Capturing light in Late Antique Ravenna
A new interpretation of the Archbishops’ Chapel

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Analysing the cultural context in which the archbishops’ chapel in Ravenna was built, the article proposes a new interpretation of the structure. Designed in a period when the Catholic Church and the Arian court were clashing, and displaying numerous baptismal motifs, the chapel seems to have been designed as a secluded baptistery. The structure’s baptismal character transpires from its architecture and iconography, analysed here on the backdrop offered by Late Antique baptismal theory and iconography.

Keywords: Ravenna, chapel, light, baptism, ritual, architecture

The cappella arcivescovile from Ravenna represents a puzzling case. Despite being the only surviving private chapel from Late Antiquity, it received only a moderate amount of scholarly attention, perhaps due to the fact that its main function remains unknown.1 The inscription in its narthex testifies to the Late Antique practice of praising lavishly decorated interiors for producing their own light, but unlike similar texts the Ravennate one goes beyond aesthetic considerations, evincing a complex theology of the Divine Presence manifested as light and of the cultic building as its mise-en-scène. The key to understanding the building lies, we argue, in the anthropological dimension of the text, an aspect so far overlooked by researchers. In light of our recent research on the role of light in Late Antique baptismal theology and ritual, we argue that the building was designed as a potential baptistery.

I. Ravenna at the Beginning of the Sixth Century

Despite the tolerant character of Theodoric’s reign, the relations between the Arian and the Catholic churches appeared tensed even before the king’s radical change of heart.2 The conflictual state is mirrored by the cultic buildings erected in the period, the iconography of both the archbishops’ chapel and that of the baptistery of the Arians having polemic tones.3 The secluded position as well as the anti-Arian agenda of the chapel’s iconography indicate that the building was either a reaction to Theodoric’s change of policy or that it reflects an already existing tension.

Bishop Peter II (494–519/520), to whom the chapel is traditionally ascribed, held office during most of Theodoric’s rule. Elected bishop the year after Theodoric’s conquest of Ravenna, Peter seems to have collaborated well with the Ostrogothic king, his signature appearing on official documents released by the court. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the small, isolated chapel is the only cultic building made intra muros during his twenty-five years office.4 Compared with the intense building activity of the Catholic Church before and after Theodoric’s reign, as well as with that of the Arian Church in the same time frame, the matter is indicative of the Church’s position during the Ostrogothic rule. Also, while in general it appears that the king discouraged proselytism in both directions, the building of an Arian baptistery for adults indicates a change of policy. The chapel’s iconography, secluded position, and baptismal dimension appear thus as a reaction of the Church to the court’s anti-Catholic attitude.

II. The Chapel as Baptistery

The chapel is at the last floor of the three-level structure that Bishop Peter II annexed to the episcopium. Affected by successive modifications, the oratory was restored to its original shape in the early twentieth century.


3 V. Mauskopf Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity, 196, respectively 177–178.

4 Agnellus, our main source for Ravenna in Late Antiquity, confuses Peter I Chrysologus (c. 431–450) with Peter II, so the information he gives on the latter’s activity is not entirely reliable. Apart from the monasterium, a medieval term denoting private chapels cf. Mackie, Early Christian Chapels, 5. Peter II is said to have built a baptistery in Classe and a house (collum) next to the monasterium cf. Agnellus, Liber pontificialis ecclesiae Ravennatis, ed. D. Mauskopf Deliyannis, Turnhout 2006, 16 (50.1–5).
tury. While most of the original decoration survived in good enough state to allow its reconstruction, the original iconography of the apse and the chapel's lunettes remains unknown. Along with this loss, the closing of the door that allowed the accessing of the narthex through the adjacent tower appears as the main factor affecting the perception of the chapel as it was intended by its builders (Fig. 1).

The inscription running on the narthex' walls, quoted in extenso by Agnellus, is instrumental in understanding the building's nature, revealing the baptismal perspective in which the architecture and decoration should be approached. As we will argue, the chapel's architecture, inscription, and iconography support the baptismal thesis.

