Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna

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The pre-modern work of art, which gained authority through its extension in ritual action, could function as a social integrator. This essay investigates the figural decoration of the Orthodox Baptistery in Ravenna, in an effort to explain certain features of the mosaic program. If the initiation ritual is reenacted and the civic centrality of the rite and its executant, the bishop, is restored, the apparent "iconographic mistakes" in the mosaics reveal themselves as signs of the mimetic responsiveness of the icon. By acknowledging their unmediated character, it may be possible to re-empower both pre-modern images and our own interpretative strategy.

The Neonian (or "Orthodox") Baptistery in Ravenna is the most impressive baptistery to survive from the Early Christian period (Figs. 1-5).[1] It is a construction of the late fourth or early fifth century, set to the north of the basilican cathedral of Bishop Ursus (389?-96?) (Fig. 1).[2] The whole of the ecclesiastical complex, including both the five-aisled basilica and the niched, octagonal baptistery, appears to have been modeled after a similar complex built in the late fourth century in Milan.[3] Within two or three generations of its initial construction, Bishop Neon (ca. 451-ca. 473) added a masonry dome, redecorated the interior of the baptistery, and lent the structure his name. The conception, construction, and decoration of the baptistery thus span a crucial period in the formulation of a Christian art, the decades between the late fourth century and the third quarter of the fifth century. The cathedral complex manifests the rearticulation of the grammar of city planning. The baptistery's decoration discloses the modification of traditional vocabularies of form: devices developed in antiquity to create the illusion of a reality beyond the picture plane began to be used as means of projecting the image into the audience's own space.

The fundamental architectural and artistic reorderings revealed in the Neonian Baptistery have not been fully appreciated, despite the sizable secondary literature generated by the monument. Because the artistic achievement of the Neonian Baptistery lies in its eloquent embodiment of a new participatory functioning of art, a deeper comprehension of the monument is possible only through a more thorough understanding of its liturgical and social context. The first section of this essay therefore attempts to reconstruct the baptismal liturgy as it may have taken place in the Neonian Baptistery. Though scholars have previously outlined the steps in the baptismal ritual on the basis of surviving texts, few efforts have been made to place the action within a specific monument.[4] This analysis introduces the principals in the ritual drama, hypothesizes an audience for the action, and establishes the significance of initiation. The second portion considers the civic character of the architecture of the baptismal hall with respect to the political centrality of both the baptismal ritual and the bishop-patron. In the final section, I argue that the apparent idiosyncracies of the baptistery's decorative program are explained by its function as a stage setting for a semi-public ritual performance.

Baptismal Ritual and the Neonian Baptistery

The ritual setting for baptism, like that of the Eucharist,

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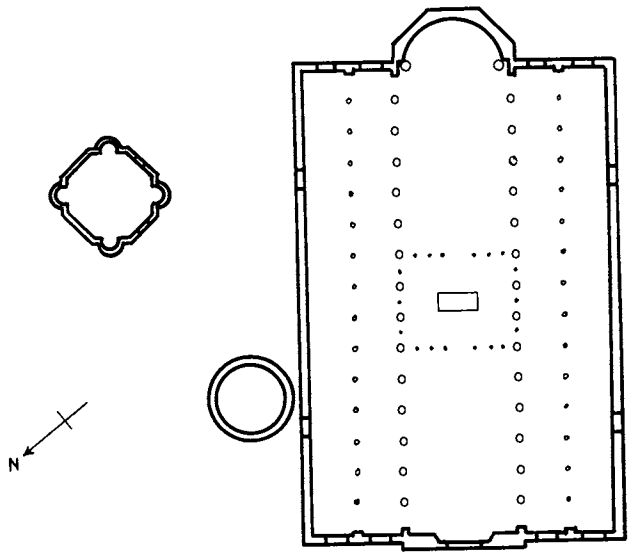
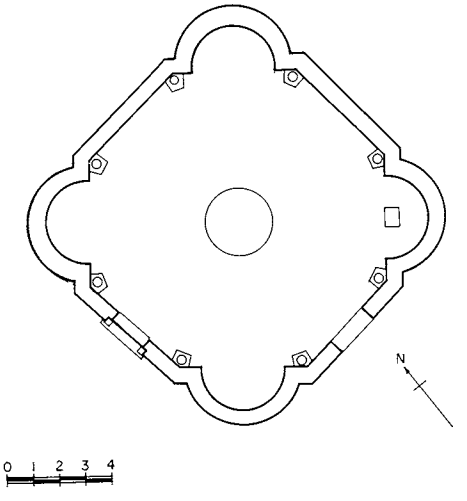
[2] Deichmann, II, 1, 3, 17-18. For earlier bibliography, *idem*, II, 17-47; Anna Marie Iannucci, "Nuove ricerche al Battistero Neoniano," *XXXII Corso di cultura sull'arte Ravennate e Bizantina*, 1985, 79-107; Kostof; and Joseph Wilpert and Walter N. Schumacher Spiro, *Die römischen Mosaiken der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV.-XIII. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg, 1976, 323-25.

[3] M. Mirabella Roberti, "La cattedrale antica di Milano e il suo Battistero," *Arte lombarda*, VIII, 1963, 77-98.

[4] For an introduction to the baptismal liturgy and earlier secondary literature, see Mario Righetti, *Manuale di storia liturgica*, IV, *I sacramenti — i sacramentali*, Milan, 1959, 21-146; Davies; Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation. Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century*, Slough, Eng., 1971; Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation (The Catholic University of America, Studies in Christian Antiquity*, XVII), Washington, D.C., 1974; C. Jones, G. Wainwright, and E. Yarnold, *The Study of Liturgy*, London, 1978, chap. 2, "Liturgy," 79-146; and Gabriele Winkler, *Das armenische Initiationsrituale. Entwicklungs-geschichtliche und liturgievergleichende Untersuchung der Quellen des 3. bis 10. Jahrhunderts* (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, CCXVII), Rome, 1982.



1 Ravenna, site plan of episcopal complex before 1750 with Neonian Baptistery, Basilica Ursiana, and campanile (after Kostof)



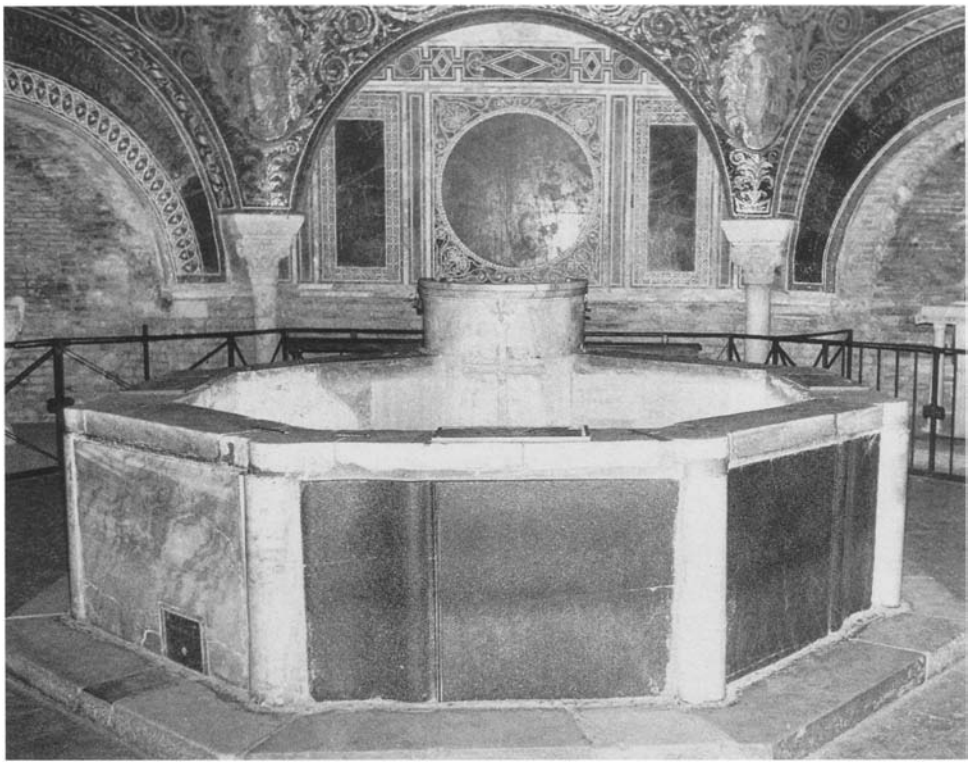
2 Ravenna, sketch plan of Neonian Baptistery (modified from Kostof)

3 Ravenna, Neonian Baptistery, exterior, general view from southeast (photo: Wharton)

was simple in the first centuries of Christianity. Tertullian (fl. 190) offered an apology for the plainness of the Christian rite in contrast to the expense and "pretentious magnificence" of pagan initiation rites.[5] The clarity of the ritual seems to have required little explanation. Apart from a few apologies like Tertullian's and a few Church manuals, not much was written on baptism in the second and third centuries. With the political legitimation and growing prosperity of Christianity in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, however, the setting, if not the ritual action, increased in its complexity. Grand baptismal halls proliferated and baptism became a particularly popular subject for the ecclesiastical literati, including Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ambrose, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Jerusalem.[6] The distinct stylistic features of their texts intimately reflect the idiosyncracies of both authors and audiences, providing some insight into the multiple levels of meaning that a ritual might have had for different groups within a community. The texts also exemplify their authors' care in constructing presentations that would en-

[5] *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, ed. and transl. Ernest Evans, London, 1964: " . . . With such complete simplicity, without display, without any unusual equipment, and (not least) without anything to pay, a man is sent down into the water . . ." (1.5-7); " . . . it makes no matter whether one is washed in the sea or in a pond, a river or a fountain, a cistern or a tub . . ." (4.14-15). Other early sources include *Didache*, ed. J. Quasten, *Florilegium Patristicum*, VII, Bonn, 1935, transl. James A. Kleist in *Ancient Christian Writers*, VI, New York, 1948; *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, ed. I.E. Rahmani, Mainz, 1899; and Hippolytus.

[6] Theodore of Mopsuestia; A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist* (*Woodbrooke Studies*, VI), Cambridge, 1933. Ambrose, *Sacraments and Mysteries; Saint Ambrose, Theological and Dogmatic Works*, transl. Roy J. Deferrari (*The Fathers of the Church*, XXXXIV), Washington, D.C., 1963. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* and *Procatechesis; Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, transl. William Telfer (*Library of Christian Classics*, IV), Philadelphia, 1955. Basil, *De Baptismo, Pat. Grec.*, XXXI, 1513-1628; M. Wagner, *St. Basil. Ascetical Works*, New York, 1950. John Chrysostom, *Ad Illuminandos Catechesis Prima et Altera, Pat. Grec.* IL, 221-40; *Varia Graeca Sacra*, ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, St. Petersburg, 1909, 154-83; John Chrysostom; *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, transl. P. Hawkins (*Ancient Christian Writers*, XXXI), Westminster, MD, 1963. Texts quoted in the article are taken from the editions and translations cited here, unless noted otherwise.



