocrats to the detriment of the state until, by the fifth century, the emperor himself was often forced to yield to their collective demands; corruption and graft that was increasingly rampant; the debasement of the currency until, by the middle of the third century, money consisted of slugs of billon washed with gilt or silvering; repeated bouts with inflation, in part brought on by repeated debasements of the currency; the making and unmaking of emperors that happened during the third century with alarming rapidity, thoroughly undermining the myth of the sacred person of the emperor; and finally the failure of the ultimate resource, the decline in population at a time when the empire most needed soldiers to fight and people to generate revenue for the state.¹⁹

At the height of her power and prestige, the Roman Empire had faced many of these dilemmas and successfully rebounded, so what made this time different? Perhaps it was the convergence of all these factors after a prolonged period of steady, although indiscernible at the time, decline that made eternal Rome unable to protect herself against raiding barbarian tribes, the self-serving demands of the aristocracy, and the declining economic conditions.

In addition to these serious problems, the Roman Empire of the Late Antique world faced a unique threat: the rise in popularity of Christianity. This particular religion had gained ground in the second and third centuries and had risen in status from just another eastern mystery cult to become the official faith of the Roman Empire. Christianity also played a decisive role in the downfall of the West. The Roman Empire had long been influenced by mystery cults from

¹⁹ All of these issues are ably covered by Oost in the prologue of *Galla Placidia*, 1-42.

the East, but Christianity proved to be a force that conquered the conqueror. Maybe the promise of eternal life and the rigid demands for absolute faith that Christianity placed on its adherents were particularly appealing at a time when the official state religion, centered on the person of the emperor, was removed, distant, and impersonal. In contrast to the aloof qualities of the officially sanctioned state religion, Christianity provided a personal alternative, offered solace, and guaranteed a better life to come in the hereafter to its followers—in return for absolute faith and unquestioned devotion in this life here on earth. This unwavering faith and devotion to Christianity eroded the tacit loyalty of the subjects of the empire in that the state and the emperor were no longer the sole objects of adoration in the mind of the Christian; the emperor and Rome now had to compete with the promise of eternal salvation preached by Christ for the hearts and minds of the people. At a time when the classical, pagan tradition seemed to have little left to offer culturally, intellectually, or spiritually this new, vital, energizing force that had plenty to say burst onto the scene. Christian writers, unlike their fourth- and fifth-century pagan counterparts, expressed their ideas clearly and passionately, free of the bombast and slavish attention to style to the detriment of content that characterized Late Antique literature.²⁰

Which of these factors dealt the fatal blow to the West? That is a question this monograph leaves to others more able and better informed to decide. For the purposes of our investigation what is important to keep in mind when viewing the

²⁰ Oost, *Galla Placidia*, 16-20. Oost discusses at some length the decrepit state of the once-great pagan literary tradition during the fourth and fifth centuries. He describes how pagan writers demonstrated in their writing a mastery of all the literary conventions of form and technical composition while their end product was completely wanting in substance and passion.

Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is that this building was erected in a world in flux; the Late Antique world with its glorious pagan past was in the process of giving way to a new epoch, the Early Christian period.

Now that general information pertaining to the location, the proposed patron, the date of construction, its intended function, and the historical context surrounding the building have been presented, the discussion will shift to the physical layout and appearance of the mausoleum.

Chapter II

Physical Description

A. Original Appearance

Today, the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia looks very different from the structure that existed in the fifth century. What is now an isolated building was once a

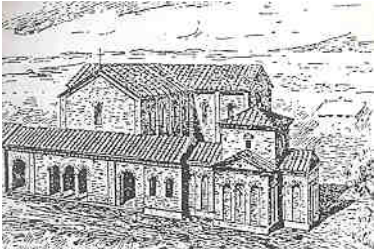


Figure 1: Reconstruction of the 5th century Church of Santa Croce

chapel attached to the church of Santa Croce at the south terminus of the narthex (right hand side)

(Figure 1); a pendant chapel, no longer extant, was

located at the northern, left end of the narthex. The

street Via Galla Placidia now runs through what was a

section of the nave of Santa Croce. The original proportions of the building are

distorted, giving the chapel a stockier appearance than what was intended,

because the floor had to be raised approximately five feet to keep pace with the

rising water table of the upper Adriatic coast of Italy.²¹

B. Modern Day Setting

A modern day visitor might reasonably get the impression that the mausoleum was originally intended to be a satellite of the church of San Vitale, which is located across the grassy enclosure from the modest, cruciform structure.



Figure 2: View of mausoleum from San Vitale; Santa Croce is located behind the mausoleum to the left

²¹ Lowden, *Early Christian*, 111, gives the exact height the floor was raised as 4'8".

Due to major alterations to Santa Croce and the site itself over the centuries, the mausoleum now has a closer physical and aesthetic relationship with San Vitale than with Santa Croce (Figure 2).

C. Exterior

The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is a simple brick,²² cruciform-shaped structure constructed in the form of the Latin cross and topped by a dome that is concealed by a rectangular tower with a four-slope roof (Figure 3). A pinecone



Figure 3: Exterior of mausoleum seen from the north (longer arm) and west

finial crowns the summit of the roof (Figure 4).²³ Small, vertical windows are located in each arm of the drum and in each of the pediments with the notable exception of the north arm pediment; the north arm serves as the entrance to the chapel. The original panes of



Figure 4: Pinecone finial on roof

the fourteen windows were replaced during subsequent restorations.²⁴ The exterior is

minimally decorated, with ornamentation limited to a blind arcade and a cornice that encircle the east, west, and south arms of the structure. The façade of the north arm (Figure 5) is plain except for a carved frieze over the doorway (Figure 6) featuring two large, cat-like animals flanking a *volute krater* amidst the motif of

²² Deichmann, *Ravenna*, 66, notes that the form of the bricks is unique to the monument, thereby making it useless as a tool for dating the building.

²³ Deichmann, *Ravenna*, 64, notes that a pinecone was a traditional funerary symbol of immortality.

²⁴ Mackie, "Early Medieval Chapel," 165, mentions that the replacement panes are made of alabaster but does not say if the original panes were as well.

vine scrolls with bunches of grapes. The simplicity of the edifice, when considered from the outside, masks the ornate nature and sumptuous materials adorning the interior.



Figure 5: Façade of mausoleum, north arm



Figure 6: Carved frieze over entrance door, north arm

D. Interior

Stepping into the chapel represents a dramatic transition from the humble exterior to the lavish interior. The mausoleum walls are covered in rich mosaics and marble revetment.²⁵ Each tier of the decorative program corresponds to a logical division of the space beginning with the purely celestial realm of the central vault above and moving down in successive levels to the four lunettes of the drum, the four barrel lunettes located in the cross arms, the four barrel vaults that act as canopies for the barrel lunettes below, and concluding with the various non-figural frames and borders that surround the four main areas outlined above. The discussion of the interior will begin at the top of the space with the central vault and will continue with

²⁵ Mackie, "Early Medieval Chapel," 164, states that the revetment presently adorning the walls of the mausoleum is a twentieth-century replacement.

an examination of the decoration of the drum and four cross arms of the chapel.

1. Central Vault

The central vault of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (Figure 7) is deep blue

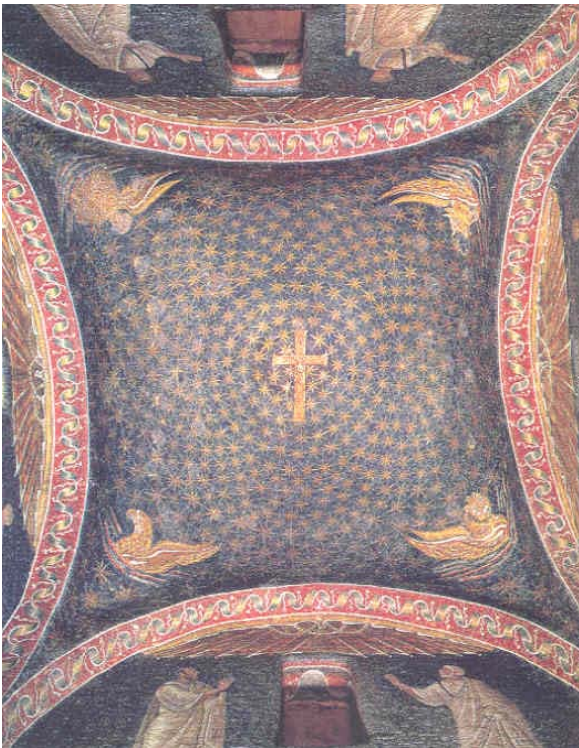


Figure 7: Central vault

and crowned with a golden Latin cross at the apex. The cross floats amid a concentric field of gold stars that are shaped like eight-petaled flowers packed tightly at the core of the vault and growing less dense at the periphery (Figure 8). The pendentives of the dome are filled with the symbolic representations of the four Evangelists: the eagle is illustrated in

the northeast arm, the man is depicted in the northwest arm (Figure 9), the lion is shown in the southeast arm, and the ox is represented in the southwest arm.²⁶ Each of the four Living Creatures of the Apocalypse is golden, has two folded wings,²⁷ and is shown

²⁶ The traditional relationship of John to eagle, Mark to lion, Matthew to man, and Luke to ox was not clearly established until the writings of Saint Jerome (d. 402), thereby making the standard associations mentioned uncertain vis-à-vis the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia.

²⁷ The two wings of the four Evangelists symbols at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is unusual for the first half of the fifth century; the four Evangelists symbols were usually depicted with six wings each at this time. An example of Early Christian symbols of the four Evangelists with six wings is the apse mosaic of Santa Pudenziana dating to circa 390. An image of Santa Pudenziana's apse mosaic is available in Appendix A.

bust-length amidst red, orange, and white lines that function as stylized clouds. Surrounding the central vault and defining the space of the four drum lunettes is a spiraling ribbon border.²⁸

Figure 8: Latin cross



Figure 9: Evangelist symbol of Matthew

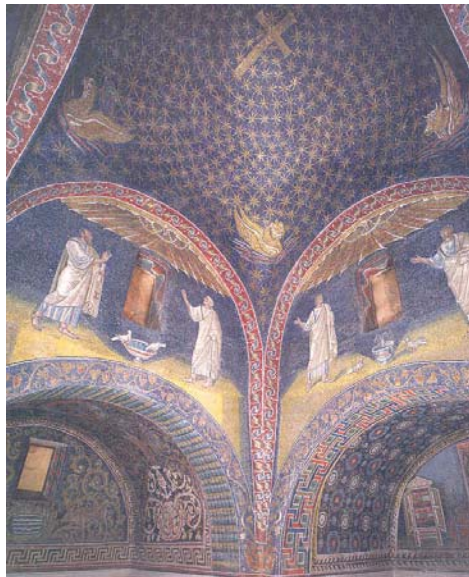


Figure 10: East and south drum lunettes

²⁸ Asher Ovadiah, *Geometric and Floral Patterns in Ancient Mosaics. A Study of their Origin in the Mosaics from the Classical Period to the Age of Augustus* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1980), 109.

2. Drum Lunettes

Physically, the drum lunettes are located between the central vault and the barrel vaults; iconographically, the drum region marks the transition from the heavenly world above to the terrestrial world below (Figure 10). Since the drum areas vary little overall, the physical description of this zone of the mosaic program will consist of a general description that applies to all four arms; attention will be called to specific features unique to a particular drum lunette as they occur in the discussion.

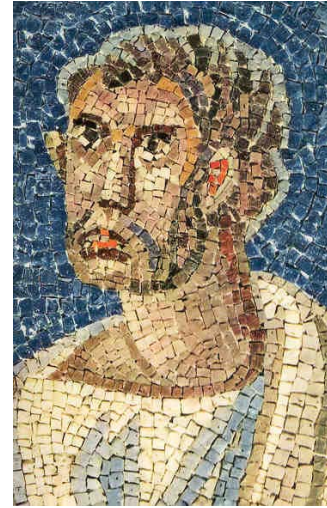


Figure 11: Middle aged man, south drum

The basic format of the drum lunettes centers on a pair of men clad in pallia and sandals flanking a narrow, rectangular window. Each of the men differs little



Figure 12: Young man, south drum

from the other seven, but they all have individualized facial features and expressions (Figure 11). All have their right arm raised in acclamation (Figure 12)²⁹; each person to the right of the window holds a rolled scroll in his left hand while each person to the left of the window has his left hand tucked into his pallium. The figures of the drum lunettes are thought to

be eight of the twelve apostles

but, owing to a lack of inscriptions or overt iconographical

clues, only the figures of the east drum can be conclusively identified. These

men are the Princes of the Apostles, Peter and Paul (Figure 13), and they are

²⁹ This posture is also known as the “Orator’s Pose” because in ancient art it was used to indicate that a speech was being made or to convey a sense of the subject’s dignity. Examples from the Republican and Augustan periods of Roman art are available in Appendix A.

identifiable because the standard iconographical conventions associated with the Princes of the Apostles were used to depict them: Peter holds a key in his left hand and has a short white beard and white hair; Paul has dark hair and full, dark facial hair.



Figure 13: Apostles Paul and Peter, east drum lunette

The background of this zone is a barren stage set lacking any trace of architecture or vegetation. In spite of this minimalist environment, the male figures themselves are rendered in a convincing three-dimensional fashion. The background for the mosaic is deep blue like that of the central vault; the color of the ground is yellow-green. The area where the men stand resembles a dais-like geometric form; a rectangle set against the rich blue backdrop. Perhaps the understated green ground and intense blue surroundings are meant to signify the terrestrial world of earth and ocean.

Above the heads of each pair of men is a golden fan-like design outlined in white with three red horizontal stripes. These bands of stripes are located beneath a protruding bird's head at the apex of the design, forming the central meeting place of three draped strands of pearls (Figure 14). Bovini calls these motifs "hieratic conches"³⁰ and Mackie describes them as "umbrellas."³¹



Figure 14: Hieratic conch

At the feet of the men, located directly beneath the window in the center of the grassy dais, are compositions of two white birds approaching small receptacles of water. The north-south drum lunettes feature the pair of doves approaching a fountain spraying streams of water into the air (Figure 15) while



Figure 15: Doves and fountain of the south arm drum lunette



Figure 16: Doves and fountain of the east arm drum lunette

the east-west drum lunettes have the doves perched on the rim of a basin of calm water (Figure 16). The birds are most probably doves, popular Christian

³⁰ Bovini, *Churches of Ravenna*, 17, identifies the bird as an eagle but fails to offer any discussion as to why he favors this interpretation, nor does he allow for the representation of any other possible species of birds, such as a dove, that could be iconographically significant to the location.

³¹ Mackie, "The Early Medieval Chapel," 111, reads this motif as a symbol of immortality or resurrection.

symbols of both the Holy Spirit and the souls of the faithful. Water, in a Christian context, can be representative of birth, rebirth, and baptism.

