

RAVENNA

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ON the occasion of the opening of the new aqueduct for Ravenna (the last one having ceased its functions before the year 1000, with the result that Martial's complaint of the frogs, mosquitoes, and stagnant water still remains true to-day) the *podesta* of the city dutifully thanked the "paternal" and "benevolent" Government in a finely rhetorical notice some six feet long. He hoped that Mussolini's munificence would open a new era in the history of the town; that it would become industrial and prosperous, and that it would no longer be visited for historic or artistic reasons alone.

These municipal hopes are indeed optimistic. There is, it is true, less grass between the cobbles of the streets and squares than before the war. There are, moreover, some dozen taxis and two omnibuses for neighbouring parts. In the harbour a few woe-begone steamers may be seen leisurely unloading cargo. Even more progressive are the number of peasant women on bicycles, their black skirts catching in the wheels, creating a pandemonium of bell ringing, to the exasperation of the pedestrian public. For there are no sidewalks, and consequently there is no escape from bicycles, lumbering oxen, or an occasional whirlwind visitation of a tempestuous taxi driver.

Unless the beach six miles away develops into a second Lido, Ravenna, it must be admitted, will continue to live on her past. And what a past this little brick-built city has had! It has seen the Roman Empire in Augustan glory, and a panic-stricken court has witnessed its destruction from these walls; it was the seat of the most enlightened Government of the dark ages until the resurgence of Roman virility from the east destroyed the Ostrogothic kingdom; and for two centuries it vied with Rome as the centre of the Western Church. Then the glory of ancient civilisation, like the sea, receded from its walls. Its later history is that of any southern town. It became the refuge of exiles driven from happy lives elsewhere, and adding to the tale of human failure and mortality which is the city's fate. Dante, driven from Florence, is buried here in an unpretentious tomb crushed between two walls. Byron, recovering from his Venetian excesses, wrote his *Don Juan* here, surrounded by his gigantic gondolier, his mistresses, his horses and his pistols. Twenty years later, Garibaldi's

epic retreat from Rome came to an inglorious shipwreck in the forest of pines along the shore.

The independent existence of the town having ceased before the time of Charlemagne, Ravenna, unlike other Italian cities, has escaped the architecture of medieval and modern times. There are few buildings of a date later than the seventh century. Rococo has left its mark on some interiors—particularly the cathedral, which was entirely rebuilt in the eighteenth century. The town, however, except for the railway station, has almost recovered the atmosphere of early Christian antiquity. No other town that I have visited is so redolent of the past as is Ravenna. It has perhaps more churches to the square foot than Avignon; but Avignon is a modern city to-day. The restorations and tourist traffic of Carcassonne prohibit any genuine sensation whatsoever. The walled city of Aigues Mortes, as it rises gauntly above the salt-marshes, is alone comparable; but Ravenna had already lived before St. Louis built those walls.

At first sight, its buildings are singularly unimpressive. The sea, which in the time of Augustus had given the neighbouring town of Classe the finest of Adriatic harbours, has now retreated six miles, leaving Ravenna surrounded by marshes and vine clad fields, with not a tree to break the monotony of the landscape. Of Classe only one magnificent basilica remains; and Ravenna once built (according to Strabo) on piers and intersected, like its younger sister Venice, with canals, is now connected with the Adriatic only by a long canal. Within the walls the glory is also departed. The churches, which are seen at every turn, are all built of the old Roman narrow brick. There are so many of them that some are used for utilitarian purposes: one basilica, its bare, majestic walls towering into the dim vastness of the roof, is a garage; instead of mosaics or marble altars are two Ford vans in the last stages of decrepitude. The hotel is pleasant, but not luxurious; the rooms with their tile floors are bare of all but the most necessary furniture: a bedstead, a chair, a cracked mirror, and an earthen ewer. But the meals in the courtyard atone for any absence of American standards of comfort. In Italy the maxim that what you lose upon the roundabouts you gain upon the swings is nearly always true.

But enter any of the larger churches, and immediately the impression changes. The walls are panelled with porphyry: the windows are of translucent amber; a stately row of amethyst pillars stretches up the nave; above the columns is a glittering vision of gold and green mosaic; and over all is a majestic flat wooden roof,

often figured with gilded panels. Only in the quietude of these majestic buildings can the ancient glory of Ravenna be recalled.

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The history of the town begins with the legendary martyrdom of St. Apollinaris, who met his death while proselytizing this district in the year 74. He is reputed to have been a friend of St. Peter, but nothing else is known of him. In his honour, however, were built the two greatest churches of the city; in the apse of S. Apollinare in Classe we may see a huge picture of him, standing in a rocky wilderness, with arms outstretched to bless.

Ravenna acquired its importance in Roman times from the neighbouring harbour which Augustus made the base of the Adriatic fleet. Of this village of Classe (now some miles from the sea) nothing is left but the great basilica already referred to, and its cylindrical campanile. In Augustan times two hundred and fifty ships rode at anchor, and a legion of soldiers was quartered there.

