

Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 444 p.

Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis's *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* follows more than a century's ongoing research into Ravenna's history. This city ranked among the most significant administrative, political and religious centers of late antiquity. Moreover, the nearby port Classe, on the shore of the Adriatic Sea, enabled an easy commercial and artistic connection with Constantinople. A dense concentration of surviving early Christian and Byzantine churches, along with their decoration, provide unique information on the city where they were built and whose history they reflect. Ever since the foundation of the *Soprintendenza ai Monumenti di Ravenna* in 1897, there has been an unflagging publication of important studies written by archaeologists, historians and art historians from Italy and abroad.¹ The results of the most essential research were published between 1911 and 2000 in the journal entitled *Felix Ravenna*. The Italian scholar Giuseppe Bovini, a distinctive personality in Ravenna's historiography, founded and directed the *Istituto di Antichità Ravennate e Bizantine*. In 1950 he began organising the annual conferences *Corso di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina* (CARB), the results of which were published under the same title; the last of them took place in 1998. The need for a synthesis of numerous studies occupied Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, a German scholar working at the *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut* in Rome, in the years 1969–1989. His five-volume study represents the best attempt to assemble comprehensive knowledge of the city's history and monuments up to the present day.² Another essential source for late antique Ravenna is the *Liber pontificalis ravennatis* written in the 930s by Ravenna's historian Agnellus; translation and edition of his texts are a long-term interest of Deliyannis.³ Familiarity with Agnellus' and Deichmann's texts and their critical reception provided the author a solid basis for the present book. In order to provide a background to the archaeological and historical facts, she strives to present a general overview of the city's history as well as an overview of art-historical monuments. Linking written testimonies with recent studies, the author describes – for the first time in English – the city's history in chronological order. This description consists of six chapters, which take the reader from the city's Roman origins in the 3rd century BC to the end of the Byzantine era in the 9th century.

The introductory chapter (pp. 1–20) describes the key issues for art-historical research in the city; these issues are analyzed in detail in the following chapters. She questions the term “capital,” traditionally used for late antique Ravenna, and summarizes research into the city's history,

starting with Agnellus in the 9th century. The author also points out the geomorphological difficulties of archaeological research at Ravenna, and she notes the role of Ravenna's monuments in the overall context of the study of late antiquity.

The following chapter deals with Ravenna in the Roman period (pp. 21–40) when it gradually became an important military and naval base. Deliyannis mentions the natural conditions, first settlement, first written sources and successive population growth. Nor does she forget the importance and expansion of commercial relationships through the port of Classe. She also mentions the crisis of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century accompanied by plagues, political instability and enemy invasions. The chapter closes with the beginnings of Ravenna's Christianisation, associated with the personality of the city's legendary first bishop Apollinaris, who was, according to the *Passio sancti Apollinaris* (6th–7th century), a disciple of Saint Peter and martyred under the reign of the Emperor Vespasian (69–79). Although material and written sources from this period are very limited, Deliyannis is successful in carefully gathering together all available information, and provides a brief overview of this stage in the evolution of Ravenna – an evolution which would lead to the future importance and glory of this north-Italian city.

Tracing the beginnings of the Ravenna's most glorious period, the 5th century, is the task of the third chapter (pp. 41–105). Deliyannis describes the history of the Western Empire in broad terms, starting with Diocletian's (284–305) decision to divide the Empire into Eastern and Western halves, and including its administration, divided among several main cities. She continues through the moment when Emperor Honorius's (395–423) relocated his court from Milan to Ravenna in 402, and she finishes with the deposition of the last Emperor of the West by the Germanic general Odoacer in 476. Using recent studies, as well as surviving written sources, the author tries to shed light on the reasons for the Emperor's choice to make Ravenna his residence – reasons that seem to be more complex than just the strategically ones discussed by the majority of scholars. The moving of the emperor's court is followed by the episcopate of the famous Peter Chrysologus (431–451) and by extensive building under the patronage of his biggest supporter, Galla Placidia, the empress who took control of the city in 425 (San Giovanni Evangelista, Santa Croce, the so-called mausoleum of Galla Placidia). Deliyannis then shifts the focus from imperial patronage to the person of Ravenna's bishop, who soon became the main authority in the city af-

