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## *Introduction*

When the Allied forces prepared to invade and occupy Italy in 1943, the British Naval Intelligence Division planned four handbooks ‘for the use of persons in His Majesty’s service only’, comprising exhaustive accounts of every aspect of the country. The first volume – of six hundred pages – was published in February 1944, five months after the first landings; packed with diagrams and pull-out maps it describes Italy’s coastal and regional topography. The second and third volumes cover every element of the country’s history, populations, roads, railways, agriculture and industry. The final, 750-page volume, published in December 1945, describes the country’s seventy inland and forty-eight coastal towns in curt, meticulous prose. Its description of Ravenna, a small city on the Adriatic coast of northern Italy, opens with a brief, authoritative statement: ‘As a centre of early Christian art Ravenna is unequalled.’

But by the time this volume was published, many parts of the city were in ruins and some of its unequalled early Christian art had been destroyed over the course of fifty-two Allied bombing raids. In August 1944 the Basilica of San Giovanni Evangelista was pulverized by bombs intended for the railway station and its sidings. This mid-fifth-century church had been decorated in mosaic. Those on the floor had already been lost when the church was modernized in the seventeenth century. In 1944 the entire building was shattered.<sup>1</sup>

If you have never visited the city of Ravenna, you have missed an amazing experience, an extraordinary delight, which this book aims to recreate. I open my history of its unique role and significance with a grim salute to this recent damage because it spun a thread that led me to write this study.

The Italians are among the finest art restorers in the world. Immediately after the war they set about repairing their unique heritage in Ravenna. To raise the funds for this and re-establish tourism, an exhibition was mounted that reproduced some of its most glorious mosaic

images, which toured Paris, London and New York in the 1950s. As it passed through England my mother, at the time a doctor working in general practice, went to see it.

Some years later she decided to visit Italy for herself and to introduce me to it as a teenager. And so, in 1959, we approached Ravenna from the north in order to see the mosaics that had fascinated her since the exhibition. I recall vividly that we caught sight of the abbey of Pomposa, its redbrick bell tower shimmering in the setting sun. Within the city the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia made a lasting impression on me with its mosaic of the starry sky, hanging suspended above the doves and deer drinking at fountains and the fascinating geometric patterns covering every arch that supported the dome. It was a hot summer and I felt that eating figs with prosciutto in a cool restaurant was more interesting than the mosaics. But a seed of curiosity had been implanted, and a postcard with the portrait of Empress Theodora from the church of San Vitale accompanied me to university.

Also, I'm told, I often mentioned the visit. Forty years later when we were on holiday in Tuscany, as a surprise, my partner booked us onto an extended all-day trip, so that he could see what had impressed me. Refreshed and thrilled by the intense, compressed tour of Ravenna's major sites, I bought the local guidebooks and settled in for the drive back. As we sat in an endless traffic jam around Bologna I grew increasingly angry at the failure of those books to provide any adequate history as to why such an astonishing concentration of early Christian art should be there in the first place, and then how it survived.

Thus, the notion of this book flickered into life in stationary traffic in the form of a double question: how to explain why the matchless mosaics of Ravenna existed, and how they endured. The idea was sustained by my overconfidence that I could answer these problems without great difficulty. They say you only really pose a problem when you are already in a position to resolve it, and I somehow felt, perhaps immodestly, that I could do so. My first book, *The Formation of Christendom*, had surveyed the Mediterranean world and I was familiar with the critical role of the Goths who built one of the most important of Ravenna's basilicas. My second book, *Women in Purple*, showed how three empresses had reversed iconoclasm, and I was about to collect my essays on the roles of women in Byzantium into *Unrivalled Influence*. I believed I was fully able to assess the impact of Empress Galla Placidia and to appreciate the

stunning presence of Theodora, wife of Emperor Justinian I. Further, at the peak of its influence, Ravenna was clearly a Byzantine city. The book I was about to publish, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, crystallized my argument that, far from being devious, over-hierarchical and manipulative – as the word ‘Byzantine’ suggests when used as a lazy term of abuse – Byzantium lasted from 330 to 1435 because of its extraordinary resilience and self-confidence. This strength was rooted in its threefold combination of Roman law and military prowess, Greek education and culture and Christian belief and morality. Proof of this, I showed, was the vitality of its outlying cities, which, as soon as the capital was conquered in 1204, burst into a Byzantine life of their own. It was a theme I had investigated over many years in essays collected in *Margins and Metropolis*, and clearly it had a special relevance to Ravenna as an outpost of Constantinople.