Ravenna itself began an independent existence at the time of the barbarian invasions. When it was already famous for its impregnable position, surrounded by marshes and connected with the Via Emilia by a raised causeway, the timid Honorius moved his court hither in 402. His general, Stilicho, with little support managed to stem the monstrous torrent of invaders by strategy, until he was accused of participating in a palace conspiracy and surrendered to the soldiers by the bishop to whose protection he had fled. With this sole obstacle to his progress removed, Alaric marched on Rome and the Imperial city, Gibbon says, "which had subdued and civilised so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered over to the licentious fury of the tribes of Germany and Scythia." An impotent court watched the destruction of the capital; the only attempt made to save it was the dispatch of a small body of retainers, who, very sensibly, proceeded to get lost in the mountains. Honorius was keeping ships ready for immediate flight, and was doubtless greatly relieved when Alaric's only action was to set up a puppet emperor at Rome, totally ignoring the existence of the Ravennese court.

It is with Honorius's sister, Galla Placidia, that the history of art begins. Her tragic career was itself an epitome of the degrading of Roman civilisation. Her first husband and her children were butchered before her eyes in Spain, and she herself had to march in the train of the barbarian assassin. With the Vandals she crossed into Africa, but she was restored by treaty to Ravenna where she was forced to marry a barbarian general. Her son,

Valentinian III, was the last of the direct line of emperors, and received the purple at the age of six. Galla, now a widow, proceeded to do very well for herself: for twenty-five years, in spite of constant cheating by generals and subtle orientals, she ruled at Ravenna. According to some, she prevented her child from growing up by teaching him dissolute practices. This method of education seems to have been responsible for moving the court back to Rome. Valentinian, justly bored with the restricted opportunities for vice which the provinces afforded, decided to seek more interesting game at the fountain head of dissoluteness, of which Ammianus has given us such a highly coloured picture.

Galla died at Rome in 450; but she had wisely built her own tomb beforehand. To her are due the first glories of the art of Ravenna: the Baptistry, the churches of S. Giovanni and S. Francesco, and above all, her sepulchre. It was she who imported the mosaic workers or *marmorarii* who founded the Ravennese school. It appears that the earliest medium was marble, such as is found in the Neapolitan mosaics: "it comes about from this art, which is superior to nature, that they piece variegated pieces of marble together in a most pleasing variety of pictures," writes a contemporary. But certainly the majority of mosaics of the city are done in a vitreous medium which gives a brighter effect, and to which is due the predominance of glittering gold.

Blue, however, is the predominant colour of the sepulchre. An unpretentious building from without, almost in the shape of a Greek cross, and in the sunlight having the appearance of a hot brick kiln! The first effect on entering this building is one of total darkness after the brilliant sunlight; for diaphanous alabaster windows of the smallest size give very little light. But when one's eyes become accustomed to the dark, the feeling is that of being in a cool Mediterranean grotto: the entire nave is coloured a deep, uniform ultramarine blue; every arch is decorated with the most sumptuous garlands of flowers and fruit, of oranges, myrtles and lemons which stretch down to the floor on either side. In the arms of the cross are three enormous marble sarcophagi, and above each are designed three scenes in mosaic. Probably the earliest in date is that in the East; a picture of the Good Shepherd—among the earliest drawings of Christ that exist. It is admirably illustrative of the way in which Christianity utilized pagan forms; for the figure immediately suggests Raphael's Apollo in the Vatican stanze. Surely this auburn haired youth in his purple chlamys and tunic of cloth of gold is Apollo strayed from Arcady and feeding his sheep in a southern landscape; but the golden nimbus

and cross have already made of the sun-god an awkward religious figure. Under this scene the body of Galla, embalmed fully dressed and sitting upright in a cypress chair, sat staring into the darkness until at the time of the Renaissance some mischievous urchins set light to this macabre figure of imperial greatness. On the left is a scene representing two Romans in togas greeting each other with the symbol of doves drinking from a vase (a detail reminiscent of Pompeii) between them. In the right hand alcove the Christian hand is more in evidence: St. Lawrence, a cross over his shoulder, walks with energetic stride towards a gridiron.

The baptistery of the cathedral is another of Galla's buildings, but the decoration of the cupola was done by later Byzantine artists. This building is built around a central marble baptistery with a small pulpit let in on one side: when total immersion ceased to be the custom, the modern foot took the place of these old octagonal basins. The prophets on the lower part of the walls make a fine array in their white and gold tunics. Of the mosaics which decorated the other churches there is now no trace.

With the end of the last miserable emperor, the barbarians became the acknowledged rulers of Italy. Theodoric, with great wisdom, removed the seat of government from the enervating atmosphere of Rome, and made Ravenna the capital of the great Ostrogothic kingdom. Under his rule the city reached the climax of its wealth and importance. The foundation of the king's policy was the fusion between Goth and Roman, and his own staff included the two foremost Romans, Cassiodorus and Boethius. The latter was clubbed to death for conspiracy after a long term of imprisonment, and that catastrophe was reputed to be the cause of Theodoric's own end. According to Procopius, the Byzantine enemy of the Arian Goths, a fish was placed before the old king at dinner; in it Theodoric discerned the face of Boethius, the teeth set and the eyes glaring; he rushed from the room shivering with terror, and died in agony a few days later. A hermit saw his body hurled by a devil into the volcano of Lipari. Such was the reputed end of the greatest of the barbarians.

