Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale

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The imperial panels in the church of S. Vitale at Ravenna are perhaps the most famous of all Byzantine mosaics. The two panels face each other, one on each side of the apse. The left panel (Fig. 1) shows the Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527–65) in the midst of his attendants. The right panel (Fig. 2) shows the empress Theodora (d. 548), Justinian's consort, similarly attended. Each member of the imperial pair wears sumptuous purple imperial robes and a crown and is distinguished by a halo. Each also carries gifts for the church, Justinian a gold paten and Theodora a gold chalice. Each group appears to be advancing toward the center of the apse across a green floor between two jeweled gold columns, which in Justinian's panel support a coffered ceiling and in Theodora's support a carved egg and dart cornice.

While the wall behind Justinian's scene is plain gold, Theodora's scene has a more elaborate background: a niche with a shell-shaped conch directly behind the figure of the empress, at the left an open doorway hung with a curtain behind a small gushing fountain on a pedestal, and at the right a section of gold ground with a drapery hanging above it. The emperor has to his right two prominent dignitaries wearing white mantles with purple tablia over short white tunics embroidered with shoulder ornaments. To their right stands a group of guardsmen carrying spears and a shield. To the emperor's left is another white-robed dignitary squeezed into a narrow space, to his left a bishop labeled *Maximianus* carrying a gold cross, and to Maximian's left two deacons, one carrying a Gospel book and the other a censer. Theodora has two eunuchs to her right, one of whom touches the curtain in front of the doorway as if to lift it, and to her left two prominent noblewomen and a group of five ladies-in-waiting.

Inside the church, in the overall context of the decoration of the sanctuary, these panels are located in the apse's hemicycle, which is otherwise occupied mainly by three large windows (Fig. 3). The panels are integrated into the larger apse decoration by the simple and standard means of ornamental borders and decorative architecture. The borders include a ubiquitous pearl and jewel band and a scalloped black and white one. The bejeweled columns used at the sides of each panel reappear in a slightly larger size between the windows of the apse (not illustrated).

In the simplest sense, the intended purpose of these panels seems clear. It is to glorify the emperor Justinian and his empress, Theodora. In a wider sense, the mosaics may be conceived as a glorification of the whole institution of imperial autocracy, in Italy and throughout the world. At this time Justinian was vigorously expanding his empire beyond the lands he had inherited in the eastern Mediterranean. In 535, just after conquering northern Africa from the Vandals, the emperor sent an expedition under Belisarius, his most capable general, to take Italy from the Ostrogoths. In 540, after Belisarius secured the surrender of the Ostrogothic king Vitigis and the Ostrogoths' capital at Ravenna, he held all of Italy except for a few Ostrogothic outposts. At that point Justinian recalled Belisarius to fight the Persians in the East. The Ostrogoths then rallied and retook much of Italy before the Byzantines finally completed the conquest in 561.

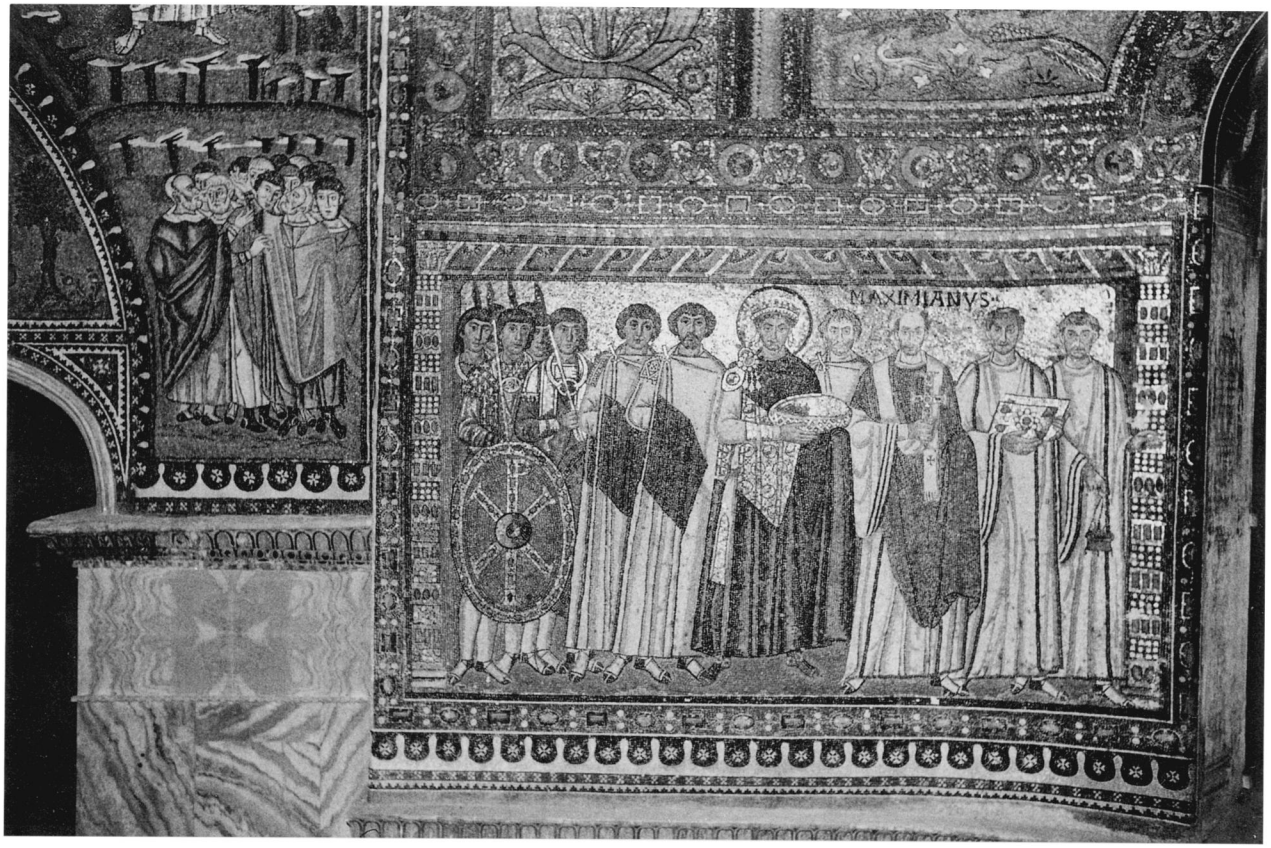
The scholarly consensus is that these mosaics represent an imaginary procession, given that Justinian, Theodora, and Maximian, the archbishop of Ravenna, who is labeled in the mosaic, were never together in the same place after Maximian's consecration in 546. The figures apart from Justinian, Theodora, and Maximian are generally thought to be unidentifiable, though some tentative suggestions have been made for two or three others.[1] Various scholars have added theoretical refinements about the precise relationships to be inferred among the imperial couple, their retinue, Maximian, the Church, Italy, and the world. Such interpretations, whether right or wrong, have seemed to require neither a close examination of the condition of the mosaics nor any further identification of the figures in them. After all, the mosaics must be essentially genuine, and the central figures can hardly represent anyone other than Justinian and Theodora, who reigned when the church was consecrated and were contemporaries of Archbishop Maximian.

Four recent and contrasting views illustrate how complex the task of interpreting these panels can be.[2] Ernst Kitzinger, following a suggestion made over thirty years earlier by Gerhart Rodenwaldt, has emphasized the importance in Justinian's panel of Archbishop Maximian, and by extension of the Church hierarchy. Kitzinger bases his argument on Maximian's prominent place next to the emperor and the fact that he alone is identified by an inscription.[3] By contrast, Henry Maguire has seen in the same panel a comparison of Justinian and his courtiers to Christ and his Apostles. Maguire counts twelve figures attending Justinian and draws a parallel

