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Western Adoption of Byzantine Tropes in the Early Medieval Period

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The historiography of the appropriation of Byzantine visual culture by early medieval western rulers is extensive and has benefitted from the input of some of art history’s major figures. Scholars such as Otto Demus, Erwin Panofsky and Kurt Weitzmann have all offered their interpretation as to why the west incorporated eastern iconographical, architectural and stylistic trends in their visual vocabulary. The predominant explanation provided is based on the notion that the west had a lack of a Christian artistic tradition and therefore copied eastern prototypes. As stylistic analysis dominates most of the literature, the insufficient consideration of political and social factors has left the modern scholar wanting for a more comprehensive explanation. The goal of my doctoral dissertation is to readdress these adoptions of Byzantine tropes while placing a larger emphasis on political and social motivations of the patron and the perceptions of the intended audience.

One possible implication of this study is that art was an active participant in the relationship between the east and the west, serving as a communicative device, rather than as the more frequently cited passive role of a conduit for iconographical transmission or cultural legitimization. I reject the belief of syncretism requiring a level of admiration and view the west's use of a Byzantine visual language as more politically, rather than aesthetically motivated. Therefore, visual culture that demonstrated syncretic features could indicate an attempt to open the lines of communication through a language unencumbered by comprehension or mistranslations, or could possibly

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indicate rising tensions between two cultural groups and therefore signal a pre-cursor to conflict.

I have organized my research in a case study fashion and have chosen five western rulers - Theodoric the Great, Charlemagne, and the three Ottos – all of whom had significant interactions with Byzantium and who bridge over five hundred years in order to determine patterns or similarities in their appropriations. For the sake of brevity, my presentation will focus on one monument of one of my case studies: Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.

Erected in the early sixth century, Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo is considered by most scholars as the palace chapel for the Gothic king Theodoric (497-526). Theodoric's building programme has been long considered to be a reflection of an ideology that was radical for the sixth century. Ostensibly a leader with a modern stance on religious tolerance, Theodoric has provided art historians with a respite from centuries of wars and destruction with what some describe as a grand scale cultural renovatio.

Prevailing scholarship has defined Theodoric's building programme as a reflection of his political ideology of civilitas, the tolerance of multiple cultures and religions, and therefore the monuments erected during his rule express a visual vocabulary that coincides with this ideology.² Theodoric's building programme is often described as being syncretic of his own Gothic heritage, the past Roman culture his renovatio professes to admire and the culture to which he owed his title of king of Italy to: Byzantium.³ However, this contextualization of his building programme simplifies the complexities of not only Theodoric's political ideology, but also his ambitions as king of Italy.

While we may never know without a doubt what Theodoric's political ambitions were and whether he considered himself to be an emperor or not, there is a body of evidence

² The civilitas ideology is found peppered through royal correspondence recorded in Variae by Theodoric's trusted court member, Cassiodorus. Hodgkin: 1886.
that suggests a certain amount of competition between Byzantium and the Goths existed. The relationship between Theodoric and Byzantium can be best described as unclear. While some believe Theodoric was completely indoctrinated to the Byzantine way of life during a decade long forced stay in Constantinople and maintained a position of clear subordination throughout his reign in Italy, others suggest that a more complicated relationship existed between Theodoric and Byzantium and the last years of his reign were a testament to the decline of the relationship.\(^4\) The alteration of Theodoric’s mosaics made by bishop Agnellus (557-570) once Byzantium regained Italy further supports the theory of competition between the two states.

One key mosaic that utilizes Byzantine iconography is the image of Christ on a lyre-backed throne. The image of Christ sitting on a grand throne conveys some imperial connections through its ornate decorations, his purple clothing and sheer size. However, it is the throne’s shape has drawn the attention of scholars and provides the strongest link to Byzantine imperial iconography, as the shape of the back has a distinctive curve similar to of a lyre. This aspect of the mosaic has been identified by James D. Breckenridge as an overt Byzantine, imperial reference.\(^5\) This image is an apt example of the appearance, or perceived copying, of Byzantine iconography in the mosaics at Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo. Here Christ is no longer the gentle shepherd leading his flock as seen so frequently in Early Christian Roman art, but an authoritative figure, the Pantokrator of Byzantine heritage.

Breckenridge suggests that the shape of the throne is evocative of the throne on which the emperor in Constantinople would have sat upon.\(^6\) Although Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo provides us with the earliest extant large-scale depiction on Christ on a lyre-backed throne (east or west), its popularity persisted in Byzantium. Similar iconography appears in Byzantium almost five centuries later in Hagias Sophia and on the coins of ninth-century emperors such as Basil I and Leo VI.

\(^4\) Scholars such as A.D. Lee, Richard Krautheimer, and Mark J. Johnson and Otto von Simson to a lesser extent stress the Romanization of Theodoric’s rule. Patrick Amory, John Moorehead, Herwig Wolfram and Christopher Wickham suggest a more complicated relationship.


\(^6\) Ibid., 248.
While other mosaics at Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, such as the Christological panels located in the upper nave, display some Roman inspiration in their iconography, the obvious imperial images were communicated in a strong visual Byzantine language. It can be argued that this syncretism was not born out of tolerance or copying, but borne out of competition.\(^7\)

The mosaics that displayed Roman iconography were not altered suggesting that any Roman iconography was not controversial. Even the iconography that some scholars believe to be Arian – the so-called ageing Christ - remained untouched by Bishop Agnellus and his renovators. However, the mosaics that associated the Goths with imperial power through the use of Byzantine iconography were more contested and as a result were the focus of bishop Agnellus’ alterations thereby indicating competition between the Goths and the Byzantines.

Theodoric utilized various types of imperial tropes in both his written and visual cultural outputs. His building programme is the physical manifestation of a complex message of power and authority and must not be viewed as an output of a singular ideology. It was a dynamic and ambitious programme reflective of an ambitious patron and political-societal pressures. The appropriation of Byzantine iconography in this case study is better understood if viewed not a testament to tolerance or simple copying, but as a signal of competition. Therefore, monuments such as Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo can be viewed as participating within a wider political-social context and help us to better understand possible motivations driving the practice of appropriating a foreign visual language by early medieval western European rulers.

\(^7\) Hayden: 2002: 205.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