**II.1. The Architecture**

The similarity of Late Antique baptism to ceremonies such as the one described by Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses* 11.23, or the one found in the so-called Mithras Liturgy, meant also the manipulation of one's response to the eventual rite through the setting of spatial thresholds. Most visible in Cyril of Jerusalem's catecheses, the process through which the spaces adjacent to the baptistery were used to enhance the expectation is attested also in Late Antique Ravenna. In the case of the chapel the spatial succession required by the ritual is evident in the relation between the tower, the narthex, and the chapel itself. The dark staircase of the tower and the narthex with its golden mosaic stand in contrast, symbolising one's passing from the darkness of sin to the light of life. A similar spatial distribution is evident in the chapel of the fourth-century Roman villa from Frampton, Dominic Perring pertinently arguing for an initiatory, perhaps baptismal, character of the ritual enacted in the space. At Frampton, the long corridor assured one's reaction to the decorated narthex while the latter prepared one for the experience it was to go through inside the main room. In Ravenna, inside the narthex the *apotaxis* and *syntaxis*, the ritual turning towards the West and then the East that preceded baptism, appear orchestrated. As one entered the antechamber through the tower he had the window on the right, opposing the lunette on the left where the devil was depicted. Like geographic east, the window symbolised the Light of Christ, catechumens pledging their allegiance towards it as dying and resurrecting with Christ, baptism was from early on associated with martyrdom. The martyrical dimension of baptism was catalysed by the disappearance of systematic persecutions, the initiation being orchestrated as a symbolic martyrdom at the end of which the person regained the Christ-like status Adam had had before the Fall. The cruciform space suited thus the symbolism of the act, synthesising the catechumens' con-crucifixion and rebirth with Christ, through baptism.

The absence of the font indicates either the use of a mobile font, like the fourth- or fifth-century lead ones found at Icklingham, or the monolithic type that could have been removed without leaving significant traces-, or the association of the very chapel with a symbolic font. Indeed, if aspersions was practiced instead of immersion

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6 Our main source for the baptismal ritual in Late Antique Ravenna are the sermons of Peter I Chrysologus in which his adoption of the Ambrosian baptismal tradition and reliance on the ritual context appear clearly.


8 Similarities between the Baptistery of the Orthodox and the chapel indicate that the designer of the latter attempted to adapt the system of the Baptistery to the new space or, more likely, to render visible the same baptismal theology in a new spatial context.


10 After Lk 12, 50 presented martyrdom as a type of baptism the idea spread during the persecutions when unbaptised martyrs were considered baptised through their deaths. The orchestration of catechumenate as a bloodless martyrdom in Late Antiquity is most evident in the north-African tradition represented by Augustine and Quodvultdeus. V. W. Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, Colledgeville 1995, 251–260.


12 Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptistrien*, Pl. 27, 33, and 37 for monolithic fonts.
the identification of the chapel with the font, catalysed not only by the popularity of cruciform fonts but also by the use of marble revetment on the lower part of the walls, appears possible.\textsuperscript{13} As shown in Bissera Pentcheva's recent study, marble was perceived in Late Antiquity as solidified water, Paul the Silentiary's \textit{ekphrasis} of the pavement in Hagia Sophia evoking "an alchemical process, in which stone liquefies into water and molten metal":

\begin{quote}
The peak of Proconnesos soothingly spreading over the entire pavement has gladly given its back to the life-giving ruler, the radiance of the Bosphorus softly ruffling transmutes from the deepest darkness of swollen waters to the soft whiteness of radiant metal.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The exiting of the structure through a door opposing that of entrance, a key element in baptismal architecture, was assured in the chapel by the door leading from the narthex to the inside of the episcopium. The placing above the door of the image of Christ warrior holding the inscription in the narthex. The anti-Arian dimension of the iconography appears as a nuance, an insertion into the main Christic and martyrical principle dominating the program. As already argued, the two dimensions have an overt baptismal meaning, as does the mise-en-scène organised as a theophany of Christ represented by the chrismon.