1. See the standard work of F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, II, pt. 2, Wiesbaden, 1976, 180–87.

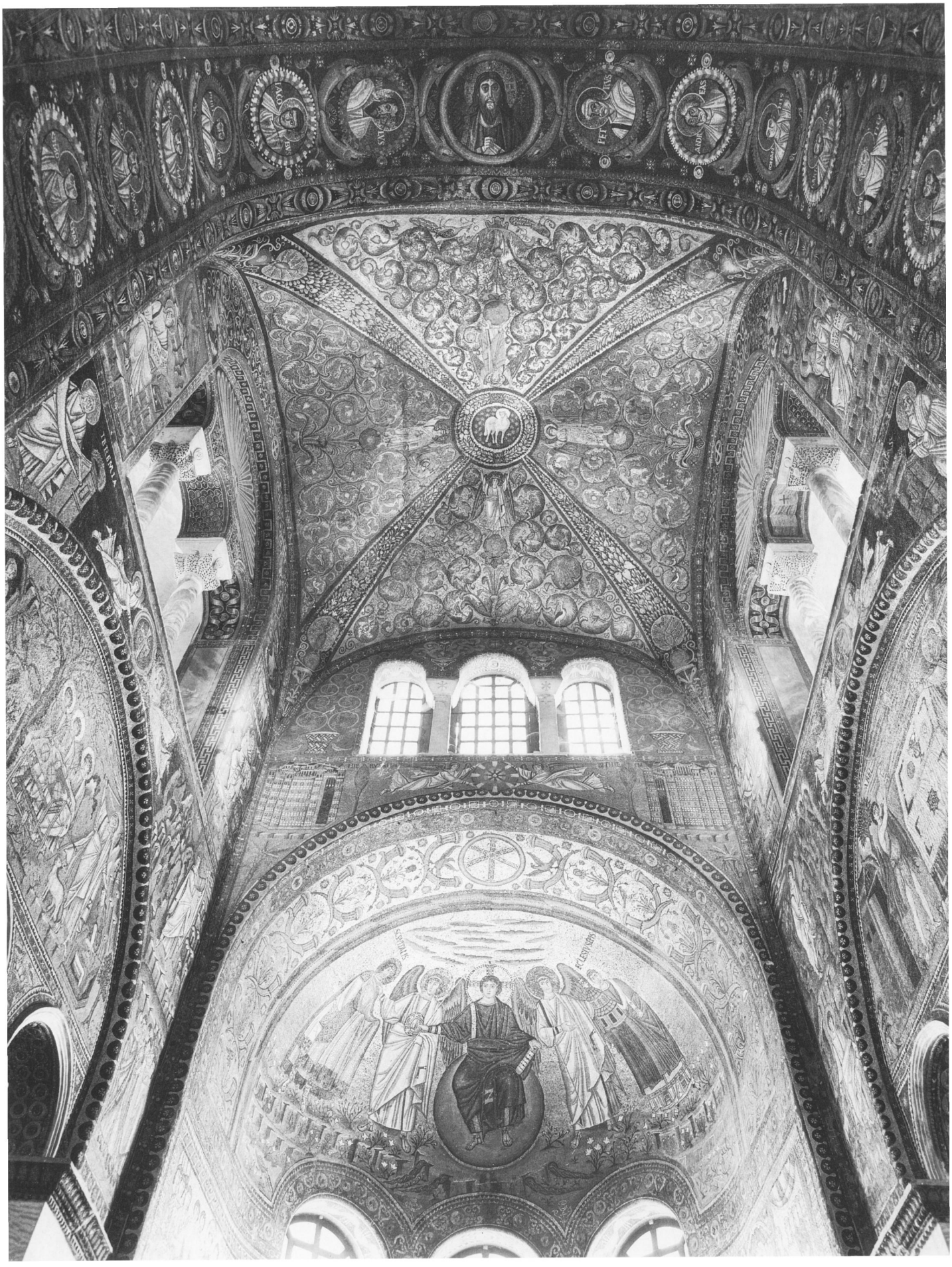
2. Besides these four, see also E. Manara, "Di un'ipotesi per l'individuazione dei personaggi nei pannelli del S. Vitale a Ravenna e per la loro interpretazione," *Felix Ravenna*, 4th ser., nos. 125–26, 1983, pp. 13–37; and J. Engemann, "Die religiöse Herrscherfunktion im Fünfsäulenmonument Diocletians in Rom und in den Herrschermosaiken Justinians in Ravenna," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, XVIII, 1984, 336–56. For the bibliography before 1976, see Deichmann.

3. Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd–7th Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1977, 87–88. Cf. Gerhart Rodenwaldt, "Bemerkungen zu den Kaisermosaiken in San Vitale," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, LIX–LX, 1944–45, 88–110, esp. 101–4.



1 S. Vitale, Ravenna, apse, Justinian panel (unless otherwise noted, photographs are by Irina Andreescu-Treadgold)

2 S. Vitale, apse, Theodora panel



3 S. Vitale, apse (photo: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome)

with the mosaic medallions of Christ and the apostles on the arch leading into S. Vitale's sanctuary.[4]

Turning to Theodora's panel, in a poststructuralist analysis of imperial imagery Sabine MacCormack has suggested that the niche indicates that at the time of the mosaic Theodora was dead and about to pass through a doorway hung with "the veil . . . between this life and the next" and preceded by "a fountain of living water." MacCormack concludes, "The mosaic thus correlates the imagery of imperial glory with the imagery of the glory of the life to come."[5] On the other hand, in another poststructuralist study of the Justinian and Theodora panels, Charles Barber has maintained, "The privileging of the male as the performer of a public role is underlined in [Theodora's] panel by the way in which the male actors are showing the way into the darkened doorway to the female actors."[6]

Maguire has pointed out that more than one such interpretation may be correct, because the same image could be designed to have several meanings. Specifically, he notes that the mosaics of S. Vitale "celebrate the victories of Christ and of the emperor at the same time."[7] Certainly, the messages that Christ is powerful and that the emperor has a share in Christ's power are compatible. Nevertheless, the interpretations of Kitzinger, Maguire, MacCormack, and Barber seem to contradict each other. To Kitzinger, the mosaic of Justinian minimizes imperial authority over the bishop. In Maguire's interpretation, the same mosaic puts the emperor in a relation to the bishop comparable to Christ's superiority over his Apostles. For MacCormack, the Theodora mosaic implies that imperial glory transcended this world, perhaps even to the point of assuring the empress's ultimate salvation. For Barber, the same mosaic apparently puts the empress in a position less privileged than one of her eunuchs. Can all of these really be impressions that whoever planned these panels intended to convey, and succeeded in conveying to contemporaries?

Kitzinger is of course correct that the Justinian panel gives the bishop some prominence. Yet if Thomas Mathews is right to identify the panels' subject as the First Entrance of the early Byzantine liturgy, the bishop should have led the procession.[8] In that case the panel has given the emperor the greatest prominence possible; the fact that his paten slightly overlaps the bishop's elbow actually implies that he precedes the bishop, even though the bishop's feet are plainly ahead of his. Since a liturgical interpretation of such a scene in a church sanctuary is almost inevitable, a leading place for the bishop in itself would convey no particular message about ecclesiastical authority. Though such a message might be found in the striking and curiously unique inscription identifying Maximian, that could also be taken to refer to Maximian in particular rather than to bishops in general.

Maguire's interpretation—that Justinian's retinue represents the twelve Apostles—requires some manipulation of the visual evidence. We must suppose not only that a Byzantine would have counted the number of people in the scene, but also that in counting them he would have included the three guardsmen in the back row, none of whom is shown full face; for one, only a scalp is visible. The Justinian panel does not correspond to any single scene of Christ and the Apostles in S. Vitale. The obvious parallel, with the Theodora panel, lends no support to Maguire's interpretation.

MacCormack's suggestions assume an even higher level of ideological awareness at Ravenna than do Kitzinger's and Maguire's. They also demand, contrary to most modern opinion, a date after Theodora's death for at least the Theodora panel. Despite this seemingly topical reference, MacCormack insists, "Like other works of imperial art, the mosaics of San Vitale were produced at a certain time for a certain occasion, but they were intended to retain their significance independently of that occasion, once it was past and forgotten."[9] Sure of the enduring significance of these mosaics, MacCormack uses her hypothesis to reach a conclusion, which is virtually the conclusion of her book, about the transcendence of imperial power in Byzantine ideology.[10] Several reviewers have criticized the sweeping ideological inferences that MacCormack has drawn from similar hypotheses, or even from outright errors.[11] As for Barber's interpretation, the idea that a man who assists a woman or a servant who assists a mistress exercises some sort of superiority seems to be a modern misunderstanding of a traditional and hierarchical society.

Our own approach to these mosaics began not with ideology but with history. One of us, while studying Procopius's *History of the Wars* and *Secret History* and the S. Vitale panels in the course of writing a general history of Byzantium, formed a hypothesis about the identities of several of the figures in the panels.[12] To test his hypothesis, he consulted the other, who was already working on the technical and art historical aspects of mosaics at Ravenna.[13] Her examination of the imperial panels from scaffoldings over several years led to

4. Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art*, University Park, Pa., 1987, 80.

5. Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, 1981, 263.

6. Charles Barber, "The Imperial Panels at San Vitale: A Reconsideration," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, XIV, 1990, 35, see also 19–42.

7. Maguire (as in n. 4), 80, see also 80–83.

8. Thomas Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*, University Park, Pa., 1971, 146–47. Mathews's case is supported by Robert F. Taft, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of Gifts and Other Preanaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, no. 200, Rome, 1975, 30–31.

9. MacCormack, 260.

10. Ibid. 266: "We have observed the emergence of a concept of imperial dominion which had its roots in the classical world, but it would have been impossible to state it there without ambivalence and in the simplicity that was found in Byzantium: 'God has given you. God will keep you. / King of heaven, preserve the King on earth.' " The final quotations, however, are from the 10th-century *De Ceremoniis* of Constantine VII, which as an official work on court protocol reveals nothing about the Byzantines' real opinions.

11. See James Trilling, *Times Literary Supplement*, Aug. 13, 1982, 884; Michael McCormick, *American Journal of Philology*, CV, 1984, 494–98; and Kathleen Shelton, *Classical Philology*, LXXIX, 1984, 259–64.

