

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION



Ravenna Capital?

The city of Ravenna in northeastern Italy contains some of the most spectacular works of art and architecture to have survived from late antiquity. These monuments were created between AD 400 and 600, at a time when Ravenna was one of the most important cities in the Mediterranean world. After 600 Ravenna experienced both economic and political downturns, but the artistic and architectural monuments remained as a testament to the splendor of the Christian Roman Empire in its early centuries, and as an inspiration both to later generations of the city's inhabitants and to visitors. In the absence of an extensive body of written sources for the late antique city, the art and architecture have become the main source for our understanding of Ravenna's role in Italy and the Mediterranean.

Since the ninth century, Ravenna has been considered the "capital of the late antique west." This is what Ravenna's own ninth-century historian Agnellus called it; it is the title of the four-volume history of the city by F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes* (1969–89), and it was the title of a conference held in 2004 in Spoleto, subsequently published as *Ravenna: da capitale imperiale a capitale esarcale*. The word "capital" (*Hauptstadt, capitale*) refers to the city's political function as the residence of the western Roman emperors after 400, of the Ostrogothic kings from 493–540, and of the rulers of the Byzantine province of central Italy from 540–751. These rulers, along with the bishops of Ravenna, made a determined effort to create a city that would provide a worthy setting for the rituals that demonstrated their authority. But did late antique rulers want the city to be regarded as a capital, and if so, did they successfully convince their contemporaries?

In order to address this question, we must first define what a capital was in the fifth and sixth centuries. The word as it is used today, defined as a city

serving as a seat of government, has no exact correlate in late antique Latin or Greek. E. Chrysos has recently noted that in late antique sources the word *caput* is used only for Rome and Constantinople, and carries symbolic connotations, whereas the term *sedes imperialis*, referring to the location of the emperor and administration, really corresponds better to what we would consider a capital city.¹ This ambiguity – the fact that Rome could be a *caput* without housing a central government – was the result of the political circumstances of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. For 300 years the city of Rome had been the center of imperial administration and the showplace of the empire’s glory. However, Rome’s location was not particularly convenient for administering the affairs of an empire that extended east to Persia and north to Scotland. The military emperors of the third century spent less and less of their time in Rome, and other cities rose to prominence as places where an emperor (or a would-be emperor) might reside.² After a century of political disarray, the emperor Diocletian (284–305) took the momentous step of dividing the empire into western and eastern halves ruled by coemperors (*augusti*), each of whom had a junior colleague (*caesar*). These four rulers and their administrations were based in different cities: initially these were Nicomedia and Milan (for the *augusti*) and Thessalonike and Trier (for the *caesares*). After 324 Constantinople, founded by the emperor Constantine, replaced Nicomedia as the eastern imperial capital. Rome was conspicuously omitted from the list of new capitals, probably largely for strategic reasons, but it is also possible that Diocletian hoped to break away from Roman traditions that he felt had been deleterious to the empire in the previous century, and in particular that he wished to minimize the threat of revolt by powerful military units stationed in Rome.³

Although most of these cities had been important administrative centers in the Roman period (with the exception of Constantinople), none of them had permanent structures for housing the imperial court. After Diocletian designated them imperial seats of government, each city began to build facilities that would accommodate the imperial ceremonial and the administration that would now be situated there.⁴ All of these new capitals looked to Rome for inspiration, while at the same time reflecting the new political, administrative, and eventually religious circumstances of the empire.⁵ As we will see in Chapter 3, the central feature was the palace, around which were arrayed hippodromes, colonnaded streets, fora, baths, and churches.

A new capital city that is intended to “. . . break away from, in particular, developed elite or bureaucratic institutions . . .” is known to anthropologists as a disembedded capital. A. H. Joffe’s study of ancient disembedded capitals notes that they are very expensive, because they have to be built from scratch on a grandiose scale, and highly unstable, especially in a

situation of political variability.⁶ The Roman Empire in the fourth to sixth centuries was extremely unstable, and while Constantinople achieved lasting success, most of the other new capitals enjoyed relatively brief building booms.⁷ Ravenna, on the other hand, had a tenuous existence in its first century as a capital, but managed to hold on to its role as a political center for a second century and beyond. This enabled it to have not just one but several phases of commemorative monuments, cumulatively reinforcing the sense that Ravenna was a traditional seat of government.