The price of such overconfidence was nine years of research! I had to work on unfamiliar Latin records on papyrus and engage with scholarly and not just conversational Italian. I struggled with a history that has too many synthetic overviews of the decline of the West and fails to recognize the rise and role of Ravenna. I had to identify a completely new cast of characters, distinguishing between Agnellus the doctor, Agnellus the bishop and Agnellus the historian. I found myself in the handsome city library of Ravenna, where Dante’s relics are kept, in a temperature-controlled environment, to inspire readers (he was exiled there from Florence). I travelled along the old Roman road, the Via Flaminia, to see how it crosses the Apennines, the formidable spine of Italy, that both connected and separated Ravenna and Rome, and explored the alternative military roads used by Belisarius, the sixth-century Byzantine general. I followed as best I could the route that Theoderic, the Gothic king who had such an important influence on Ravenna’s history, took across the northern Balkans to the banks of the Isonzo where he overwhelmed his rival, Odoacer, and then went on to conquer Italy and much of southern Gaul. This trip also allowed me to observe the craftsmanship of the Lombards preserved in Cividale: not only the Christian statues, carvings and painted decoration, but also pre-Christian grave goods in gold and garnets. Thanks to the generosity of four Ravennati yachtsmen, I sailed across the Adriatic, driven by a brisk wind, in an experiment to check how easy it would have been for mosaicists from Ravenna to work in Parenzo (Poreč, in modern-day

Croatia). There I witnessed the gleaming mosaics of the basilica of Bishop Eufrasius, which are so closely connected to the monuments of Ravenna (both were made in the sixth century).

These explorations were full of pleasures and from them three particularly challenging issues emerged, which might be labelled antiquity, perspective and location. The first is obvious enough. When we imagine going to northern Italy to admire its stunning art, we think of the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: from Siena's frescoes of good and bad government made in the 1330s to Leonardo's Last Supper of the 1490s. But the intense period of Ravenna's artistic flowering occurred nearly a thousand years earlier. The historical records that have survived are only fragmentary. It is extraordinarily hard to work out how people lived then. The secular palaces where records of government were stored have themselves been ruined, treated as quarries, dismantled for their stones. What little remains is long buried and almost all documentation has turned to dust. Sometimes, tantalizing, incomplete and very partial accounts survive, such as the unique account of the bishops of Ravenna by Agnellus, its ninth-century historian.

A simple measure of the loss of knowledge is the silence about the craftsmen and possibly women and children who created the city's mosaics. All we know is that when the Emperor Diocletian attempted to fix maximum prices across the Roman empire in 301, his edict stipulated that pay for wall mosaicists was the same as for the makers of marble paving and wall revetment – considerably below portrait painters and fresco painters, but above that of tessellated floor makers, carpenters and masons. We can imagine that there must have been families trained in the skills of making, trading and then bonding coloured tesserae, sketching the original images and portraits, calculating the repetitions of the border patterns, creating guilds in cities across the ancient world and perhaps travelling from employment in one city to the next big opportunity. What we do know is that from modern-day Seville to Beirut, from Britain to North Africa, across every island in the Mediterranean from the Balearics to Sicily and Cyprus, and in all the great cities of the Roman empire, enormous floors and endless walls were laid out with mosaic images of the gods, the myths of the ancient world, every species of beast, bird and fish, daily life and even the remains of great banquets. But we do not know the name of a single person who worked on the stupendous mosaics of Ravenna.

Although mosaic is the medium of Ravenna's unequalled early Christian art, its function and power is not merely aesthetic. It is used in a novel and distinctive fashion, which distinguishes it from its ancient predecessor. In place of the floor mosaics that had adorned every major villa of the Roman world, the apses and walls of churches become a focus. Another change lies in the replacement of a white background by a glistening gold ground, which reflects the light in a unique fashion. From the fourth century, as emperors such as Constantine I and his mother Helena patronized new ecclesiastical building in Jerusalem, Old Rome and the New Rome of Constantinople, gold was associated with Christian worship. This represented an innovative development of the inherited skill of ancient mosaic decoration, but very few skilled mosaicists of this period ever signed their work. The anonymity of the Ravenna mosaicists is itself a symptom of the enormous losses in our knowledge of this period.