ter the removal of Emperor Valentinian's court to Rome in 440. The generous patronage of bishop Neon I (orthodox baptistery, decoration of the bishop's palace, decoration of its *triclinium*, Basilica Apostolorum and Basilica Petriana in Classe) added to the artistic wealth of the city after the mid-5th century. In the chaotic period after the assassination of Emperor Valentinian and the sack of Rome by the Vandals in 455, the briefly-governing emperors are documented as residing alternately in Ravenna or Rome. It seems that during this period, Ravenna continued in its administrative and military functions, but it was used as imperial capital by the emperors only intermittently. According to Deliyannis, Ravenna was deliberately chosen as an alternative to Rome, but it depended on the subjective choice of a given emperor. This "dark period" and the reign of its "less competent" emperors was concluded by the violent invasion of Germanic King Odoacer in 476 and a new expansion of art under the reign of the Ostrogothic King Theodoric after 493. Individual monuments are carefully analyzed from a structural-historical point of view, complemented by detailed description and interpretation everywhere the monuments have survived.

The following two chapters deal with one of the most interesting and – due to numerous surviving written sources – most studied periods of Ravenna's history. It is the period of the reign of Ostrogothic King Theodoric, from 489 to 540, when Ravenna became the capital of the Ostrogothic Kingdom and thus the center of Arian Christianity. The fourth chapter (pp. 106–138) deals with the wide historical context for Theodoric's secular constructions (palaces, aqueducts, Theodoric's mausoleum) while the fifth chapter (pp. 139–200) introduces the reader to the specific milieu characterized by two diverse religious factions – Arian and Orthodox. Ravenna is the only place, where churches survive, that are known from definite evidence to have been used by Arians (San Apollinare Nuovo, Santo Spirito, Arian baptistery). This fact has led many scholars to attempt to reconstruct the Arians' theology and liturgy. In the search for Arian or, in the opposite sense, anti-Arian elements (Archbishop's chapel), Deliyannis assumes a healthily skeptical attitude, since, in fact, we know very little about Arian liturgy. She intentionally avoids efforts to distinguish them definitely and unambiguously with regard to iconography. In addition, the fact that the decoration of these churches was not changed when Ravenna was again taken over the Orthodox under the reign of Emperor Justinian (527–565) and bishop Agnellus (566–570), speaks rather of a general perception of the iconography of chosen scenes by both factions.

The sixth chapter deals with the early Byzantine period of the city after the triumph of Byzantium over the Ostrogoths and up to the end of 6th century (pp. 201–275). Ravenna became the seat of Byzantine exarchs and Byzantine administration in the West until the 8th century. Ac-

ording to Deliyannis, on the basis of surviving monuments it is impossible to speak of specific "exarchal" iconography. The real heirs of these successive sovereigns in the iconographic, historiographical, and political domain were the bishops of this era. In the period of Byzantine supremacy, they gained even more power and prestige. Their importance in the Church's hierarchy was also reinforced by the role they played in the contemporary theological conflict known as the Three Chapters Controversy. It is possible to find contemporary political and theological messages in the sophisticated programme of mosaic decoration of the basilicas of San Vitale, San Michele in Africisco or St. Stephen, founded by bishop Maximian and intended to preserve the relics of twenty saints. The real demonstration of the bishops' power, from their liturgical role to their political importance, is represented by the portraits of Ravenna's bishops in the basilica of San Apollinare in Classe.

The book closes with a short chapter continuing the narration of the period of the Byzantine Exarchate up to 850 (pp. 277–299). It seems that while the rest of Italy was devastated by plagues, disasters, and invasions, Ravenna continued the progress which had started in 5th century. We cannot speak of its decline until the 7th century or later, and its decline was rather slow. In this chapter the author tries once again, exhaustively and accurately, to sketch the historical background, the relationships between the bishops and exarchs, and the social environment and urbanism of the city. Around 800, Charlemagne still saw Ravenna as an imposing city worthy of imitation. But he then proceeded to remove from the city the valuable building materials used as *spolia* at his own seat in Aachen. This was the moment when Ravenna became a museum to its past glory.