12. See Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford, Calif., 1997, esp. 174–217, on the reign of Justinian.

13. See Irina Andreescu-Treadgold, "The Mosaic Workshop at San Vitale," in *Atti del Convegno Mosaici a San Vitale e altri restauri*, ed. A. M. Iannucci et al., Ravenna, 1992, 30–41, and corrigenda insert, 1–8. For the method, cf. eadem, the first fascicle of "The Corpus for Middle Byzantine Wall Mosaics: The Church of Santa Maria Assunta at Torcello," typescript; and for a sample entry of the "Corpus", cf. eadem, "Torcello IV. Cappella Sud, mosaici: Cronologia relativa, cronologia assoluta e analisi delle paste vitree," in *III Colloquio Internazionale sul Mosaico Antico: Ravenna, 6–10 Settembre 1980* Ravenna, 1984, 535–51, app. 1 (in English), 542–49.

4 S. Vitale, capital with monograms of Bishop Victor

some surprising discoveries.[14] These in turn led us to reconsider the internal chronology of Justinian's panel, which came to include two successive bishops. The final result was a partly revised hypothesis that identifies six of the figures accompanying Justinian and Theodora. It also seems to exclude some earlier interpretations of the ideology of the mosaics.

The only explicitly identified character in either panel is Maximian (Fig. 6), the first bishop of Ravenna to rank as an archbishop, whose name is inscribed above his head. The only other similarly identified bishop in the church's mosaics is Ecclesius, represented in the act of offering the church to Christ in the apse at the viewer's far right. This prominent position corresponds to that of the church's titular saint, Vitalis, whom Christ awards the crown of martyrdom in the same scene at the far left (Fig. 3). We know from the ninth-century chronicler Agnellus, who saw a now missing inscription in S. Vitale, that Ecclesius was the bishop who initiated the church's construction, that Maximian was the consecrating bishop, and that a certain Julianus Argentarius actually had the church built, decorated, and dedicated. Agnellus records that Julianus, a well-known patron of churches in Ravenna and probably a Greek and a banker, paid the substantial sum of 26,000 solidi to build S. Vitale.[15]

Carved monograms on several capitals in the church name a third bishop, Victor, Maximian's immediate predecessor, who obviously took a part in the construction (Fig. 4). Ursicinus, who was bishop between Ecclesius and Victor, presumably participated as well. The exact dates of these bishops' reigns are subject to some doubt, but the most likely chronology is as follows:

Ecclesius	February 20, 522–July 27, 532
Ursicinus	February 25, 533–September 5, 536
Victor	April 4, 538–February 15, 545
Maximian	October 14, 546–February 22, 556[16]

Victor's episcopate included the year 540, when the Ostrogoths, who followed the Arian heresy although they tolerated Orthodoxy among their subjects, surrendered Ravenna to the Orthodox Byzantines.

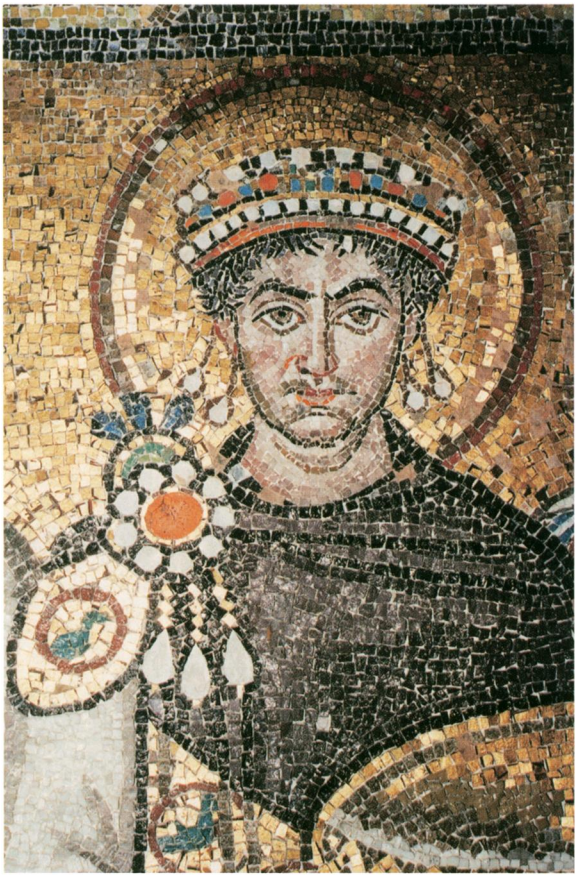
Since S. Vitale was begun under Ecclesius and consecrated by Maximian, the work spanned about two decades and took place under four bishops and two radically different political and religious regimes, one Ostrogoth and Arian and the other Byzantine and Orthodox. The details of the work's progress and the exact participation of each sponsor are not recorded in the sources and can only be conjectured. However, that the panels were planned together as a matching set depicting the imperial couple bringing gifts to the church is clear. They appear to have been conceived from the outset as part of the apse. They surely belong to the period after 540, because the Ostrogothic kings would hardly have permitted anyone to put up mosaics in their capital that glorified the emperor and empress as rulers at Ravenna.

With this background in mind, we can turn to the findings of the survey made from scaffoldings for this study. The figures in the S. Vitale panels are characterized according to conventions of Byzantine portraiture that define their age and position. The mosaicists have done this with indisputable competence and a fairly wide technical repertoire, though without excessive care for details of technique. Among the conventions known to the mosaicists was the indication of age

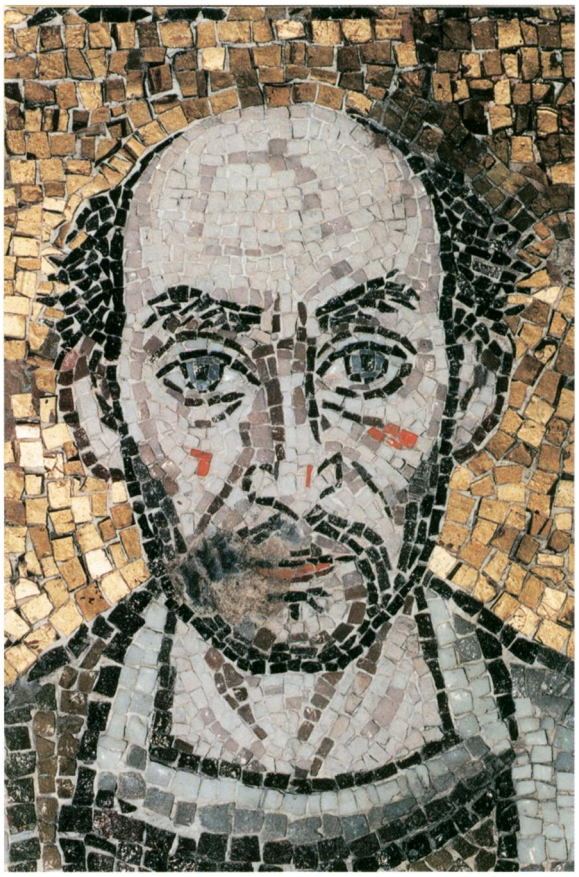
14. Over several trips to Ravenna between 1990 and 1997, thanks to Architetto Annamaria Iannucci, the Soprintendenza ai Beni Architettoni e Ambientali graciously provided a moving platform for the examination of the panels as well as access since 1988 to their scaffoldings erected on the sanctuary walls for the ongoing restoration of the mosaics. The moving platform could not be placed against the wall because of the width of the presbytery's socle bench, but it came near enough to allow for good observations and photographs from reasonably close quarters. A detailed knowledge of the many and diverse portraits on S. Vitale's west arch and east, south, and north walls, all of which have been successively cleaned and restored between 1988 and 1997—as well as parts of the vault of the Lamb, which were made more accessible by the other scaffoldings—and an acquaintance with some of S. Apollinare Nuovo's mosaics, also from scaffoldings, served as the direct background for the investigation. For a preliminary report on the findings, see Irina Andreescu-Treadgold and Warren Treadgold, "Dates and Identities in the Imperial Panels of San Vitale," in *Sixteenth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference: Abstracts of Papers,* Baltimore, 1990, 52–54.

15. Agnellus, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis,* ed. O. Holder-Egger, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum,* Hanover, Germ., 1878, 330, 318–19; another edition of Agnellus's work, ed. A. Testi Rasponi, is in *Raccolta degli storici italiani dal cinquecento al millecinquecento,* ed. L. A. Muratori, fasc. 200, Bologna, 1924, 198, 167.