Under Theodoric's peaceful rule, says a less bigoted contemporary, the gates of the city were never repaired because they were never needed. But the three greatest churches in Ravenna were begun during his reign, though not consecrated for many years. His own mausoleum, a solid impressive building situated outside the city at the end of an avenue of cypress, presents the most interesting engineering problems. It is surmounted by a dome of solid Istrian stone weighing three hundred tons and measuring

thirty metres in circumference; there is a slight crack said to have been caused when the block was moved into position, but how that superhuman task was performed is unknown. Surely such a hero is worthy to be commemorated by a tomb which will "wear this world out to the ending doom."

S. Apollinare Nuovo, the original Arian cathedral, has the most majestic nave in existence;—twenty-four columns of eastern marble with floriated capitals are surmounted by a procession of more than full size figures on a ground of gold and flowered mosaic. On the left some fifty white clad virgins start out from the harbour, on the bright blue waters of which ride three ships at anchor, with gold crowns on their heads and palms in their hands. At the head of this line the three magi, in Phrygian caps and oriental trousers, present their gifts to the Madonna enthroned. On the opposite side is an equally impressive procession of saints leaving Theodoric's palace (originally next the church) and led by St. Martin in a black cloak who stands by the throne of the Saviour. It is impossible to date these mosaics with any accuracy, but it is certain from the style that some are of later date. Unfortunately an abominable eighteenth century apse ruins a church which stands amongst the finest in Christendom.

S. Apollinare in Classe stands alone some two miles out of the town, the sole remaining monument of the ancient harbour. The church suffered considerably from the predatory instincts of the lords of Rimini, and in order to enrich his beautiful pagan church there in memory of "the divine Isotta", Sigismondo Malatesta stripped these walls of their marble facings and destroyed many of the mosaics. But this is a most impressive building from an architectural standpoint. Totally bare of furniture, the vast open body of the church gives a feeling of wonderful dignity and serenity; twenty-four columns of violet marble from Hymettus, with a medallion frieze above them, lead up to the mosaic covered apse. This mosaic scene is, however, poorly composed: the saint stands in a wilderness of rocks, bushes, lilies and sheep which have been thrown together without thought of design. But nowhere, save perhaps in the newly restored church of S. Francesco, can one obtain that atmosphere of ascetic purity and calm dignity which characterises early church architecture. No Anglican pews and prayer books, no Jesuit *baldachinos* and wax-works distract the onlooker; there is no Renaissance art introducing a foreign spirit of naturalism and peasant women within the walls; instead, the decoration everywhere enhances the effect of the building's dignified proportions.

The last of Theodoric's foundations, the church of S. Vitale, leads us to the final and comparatively inglorious age of the city's history. With Justinian's conquests of the old Roman dominions, Ravenna became the capital of an exarchate, and on this church imperial wealth was lavished. The building is octagonal, the central dome (primitively constructed of earthen pots let into the mortar) is surrounded by a cluster of small domed chapels. In the decoration Byzantine influence is predominant, and it is interesting to see that the artists certainly aimed at some degree of realism, and were not so specifically symbolic as their art is popularly supposed to be. The mosaic medium obviously lends itself to formal and symbolic treatment: the lines must be broad and the effect sweeping, for there is little opportunity for perspective or shading. But the formal treatment of the human figure cannot have developed till later. These artists clearly aimed at portraiture, and made many skilful attempts at shading. The luxury of Constantinople is much in evidence—purity of tone gives place to excessive richness of decoration; the altar screens are of pierced marble; the walls and windows of porphyry and alabaster; and every inch of space above is crowded with mosaic. One scene represents the uxorious Justinian (whose character was so disproportionate to his work) accompanied by the Archbishop in full pontificals, together with soldiers and priests; in another the bejewelled Empress (who so obviously remains true to her original profession of actress), together with her women, enters a chamber the rich curtain of which is held aside by a priest. In general, the effect is one of a palace rather than of a church.

"How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people"! Ravenna ceased to play an important part in the world's history when Pepin made it part of the Papal dominions. Since then, exiles have found refuge within her walls and battles have been fought without, but no great buildings have been added to her inheritance, and she has been despoiled of many of her treasures by later barbarians, whether Lombards, Franks, or Renaissance despots. All her history she has been a city of refuge, a true home of lost causes. To-day she lives on the glories of that distant past, her buildings recovering for us vague memories from out the limbo of time!

But ah! Maecenas is yclad in claye,
And great Augustus long ygoe is dead,
And all the worthies ligen wrapt in leads
That matter made for poets on to playe.