Following the natural progression of the space, we will begin with the analysis of the narthex where, we argue, the inscription was meant to function as an interpretative trigger. The building of an expectation followed by its fulfillment during the ritual is a technique attested in Late Antique baptism. The partial maintaining of the sacred water, Paul the Silentiary's Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae, and the inscription in the narthex.\textsuperscript{15}

\section{The Inscription}

Given that the chapel's dedication to St. Andrew seems to have been made at a later date,\textsuperscript{15} the decoration of the structure, that is its iconography and rhetoric of materials, needs to be analysed in the context represented by contemporary Ravenna, the episcopium, and the inscription in the narthex. The anti-Arian dimension of the iconography appears as a nuance, an insertion into the main Christic and martyrical principle dominating the program. As already argued, the two dimensions have an overt baptismal meaning, as does the mise-en-scène organised as a theophany of Christ represented by the chrismon.

\begin{quote}
Aut lux hic nata est, aut capta his libera regnat; 
Lex est, ante semit caeli decus unde modernum. 
Aut priuata diem pepererunt tecta nitentem, 
Inclusumque tubar secluso fulget Olympo. 
Marmora cum radiis urnuntur, cerne, serenis 
Cunctaque sidereo percussa in mirice saxa 
Auctoris pretio splendescant muneris Petri. 
Huic honor, huic meritum tributi, sic comere parua, 
Vt ualeant spatii amplum superare coactis. 

Nil medicum Christo est; artas bene possidet aedes, 
Caicus in humano consistat pictore templi.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

As revealed by Giselle de Nie, in contemporary Gaul bishops consciously altered the perception of ritual contexts through their association with Old Testament and New Testament episodes presented as patterns.\textsuperscript{17} The process can be seen developing even earlier. The fourth-century pilgrim from Bordeaux saw only the physical remains of the Incarnation in his visit to the Holy Land while a few decades later Egeria, with the help of a ritual, saw not only Golgotha but also the Cross and Christ crucified on it. It was precisely such a "strategy of imagination" that the catechetical process produced, Cyril of Jerusalem

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

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Jerusalem declaring that his pre-baptismal sermons are meant to create a prism for apprehending the world in Christian key. Upon entering the narthex and seeing/hearing the epigram's reference to captured divine light, one's imagination prepared him for the apprehension of the subsequent scene, coming to expect a space associated with heaven, thus essentially luminous and inhabited by celestial beings.

The text begins with a praise of the decorative materials, a typical appreciation of the Late Antique cultic building for being luminous "suis radiis et sine sole." The space's relation with light suited its baptismal character, the Late Antique baptistery being called photistieron due to the amount of lights used in the ritual and its lavish decoration. The nocturnal character of the ritual and its complete dependency on artificial illumination, the association of Jesus' baptism with a light theophany, as well as the common use of light in other initiatory rituals prompted the orchestration of baptism as a light theophany. The identification of the lights used in the ritual with God's luminous Glory, stimulated through the particular use of decorative materials, led to the development of a light imagery associated with baptism and its setting. The fleshesting-out of heaven inside the baptistery is attested in Chrysologus' Ravenna, being also mirrored in Neon's program which is dominated by the image of Christ as a nocturnal sun. The decoration and iconography of the chapel are thus consistent with that of baptisteries, showing the created world illuminated from above by Christ, overlapped with the sun as in the Baptistry of the Orthodox or represented by His solar symbol, the Chrismon. The inscription's reference to light being either born or captured in the chapel synthesises perfectly the ambivalence of the light used in the ritual, presented as participating in its divine counterpart.