Marking the transition from the drum lunettes to the barrel vaults is a vine-leaf patterned border. This motif echoes the ideas of life, fertility, and the terrestrial world expressed in the figural area of this zone in terms of both color and iconography. The vine-leaves, as well as the spiraling ribbon border that frames the lunettes of the drum, emanate from a large triple leaf acanthus plant of gold with red detailing outlined in white located between the springing of each of the barrel vaults (Figure 17).



Figure 17:
Vine-leaf and spiraling
ribbon motifs that
originate from
acanthus plants

3. Barrel Lunettes

The barrel lunettes are a prominent aspect of the mosaic program because they are located within the visitor's line of sight upon entering the chapel. The compositions of the east and west arm barrel lunettes are nearly identical and will therefore be treated first and in the same section. The north and south arm barrel lunettes are two of the most widely discussed zones of the interior and therefore deserve special attention. The interest in the north and south arm barrel lunettes can be attributed in part to their location; the north arm is the entrance to the mausoleum and the south arm faces the visitor upon entry. Another reason these barrel lunettes receive so much attention is because they contain figural subject matter viewed by many scholars as significant to the iconographical meaning of the structure as a whole.



Figure 18: East arm barrel lunette

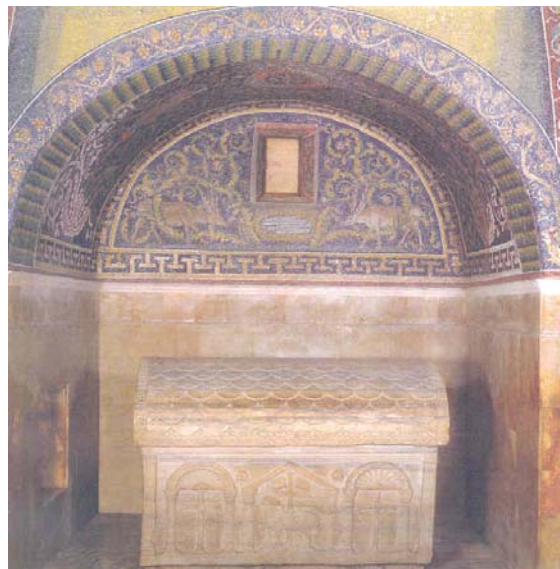


Figure 19: West arm barrel lunette

a. East and West Arms

The east and west arm barrel lunettes feature motifs identical in subject matter that differ slightly in terms of style and execution (Figures 18 and 19 respectively). These subtle differences may reflect the hand of different artists at work or may be the result of later restoration. The general layout of the east and west arm barrel lunettes centers around two stags tentatively coming to drink at a pool of water positioned below the window. Lush vegetation fills the lunettes: the water is encircled by green grass and undulating vine-leaves engulf the stags. The lunette of the



Figure 20: Stag, east arm barrel lunette

east arm is bordered by a plain meander pattern while the lunette of the west arm has a broken meander.³² Aside from sharing the same rudimentary layout, the east arm barrel lunette differs from its pendent lunette to the west in stylistic terms: the bodies of the stags in the east are softer, less naturalistic, and more whimsical; the vines are more abstract with a greater proliferation of little red and white flowers (Figure 20). The stags in the west arm barrel lunette are more muted in color and are modeled in more naturalistic proportions and shadings; the vines contain more leaves and bear a closer resemblance to actual foliage with fewer flowers (Figure 21).

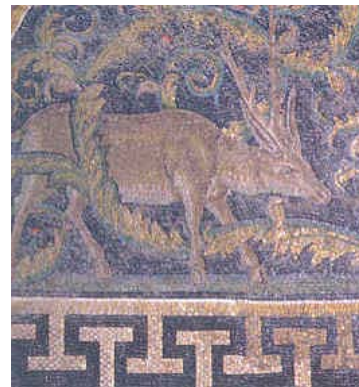


Figure 21: Stag, west arm barrel lunette

³² Ovadiah, *Geometric and Floral Patterns*, 100-1 and 103 respectively.

The window embrasures of the east and west arm barrel lunettes exhibit different patterns. The design of the window embrasure to the east consists of lozenges arranged to look like a braid; the top and bottom mosaic decoration is lost (Figure 22).³³ The window embrasure of the west arm barrel lunette features tri-petaled flowers amidst undulating yellow-green vines and a deep blue background (Figure 23).



Figure 22:
Window
embrasure, east
arm barrel
lunette



Figure 23: Window
embrasure, west
arm barrel
lunette

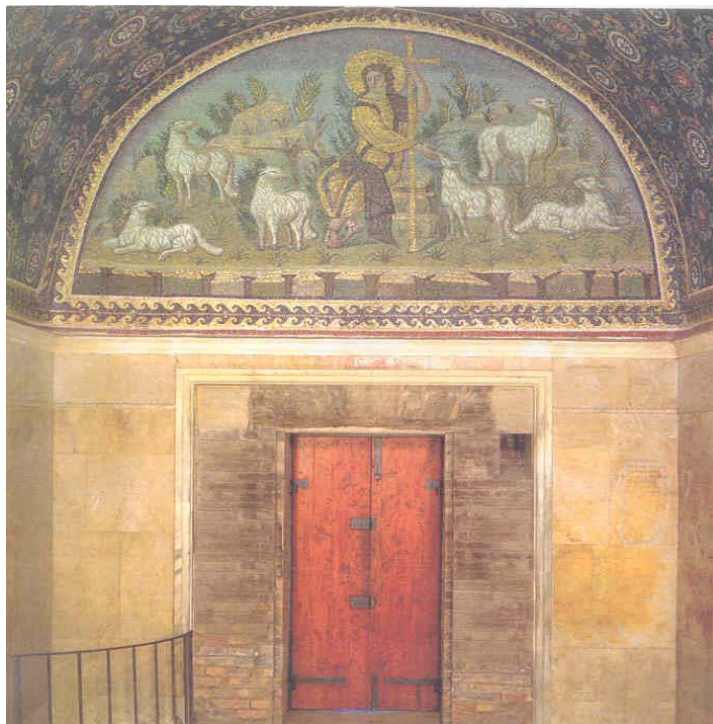


Figure 24: North
arm with Good
Shepherd lunette

³³ Ovadiah, *Geometric and Floral Patterns*, 99.

b. North Arm

The north arm barrel lunette, framed by a wave pattern border, is located above the entrance to the chapel and is dedicated to the theme of the Good Shepherd tending his flocks (Figure 24).³⁴ The subject of the Good Shepherd appealed to both pagans and Christians alike and had been frequently represented in the art of many cultures for centuries (Figure 25). The Good Shepherd of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia clearly has Christian connotations and, in terms of body type, is closely related to the clean-shaven, youthful, humble



Figure 25: Calf Bearer, Acropolis, Athens, circa 560 BCE



Figure 26: Good Shepherd wall painting, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, late 3rd century

shepherds found in the art of the catacombs (Figure 26).

The Good Shepherd of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is noteworthy, however, because he is an excellent example of how the figure type was evolving; soon the humble, adolescent Good Shepherd of the Early Christian catacombs would be

transformed into a bearded man clad in imperial garments. The Good Shepherd of the mausoleum reflects the transition that was already under way by

combining the physical attributes of the Early Christian Good Shepherd with the regal trappings of the golden tunic with purple *clavi* and the purple cloth draped across his lap (Figures 27 and 28). The stylistic changes the Good Shepherd

³⁴ Ibid, 165.

was undergoing in art reflected the changes that had taken place within Christianity itself in the previous two hundred years. The cult practiced in modest house-churches of the first and second centuries was now the official religion of the Roman Empire. The faithful were no longer comprised mainly of the poor and a few aristocratic women who had constituted the bulk of early converts to Christianity; now the congregation included the Emperor, members of the imperial household, and numerous politically and socially ambitious people.



Figure 27: Youthful Good Shepherd, north arm barrel lunette

Figure 28: Good Shepherd clad in imperial garments, north arm barrel lunette



The elaborately attired, youthful Good Shepherd of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is seated upon a rock in a rugged terrain; he holds a long-stemmed golden cross with his left hand as he extends his right hand to stroke the face of a member of his flock. Three sheep are arranged at varying distances and in individualized poses on each side of the shepherd (Figure 29). This composition is the most naturalistic and three-dimensional of the mosaic program; the representation of the rocks, vegetation, earth and sky as well as the cast shadows and the twisted S-shape position of the shepherd's body all work together to create a sense of receding space that is far more convincing than the blank stage set of the drum lunettes. Another remarkable feature of the north arm barrel lunette is the absence of a window; of the four

barrel lunettes only the north arm lacks a window. Instead, Christ with a grand, circular halo occupies the place reserved for the source of illumination in the other three barrel lunettes.



Figure 29: Sheep and terrain, north arm barrel lunette

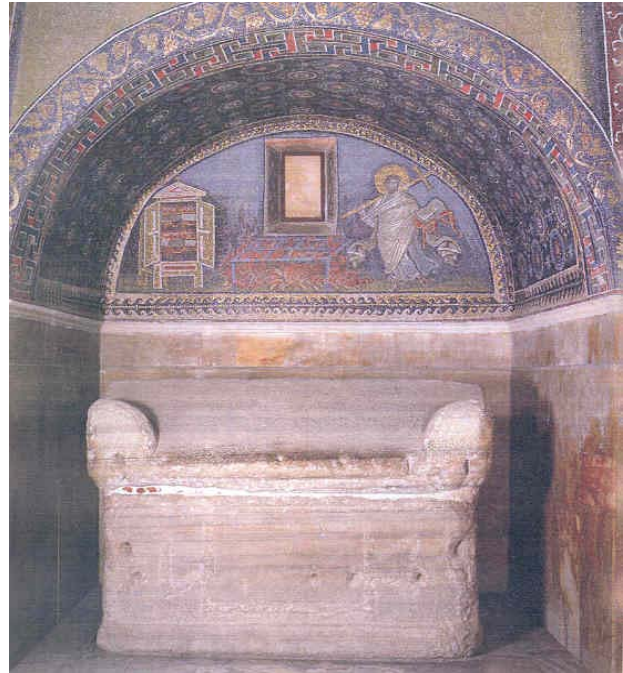


Figure 30: South arm barrel lunette



Figure 31: Male figure, south arm barrel lunette



Figure 32: Face of male figure, south arm barrel lunette

c. South Arm

The most prominent compositional area for the visitor entering the mausoleum is the south arm barrel lunette because of its location opposite the entrance (Figure 30). The mosaic features a male attired in the pristine white, flowing robes of a deacon³⁵ who holds a long-stemmed cross supported on his right shoulder (Figure 31). His left arm is outstretched in a gesture that seems to be either offering or displaying to the visitor a thick codex. The pages of the manuscript are covered with imitation text and the orange ribbons attached to the codex mimic the fluttering drapery of the man's robes. Based on the swirling of his garments and the position of the figure's feet one may reasonably assume that the man is depicted in a posture suggestive of motion. The figure's head is engulfed in a golden halo (Figure 32).³⁶

The man is standing next to an object consumed by flames; the object resembles a metal mattress frame on wheels (Figure 33). This metal, mattress-like device is not merely positioned amid sparks, but engulfed by roaring tongues of fire. This flaming metal contraption is a grill wheeled over an open fire to be used as the implement of martyrdom of the running male figure.³⁷ A cupboard, doors open wide



Figure 33: Flaming gridiron, south arm barrel lunette

to reveal four voluminous labeled books, occupies the left-hand area of the

³⁵ Mackie, "Early Medieval Chapel," 177.

³⁶ Mackie, "New Light," 54-60. The man of the south arm barrel lunette has traditionally been identified as Saint Lawrence. Mackie puts forth a new theory that identifies the saint as Vincent of Saragossa based on the life and passion of Vincent, the widespread popularity of his cult in the fifth-century Western Roman Empire, and Galla Placidia's close personal and family ties to Vincent's native country, Spain.

³⁷ Ibid, 55.

composition (Figure 34). Each book is designated as one of the four Gospels by the Latin inscription of *Marcus, Lucas, Matteus, Joannes*.

The window embrasures of the south arm barrel lunette retain only half of the original mosaic decoration; the top and bottom sections are missing. The sides of this frame have a miniature scrolling vine motif sprinkled with tri-petaled leaves or flowers in blue and red (Figure 35).



**Figure 34: Bookcase,
south arm barrel
lunette**



**Figure 35: Window
embrasure, south arm
barrel lunette**

4. Barrel Vaults

The examination of the mausoleum's interior concludes with the barrel vaults. This area of the mosaic program is often treated only as a pretty canopy for the lunettes below owing to the profusion of decorative elements and seeming lack of substantive content. A closer look at these spaces, however, reveals identifiable motifs that possessed specific meanings to contemporary viewers and acted as integral components of the iconographical program of the interior as a whole.

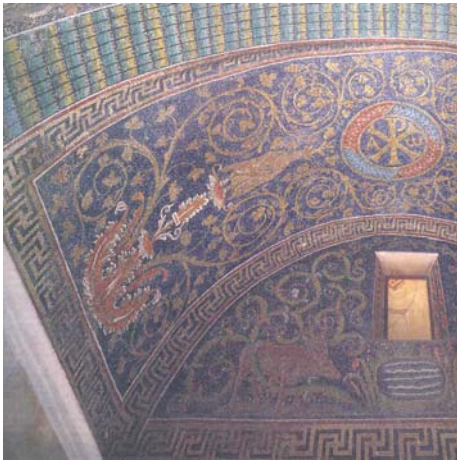


Figure 36: Barrel vault and lunette, east arm

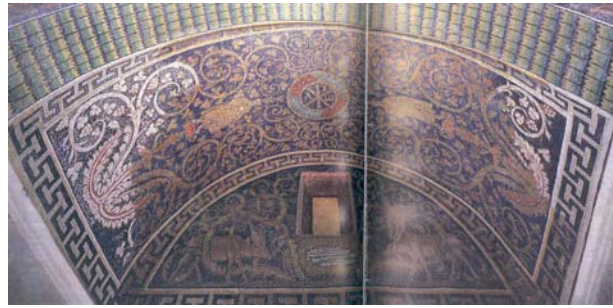


Figure 37: Barrel vault and lunette, west arm

a. East and West Arms

Blue, yellow-green, and gold are the dominant colors of the east and west arm barrel vaults (Figures 36 and 37 respectively). The stiff leaf motif³⁸ located immediately inside the barrel vaults is followed by a meander pattern³⁹ set against a deep blue background. The subject inside the meander border of both arms is nearly identical: two miniature golden men stand holding rolled scrolls amidst undulating yellow-green vine-leaves (Figures 38 and 39). These vine-leaves originate from a large tripartite acanthus plant of gold with red details outlined in white and positioned at the left and right termini of the vaults (Figure 40). At the apex of these bands is a medallion comprised of concentric circles, a

³⁸ Ovadiah, *Geometric and Floral Patterns*, 136.