The second difficulty stems from the way the time of Ravenna's flowering and influence is perceived. The period of its special history from 402 to 751, roughly 350 years, is now generally identified as 'late antiquity', which developed out of the ancient world of Greece and Rome before the identifiable medieval civilization of the Middle Ages. The book that above all others created our contemporary awareness of the period is Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*, its pages filled with the infectious vitality that characterizes his scholarship and brings the unique period to life. I am one of many historians inspired and deeply influenced by it. But in the course of writing this book I have come to doubt whether the term 'late antiquity' is appropriate, for it makes the epoch seem inextricably one of decline and antiquarianism. As I attempted to uncover Ravenna's history, the apologetic atmosphere of the term became increasingly incongruous, because it is one of the rare cities of this period in the West that did not experience the general failure clearly visible in many others.

In his great book of 1971 Brown also emphasized the innovations of the era, ranging from individual creativity, such as the first autobiography (St Augustine's *Confessions*), to the codification of Roman law, the creation of Christian canon law and the eruption of Islam, which resulted in the threefold division of the Mediterranean – which are among the tap roots of our modern world. From the process of electing the pope to the formulation of dating our calendar, it witnessed the

beginnings of modernity. Nonetheless, the term ‘late antiquity’ assumes we should be comparing the period to the glory days of classical Rome and Greece rather than emphasizing it as a time of great change: a mid-fifth-century inscription in Ravenna proclaims: ‘Yield, old name, yield age to newness!’ I have therefore sought to replace the inevitably backward-looking perspective of ‘late antiquity’ by the term ‘early Christendom’, which looks forward to a newly Christianized world seeking novel forms of organization.

Crucially, antiquity was pagan, while from the foundation of Constantinople in 330, the empire was destined to become Christian. And not just the area within the frontiers of the empire. Outsiders, the so-called ‘barbarians’, were also attracted to Christianity’s promise of eternal life in the hereafter and converted. Throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, people were working through what it meant to be Christian. The process became even more critical after the rise of Islam and the intense divisions over the role of icons this provoked.

From an early date, and especially after the conversion of the Goths, early Christendom was characterized by disputes over the exact nature of the humanity of Christ, as recorded in the Gospel stories, the ‘good news’ that established the creed of power and authority. Nothing of the sort defined antiquity. Some of the fourth-century Christian emperors believed, reasonably enough, that if Christ was the son of God, he must have been born later than his Father, must be separate from him and, in this sense, secondary to him. Such views had been formulated by the deacon Arius in early fourth-century Alexandria. When the Goths adopted Christianity, it was this definition of the faith, the commanding belief of the emperors in Constantinople at the time, that they embraced. Their loyalty to Arianism was to ensure a division that extended its impact down the centuries, as we will see. Later, Islam also reflected the dispute over Christ’s humanity, for it overtly worshipped the same God but identified Jesus as a major prophet, not the son of God.

Arianism was displaced by what became the generally accepted view, namely that God the Father, his Son and the Holy Spirit all shared in the same origin and substance. Nonetheless, theological arguments about the Trinity and Christ’s humanity continued to frustrate Christian unity and provoked a crisis in the eighth century when some western church leaders added the phrase ‘and from the son’ (*filioque*)

to the creed. Because the wording of basic belief, which had been confirmed in the mid-fifth century at the Council of Chalcedon, stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded ‘from the Father’, the addition of this little phrase ‘*filioque*’ was rejected in the East, since when it has symbolized the division between Greek Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

But in using the term ‘early Christendom’, I am not seeking to focus on such doctrinal issues. My intention is rather to characterize the period that began in the fourth century as Christianity became the dominant belief. From 380 onwards, it was a defining force in the exercise of authority as well as the organized means of transmitting community and integrating the economy. It provided many of the peoples of the Mediterranean world, often speaking different languages and battling with incomers who nonetheless thought of themselves as Christian, with a shared belief in the hereafter, and a passion to define the best means of deserving it. It was less a ‘late Roman’ civilization than an emerging new world, with all the confidence and confusion of great change. The exceptional achievements of Ravenna only make sense within this framework. In order to communicate the liveliness and energy of the process, I have divided each of the nine parts of this book (which broadly cover successive half-centuries) into short chapters and, wherever possible, I have identified a key figure, man or woman, in their titles. Among the Ravennate makers of early Christendom, kings and bishops, soldiers and merchants, a doctor, a cosmographer and even an historian, all take their places.

