

ALLEGORICAL ART IN THE EARLY BYZANTINE ERA : CHURCHES

It would be beneficial to contrast the icons in Figures 1-5 with the symbolism in the Ravenna mosaic of Emperor Justinian and his court. Nothing similar has survived for Justin II, but the attitudes and vision represented by this artwork would have existed also at the beginning of Justin's reign. Here, Christ is not being portrayed as an emperor, but the emperor is being portrayed as Christ. The emperor Justinian was sixty-four years old when this mosaic was completed (born in 482) and had never visited Italy, thus this mosaic was not a life-like representation. It was funded by the banker Julianus Argentarius and overseen by the archbishop Maximian. It was influenced by the icons of the period, and its propaganda effect had the highest priority. The mosaic was a statement of imperial power.

As the *Theotokos* in the Coptic tapestry is surrounded by medallions of the twelve apostles (Figure 5), Justinian is surrounded by twelve men. Three of the four on his left are ecclesiastics, including Maximian, the Archbishop of Ravenna from 545 to 553. The fourth on the left and the two on his right are secular officials, including perhaps the banker Argentarius on his immediate right. They are flanked by six soldiers. The mosaic is saying that Justinian's power is supported by the Church, money, and the palace, and it is backed by military might. One soldier carries a shield with the Christian *Chi-Rho* abbreviation, which would remind the viewer of Emperor Constantine. Thus Justinian's power is also backed by history. Although Justinian was still very much alive when this mosaic was completed, his crowned head is surrounded by a *corona*.

Figure 6 and detail (facing page). *Emperor Justinian & Retinue*. Artist: Unknown. Date: 546. Provenance and present location: Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna. Mosaic.

Justinian is carrying, perhaps, an empty basket that would have held the bread during the Offertory of the Eucharistic Rite, thus inviting a comparison to Christ. The mosaic is recalling the times when Christ compared his human body to bread (Mt. 26:26; cf. Jo. 6:32-58; etc.). By showing that the basket is empty, the mosaic is contrasting Justinian with the Christ that divinely and miraculously fed bread to five thousand men (Mt. 14:15-21; Mc. 6:35-44; etc.). Unlike Christ in the sixth-century icons, Justinian is not carrying the jewel-studded Bible: an ecclesiastical authority is. And unlike Christ in the icons, Justinian is not throned, not being carried aloft, and not offering a divine blessing. He is standing firmly and grimly on the ground. The *coronae* here and on Empress Theodora in the nearby mosaic are related to the *coronae* seen in pagan art and literature: they connote extraordinary power but not necessarily heavenliness (cf. Il. 5.5 ff., 18.203 ff., etc.).

There is little hierarchy in the composition. The emperor is standing in the center of the image (note the quadrilaterals above), but all the men are standing on the green earth and their faces are level. Their feet are intertwined. The statement of the mosaic is clear: Justinian is at the center, but is not the source of this awesome power. The power is created by the clergy, the palace, and the army. The viewer is not being invited to feel repentance, make a petition, or take away grace and sing a hymn of joy: it is not a devotional icon. The viewer is told by the mosaic to be awed by the power generated by this assembly. And that is all. Justinian is wearing a heavy crown, which raises him above the rest, but his expression reveals a man accustomed to the burden of authority on earth. Unlike the icons of Christ, the eyes of Justinian are fixed. There is no serenity.



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Figures 7–11 (following pages). *San Apollinare Nuovo*. Artist: Unknown. Date: 6th century. Provenance and present location: Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. Wall mosaics.

The Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo was originally dedicated in 504 to Christ the Redeemer. The thirteen small mosaics in the top zone may date to the original church. They show scenes in the life of Christ. On the left, he is always young, unbearded, and dressed as an emperor; on the right, he is always bearded and presented as the “Man of Sorrows”, recalling a vision found at Isaiah 53:3-6: “He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” In the middle zone, created c. 526, one sees saints, prophets, and the evangelists.

The bottom zone was created in 561 during the reign of Emperor Justinian, who *in absentia* rededicated the church to “Saint Martin in Golden Heaven”. The wall mosaics present an allegory similar to that seen in the icons from the 6th century, where the spiritual Christ is presented as a Byzantine emperor in his palace. At the center of the zone, Christ and the Mother of God are seated on jewelled thrones and flanked by scepter-wielding angels. At the two extreme ends one sees ornate palace architecture, representing the Palatium of Theodoric (on the right) and the Ravenna port of Classe (on the left). On Christ’s left is a procession of twenty-six martyred saints in the clothing of Roman senators (*toga praetexta*): each has received from him an individualized, ornate crown. On the Virgin Mary’s right is a procession of twenty-two virgin martyrs in elaborate clothing: each also has received a crown.