³⁹ The east arm is the plain double meander and the west arm is the broken meander (the types of meander patterns are consistent with those of the barrel lunettes discussed in the previous section). Ibid, 100-1 and 103 respectively.

victory wreath, and the Chi Rho monogram flanked by the letters representing Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (Figure 41).⁴⁰



Figure 38: Man with scroll, east arm barrel vault



Figure 39: Man with scroll, west arm barrel vault



Figure 40: Acanthus plant and vine-leaves, east arm barrel vault



Figure 41: Chi Rho symbol encircled by a victory wreath from west arm barrel vault

⁴⁰ The basic design of the medallion has myriad iconographical possibilities such as concentric circles, victory wreaths, and crowns.



Figure 42: North arm barrel vault

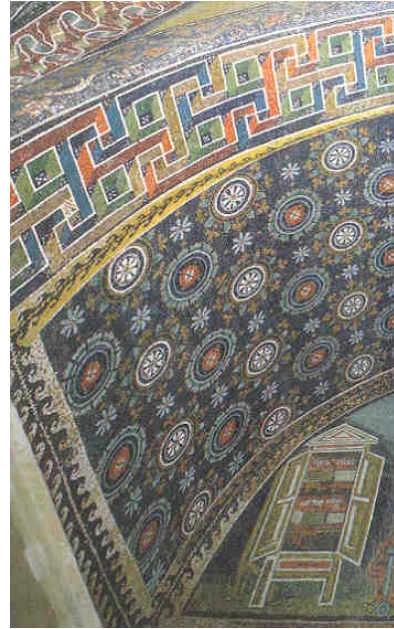


Figure 43: South arm barrel vault and lunette



Figure 44: Wreath pattern, north arm barrel vault



**Figure 45:
Isometric double
meander pattern,
south arm barrel
vault**

b. North and South Arms

The physical description of the mausoleum concludes with a discussion of the north and south arm barrel vaults (Figures 42 and 43 respectively). These seemingly abstract areas of the mosaic program contain a repetitive motif set against a deep blue background framed by a golden wave pattern.⁴¹ The only element that distinguishes the north arm from the south is the area of mosaic located immediately inside the barrel vaults. The north arm has a wreath pattern (Figure 44) that originates from two golden baskets located at the left and right termini of the vault.⁴² At the apex of the vault is a golden Latin cross set inside a blue orb. The wreath is filled with a lush display of ripe apples, pomegranates, and pears. The south arm barrel vault features an isometric double meander arranged in a three-dimensional manner to form recurring, interlocking *Tau* shapes in shades of blue, green, orange, and yellow (Figure 45).⁴³

This concludes the description of the layout of the chapel. Now that the reader possesses a fundamental understanding of the layout of the mausoleum and is acquainted with the content of the mosaic program, attention will be directed to identifying the motifs of the north and south arm barrel vaults, explaining what these designs may have meant to a fifth-century Christian, and how these findings relate to the iconographical meaning of the space as a whole.

⁴¹ Ovadiah, *Geometric and Floral Patterns*, 114.

⁴² *Ibid*, 165.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 100.

Chapter III

Function and Meaning

A. Duality of the Early Christian World

*Two kinds of nature have been entangled in us...*⁴⁴

The north and south arm barrel vaults of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia appear to be nothing more than a stylized, repetitive pattern to the eyes of a modern visitor. Concluding that these areas are devoid of specific designs intended to communicate iconographically because they “lack” figures or clearly recognizable messages is dismissive and hasty. These regions of the interior have valuable information to share with the patient and attentive viewer. The compositional fields in question are rich in meanings that would have been readily understood by a fifth-century Christian.

The task of reading these mosaics from the vantage point of the early Christian is no easy matter for someone of the twenty-first century; the world today is a very different place religiously, politically, and socially from the world of the person living fifteen hundred years ago. People of that time inhabited a double world: that of the physical, which we in the present would recognize, and that of the spiritual, which the modern scholar can only attempt to comprehend and reassemble through tactile and written clues.⁴⁵ The purpose of objects during the Early Christian period reflects this difference in world outlook. These objects were created to perform double duty and span the gap between the realm of the physical and the realm of the spiritual. For example, a piece of

⁴⁴ H.A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1976), 95.

⁴⁵ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 1-3.

silverware adorned with a cruciform pattern would function as a device to eat with then as now, but the fifth-century user got the additional benefit of protection against evil spirits from the decorative design (Figure 46).⁴⁶



Figure 46: Sixth-century spoon, silver with niello inlay.

Although a person of the twenty-first century could easily identify Figure 49 as a spoon, the subtext of the spiritual message is lost on all but the trained observer; the

tendency is to relegate the cruciform pattern to the position of mere

decoration, devoid of any special meaning. Regardless of whether or not the ornamentation was Christian or non-Christian in origin, the purpose remained the same—to adorn the object and transform it into something as effective in the invisible world of spirits as it was in the physical world of touch and sight.⁴⁷ Early Christians existed in the realm of the tangible as we do now, but in addition to this they existed in a place inhabited by unseen powers that acted directly on events of daily life. Some of these powers of the intangible world were beneficial and offered protection or assistance to the living while others were detrimental and to be avoided at all costs. Eusebius, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, referred to these harmful apparitions as, “the invisible enemies [that] were the

⁴⁶ The utensil shown here is a silver spoon with niello inlay that has an inscription reading ΠΕΤΡΟΣ (Peter). A cross appears in two locations on the spoon: preceding the inscription and on the disc joining the bowl of the spoon with the handle. Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 132.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

soul-destroying demons surely fiercer than any barbarians.”⁴⁸ The importance of that which is beyond touch should not lead the modern observer to believe that people of the fifth-century saw themselves as powerless victims left to the whims of these unseen forces. Instead, the early Christians believed that they were capable of manipulating and controlling these spirits through a complex system of symbols and practices.⁴⁹ These efforts to exert control over the spiritual realm led the pagan emperor Julian, dubbed by Christians “the Apostate,” to remark: “The sum of their [the early Christians’] theology consists of these two things: whistling to keep away the demons, and making the sign of the cross on their foreheads.”⁵⁰

Eusebius captured the view on the physical and the spiritual worlds of his time in a passage from his *Tricennial Oration in Praise of Constantine*, “...two kinds of nature have been entangled in us, I mean the spiritual and the physical, the one composed of that which is visible to all and the other of that which is invisible.”⁵¹ When viewing the interior of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia one must be mindful of Eusebius’ words; just as people were entangled with a spiritual and a physical nature, so often times were the objects of their creation. The concept of connectedness between imagery and implied meaning still exists today. Although we have this in common with our fifth-century ancestors, the problem of interpretation arises when we try to decipher messages written in a visual vocabulary with which we are unfamiliar. Proper comprehension of the

⁴⁸ Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 95.

⁴⁹ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 2.

⁵⁰ Charles N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 268.

⁵¹ Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 95.

visual message of the cruciform pattern adorning the spoon in both its physical and spiritual meanings is contingent upon an accurate contextual understanding that is often lost with the passage of time. For example, when we see a red dot enclosed in a red circle (Figure 47) we automatically think of the logo of the discount store Target. When we see golden arches (Figure 48) we think of the fast food restaurant chain McDonald's. Repeated exposure to these images over a period of time forges an ingrained, unconscious connection to their implied meaning. The sight of the Target logo conjures thoughts of quality goods at reasonable prices; the golden arches of McDonald's causes someone of the twenty-first century to think of super-sized Chicken McNugget value meals and the clown Ronald McDonald. Will people fifteen hundred years from now also see the golden arches and think of French fries and a Coca-Cola? Possibly, but not likely because the implied meaning of images is time specific and understood only by those informed about the culture from which the message emanates. The concept of imagery and implied meaning exists across time and space, but to comprehend implied meaning correctly one must possess an understanding of the culture that generated the messages.



Figure 47: Logo of the Target store chain



Figure 48: Logo of the McDonald's fast food restaurant chain

B. How Would A Fifth-Century Christian Have Read This?

*...material objects could be designed to operate in the world of the spirits...*⁵²

Two primary designs dominate the barrel vaults of the north and south arms of the mausoleum, although various other secondary patterns potentially exist.⁵³ These principle motifs are concentric circles surrounding the red and orange flowers with green crosslets and the white flowers with gold centers (Figure 49).

Each of these designs is rich in symbolic meaning; translating them with a fifth-century vocabulary adds a new facet of iconographical understanding to the meaning of the decorative program of the mausoleum as a whole. First, the purpose of the concentric circles will be considered. Next the implications of reading the north and south arm barrel vaults as stylized fields of flowers will be investigated.



Figure 49: Repeating pattern of the north and south arm barrel vaults of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

⁵² Maguire, Maguire, Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 2.

⁵³ The outer circles of each of the two designs can be read as motifs in their own right. These motifs could also be of iconographical significance but this issue is beyond the scope of this investigation.

1. Concentric Circles

*For people of the ancient world, mirrors had the ability to reflect more than light*⁵⁴

The motif of the dot encircled by a single ring or a series of rings has a long history and was commonly portrayed in the Early Christian world on a variety of objects found in places from modern Germany to Jordan. Examples of ancient uses of the concentric circle motif can be found on a piece of Predynastic



Figure 50: Egyptian Predynastic pottery decorated with concentric circles

Egyptian pottery (Figure 50) and on a Greek bronze statuette of a deer nursing its fawn dating to the eighth century BCE (Figure 51). Objects produced in the Early Christian

epoch include hair combs, weavers' combs, dice,

architectural elements, amulets and necklaces, tripods, storage boxes, mirrors, and dolls. These Early Christian pieces have a *terminus post quem* of the first century CE with a *terminus*

ante quem of the eighth century CE, testifying to the longevity of the design. The menagerie of objects demonstrates that the motif was

popular on a variety of possessions ranging from the private, portable, and personal (such as amulets and hair combs) to the grand, public, and permanent



Figure 51: Bronze statuette of deer and fawn decorated with concentric circles, 8th century BCE

⁵⁴ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 7.

(such as the original portal to the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai built by Emperor Justinian that incorporated concentric circles in the form of three projecting roundels inscribed with circles).⁵⁵

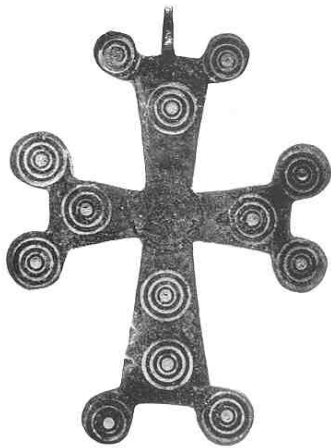


Figure 52: Bronze pendent cross, Egypt, 6th-8th century

Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers acknowledge that the circled dot or series of concentric circles could represent various things depending on how the motif was used. Concentric circles were



Figure 53: Child's wooden doll, Egypt

used to suggest the shimmer of gemstones when applied to jewelry (Figure 52) or the abstract facial features of dolls (Figure 53).⁵⁶ Another more symbolic use of the pattern is strongly suggested, however, by evidence that

repetitive rings surrounding a dot or appearing alone were seen as possessing apotropaic properties. But what exactly were these mystical powers and how did they operate in the physical world? Wooden hair combs, mirrors, plaques, and a scene on the Wedding Casket of Projecta (Figure 54) offer clues to the hidden function and meaning of this motif and help to explain its great appeal across time and space.

⁵⁵ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid.



Figure 54: Wedding Casket of Projecta, silver, circa 380 CE



Figure 55: Roman hand mirror, mirror back decorated with concentric circles, 1st-early 2nd century CE



Figure 56: Silver mirror back incised with six concentric circles, Syrian, 3rd-4th century

In *Art and Holy Powers* Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers note that, “in the ancient world, from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine period, the most

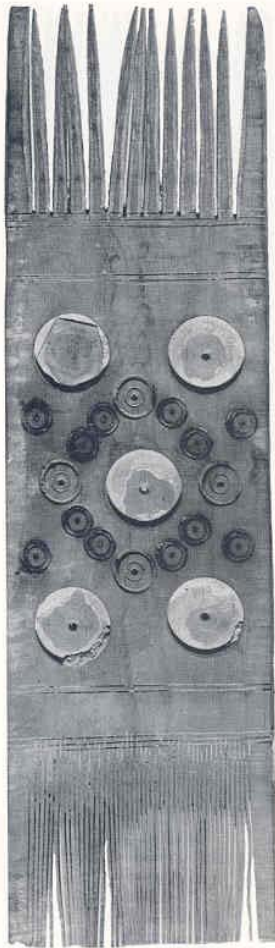


Figure 57: Wooden double-tooth hair comb, Egypt

common decoration for metal mirrors was a design of concentric rings or circles engraved or embossed on the mirror’s back or lid.”⁵⁷ Due to the technique associated with how these mirror backs were decorated, the concentric circle design lent itself well to being the standard motif for the back of a circular mirror (Figures 55 and 56). This could lead the astute observer to conclude that the repeating rings adorned the back of mirrors simply because this pattern conformed well to the shape of the object. The pairing of the mirror with nested circles goes deeper than utilitarian considerations, however, to transform the functional object from a woman’s toilet into a powerful device for

counteracting evil spirits.

Wooden hair combs

commonly featured mirrors inset into concentric rings to form the center dot (Figure 57). The repetition of circles was so common on objects from the Early Christian period that sometimes the mirrored dots themselves were omitted



Figure 58: Lintel decorated with concentric circles, 6th century, Umm el-Jimal, Jordan

⁵⁷ Ibid., 6.

without any loss of meaning or talismanic ability in the minds of the contemporary audience. Commodities such as the amulet illustrated in Figure 52 and the sixth-century door lintel from Umm el-Jimal in Jordan (Figure 58) feature this motif as the sole form of ornamentation; functional pieces such as the lady's hair comb of Figure 57, weavers' combs (Figure 59), and the toys of children (Figure 60) prominently display concentric circles in spite of the fact that their inclusion performs no practical function in the *physical world*.