4 Ravenna, Neonian Baptistery, interior, view of font, east wall, northeast niche and southeast niche from west entrance (photo: Wharton)

5 Ravenna, Neonian baptistery, interior, view of dome. Observer oriented to southeast (photo: Wharton)

gage those they addressed.[7] Despite its particularities, surviving catechetical literature indicates that the basic elements in the rite were remarkably stable throughout the Early Christian world, even if the order of the baptismal service varied from place to place.

Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (374-97), offered the newly enlightened a series of Easter week lectures explaining the baptismal ritual and arguing for its venerability and efficacy.[8] Ambrose's description provides a central source for the reconstruction of the rite of baptism in the Neonian Baptistery, inasmuch as the architectural programs of the episcopal complexes in Milan and Ravenna are remarkably similar, the churches of Ravenna and Milan are historically

[7] Perhaps the most sensitive, though abstract, discussion of the need for a teacher to modify his narrative in response to the character of his audience is found in Augustine's *De Catechizandis Rudibus, Pat. Grec.* XL, 309-47, transl. Joseph P. Christopher in *Ancient Christian Writers*, II, New York, 1946. On levels of style, also see Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, transl. Ralph Manheim (*Bollingen Series*, LXXIV), New York, 1965, 31-50.

[8] Ambrose, *Sacraments*, 1.4.11, "We marvel at the mysteries of the Jews . . . first the age of the sacraments, then the sanctity of those who vouch for them. This I assure you, that the sacraments of the Christians are more divine and earlier than those of the Jews."

Ambrose mentioned nothing about the attendance of these post-initiation lectures, but secular entertainments scheduled for the week after Easter might well have distracted the attention of the neophytes. John Chrysostom complained bitterly about a falling off of attendance in similar circumstances. "Again there are chariot races and satanic spectacles in the hippodrome, and our congregation is shrinking . . . They gave up the chance to hear this spiritual discourse and have run off to the hippodrome . . . With what zeal, tell me, shall I hereafter undertake my usual instruction, when I see that . . . the longer my discourses continue, the more, I might say, does their negligence increase?" (1-2, 216-17).

linked, often through competition over ecclesiastical status and territorial rights, and no baptismal texts are more closely associated with Ravennate practice than those of Milan. Other treatises may be referred to for contrast or, more cautiously, in order to fill lacunae in the ritual.

In the early Church, the principal baptismal liturgy took place once a year, on Easter Sunday eve: the day of the Resurrection was deemed the most appropriate moment in which to die and be reborn in Christ. The rite was also legitimately celebrated at Pentecost, but baptism on other occasions was to be avoided except under threat of death.[9] Although infant baptism was becoming increasingly popular during the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians often put baptism off until their maturity.[10] Consequently, in major urban centers a large number of believers were baptized in the great baptismal service on Easter eve. At Constantinople in 404 there were, according to Palladius, about 3,000 neophytes; Ambrose spoke of 1,000 neophytes in Milan.[11] Although the number of initiates in mid-fifth-century Ravenna may have been smaller, doubtless the crowd was still significant.

Enrollment of those to be baptized took place at the beginning of Lent. Catechumens with their sponsors were registered after being personally scrutinized by the bishop.[12] In the weeks of Lent efforts were made to prepare initiates for their admittance into the full fellowship of the Church through an arduous routine of fasting, catechism, and daily exorcism.[13] Teaching and exorcism seem to have taken place in the basilica and subsidiary structures. Apparently the baptistery itself was open only for the great baptismal liturgy.[14] Ambrose alluded to the limited access to the baptismal hall:

> The priests were accustomed to enter the first tabernacle [the church] frequently; the highest priest entered the second tabernacle [the baptistery] once a year. . . . For there was manna in the second tabernacle; there was also the rod of Aaron, that had withered and afterwards blossomed, and the censer. . . . Formerly it [the rod] was dry; afterwards it blossomed: "And you were dried, and you begin to flower by the watering of the font."[15]

That such a large structure was built for such a limited occupation indicates the importance of the rite.

On Holy Saturday, the bishop in the company of his deacons and priests entered the bapistery, exorcized the font "according to the creation of water," and then delivered an invocation and prayer insuring the sanctity of the waters and the presence of the Trinity. Before the neophytes were admitted to the baptistery, they were "opened" by the priest touching their ears and nostrils. He did not touch their mouths, because this would have been unseemly in the case of women, who clearly were present at the ceremony. After their opening, initiates, probably accompanied by their sponsors, entered the baptistery.[16]

Before immersion, neophytes rejected the Devil and bound themselves contractually to Christ.[17] At Jerusalem and Constantinople this action occurred outside the baptistery.[18] In Milan and presumably Ravenna, it took place inside the structure. The neophytes entered the hall from

[9] The best summary of the reasons for baptism at Easter and Pentecost is provided by Leo the Great, *Letter 16*, *Pat Lat.*, LIV, 695-704. In the east, Epiphany was also a possible feast on which to be baptized. See Karl Holl, "Der Ursprung des Epiphanienfestes," in the author's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, II, Tübingen, 1928, 123-54.

[10] At least through the 4th century, adult baptism was dominant, though infant baptism, known from the earliest Christian times, seems to have become increasingly popular. See J. Jeremias, *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten*, Göttingen, 1958.

[11] Palladius, *Dialogus*, IX, *Pat. Grec.* XLVII, 33-34; Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 1.17, *Pat. Lat.*, XVI, 763C.

[12] E.J. Yarnold, "The Fourth and Fifth Centuries," in C. Jones, *et al. (as in n. 4)*, 95-99. For a vivid account of the procedure, see *Égéria. Journal de voyage*, ed. and French transl. Pierre Maraval (*Sources chrétiennes*, CCXCVI), Paris, 1982, 304.22-306.22. For an English transl., George E. Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* (*Ancient Christian Writers*, XXXVIII), New York, 1970, chap. 45, 122.

[13] The cultural position of exorcism is sensitively discussed by John Bowman, "Exorcism and Baptism," in *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus. Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment*, ed. Robert H. Fischer, Chicago, 1977, 249-64. Pre-baptismal priming was well established in the early Church, e.g., Hippolytus, 30.1-37.8. However, elaborate preparations may be a largely urban phenomenon. Miraculous conversions on the periphery led to initiation without any preparation at all. See Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400*, New Haven and London, 1984, 102-19.

[14] For exorcism, small subsidiary rooms adjacent to the basilica were probably used. In Jerusalem, where exorcism followed each of a series of pre-baptismal lectures, male neophytes read to one another while awaiting their turn with the exorcist. At the same time, women were directed to occupy themselves by singing silently, "for, says the Apostle, 'I suffer not a woman to speak in the church'" (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis*, *Pat. Grec.*, XXXIII 355B). This suggests that the initiates waited in the main hall of the ecclesiastical complex. In a letter to his sister written in 386, Ambrose described his confrontation with imperial troops. In the narrative he mentioned that on the Sunday before Easter he lectured several candidates for baptism *in baptisteriis tradebam basilica*, between the dismissal and mass, perhaps in the transepts of the basilica. A. Paredi, "Dove fu battezzato Sant' Agostino," *Archivio storico Lombardo*, Nos. 91–92, 1966, 223, n. 4 (*Pat. Grec.*, XVI, 15, 137A).

[15] Ambrose, *Sacraments*, 4.1.1-2.

[16] *Ibid.*, 1.5.18; 1.1.3.

[17] The contractual nature of this ritual was emphasized in the legalistic language of John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, who drew analogies from marriage contracts and enrollment in the army. Theodore spoke of exorcism as a "lawsuit against the devil" (Theodore of Mopsuestia, Homily 2, 1, 396). Ambrose, too, spoke of the neophyte's bond of faith as more precious than one for money (*Sacraments*, 1.2.8).

[18] In Constantinople this ceremony took place on Good Friday in the Great Church. Neophytes were directed from the ambo to take off their garments and shoes, then turn to the west, arms raised in a gesture of rejection, to renounce the Devil and his minions, and finally to turn to the east and, with hands raised in supplication, to bind themselves to Christ (*Ordo of Constantinople*, in *Rituale Armenorum*, ed., F. Conybeare and J. Mclean, Oxford, 1905, 394-97). In Jerusalem the rite was performed in the forecourt or vestibule (*proaulion*) of the baptistry (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses*, 1.2, 84.1-2).

the east, facing west, the direction of the Devil, whom they renounced. They then turned to the east to face Christ, whom they recognized "by a direct glance."[19] The materiality of the language used by the bishop of Milan may be comprehended when the action is staged in the Neonian Baptistery.[20] One of the four apses of the baptistery is oriented to the southeast, as is the sanctuary apse of the main basilica (Fig. 1). The two original entrances opened in the south and west walls of the building. If the neophytes denounced the Devil after entering the south door, they confronted stucco images representing the promise of triumph of Christian faith: Christ giving the law and Christ trampling the Devil.[21] These depictions are flanked by visual references to God's power over evil: Jonah and the whale and Daniel in the lion's den (Fig. 6). Visual reinforcement of the contractual agreement made with God by the initiate at this time helps explain the odd positioning on the north and northwest sides of the octagon of the only four "narrative" images in the stucco program.[22]

If the neophytes then turned to the altar or cathedra in the southeast niche, they were properly oriented to view Christ in the image of his baptism in the vault medallion (Figs. 5 and 7). In the representation of Christ's baptism in the dome of the Neonian Baptistery, Christ is depicted nude and, in contrast to some later images, without gestures suggesting embarrassment (Fig. 7).[23] In many parts of the Early Christian world, it seems that baptizands were nude for immersion and anointment.[24] According to the *Apostolic Tradition* of the late second or early third century, neophytes were specifically directed to "put off their clothes." It states, "Let them stand in the water naked," and further that "no one go down to the water having any alien object with them."[25] Similarly, Chrysostom ordered the baptizand to be stripped by the priest who then caused his or her "whole body to be anointed with that olive oil of the Spirit." Theodore of Mopsuestia directed the baptizand to "strip completely, as Adam was originally naked and not ashamed. Clothes are a proof of mortality."[26]

It has been assumed that in preparation for their entry into the living water, initiates in Milan and Ravenna also disrobed.[27] Ambrose, however, is strangely silent about undressing. He also never mentions the presence at baptism of deaconesses who elsewhere play a prominent role in the baptismal ceremony, ministering to unclothed female initiates.[28] In addition to Ambrose's avoidance of a subject that others treated with great care, the baptistery's architectural program raises a question about nudity in Milan and Ravenna. In parts of the East and North Africa, baptisteries are commonly broken up into intimate spaces, providing a certain privacy for the ritual. Demonstrative of this self-consciousness are the peculiar baptisteries of Cyprus in which the small font-room is closeted between two larger spaces, allowing initiates a very private immersion. The baptismal complex of the basilica at Kourion is one of these (Fig. 11).[29] In contrast, the baptismal hall in Ravenna, like the principal baptistery in Milan, has a voluptuously open interior, presenting a large stage for semi-public ritual. Although this lack of architecturally articulated pri-

[19] Ambrose, *Mysteries*, 2.7.