Rivalry with Rome is a persistent theme in the political and ecclesiastical history of Ravenna. Emperors had not lived in Rome since 284, but the city remained the showplace of the Roman republic and empire, the repository of its history, and the home of the Senate, the group of powerful Italian landowners whose authority waxed and waned in the course of Rome's imperial history. Rome was the *caput orbis*, the "head of the world," even when political power was no longer centered in it.⁸ Milan had been viewed as a rival to Rome in the fourth century, and this rivalry was inherited by Ravenna when it was chosen to be the imperial residence after 402. We will discuss in detail the reasons for the choice of Ravenna in Chapter 3; certainly ease of communication with Constantinople was a major factor in its enduring political success, but it also seems clear that the "disembedded" nature of the city was important to the emperor Honorius and his advisers, as well as their successors. Most of the rulers who established themselves in Ravenna did so deliberately in order to counter the power of the Roman Senate and later of the popes: we will see this in the case of the Honorian emperors, of Odoacer, of Theoderic the Ostrogoth, and eventually of the Byzantine exarchs. Ravenna's monumentalization was thus an important and successful component of a propaganda contest about authority in Italy.

Another factor that came to play a significant role in Ravenna's history was the rise of its bishop. In addition to its secular importance, Rome was also the city of the pope, whose status as the head of the entire Church might be contested, but whose authority in Italy and the west was not doubted. The bishops of Milan rose to preeminence when the emperors resided in that city, and once the court moved to Ravenna, its bishops likewise rose in the hierarchy of the Italian church, eventually holding the rank of archbishop, ranking second after the pope and making periodic bids for autocephaly, or independence from the papal see. In a society in which the authority of bishops rivaled, or even exceeded, that of secular rulers, Ravenna's bishops and archbishops used the city's topography and monuments to stake their own claims both alongside the secular rulers of the city and against the popes.

All these rivalries produced a situation in which Ravenna's history of urban development ran directly counter to the experience of most other

western cities in the period from 400 to 600. Ravenna's period of prosperity coincides with a time in which cities throughout the Roman world were undergoing dramatic transformations.⁹ The city of the Roman Empire had been a center of secular administration, with a dense urban fabric that included public amenities such as theaters and baths, aqueducts and sewers, elaborate Roman-style houses for the elite, and evidence of long-distance trade. By the year 600 many of those features had disappeared from western Europe, replaced by towns centered on the church, with the bishop as the main authority figure, a much lower density of buildings, meaner and less architecturally integrated houses, no secular elite residents, fewer urban amenities (except for churches), and a dramatic reduction in items obtained from trade; the "ruralization of the city" is a term often used.¹⁰ Progressive invasions, sacks (Rome was sacked in 410 and 455, Milan in 539), plague, and economic problems led to dramatic depopulation, a slowdown in new construction, and decay of the old urban fabric. The same processes eventually occurred in Ravenna, but at a different pace. Ravenna was not, as far as we know, sacked in any of the invasions or wars that beset the Italian peninsula, perhaps testimony to its perceived invulnerability provided by the swamps of the Adriatic coast. Ravenna had a resident secular governmental administration until the eighth century, which led to different political dynamics in the city than were found elsewhere.¹¹ In Ravenna, construction of magnificent new buildings continued until the end of the sixth century; indeed, the middle years of the sixth century produced some of the most dramatic and spectacular works of art and architecture anywhere. After 600 Ravenna suffered from the cumulative effects of the economic downturn and the political events of the previous fifty years, but the extra time had allowed the city to build up a collection of monuments that few other cities could rival.