Figure 59: Wooden weaver's comb with ten incised concentric circles, Egypt, 1st-5th century



Figure 60: Wooden toy weaver's comb inscribed with six concentric circles, Egypt

If this popular decorative convention had no direct reward to offer in the physical realm one may reasonably conclude that the benefits operated in the elusive world of the spirits. The prophylactic functions objects like amulets were

credited with in the past is well known.⁵⁸ This past significance signals that nested rings were viewed as more than a way to fill the surface of an object used for protection; instead they were seen as a way to amplify the object's apotropaic potency. The silver Wedding Casket of Projecta, made as a wedding present for the Roman aristocrats Projecta and her husband Secundus circa 380 CE, demonstrates how the concepts of mirrors and concentric circles were linked together in a talismanic manner in the minds of early Christians.⁵⁹ Rings encapsulated within rings were so synonymous with reflective devices at this



Figure 61: Venus inspecting herself in a mirror held by a centaur, Wedding Casket of Projecta



Figure 62: Projecta at her toilet looking into a mirror decorated with concentric circles, Wedding Casket of Projecta

⁵⁸ One need only recall the faith and power invested in ampullae and *encolpia* in the later Byzantine and medieval periods. The power of these simple objects became magnified if they contained sacred ashes, oils, or relics. The practice of adorning oneself, one's home, even one's food containers with symbols that would ward off evil spirits in the Early Christian period, coupled with the practices of the Byzantine and medieval world, strongly indicates that wearing a special pendent around one's neck at this time would be seen as highly beneficial for keeping devious forces at bay.

⁵⁹ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 6.

Casket of Projecta. One side of the lid has a scene inspired by pagan mythology of a centaur holding up a mirror so Venus (the figure lounging in a sea shell) may inspect herself (Figure 61). Directly below the pagan goddess of love, on the base of the casket is Projecta at her toilet assisted by a servant with a mirror (Figure 62). The mirror Projecta looks into is unusual in that now the concentric circles adorn the reflective surface instead of the standard place for this motif, the mirror's back. Clearly the placement of incised spheres on the face of the mirror would have interfered with the task of reflection and may have been included because of the interchangeability that existed in the fourth century between mirrors and concentric circles.⁶⁰

Early Christians were not the first people to perceive reflective devices as objects endowed with extraordinary qualities; classical Greek mythology tells two of the most famous stories about the power of reflective surfaces in the legends associated with Perseus and Narcissus. Perseus bragged to King Polydectes that he could deliver the head of Medusa and was able to make good on his boast by using his shield as a mirror, decapitating the Gorgon by looking at her reflection and thereby avoiding being turned into stone by her lethal gaze (Figure 63).⁶¹ Perseus' triumph vis-à-vis reflection contrasts with the tragic fate looking and reflecting dealt to Narcissus. The physical beauty of the youth Narcissus attracted many potential lovers, all of whom he rejected because of his great pride. One jilted suitor invoked a curse against his former object of affection, asking that Narcissus know the pain of falling in love with someone he is unable

⁶⁰ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 7.

⁶¹ Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 409-410.

to possess. This curse came to fruition when Narcissus caught sight of his reflection in the smooth, reflective surface of a spring and wasted away out of grief that he could not touch his beloved. The plight of Narcissus is eloquently expressed in a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that reads:

He fell in love with a hope insubstantial, believing what was only an image to be corporeal and real...Unwise and unheeding, he desired his very self, one and the same person approving and being approved, seeking and being sought, inflaming and being inflamed.⁶²

The myths show that reflection could be something imbued with protection and rewards, as in the case of Perseus, or judgment and punishment, as was the fate of the arrogant Narcissus. Whether the outcome was perceived as beneficial or detrimental, gods and invisible spiritual forces were seen as directly determining the outcome of events in the corporeal world. As we have seen, for both the ancient Greeks and the early Christians, reflective devices were potent weapons that could be harnessed for good or for evil with the power to act as intermediaries between the tangible and abstract planes of existence.



Figure 63: Perseus Cuts Medusa's Head Off, painting by Francesco Maffei, 1650 CE

⁶² Quote from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* taken from Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 230.

2. Flowers

*...they are absent only at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia*⁶³

The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is extensively documented in the body of scholarly literature but little, if any, attention is given to the north and south arm barrel vaults. When mention is made of these areas it is usually only done so in passing to refer to the region as purely decorative mosaics that lead the eye toward the frequently discussed barrel vault lunettes. A more substantive interpretation for the concentric circles is that the design acts as a reflective surface to ward off evil and increase the apotropaic power of the overall motif.

If early Christians interpreted the concentric circles of the north and south arm barrel vaults as mirrors capable of deflecting evil spirits, the next logical question to ask is how the rest of this pattern was read by the contemporary visitor. Mackie, writing of Ravenna's rich mosaic tradition of floral imagery, says, "...in Ravenna...such flowers were almost universal among surviving Early Christian mosaics: they are absent only at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia."⁶⁴ Although these barrel vaults lack floral imagery that someone of the twenty-first century would easily recognize, investigating the possibility that the motifs flanking and encapsulated by concentric circles may be stylized flora gives the visitor access to an untapped resource of iconographical meaning that extends beyond the area of the north and south arm barrel vaults to encompass the entire space.

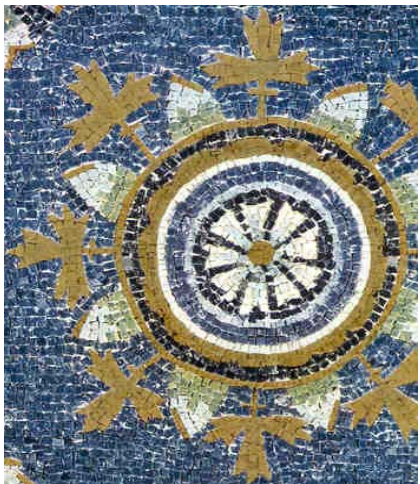
⁶³ Mackie, "Abstract and Vegetal," 179.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Three distinct types of potential flora are present in these zones (Figures 64-66). Figure 64 is extensively documented as a form of rosette found, among other places, in the floor mosaics of Antioch (Figures 67-69).⁶⁵ Doro Levi, in his



work *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, refers to this particular variety of rosette as a crosslet rosette because of the “X” that intersects the design (Figures 70-71). Figure 65 resembles what Levi calls a “Maltese cross” and appears to be a variation of the rosette (Figures 72 and 73 respectively).⁶⁶ Examples of the Maltese cross rosette appear in mosaic pavements from Antioch (Figure 74) and as part of the border of the Justinian and Theodora panels in San Vitale, Ravenna (dedicated 547) (Figures 75 and 76). The Maltese cross rosette and the crosslet rosette are frequently combined in floor mosaics to form alternating floral motifs as seen in Figures 67 and



68. The daisy-like motif of Figure 66

Figures 64 (above left): Crosslet rosette

Figure 65 (above right): Maltese cross rosette

Figure 66 (left): Daisy-like flower

⁶⁵ Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 2 volumes. (Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 1971).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, references to the Maltese cross rosette form appear throughout pages 373-488.

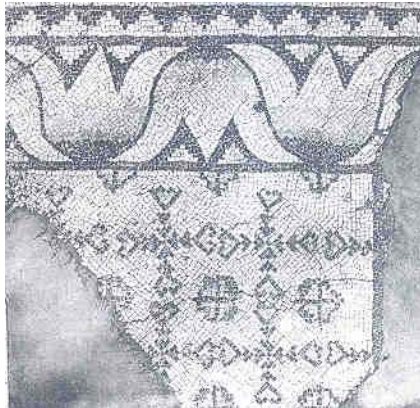


Figure 67: Crosslet rosettes alternating with stylized Maltese cross rosettes, mosaic pavement from Room 2, House of the Buffet Supper, Antioch

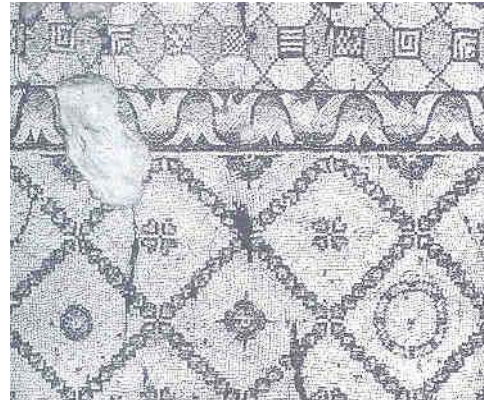
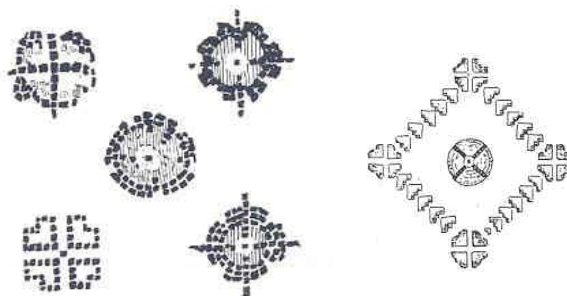


Figure 68: Crosslet rosettes and Maltese cross rosettes, mosaic pavement from Room 5, House of the Buffet Supper, Antioch



Figure 69: Crosslet rosette pattern alternating with buds, Mosaic of the Beribboned Lion, Antioch



Figures 70 (far left): Drawings of examples of crosslet rosettes found in Antioch mosaic pavements

Figure 71 (left): Drawings of examples of crosslet rosettes found in Antioch mosaic pavements

Figure 72: Maltese cross

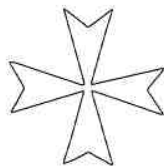


Figure 73: Drawings of Maltese cross rosettes found in Antioch mosaic pavements

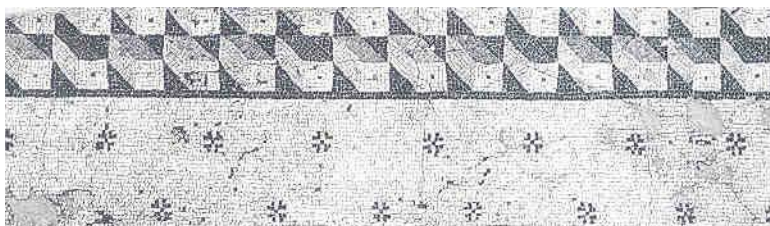


Figure 74: Maltese cross rosettes, mosaic pavement Room 5, House of Iphigenia

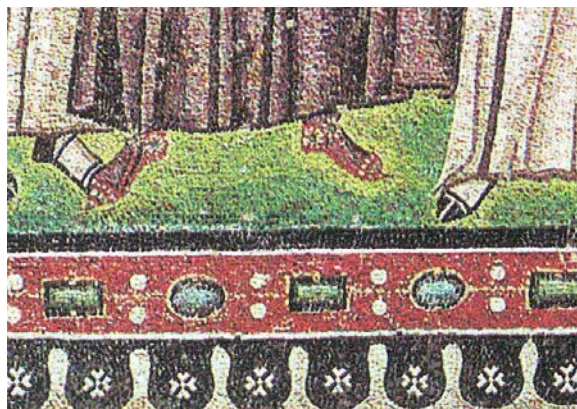


Figure 75 (top): Maltese cross rosettes that frame the panel of Emperor Justinian at San Vitale, Ravenna

Figure 76 (bottom): Maltese cross rosettes that frame the panel of Empress Theodora at San Vitale, Ravenna

is represented in the apse mosaic of Sant'Apollinare in Classe (dedicated 549) (Figure 77) and also has stylistic antecedents that can be traced back to mosaic pavements found in Antioch (Figures 78 and 79).



Figure 78:
Daisy-like
flower from
Antioch

Perpetually blossoming flowers, like the ever-ripe fruit located in the wreath of the north arm barrel vault, offer a valuable clue as to how the mosaic program of the entire mausoleum can



Figure 77: Daisy-like
flower, apse mosaic
of Sant'Apollinare in
Classe, Ravenna

be interpreted. When plants and fruit are depicted as eternally fresh in art they usually mark the space as a garden. Reading these zones as representative of a garden

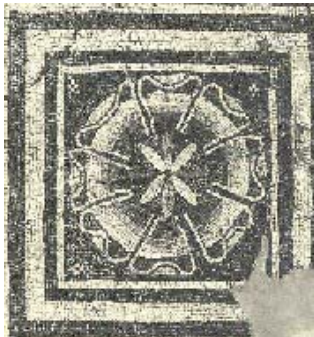


Figure 79: Daisy-like
flower inscribed
inside a Maltese
cross rosette, Room
5, House of
Menander, Antioch

sheds light on how a fifth-century Christian perceived this motif and how these barrel vaults related to the purpose and meaning of the mosaic program as a coherent whole. A garden where things never die in Early Christian art and literature often signifies not just any ordinary type of garden but the garden of the Earthly Paradise. Deciphering this pattern as a stylized representation of the Earthly Paradise conveys the meaning and significance of the vaults in their original sense and goes beyond a surface level

reading of the motifs as purely decorative and abstract in nature. In a world where people believed that invisible forces held sway over events in the physical realm and that the most mundane, fundamental objects such as spoons and weaver's combs were endowed with evocative protective patterns to enhance

their effectiveness against evil spirits, the likelihood that an area traditionally reserved for an altar or a sarcophagus in an expensive imperial structure would be lacking in apotropaic designs is highly doubtful. Viewing the interior of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia as a microcosm of the Earthly Paradise explains an aspect of the physical and spiritual functions of the images of the north and south arm barrel vaults.

The iconographical importance of the rose illustrates how flowers were laden with symbolic meaning during the Classical and Early Christian periods. In Roman times the rose gained significance within a funerary context as the flower used to cover graves during the feast of roses known as the *rosalia*.⁶⁷ Christianity refined the importance of the marriage between death and the rose when red roses were singled out as emblematic of the blood shed by martyrs in the name of their faith.⁶⁸ Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (374-397), added an additional layer of meaning to the rose when he explained that when the rose resided in paradise, its original home, the flower was without thorns: only after the fall of man from grace through sin were thorns acquired by the earthly rose.⁶⁹ Man was left with the fragrance and beauty of the rose to remind him during his stay on earth of the splendors of heaven that awaited. Writings of many of the Fathers of the Church and influential religious figures touch on the important symbolic nature of the flowers of paradise and the crowns of roses earned by the martyrs. Prudentius described heaven as being “covered and scented with beds

⁶⁷ Mackie, “Abstract and Vegetal,” 178.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Saint Ambrose, translated by J.J. Savage, *Hexameron*, as referenced in Mackie, “Abstract and Vegetal,” 179.

of rich roses.”⁷⁰ Saturus, a companion in martyrdom to Saint Perpetua, had a vision that heaven was “a great open space...which seemed to be a garden with rose bushes and all manner of flowers.”⁷¹ Flowers, laurel wreaths, scrolls inhabited with grapes and flowers, animals, and birds are all objects rich in meaning during the Early Christian period because they were perceived as articles of the faith.⁷² Mackie points out that these objects were identified by the early Christian with, “...the glory of Christ’s sacrifice, Christ’s own victory over death, and the garden of paradise on earth.”⁷³ Christian allegory cast Christ in the role of gardener cultivating his Christian souls under the deep blue sky of the vault sprinkled with golden stars; this setting established the stage for the petitioning Apostles of the drum lunettes who offered perpetual prayers of salvation on behalf of the occupant.⁷⁴

This garden that Christ was tending was no ordinary garden; in the mind of a fifth-century Christian this was the location of one’s corporeal remains until the time of the Second Coming. The sky was not believed to be the place to await the Last Judgment and paradise was not in some remote realm but a place on earth in the form of the Earthly Paradise. The term “paradise” comes from the Greek word *Paradisos*, which was in turn borrowed from a word in the Persian language to express the idea of an area used as a park or an enclosed pleasure

⁷⁰ Prudentius, *Cathemerinon* V, vs. 113-4 (trans. J.J. Thompson: Loeb edition), as referenced by Mackie, *Ibid.*

⁷¹ H. Musarillo (ed. and trans.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, as referenced in Mackie, *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 181. All of the motifs mentioned here are present in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and their presence supports the theory that the space was indeed conceived to be a representation of the Earthly Paradise.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

ground.⁷⁵ Christians appropriated the Persian meaning and applied the concept to the dwelling place of the Blessed. A later refinement of the term had occurred by the fifth century, resulting in the added meaning of *Paradisos* as the burial place in the narthex or atrium of a church.⁷⁶ This nuanced understanding of paradise is particularly germane to a study of the mausoleum because of its original attachment to Santa Croce vis-à-vis the narthex. Mackie states that:

It is clear that the early Christians, when planning the internment of their dead, believed that Paradise was a place on earth where the souls would await their reward, a delightful place of happiness for those whose good lives deserved it. It was not seen as a kingdom in the sky, but as a flowering garden with water, grass, trees, and flowers....⁷⁷

In the fifth century, the phrase “Earthly Paradise” referred to the place in which Christians who had lived a proper life passed their time in preparation for the Last Judgment.