[20] In contrast to the baptismal homilies of his contemporaries, Ambrose's rhetoric is so specifically visual that it is tempting to suggest that the hall in which he presented his lectures was decorated with scenes from the Old Testament. According to Agnellus' description of the ecclesiastical complex at Ravenna, the basilica and the bishop's refectory were adorned with images, including scenes from the Old and New Testaments (F. Wickhoff, "Das Speisezimmer des Bischofs Neon von Ravenna," *Repertorium für Kunstgeschichte*, XVII, 1894, 10-17). Ambrose alluded to the Spirit over the Waters [of Baptism] (Gen. 1.2). He directed his audience to "see" and "perceive" the water [of Baptism], wood [the saving cross] and dove [the Holy Spirit] from the scene of the raven [sin] leaving Noah's ark and dove delivering the olive branch to it (Gen. 6.12, 8.12). See his *Mysteries*, 3.10. Ambrose's description of Moses casting the wood [cross] into the fountain of bitter water at Marra to make it sweet [water of Baptism] (Exod. 15.23-25) was followed by his suggestion that his listeners "not trust only in the eyes of your body," to interpret the episode (*Mysteries*, 3.15). Ambrose was not alone in recognizing the impact of the physical stage. Cyril of Jerusalem was even more explicit: "Look, I ask you, at this solemn setting of the church. . . . Let the very place put you in awe and be admonished by what you behold" (*Procatechesis*, 4, 3.3-7). The sumptuousness of the surroundings in the Christian buildings of the major urban centers of the post-Constantinian period stood in stark contrast to the simplicity of the ritual as described by Tertullian (see n. 5 above).

[21] Cyril of Jerusalem, in *Catechesis III de Baptismo*, *Pat. Grec.*, XXXIII, 441B, referred to Jesus going down to the Jordan and binding "the mighty one in the waters, so that we might receive the 'power to tread upon serpents and scorpions'."

[22] Kostof, 66-71.

[23] For instance, in early 10th-century frescoes in Cappadocia, Christ was depicted as covering himself in all modesty with one or both hands (Guillaume de Jerphanion, *Une nouvelle province de l'art Byzantine. Les églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, Paris, 1925-32, I, 80-83).

[24] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Garments of Shame," *History of Religion*, LII, 1966, 217-38. Also see Sebastian Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter*, ed. Margot Schmidt (*Eichstätter Beiträge*, IV,), Regensburg, 1982.

[25] Hippolytus, 21.3, 5, 11.

[26] John Chrysostom, 2, 24, 147, and Theodore of Mopsuestia 3, 8, 417.

[27] E.g., Riley (as in n. 4), 21.

[28] *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Syrian version translated and accompanied by the Verona Latin fragments, ed. R. Hugh Connolly, Oxford, 1929, 3, 12.10-16: ". . . When women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men. . . ." See Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, Wilmington, 1976, esp. 177-81. Ambrose does, however, discuss the dressing of initiates in white robes in *Mysteries*, 7.34. See the discussion below. In his letter 28 he also discusses nakedness at some length, with a number of Old Testament references, but never mentions baptism. See *Saint Ambrose. Letters*, transl. Sister Mary Melchior Beyenka, *Fathers of the Church*, XXXIV, New York, 1954, 144-49. For a contrary interpretation, see M. Righetti, *Storia liturgica*, Milan, 1964, IV, 106.

[29] For Kourion, see A.H.S. Megaw, "Excavations at the Episcopal Basilica of Kourion in Cyprus in 1974 and 1975: A Preliminary Report," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, XXX, 1976, 345-71. For Cyprus more generally, see C. Delvoye, "L'art paléolchrétien de Chypre," in *XV Congrès internationale des études byzantines, Athens, 1976*, Athens, 1980, 313-28, and A. Papageorghiou, "L'architecture paléochrétienne de Chypre," *XXXII Corso di cultura sull'arte Ravennate e Bizantina*, 1985, 299-324, esp. 308-10. Also see comparative plans in Khatchatrian.

6 Ravenna, Neonian Baptistery, interior, view of window zone of northwest and north walls with stucco decoration. Above aediculae with Prophets are four "narrative" images: Daniel in Lion's Den, Christ giving law to Peter and Paul, Christ trampling the adder and lion, and Jonah and Whale (photo: Wharton)

vacy might suggest that northern Italians were less prudish than some other ethnic groups, it is more likely that the baptizands of Milan and Ravenna wore shifts — a modest departure from tradition.

The piscina or font is lower than floor level. Ambrose noted not only that neophytes "went down" into the water, but also that after their immersion they "came up from the font," "whose likeness is as a kind of sepulchre. . . ."[30] The Neonian baptistery unfortunately does not provide archaeological confirmation of this central part of the ritual. The original floor of the baptistery is buried approximately three meters below the present one. Nineteenth-century excavation reports provide little information concerning the liturgical arrangements of the building in the fifth century.[31] The medieval font uses the ancient one in its foundations, indicating that it is centrally located and approximately 2.7 meters in diameter. The original font was internally circular in plan, but nothing more can be said of it. How it was entered and how deep it was cannot be reconstructed on the basis of the few surviving excavation drawings. Nevertheless, it is evident that the piscina at Ravenna was large in comparison to most Early Christian fonts, which were small affairs with basins less than a meter in diameter at the bottom.[32] The font in Ravenna was not as large as that of the Lateran Baptistery in Rome, but it approximated in

7 Ravenna, Neonian Baptistery, interior, central medallion of dome representing the baptism of Christ. Observer oriented to southeast (photo: Wharton)

[30] Ambrose, *Sacraments*, 2.6.16, 19, and 3.1.4.

[31] F. Lanciani, *Cenni intorno ai monumenti e alle cose più notabili di Ravenna*, Ravenna, 1871, 7-8. Lanciani's drawings are published and discussed by Kostof, 36-7, figs. 20-15. The pictorial reconstruction offered by Deichmann, II, Plananhang 5, is problematic.

[32] See comparative plans in Khatchatrian.

size the octagonal piscina excavated in Milan, which lies .80 meters below the floor level of the baptistery.[33]

The tradition of baptizing in "living water" was articulated at an early date in the *Didache*.[34] Archaeological and literary evidence suggests that efforts were made to insure a continuous flow of fresh water into the baptismal font.[35] Although the plumbing of the Neonian Baptistery has not been thoroughly investigated, the fonts of Milan and Rome have elaborate hydraulic systems.[36] The convenience of having plumbing partially in place is an obvious explanation for the fact that many Early Christian baptismal halls were constructed on the site of Roman baths. The Lateran Baptistery, for example, was built over a frigidarium.

The neophyte was immersed three times while the bishop asked, "Do you believe in God the Father almighty? . . . in our Lord Jesus Christ and his Cross? . . . in the Holy Spirit?"[37] This triple immersion was common throughout the late antique world.[38] In his exegetical analogy between immersion and Christ's three days in the tomb, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose's near contemporary, confirmed that triple immersion was practiced in Asia Minor; John Chrysostom also specified a triple immersion.[39] Perhaps most explicit was Theodore of Mopsuestia, who explained that "the bishop lays his hand on your head and pushes you down into the water; . . . you bow down under the water, showing your consent, three times."[40] It seems that the initiate stood in the water, bending over to immerse his or her head.[41]

The bishop, presumably standing at the altar or enthroned in his cathedra in the eastern niche of the baptismal hall, received the newly baptized, who went "up to the priest" to have their faith sealed with an anointment of blessed oil.[42] Of this action Ambrose wrote: "There follows a spiritual sign . . . because after the font there remains the effecting of perfection, when at the invocation of the priest the Holy Spirit is poured forth. . . ." It appears that anointment was limited to the signing of the initiate's forehead with a cross.[43] "There God anointed you, Christ sealed you. How? Because you were sealed unto the form of the cross itself, unto his passion. You have received the seal unto his likeness, that you may rise again unto his form, may live unto his figure, who was crucified to sin and liveth unto God. . . ."[44] In contrast to this limited anointment, in other provinces the baptizands' entire bodies were anointed either before or after immersion.[45] Literary evidence thus suggests that in Milan nudity was avoided in anointing, as well as in immersion.

Although Ambrose never mentioned disrobing, he dwelt on the initiates' reception of "white garments as a sign that [they] had put off the covering of sins and had put on the chaste robes of innocence."[46] Clothing was as richly symbolic in late antiquity as it is in modern academic processions. The white garments put on by the neophytes in Milan and presumably Ravenna were not simply body-coverings; they dramatized the spiritual freshness of the wearers, lending visual impact to the post-baptismal procession and entry into the congregation. The initiates evidently provided their own apparel on this occasion, and took pride in its appearance, not unlike parents with christening gowns in

[33] Mirabella Roberti (as in n. 3), 86.

[34] *Didache* (as in n. 5), 7.1-3.

[35] See Theodore Klauser, "Taufet in lebendigem Wasser! Zum religions- und kulturgeschichtlichen Verständnis von *Didache* 7, 1-3," in *Pisciculi. Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums. Franz Dölger zum sechzigsten Geburtstage*, ed. Theodore Klauser and Adolf Rücker, Münster, 1939, 157-64. For a vivid description of the construction of a baptismal font and its plumbing, see Acts of John, in *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, ed. and transl. William Wright, 2 vols., London, 1871 (repr. Amersterdam, 1968, II, 38).

[36] For Rome, G. Pelliccioni, *Le nuove scoperte sulle origini del battistero Lateranense, Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, ser. III, *Memorie*, XII, I, Vatican, 1973, 44-58. For Milan, Mirabella Roberti (as in n. 3), 86.

[37] *Sacraments*, 2.7.20; also see *Mysteries*, 4.21.

[38] The triple immersion was part of the ritual from earliest times. See Hippolytus, 21.11, and J. Quasten, "Baptismal Creed and Baptismal Act in St. Ambrose's *Mysteries* and *Sacraments*," in *Mélanges — Joseph de Ghellinck*, ed. J. Duculot, 2 vols., *Museum Lessianum, section historique*, XIII, Gembloux, 1951, 223-34.

[39] *Grégoire de Nysee, Discours catéchétique*, ed. and transl. Louis Meridier, *Textes et documents pour l'étude historique du Christianisme*, Paris, 1908, 35.5-8. Also see John Chrysostom, 2, 26, 147.

[40] Theodore of Mopsuestia, 3, 18, 441.

[41] Davies, 24, argues against immersion without dealing with the evidence of the texts.

[42] *Mysteries*, 6.29. The present altar presumably replaces either an altar or throne at the original level. Emplacements in the eastern part of the baptistery are commonly found in excavations. Davies, 29, assumes a bishop's throne in every case. Among others, Riley (as in n. 4) interprets the anointment described in Ambrose, *Sacraments*, 1.2.4, as coming before immersion. It seems to me, however, that Ambrose's discussion at this point is not a chronological ordering of the ritual but a resumé of the entire rite. Riley is exemplary in his reconstruction of the action, but tends to be too literal in his interpretation of the text. For an excellent discussion of the Syrian pre-baptismal anointment as a reflection of daily life to which symbolic significance was only later attached, see J. Mateos, "Théologie du baptême dans le formulaire de Sévère d'Antioche," in *Symposium Syriacum, 1972, Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, CXCVII, Rome, 1974, 135-61.