After mentioning the patron of the oratory the first part ends with an element pertaining to Christian anthropology, the postulation of the human heart as temple of Christ. The matter testifies Peter II's belonging to the theological tradition his predecessors Peter Chrysologus and Neon had promoted. The anthropological dimension is further developed in the second part of the inscription, which is often overlooked by modern scholars:


22 E.g. John Chrysostom. Sermo post reditum ab exilio 2, PG 52, 444.

23 Other Late Antique ritual mise-en-scènes relied on orchestrated theophanies enacted through the manipulation of space and light phenomena. E.g. the Eleusian mysteries and Mysthramis.


26 On Chrysologus' Christian as a luminous Image of God and temple of His presence v. his Serm. 117. On Neon's adoption of the same v. the texts and decoration of the episcopium described by Apelli Ravennati. Liber pontificalis ecclesiæ Ravennatis 29, 175–178.

27 Ibid., 175–178.

28 V. the meaning of commercium in Chrysologus in R. Benicetti, Il Cristo nei Sermoni di S. Pier Crisologo, Cesena 1995.


20 The bishop and the clergy supervising baptism are called doctors in Rufinus Aquileiensis. Apologie in Sanctum Hieronymum, PL 21.
II.3. The Iconography

As already stated, the space inside the chapel is both martyrical/Christic and visionary. Due to the unknown iconography of the apse the complete program remains unknown but in light of the coherence of the Christic dimension in the extant decoration it appears unlikely that the missing part would have changed the overall meaning of the setting. The scene appears as a depiction of Christian heaven, martyrs living bathed in the light coming from Christ cf. Rev. 21.23.31 The central space is flanked on all four sides by the portraits and symbols of Christ (Fig. 2), reinforcing the Christic character of the ritual taking place under the centre of the vault, where the chrismon is again depicted. Both the martyrical and the Christic dimensions are relevant for our analysis, baptism being presented as a bloodless martyrdom generating Christ-like beings.32 If a font was placed at the centre of the room, under the depicted oculus, the iconography and decoration would have made perfect sense in light of Late Antique baptismal theory and imagery.

The synthetic depiction of the cosmic structure ending in an oculus through which the main deity of the cult was visible appears as a common iconographic choice for Late Antique initiation spaces. In the chapel the angel cariatids connect the earth represented by the green patches they stand on with the sky on which the zoa and the oculus appear, stressing the vertical momentum of the space. As in the baptisteries of Naples and Albenga the oculus renders visible the symbol of Christ, the golden chrismon standing for the promised light theophany.33

In Christian sources the presence of Christ as the sun during baptism is mentioned by Zeno of Verona Tractatus 2.6.3.6–7 (San Zenone di Verona. I Discorsi, ed. G. Banterle, Milano-Roma 1987, 256) while Maximus of Turin [The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin, trans. B. Ramsey, New York 1989, 127 (52.23)] states that baptism opens the skies allowing the initiated to surpass the elements and see the substance of God and the sun.

31 The rows of apostles and martyrs depicted on the arches stress the identification of the interior of the chapel with heaven, a common idea in Late Antiquity being the population of heaven exclusively with martyrs. The apostles were considered martyrs in this period.
32 V. Gregory of Nazianzus. Or. 40.10, making the newly baptised address the devil as such: “I am myself the Image of God; I have not yet been cast down from the heavenly Glory, as you have through your pride; I have put on Christ; I have been transformed into Christ by Baptism; worship me.” (Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 7, 363).
33 V. the nocturnal sun mentioned in Lucius Apuleius Madaurenis. Metamorphoses, 159–60 (11.23) and the role the sun plays in the initiation described in the so-called Mithras Liturgy (H. D. Betz, The „Mithras Liturgy“. Text, Translation, and Commentary, Tübingen 2003).
Петар II (494–519/520) подигао током двадесетпетогодишњег службовања, након што је под Теодориховом владавином осигурао положај цркве. Њена архитектура и експликација анализирана су у овом чланку у светлости позноантичких текстова о крштењу и Крстеници православних. Чиши се да је архитекта капеле покушао да визуелни програм затече у крстеници православне. Чини се да је архитекта капеле покушао да визуелни програм затече у крстеници православне.