So if the north and south arm barrel vaults were intended to be read as the perpetually blossoming flowers of the Earthly Paradise, why is the flora of the mausoleum “hidden” when other mosaic programs in Ravenna feature an abundance of flowers that are clear-cut, easily identifiable representations? The flora of the apse mosaic at Sant’Apollinare in Classe (Figure 80) and the nave mosaics of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo (first half sixth-century) (Figure 81) are

⁷⁵ James Driscoll, “Terrestrial Paradise,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14519a.html>.

⁷⁶ Mackie, “Abstract and Vegetal,” 180.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

impossible to overlook.⁷⁸ A possible explanation for the less overt floral designs of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (circa 425) in comparison to Ravenna's other extant mosaic programs is that Ravenna, as the seat of power of the Western Roman Empire, was a likely birthplace of stylistic trends and innovations. Perhaps the understated fields of flowers in monuments of an earlier date, such as the mausoleum (Figure 82), are the forerunner of Ravenna's obvious and profuse types of flora that culminate in the apse mosaic of Sant'Apollinare in Classe a century later (Figure 83).

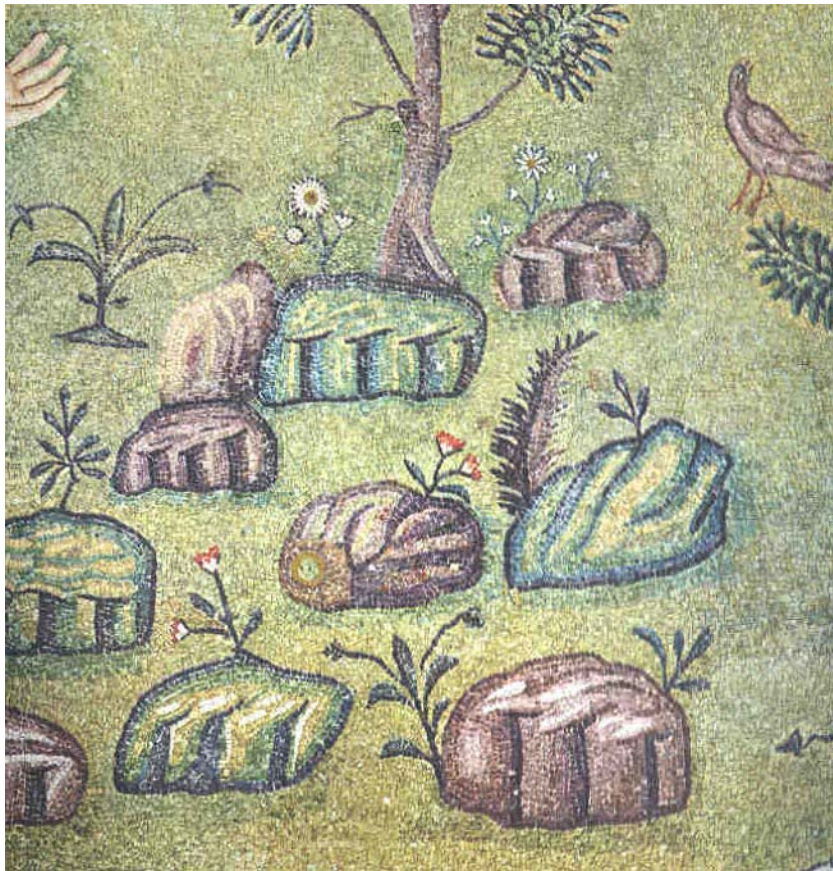


Figure 80: Flora, apse mosaic, Sant'Apollinare in Classe (dedicated 549 CE)

⁷⁸ Dates taken from John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 125, 127.



Figure 81: Wise Men offering gifts to the Virgin and Child, north nave wall, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (first half 6th century)

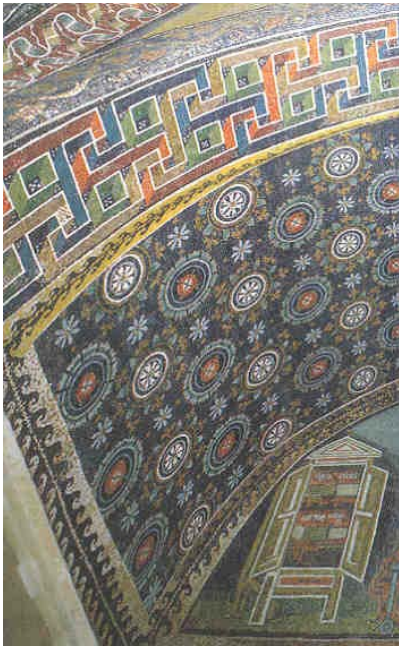


Figure 82 (left): South arm barrel vault, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, circa 425 CE

Figure 83 (above): Apse mosaic, Sant' Apollinare in Classe, 6th century

C. Where Did This Pattern Come From?

*...it is, in fact, borrowed from textiles and more specifically from woven silks of an exotic origin.*⁷⁹

Where did the motif of repeating flowers and concentric circles of the north and south arm barrel vaults of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia come from? Although there are examples that look exactly like a particular aspect of the composition or that are similar in overall appearance to the barrel vaults, there are no known extant examples that are exact copies of the entire pattern. The origin of the design in question can be traced to floor mosaics and various types of textiles.

The mosaic pavements of Antioch offer countless examples linking the appearance of the north and south arm barrel vaults of the mausoleum (Figure 84) to the patterns of numerous floor mosaics. Three pavements from Antioch have been selected to facilitate comparison (Figures 85-87). The layout of the floor mosaics, the alternation of various floral motifs, and the way in which space is compartmentalized and unified simultaneously all point to the migration of patterns from the floor to the vaults.

Ernst Kitzinger, as quoted in the epigraph to this section, cites textiles as the inspiration behind the barrel vaults of the north and south arms of the mausoleum. Although Kitzinger's hypothesis suggests why this zone of the

⁷⁹ Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making. Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art 3rd-7th Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 54.

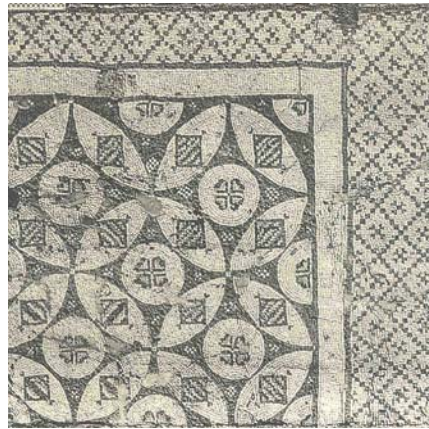


Figure 84 (top left): North arm barrel vault, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

Figure 85 (top right): Mosaic pavement from Upper level, Room 1, House of the Green Carpet, Antioch

Figure 86 (above): Mosaic pavement from House of the Ram's Head, Antioch

Figure 87 (left): Mosaic pavement from House of the Phoenix, Antioch

mosaic program looks as it does, this theory does nothing more than superficially scratch the surface of appearance without delving into the subtext of what this design was meant to communicate to its fifth-century audience. Kitzinger's theory that the mosaics in question resemble the elaborate, aesthetically appealing compositions found in textiles is supported in this thesis but expanded to include floor mosaics and another form of textile not mentioned by Kitzinger or anyone else in the corpus of scholarly literature. These forgotten textiles are curtains, a furnishing with its own rich, complicated connotations that will be examined at the end of this section.

First, various types of textiles from China and Egypt and their stylistic relation to the north and south arm barrel vaults of the mausoleum will be discussed. Michael W. Meister, in his article championing China in lieu of Persia as the birthplace of the pearl roundel in textiles, studied six examples that bear a resemblance to the overall layout of the north and south arm barrel vaults (Figures 88-92).⁸⁰ Interestingly, several scholars have attempted to link the creation of the pearl roundel in Chinese textiles to a pattern found in Han mirrors, reaffirming the link between mirrors, reflection, and the mausoleum's north and south arm barrel vaults.⁸¹ The examples taken from Meister are dated from the third- through seventh-centuries CE and all feature alternating types of stylized representations of flowers arranged in a grid-like layout over the entire piece of cloth.⁸² Similarities between the arrangement of encapsulated floral elements

⁸⁰ Michael W. Meister, "The Pearl Roundel in Chinese Textile Design," *Ars orientalis* 8 (1970): 250-265.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 257, 260, 261.

alternating with isolated flora in the Chinese textiles and the barrel vaults of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia are self-evident.

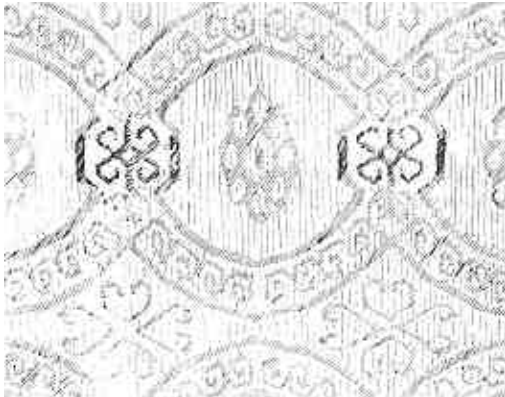
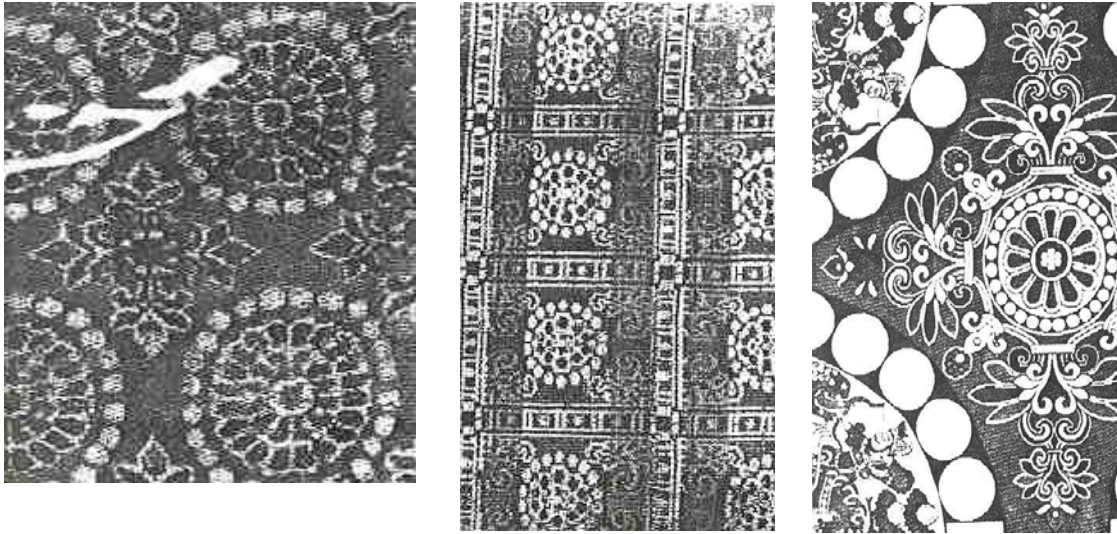


Figure 88 (top left): Lotus pattern textile found in caves at Astana, 653-661 CE

Figure 89 (top center): "Sash" cloth, Sui Period, 581-618 CE

Figure 90 (top right): Shomu Banner

Figure 91 (left): Drawing of a damask found at Toyuk, 3rd-6th century CE

Figure 92 (bottom left): Lotus pattern textile found in caves at Astana, 661 CE

Moving from China to Egypt, three fragments of Egyptian tapestries dating from the fourth- through sixth-centuries (Figures 93-95) feature compositions that



Figure 93: Wool and linen tapestry panel, Egypt, late 5th-early 6th century

are related to the layout of the barrel vaults in question. Figure 94 is a fourth-century fragment of woolen tapestry comprised of crosses encircled by knots

intersected with knot crosslets inside a circular



Figure 94: Woolen textile with tapestry roundel, Egypt, 4th century

frame. Crosses frequently appeared in mosaic and textile compositions in either an upright or tilted position to link the aspects of the design

together diagonally (Figure 96).⁸³ Figures 93 and 95, of a somewhat later date than the mausoleum, share the layout of the compartmentalized flower with the north and south arm barrel vault mosaics; Figure 94 mimics the crosslet rosette flanked by independent flora, and Figures 93 and 95 resemble the floral center of both types of concentric circle designs.

The final textile model is that of the curtain, a seemingly mundane object that had many complex functions and meanings beginning in pagan times that carried over into the Early Christian period. Many of the surviving examples

⁸³ Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 428-488.