[43] Ambrose, *Sacraments*, 3.2.8; also see *Didascalia Apostolorum* (as in n. 28), 7.42-3. Theodore of Mopsuestia refers to sealing on the forehead: "You must be sealed on the forehead. . . . Then you will receive the grace in its fullness, and it will free you from death, corruption, pain, and change . . ." (Theodore of Mopsuestia, 3, 27, 457-59).

[44] This limited anointment perhaps explains Ambrose's unusual Old Testament analogy for this moment, which is taken from Psalms, "Like the ointment on the head, that ran down upon the beard, the beard of Aaron" (Ps. 132.2). See *Mysteries*, 6.29.

[45] For example, the procedure before immersion in Antioch is described as follows: ". . . In the full darkness of the night, he (the priest) stripped off your robe and, as if he were going to lead you into heaven itself by the ritual, he causes your whole body to be anointed with that olive oil of the spirit, so that all your limbs may be fortified and unconquered by the dart which your adversary aims at you" (John Chrysostom, 2, 24-5, 147).

[46] Ambrose, *Mysteries*, 7.34.

a later era.[47]

Ambrose's description of baptism included the washing of the neophyte's feet, an action that apparently took place in the baptistery.[48] The inscription in mosaic above the northeast niche of the Neonian Baptistery refers to Christ washing the feet of the Apostles.[49] As all the other niche-head inscriptions relate to the initiation ritual, this reference suggests that footwashing was a part of the baptismal ceremony in Ravenna, as it was in Milan.[50] Ambrose acknowledged that the ritual of footwashing was not universal, noting with characteristic irony that Rome, "whose character and form we [in Milan] follow in all things," did not practice this part of the rite. He remarked further that in the old capital the practice declined, "perhaps on account of the multitude [of initiates]." The act was done in emulation of the Lord's washing of his Apostles' feet before the Last Supper, offering a model of sacramental humility. Thus the bishop was identified with Christ. Ambrose insisted that he, "the highest priest," metaphorically washed all the baptizands' feet: "For although the presbyters also do this, the highest priest, girded, I say, washed your feet."[51] The bishop's humility was nominal; priests apparently did most of the work. However, here as elsewhere in his discussion, Ambrose identified the bishop as the principal actor in the ritual. An array of clergy including priests and deacons helped administer the sacrament, but Ambrose and other prelates made clear that the bishop, who appeared "dressed in shining garments," was the central figure; he alone was "questioning and consecrating."[52]

The baptizands, resplendant in white in the illuminated night, proceeded from the baptismal hall to the basilica to partake of their first Communion. Proclus, Patriarch of Constantinople in 434, provided a vivid description of the assembly: "[You know how your Master] makes you shine brilliantly, how you lay aside your corruption in the grave of the bath, how the Spirit raises you up to the new life, how he clothes your body with shining garments, how the lamps you hold in your hands symbolize the illumination of the soul. . . ."[53] Ambrose described the procession as heralded by angels whose very human reactions perhaps allow the substitution of less ethereal witnesses: "They saw you approaching, and that human condition which before was stained with the shadowy squalor of sins they saw suddenly shining bright. . . ."[54] This procession of light in the pre-dawn darkness of Easter Sunday must have been an impressive sight, not unlike the procession of brilliantly clad Apostles against the dark blue ground represented in mosaic in the dome of the baptistery (Figs. 5 and 8).

Once within the basilica, the newly baptized, now at last full members of the Christian community, celebrated the Eucharist in its midst for the first time. The elements on the altar were presented as a sumptuous banquet presided over by Melchisedek, archetype of Christ and of the high priest.[55] The altar was visually, though not physically, accessible to the laity. John Chrysostom's description of the altar in the Cathedral of Antioch reflects its centrality to the image of the Church: "The table, like the fountain [of Moses in the desert], lies in the middle, in order that the flocks may surround the fountain on every side and enjoy the benefit of the saving waters."[56] The altar and the bishop's chair or cathedra are presented as symbols of the promised salvation of the worthy Christian.

The Social Construction of Baptism and the Baptistery

Two aspects of baptism that emerge from a reconstruction of the ritual have significant implications for an understanding of the architecture and decoration of the Neonian Baptistery. First, the bishop played the principal role in the ritual action. Second, the Christian congregation corporately participated in the rite of initiation, as candidates, sponsors, or witnesses. I therefore offer the following line of argument: tension was inherent in the relationship between the bishop and the community, which both generated and benefited from his power. The ritual of initiation, representing the bishop's authority of incorporation, mediated this tension.[57] That is, the effectiveness of the baptismal ritual laid in its absorption of the political center ground, which otherwise distanced the patron from the source and object of his patronage. Consequently, the material manifestation of baptism, the baptismal hall, assumed civic importance as the visible sign of social coherence. In order to make this argument, it is necessary to establish the centrality of baptism in the life of the early Church and the significance of the bishop's role in late antique society, particularly in northern Italy, and then to document the intimate association of the bishop with baptism.

The moment chosen for initiation was extremely privileged, indicative of the position of baptism within the life of the Church. Baptism was staged on the eve of the Res-

[47] John Chrysostom, 4, 17-18, 191-192; 2, 19, 114; also see 4, 26, 195, and Gregory of Nazianzus, *In Sanctum Baptisma*, *Pat. Grec.* XXXVI, 393, para. 25.

[48] For the ritual of the Washing of the Feet, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "The Baptism of the Apostles," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, IX-X, 1955-56, 205-51, esp. 230-34, and P.F. Beatrice, *La lavanda dei piedi: Contributo alla storia della antiche liturgie cristiane*, Rome, 1983. For churches in which this ritual was practiced, see Yarnold (as in n. 4), 27.

[49] "UBI DEPOSUIT IHS VESTIMENTA SUA ET MISIT aquam in PELVEM ET LABIT PEDES DISCIPULORum suorum" (Where Jesus laid aside his garments and bestowed water in a basin and washed the feet of his disciples). This is a paraphrase of John 13.4-5.

[50] For transcriptions and discussion, see Kostof, 58-62.

[51] *Sacraments*, 3.1.4-7.

[52] Theodore of Mopsuestia, 2, 17-18, 395-9, and Ambrose, *Mysteries*, 3.8.

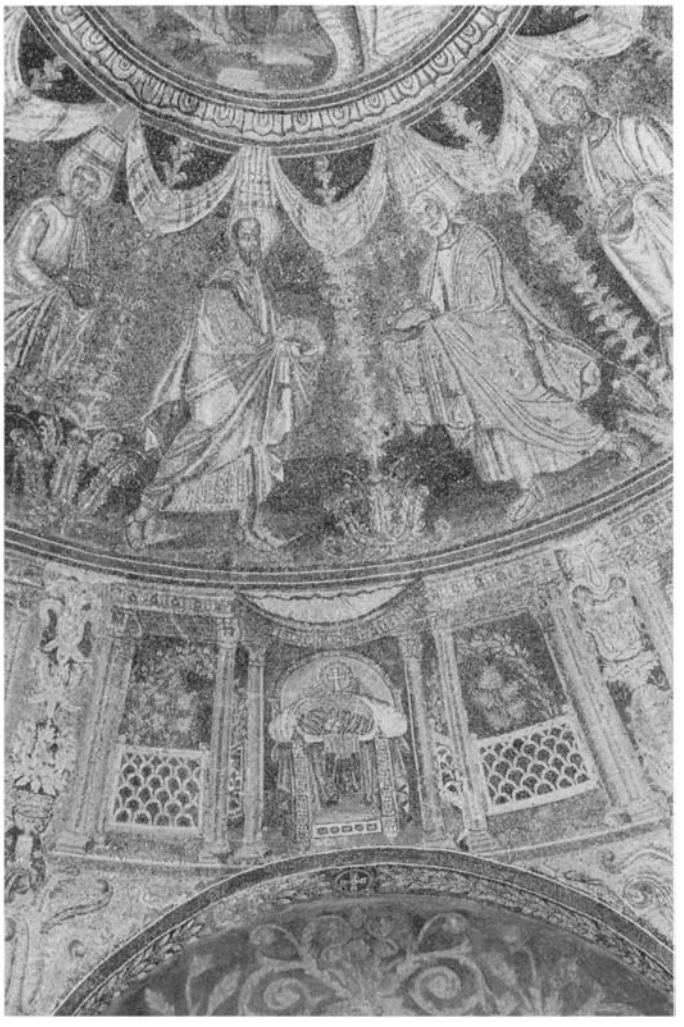
[53] John Chrysostom, 1, 101.

[54] *Sacraments*, 4.2.5.

[55] *Ibid.*, 4.3.12, and *Mysteries*, 8.45.

[56] John Chrysostom, 3, 26-27, 166.1-167.1.

[57] For a general analysis of the relations between initiation rites and social power, see J.S. LaFontaine, *Initiation: Ritual Drama and Secret Knowledge Across the World*, Manchester, 1986.



8 Ravenna, Neonian Baptistery, interior, view of zone II of cupola showing processions of Apostles led by Peter and Paul (photo: Wharton)

urrection of Christ, the most important festival in the Christian calendar. The religious sensibilities of the entire community, heightened by the long fast of Lent, were feasted by ritual reincorporation through God's rebirth and members' initiation. Ambrose preached: ". . . Whoever is baptized is baptized in the death of Jesus. . . . For when you dip, you take on the likeness of death and burial."[58] Christ's Crucifixion reified the sacrament of baptism. John Chrysostom commented:

> Saint John says that, when Christ was dead but still on the cross, the soldier came and pierced his side with a lance, and straightway there came out water and blood. The one was a symbol of baptism and the other of the mysteries [the Eucharist]. . . . It is from both of these that the Church is sprung. . . .[59]

Not only was baptism one of the two focusing mysteries of the community, but it was also the only means of access to the other. The Eucharist, the presentation of the blood and body of Christ to the congregation, dramatically reenacted the sacrifice through which salvation became possible. Participation in this recreation was strictly limited. During the Mass, the entrances were guarded against intrusion by the uninitiated.[60] Admission to this salutary meal and reception into the community that possessed it was possible only through baptism. Before being allowed to join the congregation, a stranger was asked first, "Are you a pagan or a Christian?" and then, "Are you a catechumen or a believer [i.e. baptized]?"[61] Induction into the Church was carefully controlled, as accounts of interrogation at the time of enrollment indicate. These accounts also imply that the bishop's role in baptism ritualized his regulation of access to the community.[62] The role is symptomatic of his power within the Church.