The author's aim is to provide a scholarly work in English which, unlike Deichmann's, does not try to trace the complete history of art and architecture in Ravenna, but is rather conceived as a history of the city in late antiquity. Ravenna is, obviously, a city that can be broadly understood through its surviving works of art (pp. 19–20). The book combines an art-historical approach with a critical evaluation of recent studies, archaeological research and written sources. The author's background in archeology and the history of architecture, her familiarity with Agnellus' manuscript, and her interest in late antique material culture are key to making this a universal handbook, useful as a starting point for historical as well as art-historical study. These advantages, together with its comprehensive and readable form, should make it very useful for students of this period. We can be especially grateful for the extensive bibliography for each topic.

On the other hand, the reader will notice several limitations. The most severe of them, I think, is the total omission of surviving objects in ivory and gold. This is

a pity because it is precisely these portable objects which, if understood as transmitting the ideas of those who commissioned them, could help fulfill the author's aim of providing a complex history of the city. Surprisingly little attention is dedicated to the one of the most studied of Ravenna's monuments – the ivory throne of bishop Maximian (pp. 213–218). Not even the exceptionally comprehensive group of about forty surviving sarcophagi, which could say much about a social class that once lived in Ravenna, was used to achieve the author's aim. Deliyannis often points out unresolved questions and intentionally leaves them open, but only exceptionally does she give the reader her own opinions formed by her research; her contribution to scholarly discussion is thus minimal. For a more satisfying grasp of city's history, it would help if the author had developed such topics as the reasons for and manifestations of the oft-mentioned rivalry between the bishops of Ravenna and Rome in the 5th century (pp. 41–105). More thorough coverage of the theological controversies which characterized particular periods, and which fundamentally influenced artistic commissions, would have been equally helpful. Although the author is aware of the uniqueness of Ravenna's monuments in the overall context of the late antique world, she does not always link historical circumstances with the monuments studied. In spite of this work's many positive qualities, those interested in the history and art of Ravenna will still be obliged to turn to Deichmann's five-volume syn-

thesis, which offers an incomparably condensed quantity of informations from the field of art history⁴, or to the more recent volumes of the *Storia di Ravenna*⁵ or the published proceedings of the 2004 historical conference *Ravenna: da capitale imperiale a capitale esarcale*.⁶

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Notes

¹ The most recent studies e. g.: Clementina Rizzardi, *Il mosaico a Ravenna, ideologia e arte*, Bologna 2011. – Emanuela Penni Iacco, *L'arianesimo nei mosaici di Ravenna*, Ravenna 2011. – Davide Longhi, *Significato simbolico e committenza dei mosaici tardo antichi di Ravenna*, Tricase 2012. Massimiliano David, *Eternal Ravenna. From the Etruscans to the Venetians*, Turnhout 2013

² Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, *Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes. Geschichte und Monumente*, Wiesbaden 1969. – idem, *Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes. Kommentar* (4 vol.), Wiesbaden 1974–1989.

³ Agnellus, *The book of pontiffs of the church of Ravenna. Agnellus of Ravenna*, transl. with an introd. and notes by Deborah Mausekopf Deliyannis, Washington D.C. 2004. – *Agnelli Ravennatis Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, cura et studio Deborah Mausekopf Deliyannis, Turnhout 2006.

⁴ Deichmann (see note 2).

⁵ Giancarlo Susini (ed.), *Storia di Ravenna. Vol. 1: L'evo antico*, Venezia 1990.

– Antonio Carile (ed.), *Storia di Ravenna. Vol. 2: Dall'età bizantina all'età ottoniana* (Vol. 1–2), Venezia 1991–1992.

⁶ *Ravenna, da capitale imperiale a capitale esarcale. Atti del XVII Congresso internazionale di studio sull'alto medioevo*, Ravenna, 6–12 giugno 2004 (2 vol.), Spoleto 2005.