Ravenna may have been beautiful and prosperous, but the literary texts show us a contemporary *mentalité* in which Rome reigned supreme. Because of its political importance, Ravenna is briefly mentioned in many texts, from letters to histories to poems, from the Roman and early medieval periods. Few of these offer praise of the new political center. Roman authors through the fifth century scorned Ravenna's marshy landscape, and sneered at its flies, bad water, and frogs.¹² Emperors might live at Ravenna, but they came to Rome for the important ceremonial events that were praised in panegyrics. Byzantine authors mentioned Ravenna's defensibility, but thought of the west in terms of Rome. Even the Ostrogothic king Theoderic praised Rome's monumental past far more than Ravenna's glittering present.

For strategic and economic reasons, then, Ravenna maintained its political role through several changes of regime, but its monuments do not seem

to have convinced contemporaries of glory or prestige. The process of creating a convincing capital city took 200 years, and the monumentalization that we admire was completed just in time for the economic and political decline that was to spell the end of Ravenna's dominance. It was not until the ninth century that viewers could admire Ravenna as a glorious capital: Ravenna was not commemorated in literary sources until Agnellus wrote a history of the episcopal see in the 830s, a century after the city had ceased to be a seat of anything but local and episcopal government. Only in the context of the Carolingian renaissance, as Italians began to develop a renewed sense of urban consciousness that included pride in their Roman and late antique heritage,¹³ could Ravenna's status as a former capital of the west be fully appreciated. When we talk about Ravenna as a capital, then, we must remember that we are doing so in historical hindsight.

History of Scholarship on Ravenna

Through the centuries, Ravenna's history has attracted the attention of a variety of authors and scholars. Starting with Agnellus in the ninth century, medieval authors wrote saints' lives, sermons, and chronicles that document specific moments in the city's history. From the fifteenth century, local historians and antiquarians produced ever-more-learned historical texts, as well as publishing the primary sources on which these histories were based. With the development of the disciplines of archaeology and art history in the nineteenth century, Ravenna began to occupy an ever-larger place in the historical consciousness not just of its own inhabitants, but also of outsiders. And with the recent growth of interest in late antiquity as a historical period, scholarly interest in Ravenna has exploded. Before we begin to examine Ravenna's history and monuments, it is useful to understand the way that these have been described and modified over the centuries, because early historians and artists provide us with crucial information, particularly about monuments, inscriptions, documents, and other sources that no longer survive.

Premodern Historiography

The historiography of Ravenna begins with Agnellus. The way he presented his city and its history has heavily influenced our understanding of Ravenna down to the present. Historians' preoccupation with Ravenna's rivalry with Rome, as described above, originates with Agnellus. Indeed, it is hardly possible to consider any aspect of late antique Ravenna without

reference to what he had to say on the subject. Certainly he is the person who constructed a past for the city on the basis of its splendid monuments. Agnellus is our source of chronological information for many of the surviving buildings as well as our only source for the many buildings that no longer survive. Moreover, his presentation of figures such as Galla Placidia, Theoderic, and Archbishop Maximian has influenced all subsequent ideas about them. Although his text was not widely known outside of Ravenna until the nineteenth century, we can trace its influence from the tenth century on in texts written by Ravennate authors, or by authors who came to Ravenna and consulted its archive.¹⁴

There is no external evidence for Agnellus's existence; everything we know about him comes from the passages in his *Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna* (*Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, *LPR*) in which he tells us something about himself. Agnellus was born circa 800 into one of the leading families of the city. He became a high-ranking priest in the Ravennate church, and seems to have been actively involved in construction and maintenance of antiquities and monuments in the see. Agnellus wrote the *LPR* in the 830s and 840s.¹⁵ The work consists of a biography of each bishop of Ravenna from the time of the conversion to Christianity to Agnellus's own day. Depending on the sources available to him, Agnellus tells us about the historical background, artistic and architectural patronage, political and/or ecclesiastical controversies, and other notable events for each bishop. The text was directly modeled on the *Liber pontificalis* of Rome, a history of the papacy that by the early ninth century was widely known throughout Europe. One of Agnellus's main preoccupations was the rivalry between the sees of Ravenna and Rome, and he deliberately structured his text as a response to the Roman version of Italian history.¹⁶ Agnellus was also preoccupied with the rights of the clergy in the face of oppression by bishops. Both of these themes color his accounts of individual bishops and of the history and monuments associated with them.