The authority of the bishop was well established by Ambrose's time. The tight institutional organization of the early Church, centered on the bishop, distinguished Christianity from other religious sects of the Roman empire. Several structural features of the bishop's office lent it a strength unique in the late antique world. There was one bishop per city and that bishop held his position for life. A bishop was also often locally rooted; he was commonly even a native of his diocese. Further, the movement of clergy was restricted; legally they were not supposed to leave the city in which they were ordained.[63] Finally, from earliest times, bishops had authority over the practical as well as spiritual affairs of the Church — arbitrating disputes within the community, establishing policy, and controlling Church monies and property. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (ca. 375) provides an extreme statement of the elevated position of the bishop:

[58] *Sacraments*, 2.7.23.

[59] John Chrysostom, 3, 16-7, 163.

[60] The subdeacons who guarded the doors to the church during the liturgy were forbidden to "leave the doors to engage in the prayer, even for a short time." See Council of Laodicea (mid-4th century), canon 43, in Charles Joseph Hefele, *Histoire des conciles*, I, 2, Paris, 1907, 1020.

[61] Augustine, Sermo 46.13.31, in *Pat. Lat.*, XXXVIII, 288.

[62] For a compelling historical interpretation of baptism, see K. Koschorke, "Taufe und Kirchenzugenhörigkeit im 4. und frühen 5. Jahrhundert," *Taufe und Kirchenzugehörigkeit. Studien zur Bedeutung der Taufe für Verkündigung*, ed. Christine Lienemann-Perrin (*Forschungen und Berichte der Evangelischen Studien-gemeinschaft*, XXXIX), Nördlingen, 1983, 129-46.

[63] Nicaea I, 15, in J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum*, II, 681-82, continuously repeated. John Chrysostom is, of course, one of many famous exceptions to the ecclesiastical rule. See H. Chadwick, *The Role of the Christian Bishop in Ancient Society, Center for Hermeneutical Studies*, XXV, Berkeley, 1980, with a very interesting commentary by Peter Brown. A model for the discussion of the civic role of the bishop in late antiquity is provided by Martin Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft in Gallien. Zur Kontinuität römischer Führungsschichten von 4. bis zum 7. Jahrhundert. Soziale, prosopographische und bildungsgeschichteliche Aspekte (Beihefte der Francia)*, V, Munich, 1976.

> He [the bishop] is minister of the word and mediator; . . . *your father after God, who begot you through the water*. This is your chief and your leader, and he is your mighty king. He rules in the place of the almighty: but let him be honored by you as God, for the bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty.[64]

After Constantine, as the Christian community became increasingly coincident with the broader society, the political significance of the bishop dramatically increased.[65] Episcopal correspondence, history writing, and conciliar legislation reflect the highly charged nature of the office. Canons of all but the most local councils were preponderantly devoted to the definition of the authority of the bishop and his clergy. On numerous occasions the bishop acted as an advocate on behalf of his congregation, requesting reductions in taxes and fines or seeking preferential consideration of individual members of his community. The bishop's accumulation of civic authority was given further impetus in areas where centralized imperial power was continuously threatened, as in northern Italy. As an influential advocate, the bishop could function as an important social integrator within a community, as reflected in the uncanonical election of Saint Ambrose, an unbaptized, secular official, to the episcopate by the acclaim of opposing factions.[66]

There was intense rivalry among the sees of the northern Adriatic during the later fourth and fifth centuries. Such rivalries were expressed in a bishop's attempt to establish the prestige of his see by invoking the antiquity of its foundation and status of its founder. Establishing the apostolic origins of a church was part of the struggle to legitimate a bishop's claims to authority.[67] The popularity of acquiring Apostles' relics and founding Apostles' churches was an indication of the force of this concern.[68] This construction of the bishop as heir of the Apostles also informed the meaning of the mosaic program of the Neonian Baptistery, as will be discussed below.

Interdiocesan rivalry was not, of course, a simple struggle of individual bishops for self-aggrandizement; it involved the political positioning of their communities. The spiritual and material fortunes of a city were intimately linked with those of its bishop. The position of the bishop within the hierarchy of the Church indicated the status of his city, as was articulated in the affirmation of Constantinople's high ecclesiastical rank at the Council of Chalcedon (461):

> For the fathers rightly granted privileges to the throne of old Rome because it was the royal city. And the one hundred and fifty most religious bishops [of the Second Ecumenical Council, Constantinople I (381)], actuated by the same consideration, gave equal privileges to the most holy throne of New Rome [Constantinople] , justly judging that the city that is honored with the sovereignty and the senate and also enjoys equal [civil] privileges with the old imperial Rome, should in ecclesiastical matters also be magnified as she is, and rank next after her. . . .[69]

Nor was this secular construction of spiritual precedence limited to the patriarchates. As late as the Council of Trullo (692), this principle was clearly pronounced: "If any city be renewed by imperial authority, or shall have been renewed, let the order of things ecclesiastical follow the civil and public models."[70]

The interdependence of the community and its spiritual leader, particularly in the intensely political circumstances of late fourth- and fifth-century Italy, added social weight to that ritual which was most closely associated with the episcopal office: baptism. The bishop was traditionally identified with initiation. Tertullian (ca. 200), for example, stated: "The supreme right of giving it [baptism] belongs to the high priest, which is the bishop; after him, to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop, on account of the Church's dignity."[71] In the mid-third century Saint Cyprian of Carthage linked the unity of the Church with the authority of the bishop particularly as that authority was expressed in baptism. Cyprian even expressed doubts about the common assump-

[64] *Didascalia Apostolorum* (as in n. 28), 87.17-89.1.

[65] Ambrose's letters eloquently demonstrate the important political role of the bishop in northern Italy. The prologue of the pre-Metaphrastian life of Saint Ambrose, which simplistically described Ambrose as having been entrusted with the government of the whole of Italy by the pious emperors, Constantine and Constans, sons of Constantine the Great, presumably reflects a later popular view of the situation. The rest of the document is exclusively concerned with relations between the emperors and Saint Ambrose, emphasizing the great superiority of the latter. See C. Pasini, "La vita premetafrastica di Sant'Ambrogio di Milano," *Analecta Bollandiana*, CI, 1983, 101-50, esp. 120.1-5. This document is only vaguely dated between the mid-5th and early 9th century. For church economy, see A.H.M. Jones, "Church Finance in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XI, 1960, 84-94. The power of bishops is reflected in canonical attempts to limit their access to the emperor: Synod of Antioch, ca. 341, 11 (J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum*, II, 1332). Even doctrinal disputes seem to revolve around the identification of the orthodox as opposed to unorthodox bishop.

[66] E.g., *Paulinus Mediolanesis, Vita di S. Ambrogio*, ed. M. Pellegrino, Rome, 1961, 58.1-60.16.

[67] F. Dvornik, *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of the Apostle Andrew* (*Dumbarton Oaks Studies*, IV), Cambridge, MA, 1958, provides an introduction to this perception. The primacy of Rome is promoted particularly by Leo the Great (440-61) in the mid-5th century. See H.M. Klinkenberg, "Papsttum und Reichskirche bei Leo dem Gross," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung*, XXXVIII, 1952, 37-112.

[68] R. Krautheimer, "Zu Konstantins Apostelkirche in Konstantinople," *Mullus, Festschrift Theodor Klauser. Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, suppl. I, Münster, 1964, 224-29. For a general introduction to the politics of relics, see P.J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, Princeton, 1978.

[69] Chalcedon, 28, in Hefele, *Histoire des conciles*, II, 2, Paris, 1908, 815, transl. Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ser. II, XIV, repr. Grand Rapids, 1983, 287.

[70] Trullo, 38, in P.P. Joannou, *Pontificia commissione per la redazione del codice di diritto canonico orientale. Fonti*, IX, Grottaferrata, 1962, 172.12-173.2.

[71] Tertullian (as in n. 5), 17.2-5.

tion that martyrdom made baptism unnecessary. "Let not any say: 'He who receives martyrdom is baptized in his own blood and no peace from the bishop is necessary to him who is about to have the peace of his own glory. . . .'"[72] The bishop's church remained the ideal if not the only setting for baptism. "Baptism is by no means to be administered in an oratory which is within a house; but they who are about to be held worthy of the spotless illumination are to go to the principal church of the diocese and there to enjoy this gift."[73] In the East, the bishop increasingly competed with local representatives of the holy — priests, monks, even martyrs — for the baptism of adults and infants.[74] In the West, the bishop maintained his privileged relation to initiation into the Middle Ages by controlling confirmation. Though a baby might be baptized in the village in which it was born, it had to be brought to the bishop's church to be confirmed.[75]

In both the East and the West, the status of the initiate was defined by the status of the baptizer by some among the pious. Cyril of Jerusalem asserted his own importance as baptizer in his comment on John the Baptist: "For since the grace of baptism was so great, its minister too must needs be great."[76] Gregory of Nazianzus chastised members of his congregation for postponing their illumination: "Do not say, 'A bishop shall baptize me, — and he a metropolitan, — and he of Jerusalem . . ., — and he be of noble birth, for it would be a sad thing for my nobility to be insulted by being baptized by a man of no family.'"[77] Ambrose indicated that something of the same sentiment kept Valentinian from receiving baptism before his premature death. Evidently the young emperor wrote to Ambrose from Gaul expressing his desire to be baptized by the great bishop of Milan.[78]

The bishop appears to have been closely associated not only with the ritual of baptism, but also with the structure that housed it. This was most clearly articulated in the identification of a baptistery by the name of its bishop-founder, as in the case of the Neonian Baptistery.[79] The bishop's interest in demonstrating the status of his see by the grandiloquence of his baptistery seems to be reflected in the building and rebuilding of great baptismal halls.[80] The Lateran Baptistery was built under Constantine in the early fourth century. The episcopal complex in Milan was constructed apparently on the model of the Lateran in the mid-fourth century. The cathedral and baptistery raised in Ravenna in the late fourth or early fifth century appear in turn to have been modeled on the Milanese complex. In the second quarter of the fifth century, Sixtus III thoroughly reconstructed the Lateran Baptistery. Perhaps in response, Bishop Neon of Ravenna remodeled his baptismal hall. Such inter-city architectural rivalry is peculiarly, if not uniquely, Italian.

The main baptisteries of Rome, Milan, Ravenna, and many other cities in central and northern Italy were octagonal in plan.[81] The origins of the octagonal baptistery in Roman bath establishments and/or funerary monuments

[72] Saint Cyprian, *De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate*, ed. and transl. M. Bénenot, Oxford, 1971, esp. 4.60.1-64.45 and 11.74.1-20. Also see *St. Cyprian. Letters*, transl. Sister Rose Bernard Donna, *Fathers of the Church*, LI, Washington, D.C., 1964, 164, para. 4.

[73] Trullo (as in n. 70), 59, 195.1-16 (*tais katholikais ekklēsiais*).

[74] For the social positioning of the holy in the East, see P. Brown, "The Rise and Fall of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies*, LXI, 1971, 80-101.

[75] Confirmation continued to be controlled by the bishop in the West. See U. Schwalbach, *Firmung und religiöse Sozialisation, Innsbrucker theologische Studien*, III, Innsbruck, 1979, 21-23.