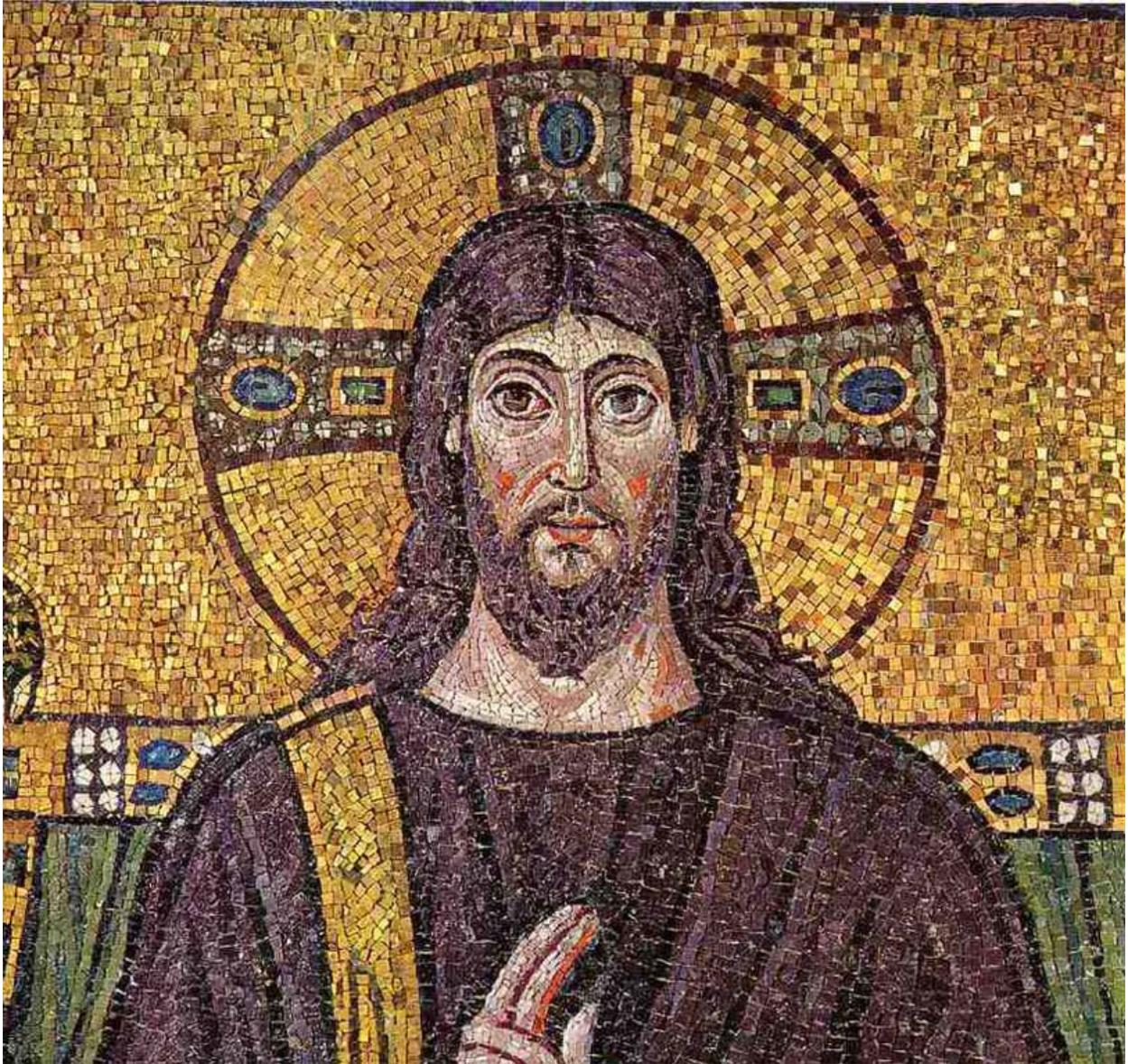
Unlike the nearby mosaic of Justinian at the Basilica of San Vitale, Christ is depicted as the source of all heavenly and earthly power. Similar to the icon of the Ancient of Days, the angels hold up their right hands. Christ holds up his right hand in blessing. In his left hand, he holds what appears to be a double scepter of power over heaven and earth.