Figure 95: Linen and wool tapestry panel, Egypt, 6th century

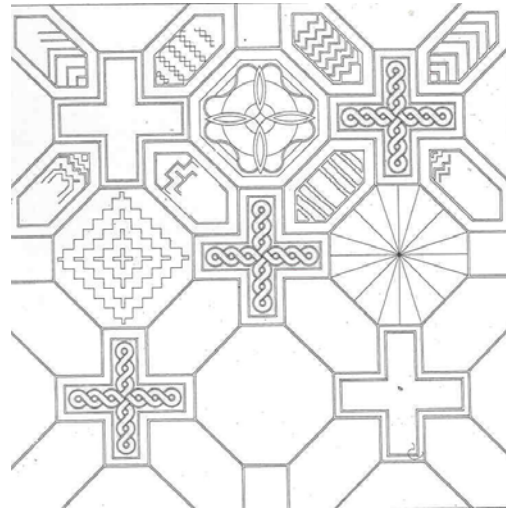


Figure 96: Drawing of mosaic pavement from Antioch

of Early Christian curtains exist today because they were used as burial shrouds.⁸⁴ Ironically, these ordinary objects from everyday life have survived as a result of this connection with death and entombment.⁸⁵ Mosaics such as the scene at Theoderic's palace in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (sixth-century) (Figure 97), the Theodora panel in the sanctuary of San Vitale, Ravenna (547) (Figure 98), and the scenes of the *Israelites Threatening Revolt* and the *Stoning of Moses* in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (432-440) (Figures 99-101) reconstruct for the modern visitor how these extant fragments originally appeared and functioned. Curtains acted as doors in the Early Christian dwelling, offering semi-permeable coverings for doorways and openings that allowed light and air from the outside to enter the interior while simultaneously providing the home with

⁸⁴ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 45.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

privacy and a protective barrier from street noise and dirt.⁸⁶ The light filtering properties of curtains necessitated decorative patterns and materials that were heavy enough to transform the interior into a refuge from the street and withstand the constant handling and knotting they were subjected to daily but not so dense



Figure 97: Curtains from *Palatium* mosaic of south nave wall of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, 6th century CE

⁸⁶ Ibid.



Figure 98: Curtains from Empress Theodora mosaic, San Vitale, circa 547 CE



Figure 99: *Israelites Threatening Revolt* and *Stoning of Moses* (top and bottom respectively, apse mosaics, Santa Maria Maggiore, 432-440 CE



Figures 100 (left): Curtains from *Israelites Threatening Revolt*



Figure 101 (right): Curtains from *Stoning of Moses*

as to block out all light and air. This need for adaptability led to curtains in doorways being hung in pairs so they could function in the same manner as a modern screen and door.⁸⁷ Pictorial evidence supports the use of curtains as walls to partition larger rooms into smaller spaces and to act as doors for doorways and arches inside the house.⁸⁸ Images in mosaics instruct us as to how these curtains were hung: suspended from hooks or rods by loops sewn into the tops of the curtains.⁸⁹

Curtains were also prized for the layer of mystery with which they endowed a space. In addition to the more practical uses that curtains performed in the Early Christian era, the function of partitioning a large space into component parts was more significant. Curtains bestowed an aura of respect and dignity because of the insular areas they created. In the Early Christian world what was visible to all and displayed in the open was not as valued as what was hidden and seen only by a select few.⁹⁰ In Constantinople outdoor arcades were closed with curtains for state occasions to impress the onlookers with an even greater sense of awe and majesty.⁹¹ Flavius Cresconius Corippus explains the fascination of his contemporaries with curtains when he writes, "...that which is common is worthless: what is hidden stands out in honor. And the more a thing is hidden, the more valuable it is considered. Then no one was allowed to go

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ V. Gervers, "An Early Christian Curtain in the Royal Ontario Museum," *Studies in Textile History in Memory of Harold B. Burnham*, as referenced in Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 45.

⁸⁹ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 45.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁹¹ Ibid.

beneath the closed arches, but the wide path in the middle was open to all.”⁹²

Corippus’ words clearly indicate that at the time of the mausoleum’s construction the idea of concealing what was most precious and the practice of using curtains to do so were so common as to be taken for granted.

The location of the concentric circle-stylized flora motifs in the barrel vaults of the north and south arms is in keeping with the belief that what was concealed

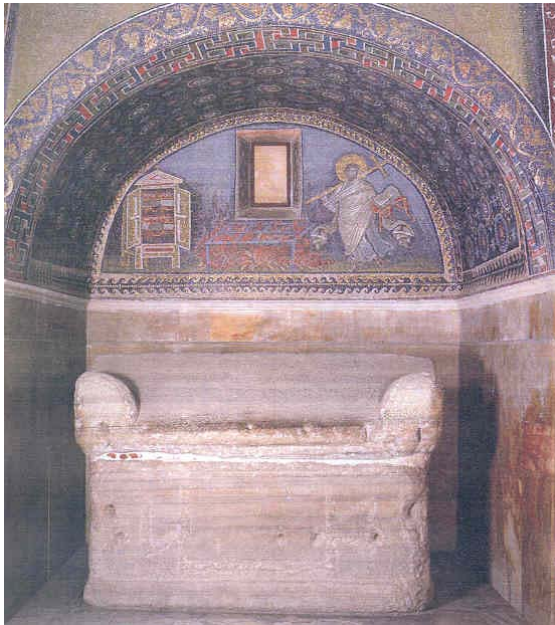


Figure 102: South arm, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia



Figure 103: Arocosolium, Cubiculum of Leonis, Catacomb of Commodilla, near Rome, late 4th century

was more sacred than what was revealed. This motif appears over the area where an altar or sarcophagus was likely to have originally been positioned; the space created by the barrel vaults in the mausoleum is similar in appearance to arcosolia in catacombs that covered sarcophagi and altars (Figures 102 and 103). Decorating the vaulted spaces over the most sacred objects in the interior

⁹² Avril Cameron, ed. and trans., *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, as referenced in Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 47. Flavius Cresconius Corippus was a North African Latin poet active 566-578 CE.

with apotropaic symbols like concentric rings to deflect evil spirits, repeating floral patterns to link the room to the Earthly Paradise, and borrowing the patterns of curtains that were used to conceal and protect important places relates well to the idea of the interior functioning as a funerary context. Adorning the surfaces with a design commonly found in curtains of the period also ties into the theme of the ever-blossoming flora of the Earthly Paradise and burial since bodies were often wrapped in these textiles. This practice offers yet another connection between the north and south arm barrel vaults and the internment of the dead.

D. What Does All of This Mean?

*On one level, the artifacts worked in a material sense, in that they were designed to perform tasks in the physical world....But, at another level...*⁹³

Examining the function and meaning of the barrel vaults of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia has unearthed evidence from a variety of fields of art historical scholarship that add additional layers of significance to an area once considered nothing more than window dressing for the figural compositions in the barrel lunettes below. Foremost in importance for uncovering the forgotten meaning of the barrel vaults is an understanding of and sensitivity to the duality believed to exist between the physical and the spiritual worlds at the time the mausoleum was constructed. This dualism must become the lens through which the individual motifs of the areas in question are considered and interpreted.

⁹³ Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 2.

The first motif encountered was the concentric circle imagery associated with mirrors and reflective properties. These concepts were so strongly linked to one another in the Early Christian epoch that the sight of nested rings alone was enough to suggest a mirror and reflection in the mind of a fifth-century viewer. The idea of refracting evil and amplifying the apotropaic properties of an already powerful symbol are key benefits delivered by the placement of concentric circles in the barrel vaults. These benefits are desirable, especially when placed over a sarcophagus or an altar, locations where one would understandably want to keep evil at bay. Next, the significance of perpetually blossoming flora, no matter how stylized or how unlike the twenty-first century visitor's conception of flowers, was explored. The presence of flowers that are eternally in bloom is one of the key factors that mark a space as a microcosm of the Earthly Paradise. This sacred area was the location on earth where one waited until the time of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. The appearance of similar motifs on textiles is noteworthy since these items were often used as burial shrouds. Patterning the north and south arm barrel vaults after designs commonly used on curtains, as is suggested by the representations of curtains found in extant mosaics, indicates that these arches may have been intended to act as partitions to protect the most sacrosanct areas of the mausoleum. This protective function mimics the task performed by curtains in the physical world during the Early Christian period to enhance the importance and dignity of select areas.

Once one knows how to decipher the code and properly read the imagery of the north and south arm barrel vaults an entirely new way of responding to the

space comes alive before the eyes of the modern viewer. This space was not intended to be purely decorative; instead it was designed to be interactive, alive, dynamic, protective, and sacred. The findings relating to this often overlooked, non-figural area of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia contain a stockpile of information that can be extrapolated beyond these two sections of the interior and applied to the space as a cohesive whole to shed new light on old arguments favoring a funerary function for the structure.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

Due to accidents of survival and history, debates have long circulated about the person of Galla Placidia and the objects of her patronage. The very location of her final resting place was shrouded in mystery for centuries. Ravenna was a leading contender for the title because of its position as the seat of the Western Roman Empire during Galla Placidia's lifetime, coupled with the fact that the city was her primary place of residence and the location of a structure believed by many to have been built for her entombment. There is widespread agreement now that Galla Placidia died on November 27, 450 in Rome and was interred in the family burial space in the Lateran, ruling out Ravenna as the place of the august empress' corporeal remains.

This fact, confirmed only to the extent that Galla Placidia's chaotic life and burial will allow, does not rule out the possibility that the empress planned to be laid to rest in Ravenna and made arrangements to prepare a space to fulfill this important function. Mackie has suggested an intriguing and plausible alternative to the standard belief that the mausoleum was built by Galla Placidia for her personal use.⁹³ Instead she suggests that Galla Placidia constructed the chapel as a resting place for the remains of her son Theodosius who did not survive infancy.

Regardless of whose use the building was constructed for or where Galla Placidia was actually laid to rest, the investigation into the pattern of the north and south arm barrel vaults reveals many associations between the Mausoleum

⁹³ Mackie, "A Possible Occupant," 396.

of Galla Placidia and features that clearly connect the edifice with a funerary function. The coincidences between the imagery of the specific area investigated here and its links to death, burial, and the Earthly Paradise enumerated at the end of the preceding chapter are simply too numerous to be denied. Subjecting other previously overlooked areas of abstract patterning of the mosaic program to the same sort of scrutiny may bring to light new and compelling evidence to support the conclusions put forth here. The findings generated by examining the subtle and the abstract aspects of the north and south arm barrel vaults are surprisingly complex. These zones that seem to be purely decorative in nature are inextricably connected to the meaning of the mosaic program and the building as a whole; investigating these often overlooked regions enriches one's understanding of the space in its entirety.

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APPENDIX A
ADDITIONAL IMAGES



Figure 104 (above): Map Roman Empire, 12 CE

Figure 105 (below): Map Roman Empire, 150 CE





Figure 106 (above): Map Roman Empire, 500 CE

Figure 107 (below): Map of Ravenna, area around Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

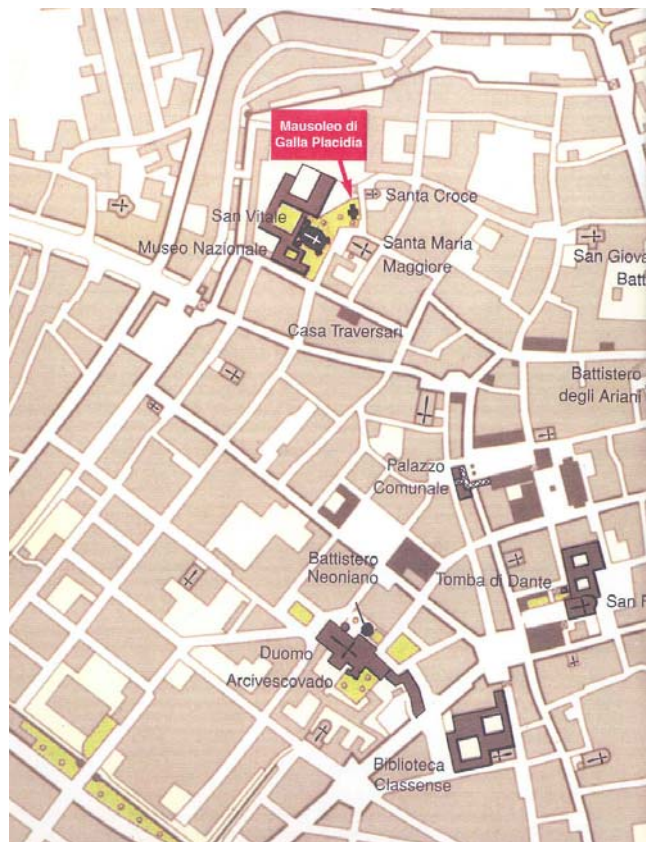




Figure 108: Gold medallion of Galla Placidia, 425-450 CE



Figure 109: Solidus of Galla Placidia



**Figure 110:
Theodosius the
Great, father of
Galla Placidia,
detail from silver
Missorium of the
Emperor
Theodosius,
388 CE**



Figure 111 (left): Solidus of Justa Grata Honoria, daughter of Galla Placidia and Constantius III

Figure 112 (right): Solidus of Valentinian III, son of Galla Placidia and Constantius III





Figure 113: Solidus of Arcadius, half-brother of Galla Placidia, emperor of the East 395-408 CE



Figure 114: Solidus of Honorius, half-brother of Galla Placidia, emperor of the West 395-423 CE