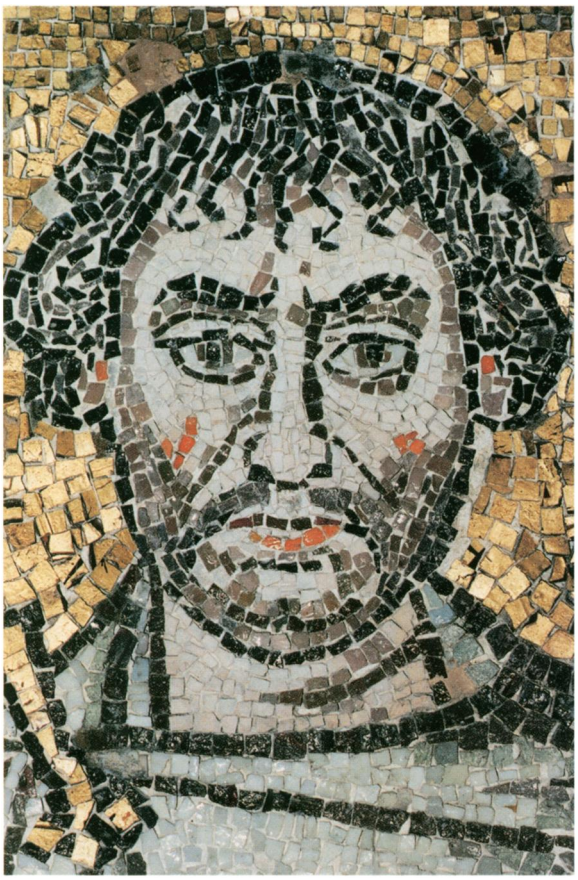
16. See Giorgio Orioli, "I vescovi di Ravenna: Note di cronologia e di storia," *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata,* n.s. 32, 1978, 45–75, dates on 63–64, except that he lists Victor's dates as Mar. 4, 537–Feb. 15, 544. According to the transmitted text of Agnellus (Holder-Egger, 324, 325; and Testi Rasponi 182, 184–85), Victor celebrated the anniversary of his consecration on Easter and had been bishop for six years, eleven months, and eleven days when he died on a Feb. 15. But this text must somehow be at fault, because it implies that Victor had been consecrated on a Mar. 4, while Easter can never fall before Mar. 22. The lengths Agnellus gives for the other episcopates show that Victor could only have been consecrated in 537 or 538. Noting that in 538 Easter fell on *Apr.* 4, Alessandro Testi Rasponi, 185 n. 1, emended the text to make Victor's episcopate six years, ten months, and eleven days (correcting *menses xi* to *menses x*). Testi Rasponi also argued that the political circumstances rule out a consecration in 537 (when Easter fell on Apr. 12). This solution, which seems practically certain, means that Victor was consecrated on Apr. 4, 538, and died on Feb. 15, 545. Deichmann, 9–10, ignoring the problem of the Easter consecration, based his preference for 544 over 545 as Victor's death date on the weak argument that the church of S. Michele in Africisco would not have been dedicated on May 7, 545, without a bishop, as was the case, unless a fairly long interval had persuaded the dedicators that no new bishop would be named soon.



5 Detail of Justinian panel: Justinian



6 Detail of Justinian panel: Archbishop Maximian



7 Detail of Justinian panel: official between Justinian and Maximian, probably John the Nephew of Vitalian

8 Detail of Justinian panel: hand of Justinian

9 Detail of Justinian panel: hand of Maximian (originally Victor)

10 Detail of Theodora panel: young woman, probably Joannina

11 Detail of Theodora panel: Theodora

through the choice of colors and the setting of rows in patterns to represent either younger and firmer flesh, as in the faces of Theodora's ladies-in-waiting and the young lady to their left (Fig. 10), or sagging and paler cheeks—if in a somewhat understated manner—for Theodora herself (Fig. 11) and her closest female companion (Fig. 12). Age is represented for men through hairstyles, beards or a lack of them, and brow and cheek patterns ranging from smooth to furrowed. For instance, Justinian, though clean-shaven, has the shadow of a beard (Fig. 5), while the adolescent second from his right and Theodora's eunuchs (Fig. 13) have no traces of beards. Similar features can also be seen in the gallery of Apostle portraits on the west arch, which range from young and beardless to old and gray.

In the emperor's panel, despite the essentially formulaic components—Justinian's guardsmen (Fig. 14) seem lifted from the same model book as those on the base of Theodosius I's obelisk in the Hippodrome, of Constantinople (Fig. 15)—some of the characters achieve a portraitlike quality, as in the group of two dignitaries (Fig. 16) and that of the deacons (Figs. 17, 18). The visible flesh parts in the S. Vitale panels' heads and hands are made exclusively with glass tesserae, except for two of the heads, to be considered shortly, which are made mostly with stone cubes.

This last observation, which bears on the technique, is important because it allows the group as a whole to be placed in the chronologically earlier stages of the S. Vitale mosaic decoration, when glass tesserae were used overwhelmingly to render features, hands, and feet as well as ornaments. Areas similarly treated include the entire apse, the vault of the Lamb, the topmost parts of the sanctuary walls, and the top medallions of the west arch (Fig. 3). During a second phase, to give the most noticeable example, white marble and limestone usually replace the white and silver glass.

The characters in the imperial panels, for all their typological variety, share a competent pictorial and technical treatment, which shows the workshop's professionalism. Despite the seemingly uniform style, however, a few differences in details undoubtedly reveal different artisans working on the same scaffolding, probably back to back from the center out. Back to back—and top to bottom in areas that, unlike the imperial panels, exceed the height of a man—is the standard sequence for setting mosaics as documented in various monuments. A good instance of this sequence and division of labor at S. Vitale can be found in the west arch, where the geometric ornament that frames the long panel with the medallion busts was started in the middle at the top of the

12 Detail of Theodora panel: older woman, probably Antonina

13 Detail of Theodora panel: eunuch

arch and continued down on both sides simultaneously. This explains why the two sides came to be increasingly out of synchronization, until some elements of the repetition had to be dropped on one side at the bottom of the panel in order to correct the imbalance.[17]

Stylistic differences alone can be misleading, because the individual styles within one workshop could differ as much as the styles of two workshops that were so close in date. The phases can be reliably detected only when differences in materials correspond to distinct areas of the walls that represent either work loads or repairs.[18] Thus, the evidence of the mosaics resembles the stratigraphy of an archaeological excavation. Moreover, a fuller understanding of the practices of a team of mosaicists requires that the resulting mosaics be scrutinized as archaeological artifacts, taking as the decisive factor the use of materials. These are more or less uniform for the members of a given workshop, probably because of the way in which supplies were procured in bulk.[19]

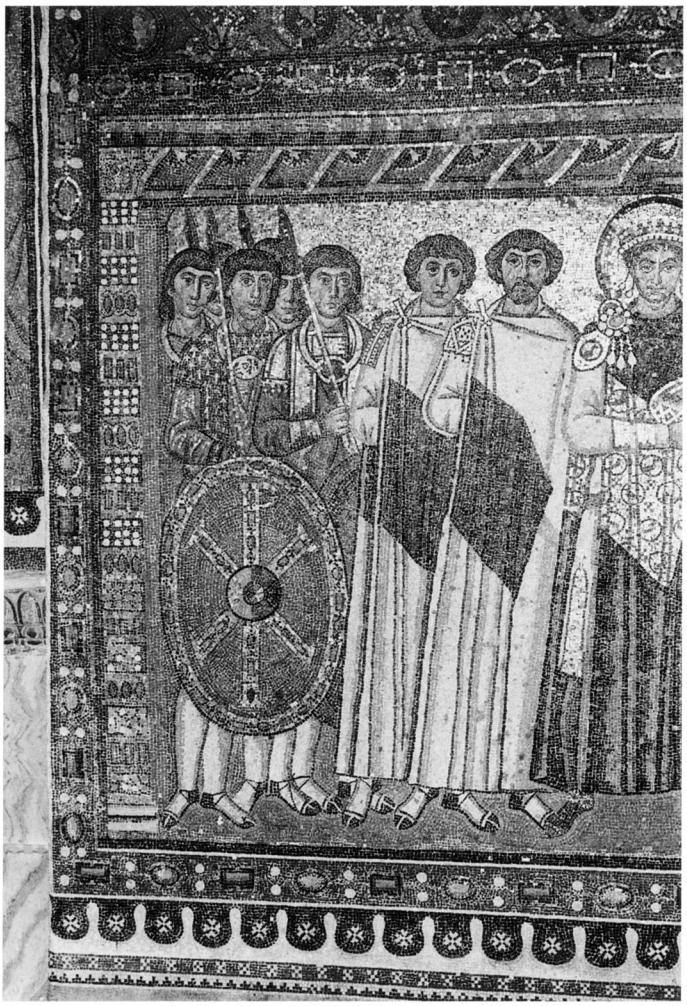
Such archaeological scrutiny indicates that two workshops, distinguished by a slightly different selection of materials, were employed within a short space of time in S. Vitale, probably with some overlap in membership, or even that the same workshop resumed work after an interval. Differences that betray either more than one artist or several phases of the execution of a decoration are much easier to identify in a continuous or repeated ornamental band than in the less regular representations of people or scenery. At S. Vitale a simple but revealing geometrical element, the pearl and jewel border that runs ubiquitously through the entire mosaic composition and separates and connects all its main units, was at this stage of the investigation the decisive factor in determining the changes in the workshop, which other evidence confirms.