[76] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses*, 3, 6. On the presence of Christ at baptism and, consequently, the identification of Christ with the bishop, see Hans-Joachim Schulz, " 'Wann immer einer tauft, ist es Christus, der tauft!,' " *Praesentia Christi. Festschrift Johannes Betz zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. L. Lies, Düsseldorf, 1984, 240-60.

[77] *Pat. Grec.* XXXVI, 396, para. 26.

[78] *Saint Ambrose. Letters* (as in n. 28), 27.

[79] Episcopal churches were also commonly named after their bishop-founders in Italy. In Ravenna, the bishop's identification with his church apparently went even further than its name. Agnellus (fl. 550) maintained that Ursus died on the day of his cathedral's dedication. True or not, the tradition indicates the strength of Ursus' association with his church. It is not surprising that the baptistery was known by the name of its episcopal refurbisher, Bishop Neon. See Agnellus, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis, Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum*, 1878, 265-391, 23v, 288-89. Many scholars have assumed a post-403 date for the construction of the cathedral despite this text. Deichmann, II, 1, 3, however, suggests that an important provincial capital might well build such a cathedral. The points that I am making do not, in any case, depend on the date of the first construction of the baptistery.

The civic centrality of baptism and the baptismal hall in late antique northern Italy for which I am arguing has a remarkable echo in the high Middle Ages. See Enrico Cattaneo, "Il battistero in Italia dopo il Mille," in *Miscellanea Gilles Gerard Meersseman, Italia sacra. Studi e documenti di storia ecclesiastica*, XV, 2 vols., Padua, 1970, I, 171-95. With the emergence of independent communes and intense intercity competition in northern Italy in the 11th century, large baptismal halls once more become an urban focus. The splendid medieval baptisteries in Florence, Pisa, Parma, and many other cities still dominate their urban contexts. The scale, prominent positioning, and lavishness of these structures help us visualize the impressiveness of their late antique equivalents at Milan and Ravenna. These magnificent later baptisteries also clarify something of the nature of architectural function. There were no mass conversions in the 11th century; a large number of adults were not baptized with great ceremonial pomp once a year. Baptism took place in infancy. The appearance of these great monuments cannot then be explained narrowly in terms of cult requirements. Their public address might perhaps better be linked to the association of Christian initiation with entrance into the community, that is, citizenship. Although such speculation is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning because it supports the notion that architectural form does follow function, but that that function is ideological as well as material.

[80] For a summary discussion, see Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 3rd ed., Harmondsworth, 1981, esp. 91-96, 185-98.

[81] For typological comparisons, see Khatchatrian, 40-57.

and the form's dissemination in Italy and beyond have been the subject of numerous typological studies.[82] The symbolic content of the octagon has also been treated.[83] On the basis of a much discussed verse ascribed to Ambrose, it is arguable that the number eight embodied in the plan represented for at least certain well-educated members of the community the death and rebirth of both Christ and the neophyte: "Eight-niched soars this church destined for sacred rites, eight corners has its font, the which befits its gift. Meet it was thus to build this fair baptismal hall about this sacred eight: here is our race reborn."[84]

Whatever the questions posed by or conclusions drawn from these studies, they all support the notion that the octagonal form is meaningful. At the most fundamental level, this meaning lies in the late antique Christian observer's association of a polygonal structure within an episcopal complex with baptism. The Neonian Baptistery was large and virtually independent. Nineteenth-century excavations indicated that the only subsidiary structure associated with the baptistery was a portico, which connected it to the basilica.[85] The baptistery's relative isolation from the congregational hall allowed a reading of its form externally as well as internally. But the Neonian Baptistery was not simply visible, it was displayed, for in addition to its considerable independence, the baptistery was prominently positioned. In the urban topography of Ravenna, the baptistery was sited as a civic monument. The episcopal complex was built at the periphery of the city, next to the walls. The baptistery was set in front of the cathedral on the city side of the compound. The Lateran Baptistery in Rome was dramatically sited in relation to the Via Claudia and Via Gregoriana.[86] The Early Christian precursor to S. Giovanni in Fonte in Florence flanked the main north gate of the city.[87] The Milanese baptistery was also virtually independent of the cathedral, but its urban effect is difficult to determine because the plan of the city in the fourth and fifth centuries is unclear. Baptisteries in less powerful bishoprics and, even later, parochial baptisteries in northern and central Italy often reproduced on a smaller scale the public character of the baptismal halls of Ravenna, Florence, and Rome.[88]

The identification of these Italian baptisteries with the bishop as representative of the city can be more fully appreciated through contrast to the more privately placed structures in the East. In Syria and Asia Minor baptisteries were much more commonly located outside the cathedral's precincts, at martyria and in monasteries. Baptisteries occurred in such remote rural sites as Kalat Siman and Alahan Kilise.[89] Perhaps because baptism in the East was less closely tied to the authority of the bishop than in Italy, baptismal structures were generally less prominently sited than their Italian counterparts. Archaeological evidence suggests that most fourth- and fifth-century baptismal structures in the East were typically unobtrusive structures, attached directly to the congregational church and masked by subsidiary buildings. In Salamis, for example, there is nothing to distinguish the baptistery from other secondary structures (Fig. 11). Even a much larger baptistery, like that in the complex of the martyrium of St. John in Ephesus, is attached to the rear wall of the atrium. It must have been virtually invisible to those approaching the church.[90]

It appears, therefore, that the social centrality in northern and central Italy of both the rite of baptism and its bishop-patron is manifested in the particularized form and topographical prominence of the Neonian Baptistery and other baptismal halls of the region. The structure housing the ritual of initiation functioned as the material correlative of the aspirations of both the community and its spiritual leader.

The Mosaic Program

The popular address of the baptismal hall and the focal role played in the ritual by the bishop are as clearly articulated in the decoration of the Neonian Baptistery as in its architecture. The interior of the structure, like its exterior, implied witnesses. Just as the bishop forms his oral discourse in response to his listeners' level of understanding, so he programmed his buildings for their comprehension. If the decoration of the Neonian Baptistery is read as a stage-setting carefully designed by its patron to complement the baptismal ritual during its enactment, its meaning reveals itself.

The Neonian Baptistery retains much of its elaborate original decoration. Marble revetment, stucco reliefs, and ornamental mosaics enliven its walls (Figs. 4 and 6). Its vault is adorned with an elaborate mosaic program (Figs. 4, 5, 7, and 8). The image of the baptism of Christ appears in the apex of the dome (zone I) (Fig. 7); the twelve Apostles carrying crowns proceed in the register below (zone II) (Fig. 8); the third register contains architectural panels alternately enframing thrones and altars (zone III).

[82] E.g., Davies, 1-13. Deichmann, II, 1, 26-27, seeks the origins of the octagonal baptistery in the Aegean coastlands; Krautheimer (as in n. 80), 187-88, who argues that the Constantinian baptistery was octagonal, ascribes the popularity of the octagonal form to Italian influence.

[83] F. Dölger, "Zur Symbolik des altchristlichen Taufhauses," *Antike und Christentum*, IV, 1933-34, 153-87.

[84] Transl. in F. van der Meer and C. Mohrmann, *Atlas of the Early Christian World*, London, 1958, 129. For a discussion of this verse, see O. Perler, "L'inscription du baptistère de Sainte-Thècle à Milan et le *Sacraments* de Saint Ambrose," *Rivista di archeologia cristiana*, XXVII, 1951, 147-66.

[85] The excavator unfortunately neglects to specify the nature of this portico. See Lanciani (as in n. 31).

[86] For excavation reports, see Pelliccioni (as in n. 36).

[87] P. Bargellini, G. Batini, G. Morozzi, *Santa Reparata. La cattedrale risorta*, Florence, 1970.

[88] Cattaneo (as in n. 79).

[89] For Kalat Siman, see M. Falla Castelfranchi, *Baptistēria. Intorno ai più noti battisteri dell'Oriente*, Rome, 1980, 12; for Alahan, see M. Gough, ed., *Alahan. An Early Christian Monastery in Southern Turkey* (*Studies and Texts*, LXXIII), Toronto, 1985.

[90] See Delvoye (as in n. 29), 313-28, and *Forschungen in Ephesos*, IV, 1, Vienna, 1932, 5, 27ff. For bibliography and further examples, see Falla Castelfranchi (as in n. 89).

The representation of the baptism is based on Mark 1.9-11: "Jesus . . . was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens open and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'"[91] The historical baptism, experienced through the image, functioned as a pattern or image (*forma*, in Greek *typos*) of the ritual, as Ambrose made clear: "Therefore, if baptism is for our sakes, the pattern has been established for us, the pattern of our faith has been set forth."[92] Other authors expressed the same idea; Theodore of Mopsuestia, for example, wrote: "You are baptized, then, with the same baptism that Christ our Lord received in his humanity . . . the very events at Christ's baptism foreshadowed your baptism in sign."[93] The pattern established in the mosaic is a condensed narrative; action and revelation occur at the same moment. Ambrose's text is constructed in the same manner: "Christ descended [into the Jordan]; John stood by, who baptized, and behold! the Holy Spirit descended as a dove."[94] The sense of collapsed time is reinforced by the inclusion of the personification of the Jordan, a visual reference to the Old Testament prefiguration of the baptism — the Ark brought through the midst of the Jordan. Joshua 3.14-17 reads: "And when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan . . . the waters coming down from above . . . were wholly cut off . . . until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan." In Psalm 113.3-5 [114.3-5], the Jordan is personified: "The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back. . . . What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?" This passage inspired numerous allusions in Early Christian sermons, including that by Peter Chrysologos, Neon's predecessor as bishop of Ravenna: "Why is it that Jordan who fled in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant did not flee away from the presence of the Holy Trinity? Why? Because he who yields to piety begins not to be afraid."[95]

The central section of the image, including John's head and arm, Christ's bust, and the dove of the Holy Spirit, has been crudely restored. As others have recognized, a corrective to these post-medieval alterations is offered by the program of the Arian Baptistery, which was built in Ravenna and decorated with mosaics during the reign of the Arian Ostrogothic King Theodoric (493-526).[96] A number of the architectural and decorative features of this small monument were derived from the larger Neonian Baptistery. Most notably, the scheme of the dome appears to be a modification of the earlier Neonian program (Figs. 5 and 9). A medallion representing the baptism occupies the apex of the vault (Fig. 10). In conformity with other fifth- and sixth-century depictions of the subject, Christ is represented as a beardless youth. John does not pour water from a patera or bowl, but rests his hand on Christ's head.[97] It is likely that the figures of Christ and John were similarly rendered in the original image in the Neonian Baptistery.

There are, however, significant differences between these two representations of the baptism. Most notably their orientation is reversed. In the Arian Baptistery, the scene of the baptism is directed to an observer standing before the apse in the east, facing west. It thus appears that the image addressed the bishop, not the neophyte, at the moment of the enactment of baptism. In contrast, in the Neonian Baptistery the mosaic seems to have been oriented so that it might be properly viewed by the initiates and their sponsors. Such an acknowledgement of the non-clerical audience suggests, perhaps, that the audience played a particularly significant role in the Neonian Baptistery.

