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The Survival of Ravenna

Review of: Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*,
Cambridge University Press, New York: 2010

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The preservation in Ravenna of more than twelve churches of fifth and sixth century date offers the rare opportunity to study the history of a major urban center of the late Antique period. The famous early Christian and Byzantine churches of this city, most of them restored drastically in the 19th and the 20th centuries, display a wide variety of sophisticated architectural forms, alongside countless examples of mosaic decoration, fresco, and polychromous marble revetment. This precious heritage, correctly interpreted with the help of written records and inscriptions, has the potential to shed light on the complex artistic and cultural developments that marked the transition from the last centuries of Antiquity to the Middle Ages. This subject has been repeatedly explored in the past. The standard works of F. W. Deichmann, as well as numerous scholarly publications investigate individual monuments and illuminate particular aspects of the history of late Antique Ravenna. The recent book by Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis constitutes the latest contribution to this field. Skillfully interweaving the evidence of written testimonies with the interpretation of architectural forms, frescoes and mosaics, this publication seeks to recount, for the first time in English, the history of Ravenna from the Roman times through the end of the Byzantine period.

This survey organizes this vast subject chronologically, in five main chapters. It starts with an attempt to visualize the city during the Roman period, when it gradually became a major military and naval base. Although the evidence is limited, the author assembles all the information available to present a sketchy overview of the Roman city. Chapter three outlines the conditions in which early 5th century Ravenna, occupying a site considered defensible, well connected to Constantinople, easily provisioned and lacking a strong pagan establishment, became the capital of the Western Roman Empire. The meticulous surveys of monuments such as Santa Croce and the “Mausoleum of Gala Placidia” form the core of this section. These surveys combine the careful analysis of architectural forms and structures with the description and interpretation of the surviving mosaics.

The following two chapters treat one of the most interesting phases in Ravenna’s history, the period during which the city was the capital of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. The survival of a series of churches securely known to have been used by Goths makes Ravenna the best site to study Arian–Gothic sacred art and architecture. The author carefully surveys major churches such as Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, but also draws attention to lesser known monuments such as the Capella Archivescovile, describing them thoroughly and reviewing them within their broad cultural framework. Deliyannis also pays particular attention to the iconography of this period and its symbolism, refers to the theories concerning Arian and Orthodox stylistic concepts, but avoids making a clear-cut distinction between the two.

Chapter six is dedicated to early Byzantine Ravenna, tracing the history of the city from the Byzantine reconquest to the end of the 6th century. This section includes surveys of the churches of San Vitale and Sant'Apollinare in Classe. As usual, the reader is impressed by the multifaceted nature of the approach. Based on the careful consideration of all available sources, the author pays equal attention to architectural forms, structures and iconography. The book ends with a short chapter on the history of the city as capital of the Byzantine Exarchate (AD 600 – 850). This refers to a period whose cultural, political, and economic establishments are radically different from the ones of late Antiquity. Still, the author explains how essential parts of the late Antique city kept being maintained, admired and recorded throughout the Middle Ages. It is partly in this period of maintenance that the keys to the survival of Ravenna's late Antique monumental fabric are to be found.

It is difficult to do justice to the high quality and wide scope of this book. Its approach to the history of early Christian and Byzantine Ravenna stimulates reflection by combining evidence from buildings and archaeological records with information from written testimonies. Embodying all the latest research, the book allows inaccessible information to be used and understood. On the other hand, the reader may register few limitations. For instance, more numerous and varied illustrations (such as graphic reconstructions and three dimensional drawings) would help to capture the most complex and opaque aspects of Ravenna's architecture and urban forms. More importantly, the fact that almost all the surviving monuments are churches makes for a treatment that tends to emphasize the study of ecclesiastical art and architecture. Still, these points do not detract from the great merit of this work once its scope and limits are realized. The wealth of information in this book, and the vast knowledge it displays and organizes into a coherent picture make it an invaluable resource for all students of Ravenna's history, art, and architecture.