Figure 115: Solidus of Constantius III, second husband of Galla Placidia

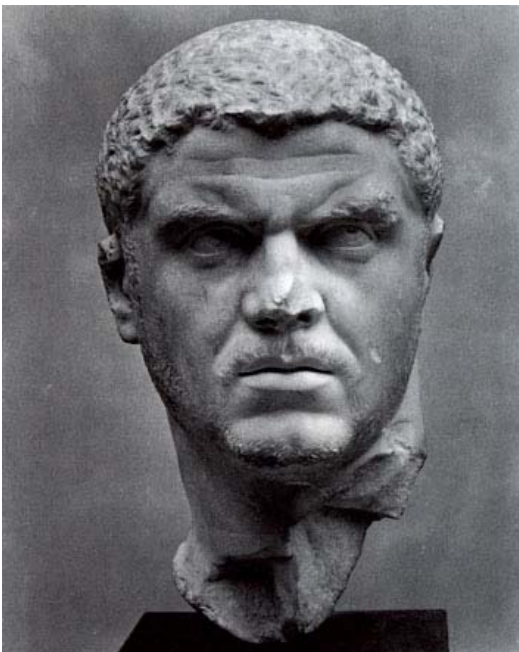


Figure 116 (above): Caracalla, emperor 211-217 CE

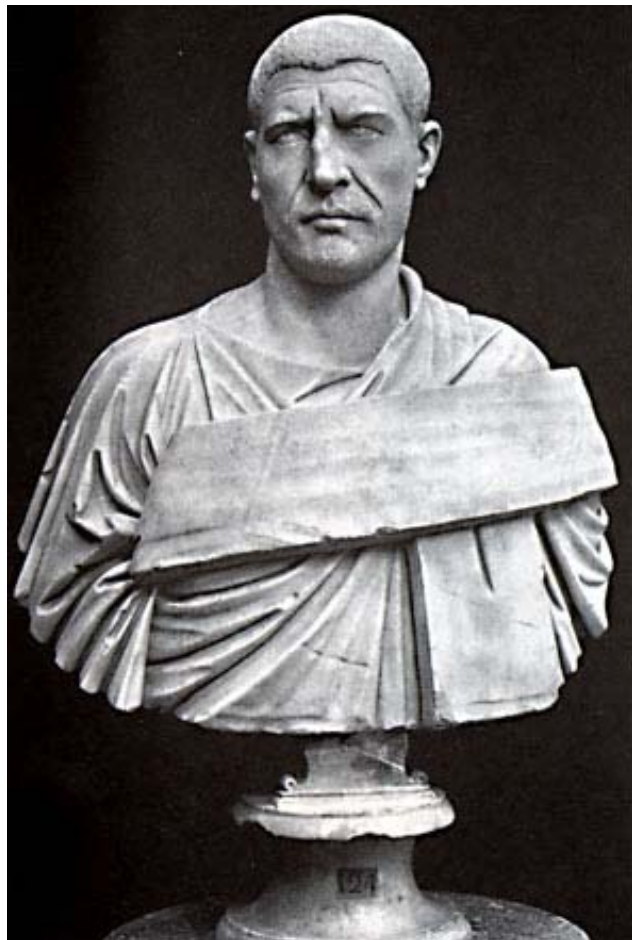


Figure 117 (right): Philip the Arab, emperor 244-249 CE

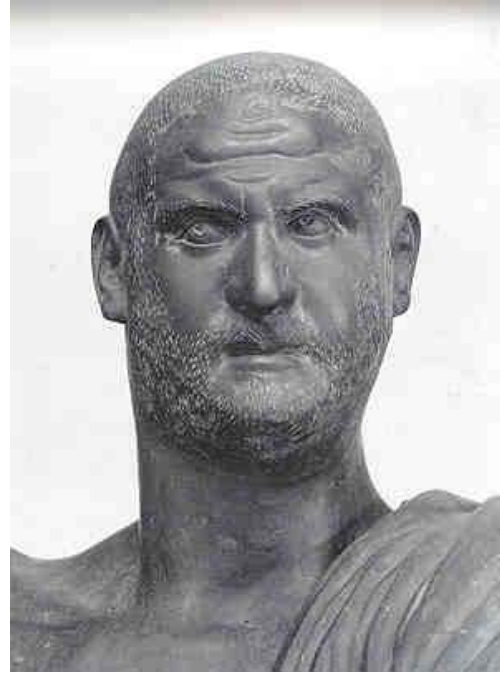
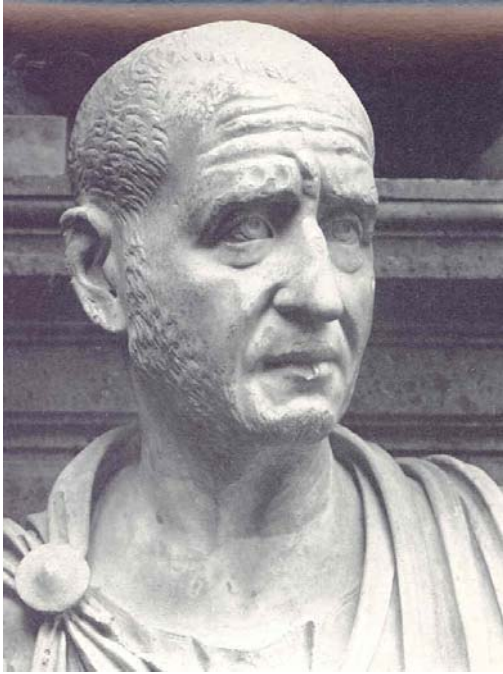


Figure 118 (left): Decius, emperor 249-251 CE

Figure 119 (right): Trebonianus Gallus, emperor 251-253 CE

The troubles that plagued the Roman Empire in the third century are conveyed in the brief reigns and the weary or menacing expressions that dominated official imperial portraiture of the time (Figures 116-119)

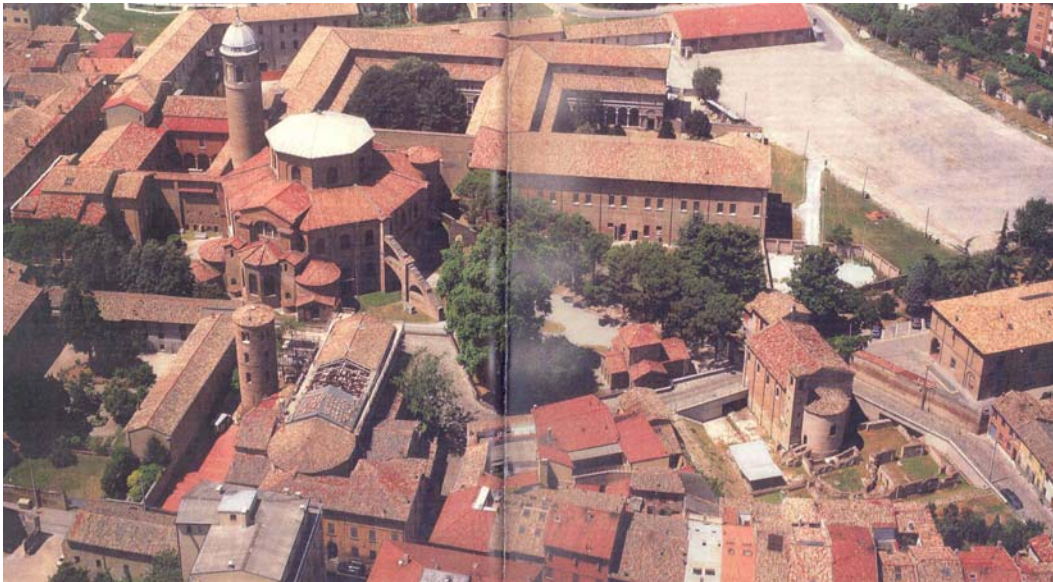


Figure 120: Aerial view Ravenna, area around San Vitale

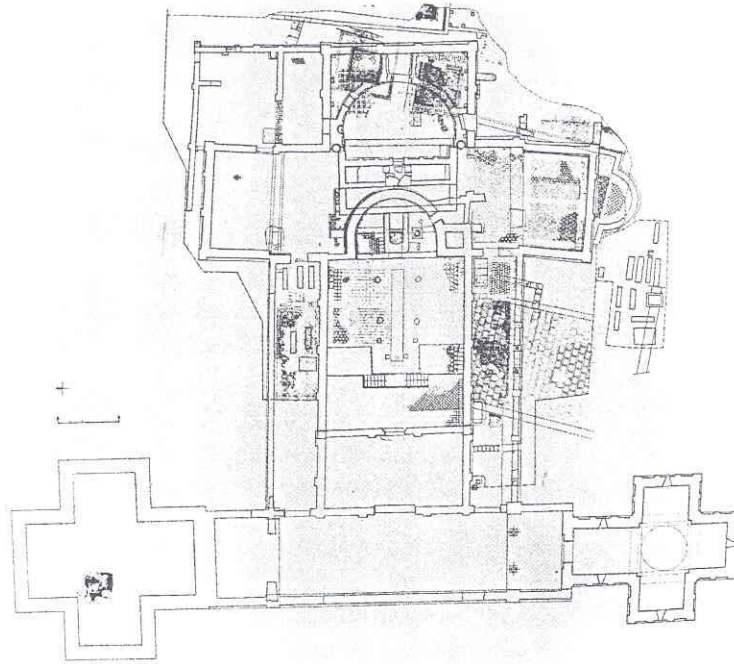


Figure 121 (above): Original plan of Santa Croce with pendant chapels attached at the termini of the narthex

Figure 122 (below): East arm exterior, flanks of south and north arms





Figure 123(above): North and west arms, exterior

Figure 124 (below): Pediment, west arm

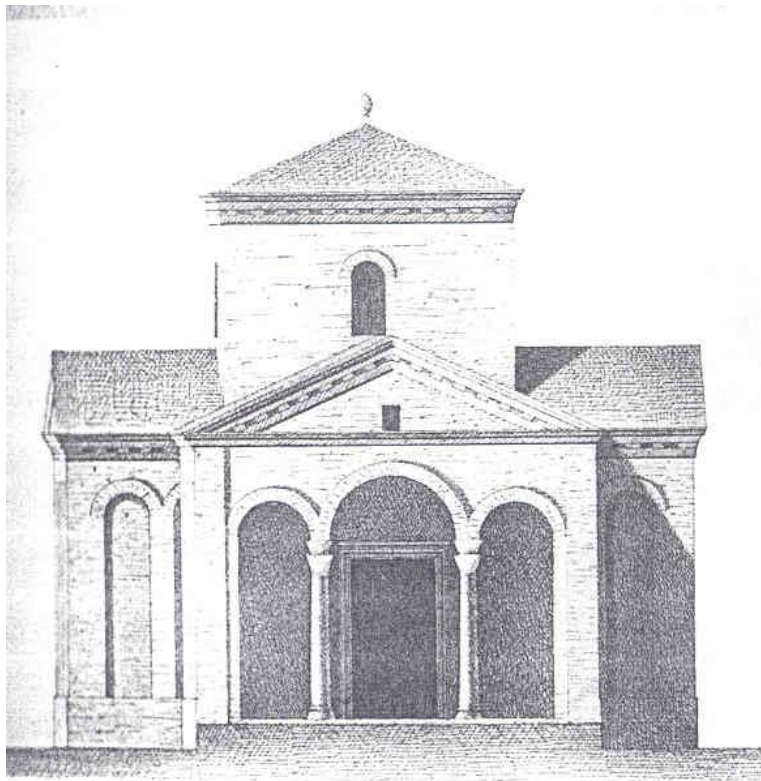
Figure 125 (bottom): Blind arcades, west arm





Figure 126 (above): Frieze over entrance to mausoleum

Figure 127 (below): Reconstruction drawing of entrance into the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia



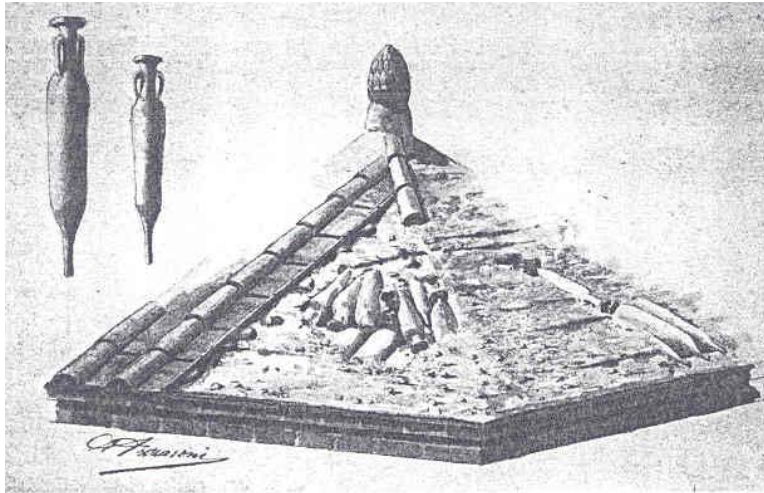
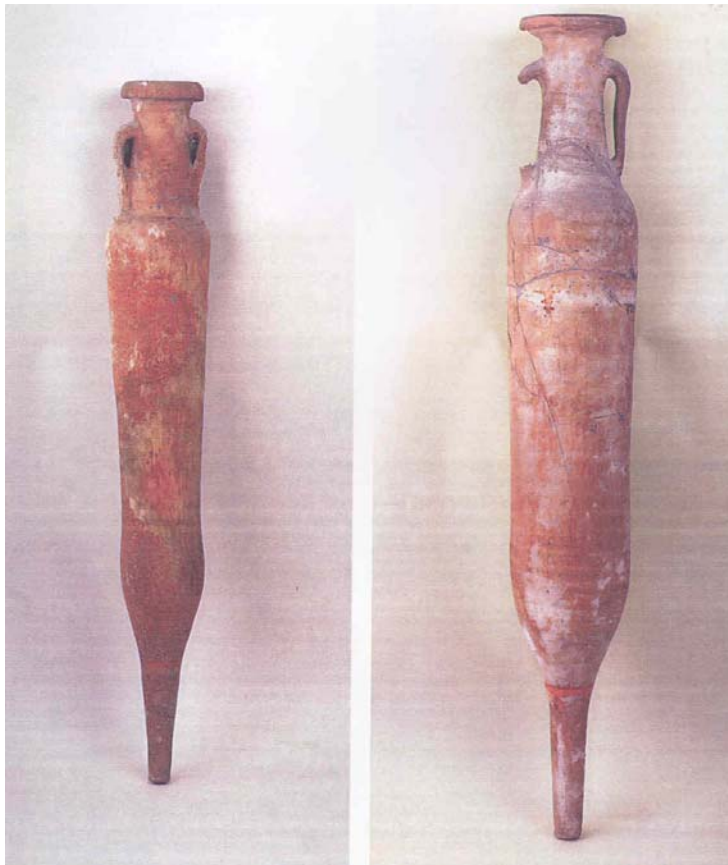


Figure 128 (above): Drawing of how the amphorae were used in the construction of the central vault of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

Figure 129 (below): Amphorae used to support the central vault of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia



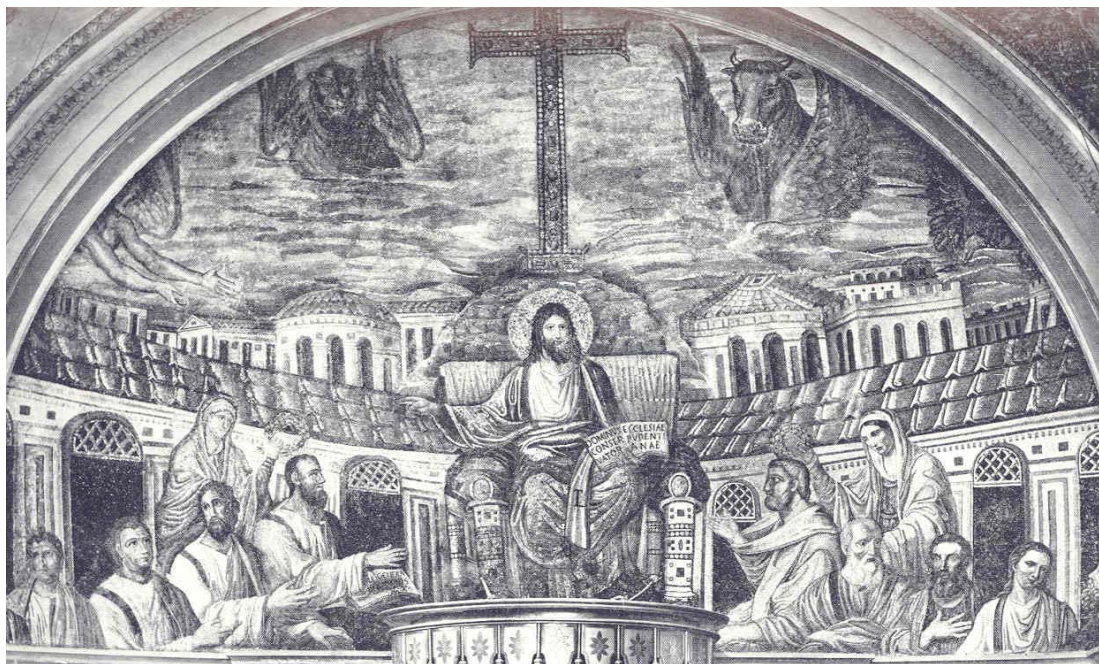


Figure 130 (above): Apse mosaic of Santa Pudenziana featuring the standard six-winged representation of the symbols of the Four Evangelists