The formal distinctions between the two images enrich this reading. In the Arian Baptistery, the image's intended function as a "sign" is well served by its diagrammatic realization. It has the formal features of an emblem. The sign is laid on the surface. The gold ground eliminates recession; it encircles the image, denying foreground as well as background. Protrusion is also limited by the flattening effects of hard line, clear contours, avoidance of overlap, and minimally modulated color intensity. Christ arrogates the focus of the audience. He occupies the axis of the image created by the dove and its effusion. His navel is literally the center of the medallion and hence the nexus of the building. His dominance is evocatively reinforced by enframing figures: their similar, counter-balancing gestures toward the center establish their subsidiary character. At the moment that the bishop identifies the dominant figure of Christ with the initiate, he himself becomes the Baptist. Attention is directed to the immanent power of the figure, not to its pictorial action. The icon emerges.

The novelty of the artist's treatment of the image in the Arian Baptistery can be appreciated when it is compared to the highly refined, but more conservative handling of form in the Neonian representation. In the baptism roundel of the earlier monument, the personification of the Jordan and landscape features fill the lateral segments of the roundel. The three-dimensional treatment of the flora and the figure create a sense of illusionistic space within a floating, light-filled gold ground. The central third of the roundel is shared by Christ and John, who are rendered not as unchanging emblems, but as figures interacting within a space created for them by subsidiary elements. Illusionistic devices complement the intention: the audience is visually

[91] The reading is very similar to Matthew 3.16-17.

[92] Ambrose, *Sacraments*, 1.5.16. *Typos* is used in Greek with the same force. See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *In Baptismum Christi*, *Pat. Grec.* XLVI, 588C, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, *In Epistolam ad Galatas*, *Pat. Grec.* LXVI, 905D.

[93] Theodore of Mopsuestia, 3, 24, 451.

[94] *Sacraments*, 1.5.17.

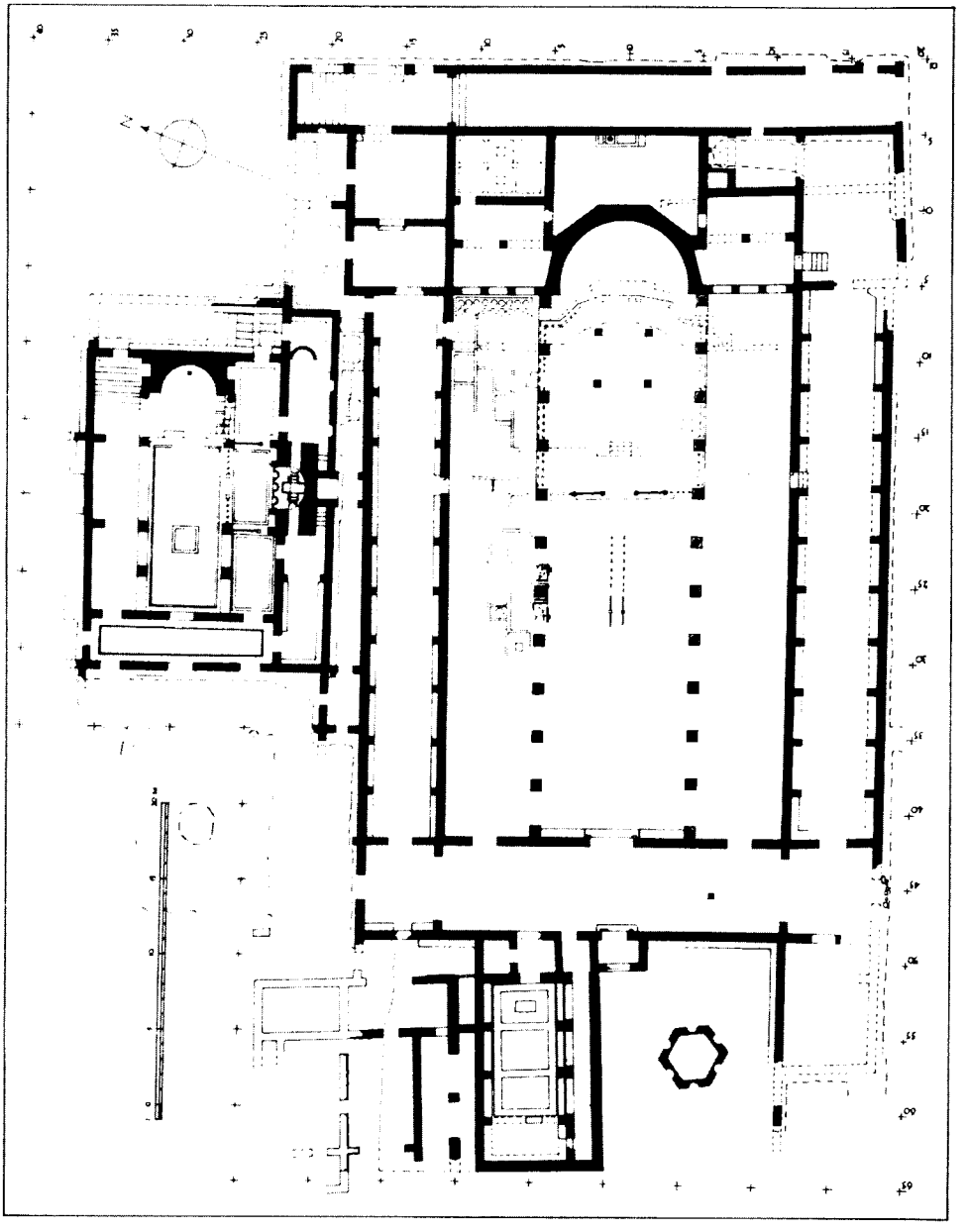
[95] Peter Chrysologos, *Sermo 160*, *Pat. Lat.* LII, 621-22, quoted by C.O. Nordström, *Ravennastudien. Ideengeschichtliche und ikonographische Untersuchungen über die Mosaiken von Ravenna*, Uppsala, 1953, 33.

[96] A. Bruno, "Il Battistero degli Ariani," *Felix Ravenna*, LXXV, 1957, 5-82, and Deichmann, II, 1, 251-55. Also see Kostof, 86-87.

[97] Lucien de Bruyne, "L'initiation chrétienne et ses reflets dans l'art paléochrétien," *Recherches de science religieuse*, XXXVI, 1962, 27-86.

9 Ravenna, Arian Baptistery, general view of dome. Observer oriented to west (photo: Wharton)

10 Ravenna, Arian Baptistery, interior, central medallion of dome representing baptism of Christ. Observer oriented to west (photo: Wharton)



11 Kourion, basilica and baptistery (after Megaw)

engaged not by one or the other figure, but by their synergy. The formal organization of the representation directs the baptizand's attention to the liturgical performance. The initiate must acknowledge the importance of the role of the initiator, that is, the bishop. Though by different manipulations of orientation and form, in both the Arian and Neonian Baptisteries the bishop is identified with the Baptist in the prototypical enactment of the ritual.[98]

The lower zones of the cupolas of the two baptisteries share the similarities and differences of their baptism medallions. Both monuments have processions of crown-bearing Apostles in a register below the central roundel. The register of alternating thrones and altars that occupies a third zone in the cupola of the Neonian Baptistery is not found in the Arian Baptistery. However, the programmer of the Arian Baptistery appears to have intercalated the ideas of the second and third registers of the Neonian Baptistery by adding a throne between Peter and Paul on the east axis of the monument.[99] This throne seems to represent Christ's power, for Peter and Paul hold attributes that derive from Christ's authority — the keys and the word. By analogy, the crowns in the hands of the Apostles may equally depict gifts bestowed by God on his deserving disciples. As they receive their reward, so the neophyte receives his or her reward through baptism. Viewers are apparently engaged in identification with the figure of the Apostle rather than with his action, analogously to their identification with Christ rather than the action of baptism in the central image.

The addition in the Arian Baptistery of a throne in the

[98] The tendency for art historians to denigrate the accomplishment of the artisans who worked on the Arian Baptistery seems to me to represent a curious prejudice for a "classicizing" style.

[99] This point has been made often, e.g., by Kostof, 89.

Apostles' procession seems neatly to resolve a perceived compositional problem present in the Neonian mosaic: the apparent lack of an object for the Apostles' procession. Though the momentum of the Apostles' forward movement increases and their gestures of presentation become more exaggerated as they move to the east, nothing displayed in the mosaic receives their offering. This lacuna has deeply offended a scholarly sense of propriety. It has been argued that the master of the Neonian Baptistery has misunderstood an earlier model, or that he was incapable of dividing the dome into thirteen compartments.[100] A.C. Soper observes, for example, that "the omission [of a throne between Peter and Paul] is so singular that it is plausible to suppose the mosaic [of the Neonian Baptistery to be] an unskillful adaptation of a design more competently imitated in the Arian rotunda, the earlier artist being unable to divide his circle with its rigid architectural relationships into the necessary thirteen parts."[101] It has also been suggested that the Apostles are presenting their martyrial crowns to the throne below.[102] These hypotheses lack both intellectual and visual conviction.

Bettini proposes an overly complex three-dimensional reconstrucion of the image in which the Apostles proceed between the baptism and the architectural backdrop.[103] Nordström argues that the dome is a Christianized version of the *aurum coronarium* or *aurum oblaticium*, an offering of golden wreaths to a new emperor at the time of his investiture.[104] Basic criticisms of these explanations have been raised.[105] Such readings are not only too abstruse, but more essentially they remove the meaning of the image from its audience, the common man and woman participating in the ritual. Kostof deftly avoids problems of interpretation by suggesting that the offering of crowns is typical of the generic symbolism of the Neonian Baptistery, and is therefore more subtle and complex than the unambiguous solution of the Arians, born as it were of a "pragmatic theology."[106] In support of such an argument, it is possible to cite the Apostles of the mosaic dome of S. Giovanni in Fonte, the baptistery of S. Restituta in Naples (Fig. 12). These figures also bear crowns, but again appear to be without sources or recipients for their gifts. However, because of the isolation of the Neapolitan figures and the lack of concerted movement among them, their crowns may be interpreted simply as apostolic attributes.[107] The momentum of the Apostles in the Neonian Baptistery does not allow such a solution.

By replacing the iconographer with the initiate as the object of the decoration, the program of the Neonian Baptistery becomes legible. Zone I hardly requires explanation: the image of baptism at the apex of the interior is the model of the ritual provided by Christ. Zone III, with its succession of thrones and altars, may be least problematically explained as the representation of the Church into which the initiate enters through baptism. The multiplication of these liturgical fittings conforms with the emphasis on the universality of the rite. Ambrose remonstrates, "You O Lord Jesus have today cleansed a thousand here [in Milan] for us. How many in the city of Rome, how many in Alexandria, how many in Antioch, how many in Constantinople."[108] Thrones and altars were those liturgical accoutrements which were most intimately associated with the bishop's authority. Gregory of Nazianzus presented his own empty cathedra and the altar of his church to the neophytes of his congregation as witnesses to their place within the Christian community and as a promise of their salvation: "My throne before which you will presently stand after your baptism before the great sanctuary is a foretype of the future glory."[109] In Gregory's rhetoric, as in the mosaics of the Neonian Baptistery, the earthly and heavenly churches merged within the matrix of the bishop's power, embodied in these pieces of sacred furniture. This zone appears to demonstrate again that the neophyte entered the community of the saved through the commission of the bishop.