Another aspect of the period that ‘early Christendom’ characterizes much better than ‘late antiquity’ is the role of Byzantium. During the fourth and fifth centuries the new centre of imperial government at Ravenna developed in tandem with the Christian authority of its bishop, as church leaders throughout the western provinces of the Roman world took over administrative roles. They all also drew on the legacy of the emperors established in Constantinople, which became the outstanding achievement of the later Roman Empire. Constantine I’s capital of New Rome continued to lead the Mediterranean world, providing guidance in legal matters, diplomatic disputes, political negotiations and theological problems. These centuries were marked by the hegemonic importance of Constantinople and it had a distinct influence in the way what we now call Italy developed.

At the same time a new force emerged in the western regions of the

empire, which combined barbarian energy and prowess with Roman military, architectural and legal achievements, as well as Christian belief and organization, to create a widely diffused but unstable mixture. Gradually, it became a specifically Latin fire that spread and generated its own autonomy and influence across Italy and North Africa between 400 and 600. Ravenna was one of the cities that exemplified and sustained its growth, particularly under the long domination of Theoderic, the multilingual Gothic king trained at the Byzantine court and formed by its perspectives. His determination was crucial in the integration of the 'barbarian' and 'Roman' elements in a decisive new synthesis.

Across these in-between centuries Ravenna not only produced some of the most refined and exquisite art, it also assisted the development of what was to become 'The West'. In this process Constantinople played a key role in the emergence of institutions in Italy that is often overlooked by western medieval historians.

The third difficulty stems from the peculiar nature of Ravenna's influence. It was more shaped than shaping. When the general Stilicho and the young Emperor Honorius (395–423) decided to move his capital to Ravenna, Alaric, the feared chieftain of Gothic forces, had recently broken through the Alpine frontiers of Italy and was about to threaten the imperial government based in Milan. Milan's walls were too extensive to defend effectively, while Ravenna's position among the marshes, lakes and tributaries of the Po estuary provided a natural protection, reinforced by strong walls; it also had direct access, via its nearby port of Classis (modern Classe), to Constantinople, as well as to supplies of the trading centres of the East Mediterranean. This was an inspired strategic redeployment. Laws issued in Ravenna in December 402 record the initial stages of this relocation, which made it the new capital city.

The city was already famous for its port at Classis, a large harbour planned centuries earlier by Julius Caesar as a base for the Roman fleet in the East Mediterranean. It was from this point, in 49 BC that Caesar set out for Rome and crossed the Rubicon a few miles to the south, an act now famous as a sign of irreversible commitment. Twenty-two years later, his great nephew Augustus established the centres of Roman naval power at Ravenna on the east coast of Italy and Misenum on the west, under praetorian prefects. He also gave his name to a

channel that ran through the eastern part of the city, the Fossa Augusta. The harbour was artificially created within a lagoon, its bases built on stilts, with a capacity to shelter 250 ships. Classis became a large naval centre filled with shipbuilders, sailors, oarsmen and sailmakers, whose funerary monuments record their skills. It was connected to Ravenna by a channel that permitted boats to dock close to the city, and between the harbour and the city another settlement, named Caesarea, gradually developed. In this way, the combined settlements represented a secure urban centre with access to the Adriatic and maritime communication with Constantinople.

Ravenna was built on sandbanks and wooden piles, with bridges over the many canals that flowed around and into the city, just like Venice in later centuries. It had all the components of a typical Roman city – municipal buildings, facilities for public entertainment, temples and, eventually, churches – scattered across marshy land separating the Padenna and Lamisa tributaries of the Po. Now the enormous apparatus of government, military forces, merchants and scholars all followed the emperor to their new capital. Stilicho's instinct proved correct. Ravenna became a nigh-impregnable centre, often besieged but rarely captured by force, and it developed into a capital with appropriately grandiose structures decorated in the impressive artistic styles of the day.

Nonetheless, it was a city whose importance stemmed from its location. It was, par excellence, a centre of connectivity. The tremendous forces that divided the Mediterranean and would forge a new settlement in the western half of the Roman world were enabled, focused and, in part, defined by it. Its history, therefore, is not simply the story of the city, its rulers and its inhabitants' way of life. It is also a much broader account of the far-flung powers drawn to and through it that were to make Ravenna a crucible of Europe.

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