One of the issues that must be addressed when using the *LPR* for studying Ravenna's past is that it was written several centuries after the most exciting events. Agnellus was well aware of the impact of Ravenna's material remains; indeed, he exploited it throughout his text as evidence that Ravenna's history was equal to that of Rome. What he tells us, however, is not so much what actually took place in Ravenna in the fifth through eighth centuries, as how these things were perceived in the ninth century, and this distinction is not often appreciated by modern readers of the text.

Despite more than two centuries of archaeological, historical, and art historical investigation, it is remarkable how little we know about late antique Ravenna, and how much our ideas are shaped by Agnellus's account of this period. It is Agnellus who tells us that Ravenna was made the capital of Italy;

that Bishop Ursus built the cathedral; that Galla Placidia, Theoderic, and Archbishop Maximian monumentalized the city; and that the struggle with the popes consumed the seventh and eighth centuries. Since Agnellus's statements match the remains of churches and walls, they continue to provide the basic outline for Ravenna's history. Agnellus himself used as sources a chronicle or annal attributed to Archbishop Maximian, the sermons of Bishop Peter Chrysologus, and a few documents; he otherwise looked at buildings and inscriptions (many of which are now lost), and relied on hearsay current in the ninth century. Although today we have information from archaeology and better access to more historical texts, we do not know much more than Agnellus did.

After Agnellus, little else was written about the city of Ravenna until the thirteenth century.¹⁷ Biographies of some individual bishops and saints were produced starting in the tenth century, often taken more or less exactly from the *LPR*; there was an increase in production of these biographies in the thirteenth century.¹⁸ In addition to hagiography, there were several other texts produced in this period that are interrelated, and probably related to the manuscript of the *LPR* that remained in the archive. In the first half of the thirteenth century, the list of bishops in the *LPR* was brought up to date, with short entries written for each bishop, based on the *LPR*. In the 1260s, two works were written about Ravenna's history. One, the *Aedificatio ciuitatis Rauennae*, is a short text describing the foundation of Ravenna at the time of Noah and its subsequent construction history and geography through late antiquity, largely based on Agnellus. The other, the *Chronica de ciuitate Rauennatis*, was based on the earlier texts. Shortly after this, around 1296, the episcopal list was codified as the *Reuerendi Patres* by an anonymous author, possibly Riccobaldo da Ferrara.¹⁹ The *Chronica* was subsequently continued and brought up to date, ending in 1346. This upsurge in historiographical interest in the city is linked to the political situation at the time: the rise of the commune, the wars between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, struggles for independence from the Papal States, and the eventual dominance of the ravennate da Polenta family from 1275 to 1440. As in the ninth century, the autonomy of Ravenna was in question throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and hagiographers and historians were producing new works, often based on the highly proautonomous *LPR*, to bolster Ravenna's status.²⁰

In these texts, the late antique period of Ravenna's history is again given prominence, as are the buildings. The main focus of both the *Chronica* and the *Aedificatio* is the built environment of the city. The *Aedificatio* attributes many buildings to the Babylonians and then to the Romans, but for the fifth century on, both texts depend on the *LPR* as their main source of information; indeed, the *Chronica* contains only four entries for the entire period

between 810 and 1205. After 1205, the entries become more frequent, but are concerned now with the secular political history of the city, although some major building activities are described, such as the reconstruction of the nave of the Ursiana cathedral in 1314. It is thus not possible to reconstruct from the *Chronica* much information about the condition of the city in this period, as could be done for the ninth century.

From the fifteenth century on, antiquarian historians of Italy began to include information about Ravenna in their works. About 1413 the *LPR* was copied, along with most of the other historical texts, into one volume, which today is housed in the Biblioteca Estense in Modena; all earlier manuscripts of the texts were subsequently lost.²¹ The *Codex Estensis*, as it is known, was consulted by several non-Ravennate historians, including Flavio Biondo, who described Ravenna's churches in his *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum imperio Decades III* written in the first half of the fifteenth century, while Ambrogio Traversari likewise praised San Vitale and Sant'Apollinare in Classe in letters written at about the same time.²² The influence of these texts in Ravenna, on the other hand, seems to have declined: Desiderio Spreti wrote *De amplitudine, de uastatione et de instauratione urbis Rauennae* in 1489, while Ravenna was under Venetian rule (1440–1509), but cites Agnellus only once, although he knew Biondo's text.²³