Only the apparent problem of Zone II remains unresolved. The prominent presence of the Apostles in the baptistery may be explained by Christ's commission, quoted by Ambrose in his exegesis on baptism: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. . . ."[110] According to Gregory of Nyssa, the twelve stones set up by Joshua on the banks of the Jordan anticipated the twelve disciples as "the ministers of baptism."[111] Ambrose also invoked the names of the Apostles to impress his listeners with the sanctity of the mystery of baptism: ". . . Regard also the merits of Peter or of Paul who handed down to us

[100] G. Wilpert, *Die Römische Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg, 1916, I, 70-71.

[101] A.C. Soper, "The Italo-Gallic School of Early Christian Art," *Art Bulletin*, XX, 1938, 157.

[102] See A. Grabar, *L'Empereur dans l'art byzantin*, 232; K. Wessel, "Kranzgold und Lebenskrönen," *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, LXV-LXVI, 1950-51, 112; and H.P. L'Orange and P.J. Nordhagen, *The History of Mosaics*, London, 1966, 25-26.

[103] S. Bettini, "Il battistero della Cattedrale," *Felix Ravenna*, LII, 1950, 41-59.

[104] Nordström (as in n. 95), 32-54.

[105] See Kostof, 91-92 and, for bibliography, 164.

[106] Kostof, 91-93.

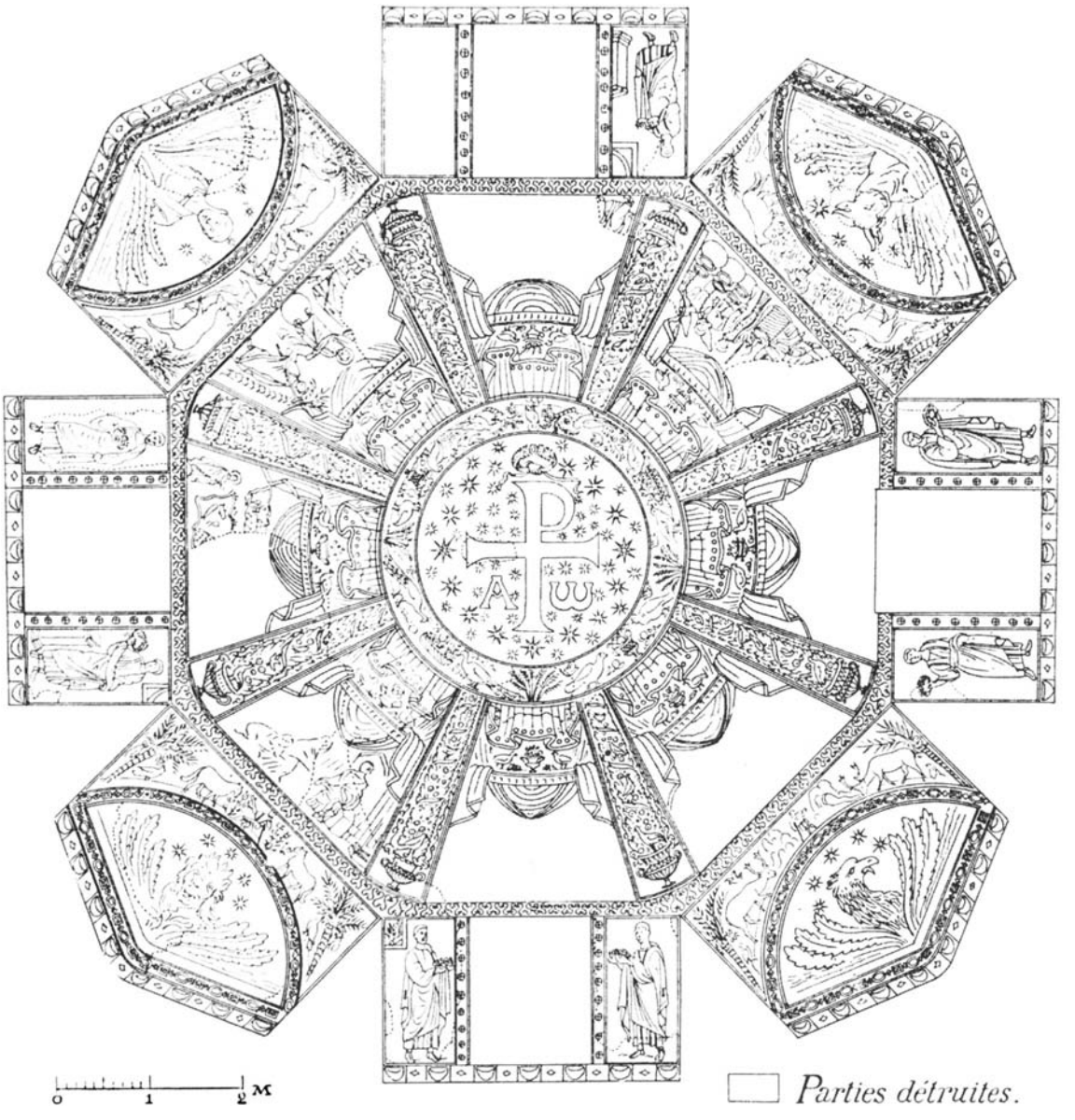
[107] G. Bovini, "I mosaici del Battistero di S. Giovanni in Fonte a Napoli," *Corsi di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina*, I, 1959, 5-26, with bibliography.

[108] *De Spiritu Sancto*, 1.17. It has been argued that the Church and the authority of the bishop are ideally rendered as "an empty bejewelled throne adorned with the cross." See X. Barbier de Montault, "Baptistère de la Cathédrale," *Revue del l'art chrétien*, 1896, 73-86. For a summary of ways of reading zone III, see Kostof, 76-82.

[109] *Pat. Grec.* XXXVI, 425B.

[110] Matthew 28.19, and *Sacraments*, 2.4.10.

[111] *Pat. Grec.* XLVI, 577-600.



12 Naples, schematic rendering of vault of S. Giovanni in Fonte (from E. Bertaux, *L'Art dans l'italie méridionale*, Paris and Rome, 1903, 47)

[the bishop] this mystery which they had received from Jesus Christ."[112] The program's visual assertion that Apostles function as intermediaries between Christ and the universal Church fully accorded with the Christian view of history. As already discussed, the Apostles were intimately identified with the ordering of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Bishops insisted that only they, as direct heirs of the Apostles, articulated true doctrine.[113] The Apostles in the Neonian Baptistery may then have appeared as a reaffirmation of the bishop's authority.

This does not, however, explain the offering of crowns in the Neonian Bapistery. Too often crowns are interpreted narrowly as representing only the offerings of martyrs to Christ. But crowns, more broadly associated with immortality, were available to all good Christians. Thus John Chrysostom wrote: "From death we have become immortal. Did you understand the victory and the way it was achieved? . . . We did not bloody our weapons, . . . we received no wound, . . . but we won the victory. The struggle was our Master's, but the *crown of victory is ours*."[114]

[112] *Mysteries*, 5.27.

[113] E.g., Irenaeus argued that the strength of the continuity of Apostolic succession was equivalent to the reliability of doctrinal tradition (*Libros Quinque Adversus Haereses* III, 3.1-4, ed. W.W. Harvey, Canterbury, 1857, II, 1-18). It is perhaps also worth noting that Ambrose defended the position of Paul in the apostolic college, as a means of protecting the privileges of Milan against Rome: Ambrose, *De Spirito Santo* II, 158, *Pat. Lat.* XVI, 808D (". . . nor was Paul, I say, unworthy of the association of the Apostles, since he is also easily to be compared to the first, and is second to none. For he who does not know that he is inferior makes himself equal").

[114] John Chrysostom, *De Coemeterio et Cruce*, *Pat. Grec.* XLIX, 396.

In his *Protreptic on Holy Baptism*, Saint Basil admonished members of his congregation to discipline themselves in preparation for baptism: "Whoever was adorned with *the crown of victory* [baptism] while in the midst of luxury and to the sound of the flute?"[115]

In return for a righteous struggle with the ordeals of this life, the neophyte was promised a heavenly reward. Ambrose thus explained anointment to the initiate:

> . . . You are anointed as an athlete of Christ, as if to contend in the contest of this world. You have professed the struggles of your contest. He who contends has what he hopes for; where there is a struggle, *there is a crown*. You contend in the world, but *you are crowned* by Christ. And for the struggles of the world *you are crowned*, for, although the reward is in heaven, the merit for the reward is established here.[116]

In another context, Ambrose repeated the same notion:

> [Like an athlete] you too have given in your name for Christ's contest; you have entered for an event and *its prize is a crown*. Practice, train, anoint yourself with the oil of gladness, an anointment that is never used up. . . . Keep your body chaste so as to be fit to wear *the crown*. Otherwise your reputation may lose you the favor of the spectators, and your supporters may see your negligence and abandon you.[117]

It appears that the object of the Apostles' procession, the intended recipient of the prize that they hold out, was the initiate. The meaning of the decoration of the Neonian Baptistery lies in the axis of its program. This axis begins with the historical archetype of baptism. It runs between the two most prominent advancing Apostles, Peter and Paul, and through the universal Church. It culminated with the neophyte, at the moment of his anointment, standing with the bishop at the altar or cathedra in the east niche of the baptismal hall. The bishop signed the baptizand with holy oil, admitting him or her to the earthly congregation and to eternal salvation: the "enlightened" received the crown of glory. The image promised before witnesses a reward that was realized through the power of the bishop, the successor of the Apostles. The Church, established by the Apostles and maintained by their successors, the bishops, was renewed with the reception of the initiate.

The procession of Apostles offering crowns in the Neonian Baptistery did not occupy a different time or space from those who enacted the ritual below. They engaged in the drama of initiation, and cannot be understood except in terms of the theater of experience. Brenk has observed that a radical reevaluation of materials was realized in the mosaics of the Neonian Baptistery: glass supplanted stone as the dominant material used for tesserae.[118] Not only in technology, but also in function, a critical shift from late antique to early medieval art is witnessed in this decoration: images assumed new powers. By the sixth century power resided in the isolated holy figure. In the Neonian Baptistery images intervened through the action they represented. However, without the reenactment of the rite of baptism and the reconstruction of the broader social meaning of initiation, the participatory potency of these images is denied them. We are left only with our aesthetic pleasure.

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[115] *Pat. Grec.* XXXI, 440B, transl. in A. Hamman, *Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts, Alba Patristic Library*, II, Staten Island, NY, 1967, para. 7.

[116] *Sacraments*, 1.2.4.

[117] Ambrose, *De Elia et Ieiunio*, 21.79, in *Pat. Lat.* XIV, 726.

[118] Beat Brenk, *Spätantike und frühes Christentum, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte*, Suppl. I, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1977, 74-76.