Thus, several years of study of the mosaics, from scaffoldings shifted from one wall to another, established the existence of a division between two phases at the same level on all

17. See Andreescu-Treadgold, 1992.

18. A work load is the part of a mosaic set on a single plaster surface while that surface is still wet. For a discussion of repairs that includes these panels, see Irina Andreescu-Treadgold, "The Emperor's New Crown and St. Vitalis' New Clothes," in *41 Corso di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina,* Ravenna, 1995, 149–86, esp. 149–60.

19. For a discussion of materials, see Irina Andreescu-Treadgold, "Torcello V. Workshop Methods of the Mosaicists in the South Chapel," *Venezia Arti,* IX, 1995, 15–28; and for documentation of the procurement of supplies in a 14th-century workshop, see most recently C. Harding, "The Production of Medieval Mosaics: The Orvieto Evidence," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers,* XLIII, 1989, 73–102.



14 Detail of Justinian panel: guards

four walls of the sanctuary and in the west arch. It follows that all the work on the mosaics in S. Vitale was interrupted at the same point, after the mosaics of the apse had been finished. Work was resumed somewhat later with slightly different materials, although at least in the medallions of the west arch it continued the program's original plan (Fig. 3). The boundary between the two original phases runs horizontally around the sanctuary at about the level of the springing of the vault, so that it separates the vault and the north and south tympana from everything beneath them, including the panels of the Evangelists that flank the two *triforae*.[20] Many smaller divisions in the mosaics resulting from the distribution of work loads within the workshop should become apparent once the documentation for the cleaning and restoration is made available.[21]

The figures of the two deacons in Justinian's panel display an oversimplified and linear rendition of their features that points to a lower level of technical proficiency (Figs. 17, 18). They seem inspired by real people and were set by a different hand from the dignitaries and guards. The remaining two heads, those of the bishop (Fig. 6) and of the man who appears in the background between him and the emperor (Fig. 7), are even more different. They alone are made predominantly with stone tesserae, even though they share with the deacons a technically less achieved manner, noticeable in the less careful setting of the rows of tesserae. The trained eye can readily identify the same mannerisms in both: the cheeks with similarly sagging V lines and orange accents, a sloppy rather than evenly set fabric for Maximian's brow, and the same palette used for flesh tones, which differs from that used for the deacons and everyone else in both panels. These two heads, which are real portraits, were made by the same mosaicist and at the same time.

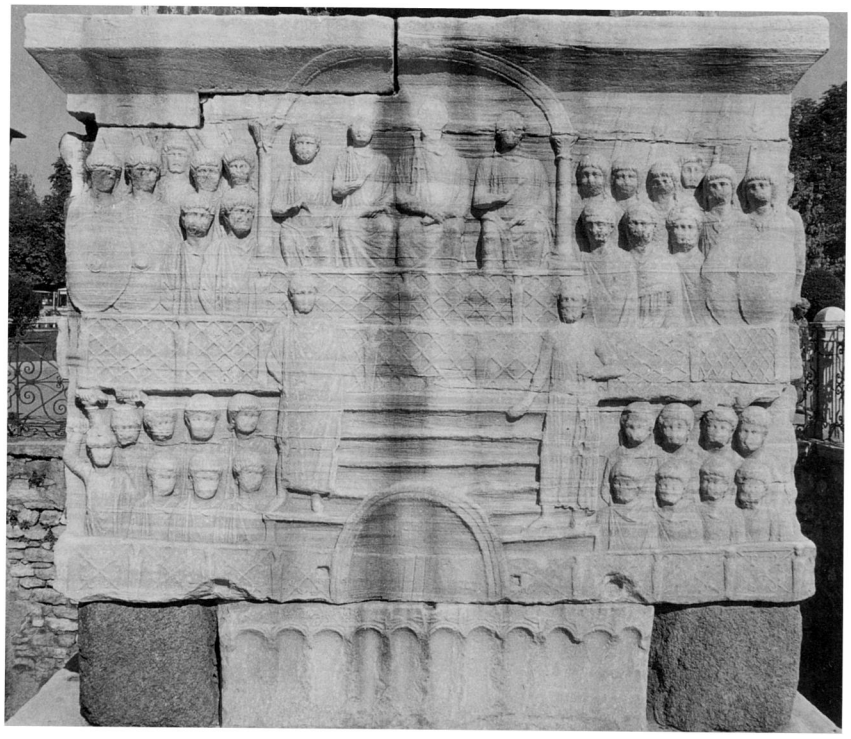
The bishop's head is slightly smaller than those of his immediate companions, but this was probably dictated by the need to fit the inscription *Maximianus* into a limited space above him. Further complicating matters, the top of the neighboring deacon's head (Fig. 17), the emperor's crown (Fig. 5), and the beginning and end of the bishop's inscription have all been remade, with smaller tesserae than the ones used originally (Fig. 19). These repairs belong to a far larger restoration, recently identified as medieval and dated tentatively around 1100, that affected the main apse and modified the iconography in various details. In the imperial panels the restorers probably added the deacon's tonsure and simplified and presumably diminished the crown of Justinian, though the crown of Theodora (Fig. 11) is original.[22] This medieval repair, however, is not to be connected with the presence of the inscription, which predates it.

In spite of an extremely prominent location, the person squeezed between the emperor and the bishop, made at the same time as the latter's head, was not planned from the start. This is demonstrated by the fact that the mysterious character, unlike the others, lacks feet as well as the lower part of his garment, and further by a gap between the emperor and the bishop where this figure's white-clad body ought to be (Fig. 19). Unlike the missing feet of the generic guards in the back rows, the missing lower part of this figure, who was important enough to be placed between the emperor and the bishop, can be explained only by his having been inserted as an afterthought to the original composition. When this might have happened will be suggested below.

The differences between the heads made with stone tesserae and the others strongly suggest a last-minute change. They concern two central characters, one of whom was a controversial newcomer, Maximian, who had his name inscribed above his head to make his identification unmistakable. All this analysis points to an alteration of the original mosaic. Neither panel has been cleaned recently, and the several work loads that doubtless were necessary for the setting of these rather large scenes have not yet been identified, with a few exceptions—barely visible horizontal joins in the necks of the figures of Theodora and one of her attendants and the gold

20. For a discussion of the internal progression of the work on the mosaics of S. Vitale, based on analysis of the materials used, see Andreescu-Treadgold, 1992; and eadem, "The Two Original Mosaic Decorations of San Vitale," *QdS: Quaderni di Soprintendenza, Ravenna,* III, 1997. For a comparable discussion of another mosaic decoration, see eadem (as in n. 19).

21. Twelve foldout plates, including those with the indication of materials by categories, have already been published for the west arch mosaics by the restorers from the Consorzio Arké at the end of Cesare Fiori and Cetty



15 Obelisk of Theodosius, Istanbul, base

16 Detail of Justinian panel: dignitaries, probably Anastasius and Belisarius

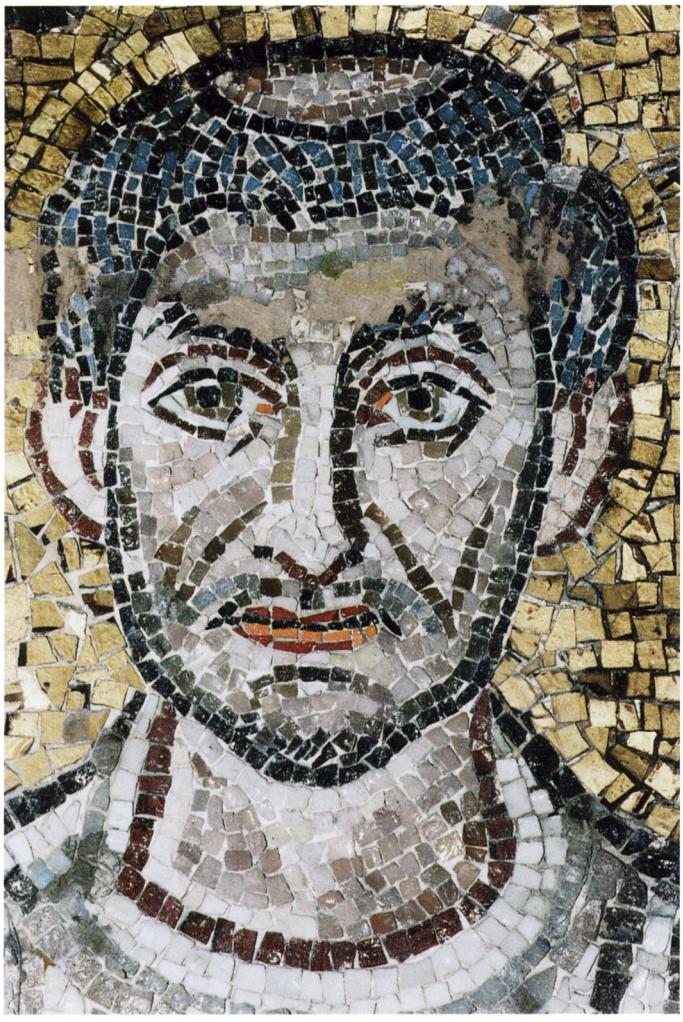
ground between the two figures to Justinian's right (Fig. 16). Yet no crude or even clear seam is visible around the head of the bishop or the head of the official in Justinian's panel.