The allegory here has taken on a new dimension. The saints, Christ, and the *Theotokos* in heaven are still depicted as kings, the emperor, and the empress, but there is a new realism and local character.





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Figures 12–13 (facing page). *Annunciation*. Artist: Unknown. Date: 6th century? Provenance and present location: Syrian Monastery at Wadi El Natrun (Scetis), Egypt. Fresco.

Wadi El Natrun was a center for monastic Christianity in Upper Egypt and attracted followers from around the Byzantine World. Its alternate name, Scetis, is derived from the Greek term for “the ascetics”. In addition to becoming the home of several important Christian writers, it served as a refuge for Coptic Patriarchs of Alexandria. Among the many monasteries that arose at Wadi El Natrun, one was founded by Syrian monks in the 6th century and consecrated to the *Theotokos*. According to tradition, the monastery was designed on the basis of Noah’s ark. Most of the monasteries at Wadi El Natrun were destroyed or looted during the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 7th century. But the fortified monasteries survived, as did the Syrian monastery.

The fresco in Figure 12 was only recently discovered during restoration work between 1991 and 1999. It could have been created as part of the original 6th century church, but scholarly opinions vary. The fresco reveals an allegory similar to that seen in the previous Figures from the 6th century. On the surface level of meaning, the Virgin Mary is enthroned and surrounded by ornate palace architecture. She is wearing makeup. She is being greeted by the archangel Gabriel, who carries a scepter. She is flanked by four prophets dressed as court nobility: Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. As in the mosaics at San Apollinare Nuovo, there is an increased realism and local character. The palace architecture behind the Virgin Mary is taking on a vivid reality. The four Hebrew prophets that foretold the Virgin Birth are unrolling papyrus scrolls to reveal the pertinent verses—written in the Coptic language.

What makes this allegory even more fascinating and complex is that the deeper level of meaning is not a scene in heaven: it is an historical event in the life of Mary of Nazareth.



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Figure 14. *Christ Embracing St. Menas*. Artist: Unknown. Date: late 6th century. Provenance: Bawit, Egypt. Present location: Paris. 57 x 57 cm. Paint on fig wood.

This image, which is not monumental but a portable icon, was found in Egypt during the archaeological excavations of a monastery at Bawit. Painted in the late 6th – early 7th century it is in excellent condition. St. Menas (285 – c. 309) was the abbot of the monastery there. He was originally a high-ranking officer in the Roman army, but after only three years of service, left the army and began a hermetic life in Egypt. During his stay in the desert, he saw a revelation of angels crowning martyrs with glorious diadems. He also heard a voice saying that he would receive three immortal crowns: one for his celibacy, one for his ascetic lifestyle, and one for his martyrdom.

The allegory in Figure 14 is subdued, as in Figure 1, but also shows the new realism and local character evident at Ravenna. On the deeper level, this is a scene in heaven. On the surface level of meaning, there is a mixture of history with fictional royalty. Christ has the short brown beard of a young man; Menas has the long grey beard of an old man. Christ is wearing imperial purple. St. Menas is wearing over a brown *tunica* perhaps the *toga praetexta* of a Roman senator. Christ is carrying a jewel- and pearl-studded codex, while Menas is holding a tiny scroll that may contain the rules of his monastery. The concept of religious rule is emphasized by the Coptic inscription that reads “Abbot Mena, superior.”

Emphasizing the spirituality of the scene, their eyes are not focused on any particular point and both men look remarkably serene. This serenity is enhanced by the rolling hills behind, from which their *nimbi* seem to be rising like twin suns. In a strict hierarchical order, Christ’s head is slightly higher than St. Menas’s.

What is most striking in this icon is the relaxed arm and hand that Christ has placed around the shoulder of Menas. Therefore, unlike the icon in Figure 1, Christ cannot give a salutary blessing. Instead, Menas does so with his right hand. The physical language is one of geniality and conveys the message of heavenly kinship and affection that was stressed by Christ in the Gospels (Mt. 5:45; Jo. 15:15; etc.). The seriousness of the dynastic temple paintings has been replaced by the childlike innocence and exuberance typical of Coptic art.



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