Figure 131 (below): Two-winged symbol of the Evangelist Mark, central vault of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia





Figure 132 (above): Two-winged symbol of the Evangelist John, central vault of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

Figure 133 (below): Two-winged symbol of the Evangelist Luke, central vault of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia



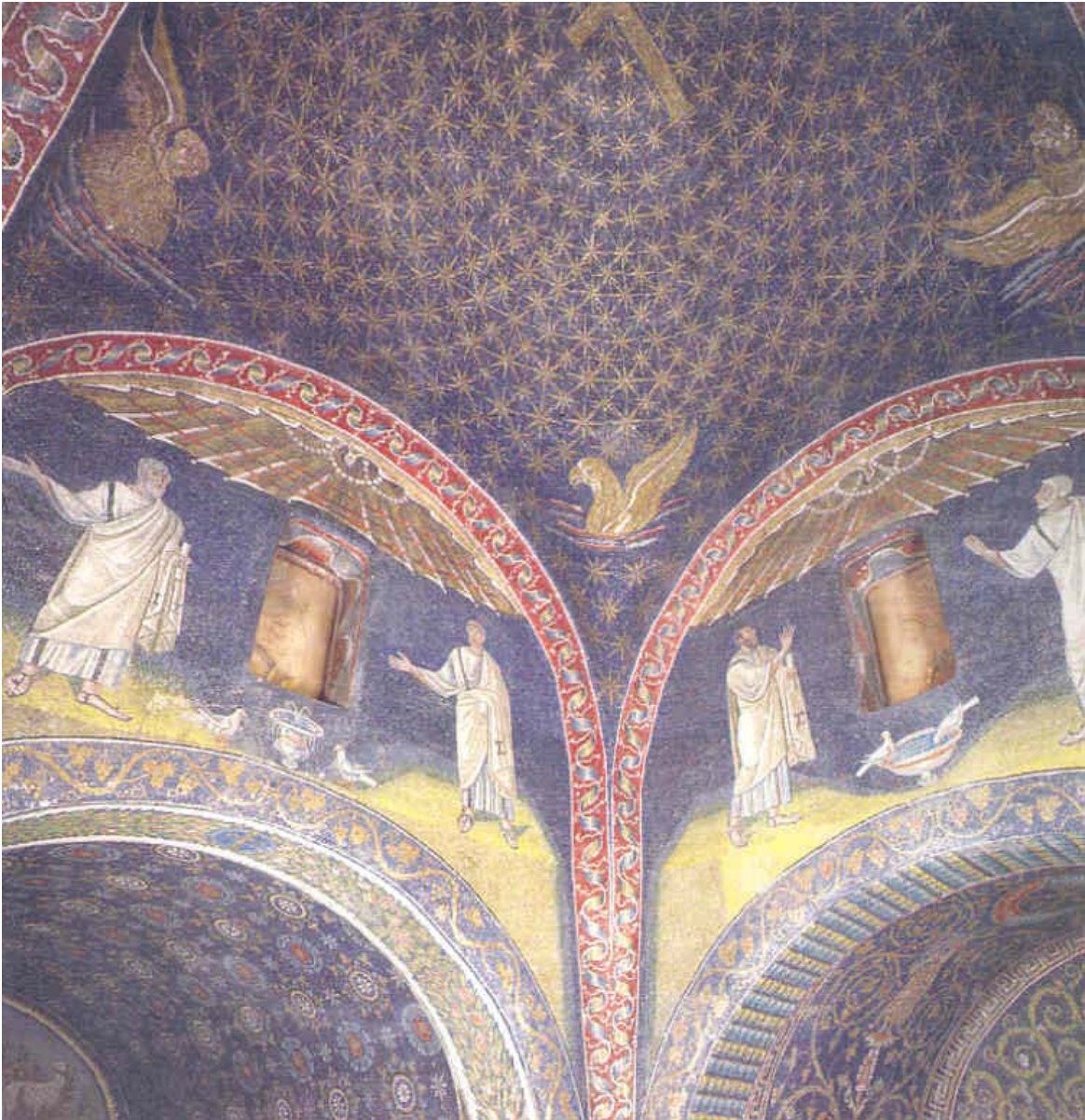


Figure 134: North (left) And east (right) drum lunettes

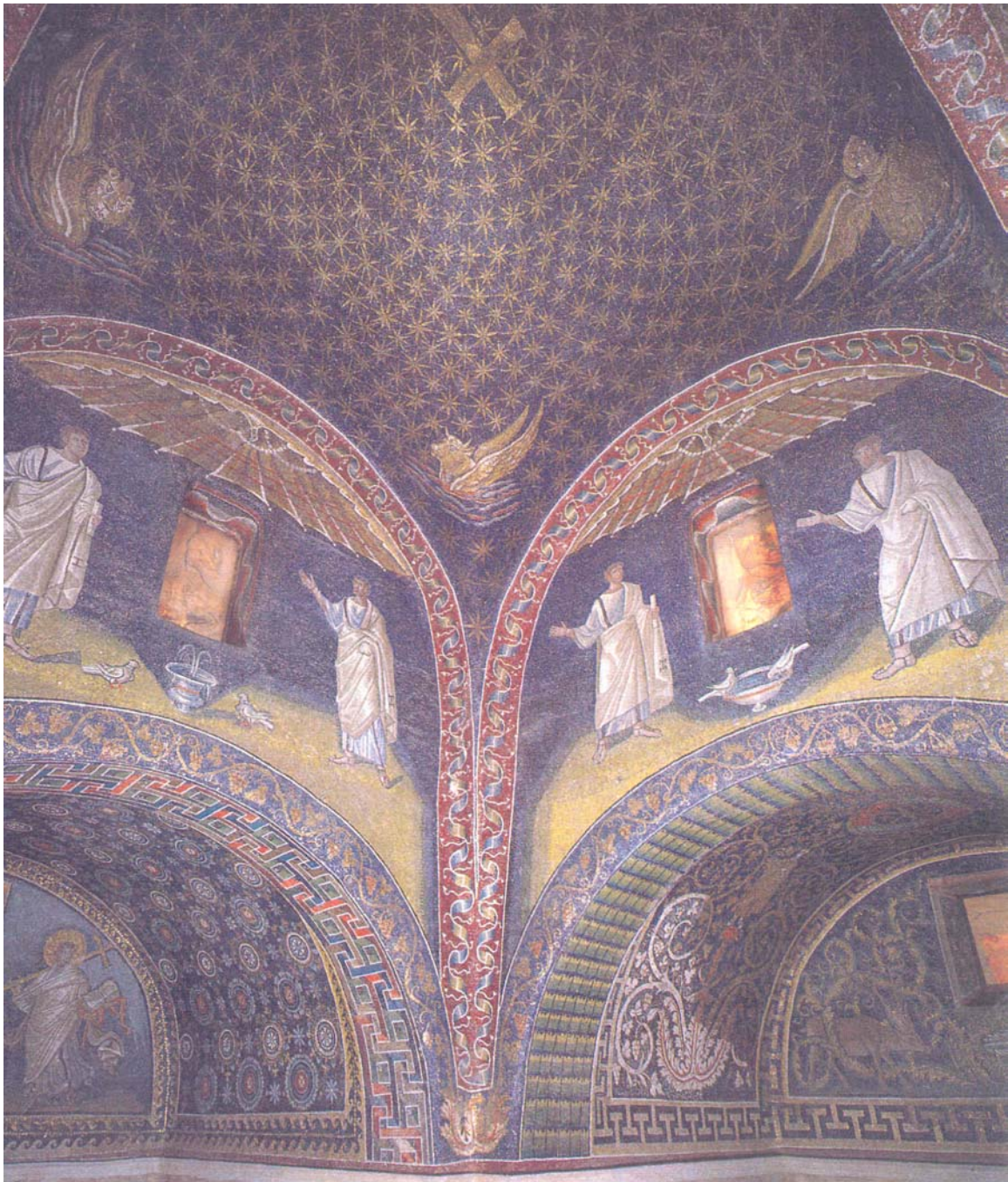


Figure 135: South (left) and west (right) drum lunettes

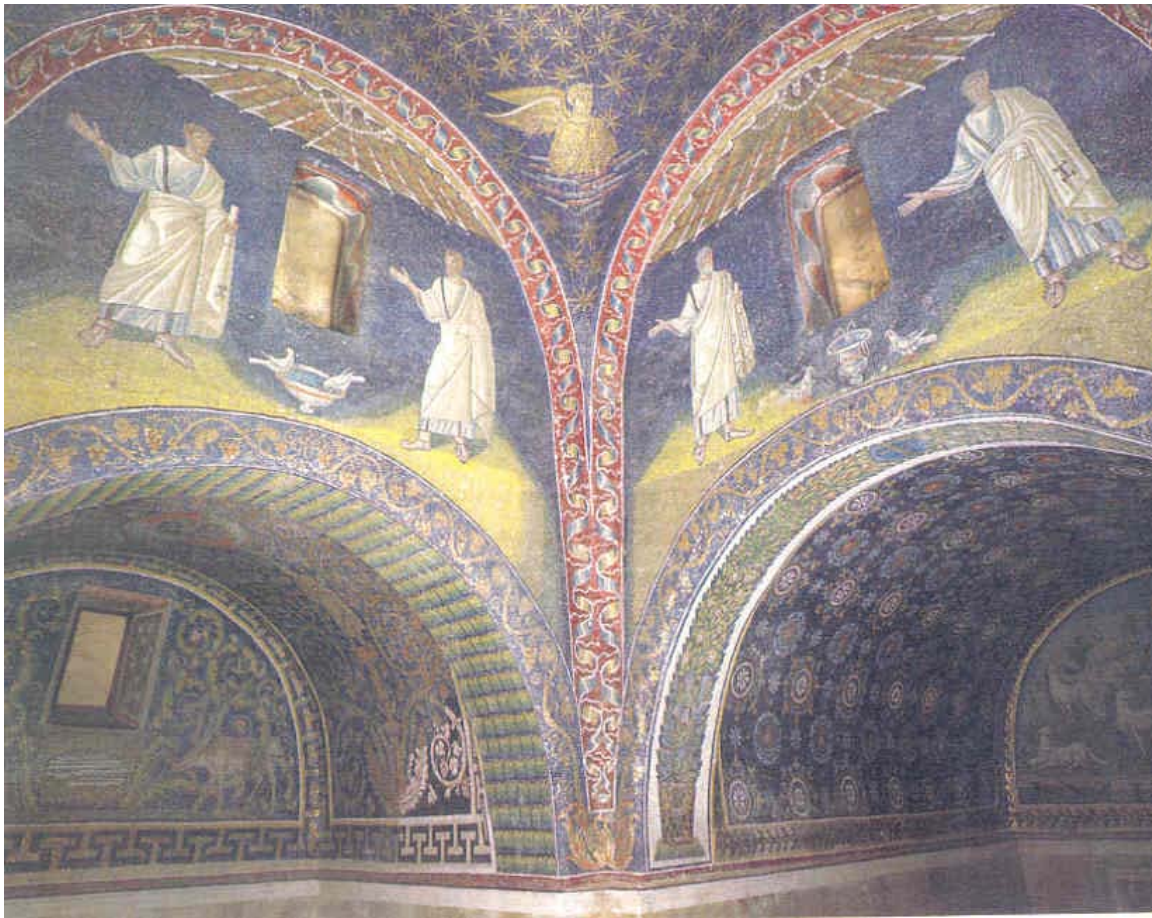


Figure 136 (above): West (left) and north (right) drum lunettes

Figure 137 (below left): Acclaiming apostle from west drum lunette

Figure 138 (below right): Acclaiming apostle from west drum lunette





Figure 139 (left): Acclaiming apostle, north drum lunette

Figure 140 (center): Acclaiming apostle, north drum lunette

Figure 141 (right): Acclaiming apostle, south drum lunette



Figure 142 (left) Apostle Paul, east drum lunette

Figure 143 (right): Apostle Peter, east drum lunette



Figure 144: Aulus Metellus, 1st century BCE, Republican example of "Orator's Pose"



Figure 145: Augustus of Prima Porta, circa 20 BCE, Augustan example "Orator's Pose"

Figure 146: Christ as the Good Shepherd touching a member of His flock





Figure 147 (above left): Ceiling with Good Shepherd medallion, Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, late 3rd-early 4th century

Figure 148 (above right): Good Shepherd, Catacomb of Callixtus, Rome, 3rd century

Figure 149 (below): Good Shepherd, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, late 3rd century





Figure 150 (above): Good Shepherd, Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome, second-century
Figure 151 (below): Good Shepherd, Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome, second-century





Figure 152 (left): East terminus of wreath pattern, north arm barrel vault
Figure 153 (right): West terminus of wreath pattern, north arm barrel vault



Figure 154 (left): Bronze mirror decorated with concentric circles
Figure 155 (right): Bronze mirror decorated with concentric circles



Figure 156 (above left): Bronze necklace and pendent cross, Egypt, 6th-7th century

Figure 157 (above right): Amulet with concentric circles

Figure 158 (above): Wood double-tooth hair comb, Egypt

Figure 159 (right): Wood double-tooth hair comb, Egypt



Figure 160 (above left): Wood tripod stand with concentric circles, Egypt, 3rd-5th century

Figure 161 (above right): Earthenware mirror plaque, Syria or Palestine, 5th century

Figure 162 (below left): Wood and bronze storage box, Egypt

Figure 163 (below right): Wood box, Egypt





Figure 1 : Arcosolium, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, late 3rd century



Figure 1 : Cubiculum E, Via Latina Catacomb, Rome, 4th century

VITA

Lisa Onontiyoh West was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She moved to New Orleans, Louisiana, with her parents when she was three. Lisa earned her bachelor of arts degree in history in 1996 from Louisiana State University. She began the graduate program in art history in the fall of 1999 with a concentration on the study of medieval art. She is currently a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in art history, which will be awarded May 23, 2003.