At present there are two main grounds for dating these two figures to the second phase, which was close in time to the first. One reason is the compositional oddity that represents the official in an awkwardly confined position, with no trace of a lower body and with very narrow shoulders that are out of proportion with his head and with the other figures. The second reason is the difference in materials. Stone dominates both of these figures' faces (Figs. 6, 7), instead of the glass used in the faces and hands of all the other characters (see Justinian's face in Fig. 5 and his hand in Fig. 8) and even in the hand of the bishop himself (Fig. 9).[23] Another difference in materials, which needs to be reassessed after the panel's scheduled restoration, is in the bishop's chasuble: sections of the top part include a variety of olive green glass which is not found in the section below the arm carrying the cross. Although this may simply represent a different workload in the original phase, it could conceivably mean that some of the upper part of the bishop's body was remade in the second phase.

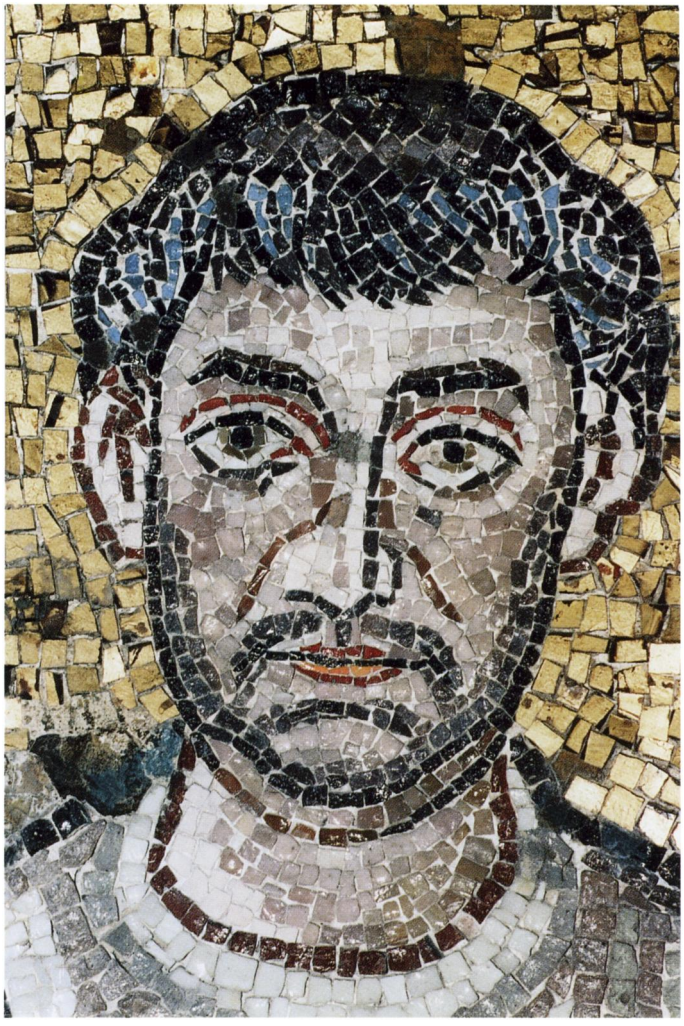
Muscolino, eds., *Restauri ai mosaici nella basilica di S. Vitale a Ravenna: L'arco presbiteriale,* Ravenna, 1990.

22. Andreescu-Treadgold (as in n. 18), esp. figs. 6–8.

23. The reasons for discontinuing the use of glass paste for flesh tones in the second phase are still not clear, but one possibility is that the white and pale-colored glass was more expensive than stone.



17 Detail of Justinian panel: deacon



18 Detail of Justinian panel: deacon

It seems, therefore, that the head of the bishop was replaced, but not most of his body or his hand, which is made with the same glass-paste tesserae as that used for the other hands in both panels. At the time of this alteration, the inscription *Maximianus* was fitted in above the bishop's head and the official behind him was carefully added, but without a lower body to correspond to his upper body because the original composition left too little room for him. These two heads, which belong to the technical vocabulary of the second phase of the mosaics, appear not to have been part of the original mosaic surface, and the same is true of the inscription.

Although many scholars have told us in detail what these mosaics mean, few have tried to guess who the figures in them are—apart from Justinian, Theodora, and the ostentatiously labeled Maximian. Admittedly, Justinian's guards and Theodora's eunuchs and ladies-in-waiting are generic figures, included in order to show the imperial pair with suitable attendants. That was only natural, because most people in Ravenna would have neither known nor cared about the servants and guards who actually waited on the emperor and empress in Constantinople. The deacons next to Maximian may have been well-known men in the church of Ravenna at the time, but we can hardly expect to be able to identify them now. Yet the four men flanking Justinian and the two women next to Theodora should have been quite prominent, as Maximian was, and of high rank, as their court dress and proximity to the rulers demonstrate. Moreover, they are depicted as if they were meant to be particular people, with recognizable features.

These six court figures appear to have belonged to a very small group of people who could reasonably be represented as close associates of Justinian and Theodora but were also persons of some consequence in Ravenna at the time. Maximian, appointed by Justinian and sent from the East, more or less qualifies. Of course, Maximian would have had special justification for being depicted in a church that he finished building and decorating—if that was what he did.

Unfortunately, we have no clearly labeled portraits for any of the leading figures of Justinian's reign—in fact, the imperial panels supply our most securely identified portraits of the emperor and empress themselves. Yet the four men and two women with them should have been important enough to give us some hope of identifying them from literary sources. For this period we have excellent accounts of events both in Italy and elsewhere in the empire composed by Procopius's of

Caesarea, secretary of the Italian commander Belisarius. Procopius's works are the detailed *History of the Wars,* the more candid—not to say scabrous—*Secret History,* and a laudatory description of Justinian's building activity, the *Buildings.*

Although Procopius never describes S. Vitale, in the *Buildings* he describes mosaics set up by Justinian on the vaults of the Chalce, a building that formed the entrance to the imperial palace in Constantinople. The Chalce mosaics, long since destroyed, depicted the victories in North Africa and Italy that Belisarius had won for Justinian and showed the general's return from his wars with rich spoils and the captured kings of the Vandals and Ostrogoths. In one scene Belisarius presented both the spoils and the kings to a rejoicing Justinian and Theodora, who were attended by the dignitaries of the Senate.[24] These mosaics, evidently more elaborate than the Ravenna mosaics, presumably dated from soon after Belisarius's return to Constantinople with the Ostrogothic king Vitigis in 540, when Italy seemed to have been conquered for good. It is noteworthy that besides being a general celebration of imperial power, they seem to have commemorated a specific event and particular people.

Before proceeding further, we need to date the S. Vitale mosaics, which, as we have seen, had two early phases. The first phase evidently did not include Maximian, because the technical considerations outlined above indicate that Maximian's head and inscription were added later. Since the bishop's garb is original, the original figure was presumably an earlier bishop of Ravenna. Yet he was not much earlier, because the figure of Justinian was part of the original mosaic and was unaccompanied by any Ostrogothic king. It follows that the mosaic was put up after imperial forces entered Ravenna in 540. That narrows the possibilities for the original bishop of Ravenna to just one: Maximian's immediate predecessor, Victor.

Let us begin with the man to the emperor's right and the woman to the empress's left. As the people just following the emperor and empress in their processions, they are the second-ranking personages in the panels. One might therefore guess that they were the highest-ranking man and woman in Ravenna. For this reason they have occasionally been identified as the imperial commander-in-chief of Italy, Belisarius, and his wife, Antonina.[25]

They can scarcely be another general and his wife, because from 540 to 545 Belisarius was the only Byzantine commander of Italy to hold that office by himself. Between Belisarius's departure from Ravenna in 540 and his return there in 544, Justinian divided the Italian command in several ways; the two figures to Justinian's right, however, cannot be two co-commanders, because the one at the left, a beardless adolescent, is too young to fit any of the possibilities. In 544

19 Detail of Justinian panel: dignitaries (probably Anastasius and Belisarius), Justinian, official (probably John), and Maximian

Belisarius was about forty-five and Antonina about sixty, ages that fit well enough with the faces.[26]

In 540 Belisarius left Ravenna almost immediately after taking possession of the city, too quickly to allow a mosaic to be put up first.[27] He then stayed in the East for four years, most of them as commander of the Byzantine forces fighting the Persians. He and his wife only returned to Ravenna when they spent several months there from the autumn of 544 to the spring of 545.[28] Thus, the mosaic probably dates between autumn 544 and February 15, 545, the date of Bishop Victor's death.

This appears to have been the date when the building of S. Vitale was essentially complete. Victor did not consecrate it, however, presumably because he died before he considered it ready. It follows that Maximian contributed little if anything to building the church or to decorating its apse. Yet much of the mosaic decoration of the rest of the sanctuary should be his, because it belongs to the second phase that was apparently begun after Victor's death and can scarcely be later than Maximian's inscription and his consecration of the whole church.

If the imperial panels were originally executed between late 544 and early 545, we can also suggest probable identifications for the young woman behind Antonina and the young dignitary behind Belisarius. The young woman is particularly

24. Procopius, *Buildings* 1.10.15–18.

25. Testi Rasponi, 197 n. 2; cf. Otto Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna,* Chicago, 1948, 27.

26. For Antonina's age, see Procopius, *Secret History* 4.41. Belisarius's age is not precisely known, but the estimate of Ernest Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire,* II, Paris, 1949, 284, that Belisarius was born about 500 must be roughly right.

27. Procopius, *History of the Wars* [hereafter cited as *Wars*] 6.29–30.

28. Ibid. 7.11.1 (Belisarius's arrival at Ravenna) and 7.13.19 (his departure).

20 Šalmat and her daughter Ḥaqqā, funerary stela from Palmyra, Istanbul, Archaeological Museum

close to Antonina and points to her—a gesture that probably indicates a family tie, as it does in certain Roman funerary sculptures (Fig. 20).[29] Therefore, she should be Antonina's only daughter, Joannina, as some have already suggested.[30] But it is just as likely that the young man is Joannina's recently betrothed fiancé, Anastasius. Although both Joannina and Anastasius were of marriageable age at this time, Procopius describes them as adolescents, as these two figures in the mosaic surely are.[31]

Anastasius's apparent rank can easily be explained despite his youth, because he was the grandson of the empress Theodora by an illegitimate daughter. The engagement of Joannina and Anastasius, according to Procopius's *Secret History*, took place in the spring of 544, just before Belisarius and Antonina left for Ravenna.[32] Procopius reports that the young couple remained behind in Constantinople, where he is appalled to report that, though still not legally married, they began living together with Theodora's encouragement.[33]

Procopius indicates that Theodora forced this engagement on Belisarius in order to gain control of the general's large private fortune, which Joannina was to inherit as Belisarius's only child. The historian declares that Belisarius could not object because at the time he was in disgrace. (Belisarius's offense was that he had considered the possibility of becoming emperor himself when Justinian had seemed to be dying of the plague not long before.) The general was able to regain a measure of favor only by concluding this engagement of his daughter to the empress's grandson and by agreeing to pay some of the expenses of his new Italian command out of his own pocket. Procopius represents the engagement as a concession forced on Belisarius.[34]

These panels, however, put the engagement in a perspective that is somewhat different, though perfectly plausible and compatible with Procopius's account. If what Procopius says is true, even though Belisarius and Antonina did not want the marriage actually to occur and succeeded in postponing it, in 544 they needed the connection with the emperor and empress to strengthen what was then their dangerously weak position at court. Even so, most people at Ravenna must have known that at the time Belisarius had inadequate troops and funds to carry on the war, and some may have known that he had just sent a desperate letter to Justinian appealing for more men and money.[35]

If the identifications proposed here are correct, one clear message of these mosaics to prominent Italians would have been that Belisarius and his wife, despite any rumors of his disgrace that might have reached Ravenna, were now very close to the imperial couple and had just made arrangements for a marriage alliance with the empress. It may even be significant that the young woman's left hand is positioned so as to display a ring, which could be the customary engagement ring.[36] Bishop Victor won his place in these prestigious panels because S. Vitale was after all his church. Victor may have felt a special need to emphasize his loyalty to Justinian and even to Belisarius, because he had been consecrated bishop under the Ostrogoths when they were already at war with the emperor and his general. Yet the main initiative behind the selection of figures for the mosaics presumably lay with Belisarius and Antonina.

As for the likenesses, the authorities in Ravenna would naturally have had on hand official portraits of Justinian and Theodora, though perhaps somewhat idealized ones. Belisarius and Antonina may well have brought with them portraits of Joannina and Anastasius; in any case, the mosaicist has portrayed the youthful couple in a somewhat idealized fashion, types of a handsome young man and a beautiful young woman. The likenesses of Belisarius and Antonina were presumably recognizable, even if the two of them had better things to do than sit for their portraits.

The same workshop seems to have set all the faces, with a different mosaicist doing those of the deacons. This workshop, in generic figures and specific personalities alike, shows a tendency toward idealization, perhaps because it was considered appropriate for the imperial court. Less idealization

29. The example shown, in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum (inv. 3725T), dated from 200 to 273, represents Šalmat and her daughter Ḥaqqā. For a similar but full-length mother gesturing toward her daughter, see R.-B. Wartke, "Palmyrenische Plastik im Vorderasiatischen Museum," *Forschungen und Berichte*, XXXI, 1991, 72–73, fig. 3. For other examples of gestures of kinship, see G. Ploug, *Catalogue of the Palmyrene Sculptures: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, Copenhagen, 1995, updating H. Ingholt, *Studier over Palmyrensk Skulptur*, Copenhagen, 1928. No study exists of gestures of kinship as such, despite a large literature on Roman portraiture; for the bibliography, see Jan Bazant, *Roman Portraiture: A History of Its History*, Prague, 1995. Many conjugal portraits show either the *dextrarum junctio* (joined right hands) or the wife placing her hand on the arm, chest, or shoulders of her husband.

30. Testi Rasponi, 197 n. 2.

31. Procopius, *Secret History* 5.20.

32. Ibid. 4.36–39.

33. Ibid. 5.20–22.

34. Ibid. 4.1–42.

35. Procopius, *Wars* VII.12.1–11.

36. On early Byzantine engagement rings, which were ordinarily worn only by women, see most recently Gary Vikan, "Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, XLIV, 1990, 145–49.

37. See Agnellus, in Holder-Egger, 326–27; and in Testi Rasponi, 187–89. For Theodora's death, see John Malalas, *Chronicle*, ed. L. Dindorf, Bonn, 1831, 484; *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, trans. E. Jeffreys et al., Melbourne, 1986, 289.

38. Agnellus, in Holder-Egger, 330 (choosing a reading indicating Apr. 19,

appears in the faces of the Italian ecclesiastics, who apparently did sit for their portraits, though in Victor's case the replacement of his face has destroyed the evidence.

So much for the first phase of the mosaics, that of late 544 to early 545. The revision of the Justinian panel, with the substitution of Maximian's head for Victor's and the addition of the bust of the official to Justinian's left, must be several years later. The new work should belong to the time between late 546, when Maximian first entered Ravenna, and the midsummer of 548, when news of Theodora's death on June 28 would have reached the city.[37] While the mosaic would not of course have been taken down at the news of the empress's death, after this event, mosaics including her would not have shown the existing constellation of power. They could accordingly no longer have been an appropriate vehicle for a current political message, and Maximian would have been unlikely to insert himself into them. In any case, he presumably had the alteration made in time for his consecration of the church, which can be dated to May 17, 548, at the latest.[38]

Belisarius was the commander in Italy up to the date of Theodora's death. But by 547 his failure to defeat the Ostrogoths was patent. The end of his command was expected, and his authority was shaken. His influence was particularly feeble over his chief subordinate, John, always identified by Procopius as the nephew of the former usurper Vitalian. John the Nephew of Vitalian had recently made his own marriage alliance with Justinian's cousin Germanus by marrying Germanus's daughter Justina. Since his marriage, John had avoided Belisarius, acted almost entirely independently of his nominal commander, and probably hoped to be named Belisarius's successor, a post that Procopius later expected him to receive.[39] In early 548 John marched into Picenum, a province that may have especially attracted him because it included Ravenna, the capital of Italy.[40]

The most likely candidate to be the additional official to Justinian's left is therefore John the Nephew of Vitalian. Like Maximian, John was at hand and could have sat for his portrait in Ravenna if necessary, and the realism of both portraits indicates that both men did so. Apparently Maximian, believing that John was worth cultivating, included him among the figures close to the emperor when altering the mosaic. Though there was not much room for John, at least his position in the panel was a prestigious one, between the emperor and the bishop.

In altering the mosaic Maximian's main purpose was doubtless to promote his own authority in Ravenna. That authority was then insecure, since the archbishop had recently been barred from entering the city because its citizens objected to his support for Justinian's Edict of the Three Chapters.[41] This mosaic, after he had altered it, reminded his flock that Maximian had the backing of the emperor, the empress, and of both of the emperor's chief officers, Belisarius and John the Nephew of Vitalian. Beyond this, substituting Maximian's head for Victor's allowed Maximian to lay claim early in his tenure to a church that he had seen to completion, although it had actually been built and in large part decorated under his predecessors.

From the start, Maximian showed great energy in altering and finishing the buildings of earlier bishops. In S. Apollinare in Classe, for instance, he radically changed the original program of mosaic decoration and had the present mosaics finished quite quickly.[42] Before beginning several buildings that were entirely his own, he also completed the Tricoli, a hall in the episcopal palace begun under his five predecessors, which he decorated with mosaics depicting all six of its builders, including himself, and describing their deeds in verse.[43]

Our revised chronology for the mosaics also solves a puzzle that tantalized Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, perhaps the most serious researcher on late ancient Ravenna in general, during the more than twenty-five years that separate his first and last contributions on the subject. While noting the presence of two different styles in the mosaics of San Vitale, Deichmann was unable to distinguish them chronologically, because the presence of the portrait of the consecrating bishop Maximian in the apse, which was obviously the first section to be decorated, seemed to date the entire decoration to the period of Maximian's episcopate before his consecration of the church. The only solution Deichmann could propose was that the style of the mosaics changed with the "mode" of the subject they represented. Such theories of "modes" were popular a generation ago and have their proponents even today. At least in the case of San Vitale, however, the evidence fails to support them.[44]

If these dates and identifications are correct, we can see that the panels' political meaning is not simply the celebration of Byzantine autocracy that has often been supposed. In fact, Byzantine autocracy was faring quite badly in Italy in both 544 and 548, when the Ostrogoths held most of the peninsula and Ravenna was almost an isolated imperial outpost. The mosaics, however, were not really meant for Justinian and Theodora, who were never expected to see them and never did. They were meant to impress any Italians, Byzantines, and Ostrogoths who saw them with the close connections between Belisarius and Antonina and the em-

547); Testi Rasponi, 198 (with n. 15, preferring May 17, 548, because it was a Sunday, which in view of church practice at Ravenna seems more probable).

39. On John's marriage and estrangement from Belisarius, see Procopius, *Secret History* 5.7–15, and *Wars* 7.12.11. Cf. *Wars* 7.34.41, where John is put in command of an army headed for Italy in 549, *Wars* 7.40.10, where he is again put in command of an army headed for Italy in 550, and *Wars* 8.31.4–9, describing how John was about to lead an army to Italy in 551 until, to Procopius's surprise, Justinian chose Narses, apparently on the grounds that the other Byzantine commanders would be unwilling to obey John. Procopius expresses admiration for John in *Wars* 6.10.9–10.

40. Procopius, *Wars* 7.30.15–17.

41. Agnellus, in Holder-Egger, 326–27; and in Testi Rasponi, 187–89. The edict, an attempt that the emperor made in 544 to compromise with the eastern Monophysites, was generally unpopular in anti-Monophysite Italy.

42. Giuseppe Bovini, "Qualche nota sulle sinopie recentemente rinvenute sotto il mosaico absidale di S. Apollinare in Classe di Ravenna," in *Atti della Accademia delle Scienze dell'Istituto di Bologna, Classe di Scienze Morali: Rendiconti*, LXI, 1972–73, 1–13; Deichmann, 245–47.

43. Agnellus, in Holder-Egger, 328–29; and in Testi Rasponi, 193.

44. Deichmann, "Gründung und Datierung von San Vitale in Ravenna," in *Arte del Primo Millenio: 2 Congrès International pour l'Étude du Haut Moyen Age: Pavia 1950*, Turin, 1953, 111–17; idem, 188–90. For a reassessment of the S. Vitale mosaic workshop and a refutation of the theory of "modes" as applied here, see Andreescu-Treadgold, 1992; and eadem, 1997 (as in n. 20).

peror and empress, who after all remained powers to be reckoned with.

The panels may be compared to a modern photograph or videotape of an American president standing beside candidates of his party who face a difficult election campaign. The point is not so much to emphasize the great man's authority, which is taken for granted, but rather to show that his loyal but embattled subordinates enjoy his favor, and can count on his help and support. The ones who are likely to make most use of such images are those who are in a fairly weak position and whose support from their patron is actually in doubt. And so it was in 544 and 545 with the position of Belisarius in Italy and, indeed, with the emperor's hold on the peninsula. In a similar way, emperors often celebrated lavish triumphs specifically to disguise their military weakness.[45]

At this date Belisarius and Antonina needed all the help such an image could give them, and they presumably arranged with Victor to have their portraits included in the panels. Later, Maximian and John the Nephew of Vitalian found a way to claim places in the picture for themselves as well. Although the mosaics' topical message may be difficult to decipher today, it would have been clear enough at the time to politically alert viewers in Ravenna, who could then have spread the word to others.

We see here the same mentality that so frustrates scholars confronted by the many Byzantine documents and inscriptions dated only by an indiction, a year in the taxation cycle that recurred every fifteen years. When, for example, a Byzantine recorded a death on September 10 of the eighth year of the indiction, he paid no attention to those who might wonder more than fifteen years later which indiction it had been.[46] In the same way, Belisarius would have cared more about shoring up his authority in 544–45 than about what future beholders of the mosaics might understand. Even Maximian, when he replaced Victor's head with his own and added the inscription with his name, probably cared more about impressing his contemporaries than about being remembered by posterity.

It follows that the original designer of the imperial panels did not mean to give Justinian twelve companions representing the twelve Apostles, since originally those companions numbered eleven. Nor did the designer add Maximian's inscription to give the bishop prominence in the mosaic, since his inscription was not part of the original composition and was added later to serve a different purpose. (Although we cannot be absolutely sure that Maximian's name was not substituted for Victor's, such a label seems out of keeping with the rest of the original panels, and Victor would probably have expected his portrait to be recognizable by itself.) Nor was the designer making any statement about Theodora's death, which was then at least three years in the future.

This being said, Kitzinger is right that the Byzantines generally accorded bishops a measure of authority independent of emperors, just as Maguire is right that the Byzantines generally accepted that the emperor was in some sense the representative of Christ on earth. The ample evidence for both propositions, however, does not really include these mosaics, which were designed with less portentous ideas in mind. Those who planned, executed, and contemplated the mosaics, while they certainly considered emperors and bishops to be important, were not particularly reminded of that importance by the bishop's inscription or by the number of the emperor's attendants.

The errors of the poststructuralist interpreters of these mosaics are more serious. MacCormack's interpretation, implying that an empress would enter heaven merely because she was an empress, gives a badly distorted picture of Byzantine ideology. Even if we discount Procopius's suggestion in the *Secret History* that Justinian and Theodora were demons in human shape, his book shows that they were widely reviled, an impression confirmed by the Nika riots of 532 that almost overthrew them.[47] The abundance of such criticisms and uprisings in Byzantine history shows how little the glorification of the imperial office contributed to respect for those who held it.[48] No Byzantine could have believed that all emperors would win salvation, because from any point of view a number of emperors had been heretics, not to mention pagans. Although many majestic depictions of emperors also appear in middle Byzantine art, middle Byzantine scenes of the Last Judgment regularly include generic emperors (and bishops) burning in Hell.

The interpretations made by Barber owe almost everything to modern scholarly fashions and barely anything to Byzantine sources. He suggests "that by naming the Bishop the designer of the mosaic has localised, both temporally and spatially, a concept of power," when we have seen that Maximian's inscription is not original. He declares, "The additional luxuriance of Theodora's crown" in comparison with Justinian's "can be interpreted as an attempt to 'feminise' the [imperial] uniform," when we have seen that Justinian's rudimentary crown is a restoration made five or six centuries later. After further structuralist and feminist theorizing, he concludes that each panel "fulfils the norms" for perceptions of emperors and empresses that he has elaborately and anachronistically defined.[49]

Although our findings here admittedly would have been difficult for these scholars to anticipate, the fact remains that their interpretations show a tendency that has long been popular, and has recently become even more so, to exaggerate the amount of ideology in Byzantine and late ancient thinking. We are told that ordinary Byzantines idolized their emperors and took the fulsome panegyrics of the court very seriously.[50] In this vein, MacCormack, without argument, dismisses as "misleading" the only explicit statement by a panegyrist about how serious his work was: Saint Augustine's rueful reflection that his speech praising the emperor was a tissue of lies, and known by his audience to be such.[51] Not long ago, we used to be told that the circus factions of the Blues and Greens represented political and theological opinions, until Alan Cameron laboriously showed that the factions' main interests were in sports and shows, and by extension in hooliganism.[52]

If texts can be misread, art is even more susceptible to misinterpretation. Today, some scholars seem to want to believe in a Byzantium that idealized its rulers and cared above all for politics. The sources seem rather to show a society that preferred sports and shows to politics and, despite lavish spending to advertise its rulers' virtues, valued the

rulers, if it valued them at all, mostly for the practical benefits they could bestow. The reality behind an idealized image of power was often weakness; attempts to glorify figures in authority often masked their actual insecurity and unpopularity. While parallels with modern times can easily be carried too far, we should realize that the people who created Byzantine works of art were not utterly unlike ourselves.

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45. Cf. the conclusion about late ancient triumphs of Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Medieval West,* Cambridge, 1986, 79: "The timing of celebrations . . . display[s] irrefutable—if surprising—links with the decline of imperial military fortunes."

46. Cf. Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome,* London, 1980, 189. The comparison with the indiction in the context of these mosaics was suggested to us by Ihor Ševčenko.

47. For Procopius's suggestion that they were demons, which he meant seriously, see *Secret History* 12.14–32, 18.1–4, 18.36–37, 30.34.

48. For an introduction to some of the literature, see Franz Tinnefeld, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der byzantinischen Historiographie,* Munich, 1971.

49. Barber (as in n. 6), 34, 36, 40.

50. See W. Treadgold, "Imaginary Early Christianity," review of Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire,* and Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity, International History Review,* XV, 1993, pp. 535–45,

51. MacCormack, 1.

52. See Alan Cameron, *Porphyrius the Charioteer,* Oxford, 1973; and idem, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium,* Oxford, 1976.