The *LPR* was rediscovered by Gian Pietro Ferretti, a native of Ravenna who became Bishop of Lavello (d. 1557) and who wrote a history of the church of Ravenna that survives in manuscript form.²⁴ Part of Ferretti's copy of the *LPR* survives as our second manuscript witness to the text; sometime before 1589 the original manuscript in Ravenna disappeared.²⁵ The most notable Renaissance historian of Ravenna was Girolamo Rossi (also cited frequently by his Latinized name, Hieronymus Rubeus), whose *Ten Books of Histories of Ravenna (Historiarum Rauennatum libri decem)* first appeared in 1572, with a revised edition published in 1589. Rossi depended heavily on the *LPR* as a source for late antique Ravenna, and was influenced by Agnellus's presentation to use buildings, works of art, and inscriptions as historical sources. He provides invaluable information about monuments that survived in the sixteenth century but are now lost.

The eighteenth century saw a new burst of interest in Ravenna and its sources and monuments.²⁶ In 1708 Benedetto Bacchini, the librarian of the Duke of Modena, published the first edition of the *LPR*, based on the *Codex Estensis* manuscript that he had found in his library. His colleague and successor at the library, L. A. Muratori, who initiated the series *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, published Bacchini's edition along with most of the other texts from the *Codex Estensis* in two volumes of his new series. A new interest in late antique works of art also now became evident. G. G. Ciampini's *Vetera monimenta* of 1690–9 included drawings of many of

Ravenna's mosaics, invaluable evidence of their pre restoration state. Antonio Zirardini, a Ravennate lawyer and historian, published a work entitled *Degli antichi edifizii profani di Ravenna* in 1762; he also wrote a companion volume, *De antiquis sacris Ravennae aedificiis*, which was published only in 1908. The papyrus documents surviving in Ravenna's archive were first published in 1805 by G. Marini, in an edition that is still used as a reference today, although it was largely superseded by H. O. Tjäder's edition of the 1950s. Count Marco Fantuzzi, also of Ravenna and a student and colleague of Zirardini and Marini, published his six-volume work *Monumenti ravennati de' secoli di mezzo per la maggior parte inediti*, containing the texts of medieval documents in the archiepiscopal archive, during the period 1801–4. Finally, the eighteenth century attempts at restoration in several of the city's surviving monuments, most notably at San Vitale and Sant'Apollinare in Classe.

Modern Historiography of Ravenna

Despite the increasing scholarly interest in Ravenna's monuments, by the early nineteenth century many of them were completely destroyed or in a very fragile state. Under Napoleon the city became part of the Italian Republic (1796–1814), and many of its monasteries were dissolved; some churches were deconsecrated, others were simply abandoned. At the same time, the increasing interest in antiquities, and the new discipline of archaeology, led to the first attempts to uncover Ravenna's lost past through excavation.²⁷ As far back as the late eighteenth century, local antiquarians were investigating underground remains, and this activity continued into the nineteenth century; construction of the railroad started in 1881, revealing many ancient remains, especially in Classe.²⁸ The religious monuments and mosaics also received attention. Filippo Lanciani and Alessandro Ranuzzi, engineers employed by the state department of civil engineering, conducted excavations and restorations of some of the buildings between 1859 and 1897. From the 1850s to the 1870s a Roman artist named Felice Kibel was commissioned by the municipal government of Ravenna to restore the surviving mosaics; he worked in the "mausoleum of Galla Placidia," the Orthodox Baptistery, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Sant'Apollinare in Classe, and San Vitale, and his work was highly controversial, both for the techniques he used and for the iconographical details that he restored.²⁹ Mosaic restoration work by the Ravennate mosaicists Carlo Novelli and Giuseppe Zampiga continued into the 1890s. The Museo Nazionale of Ravenna was established in 1885, with its original collection representing that of the Camaldolensian monastery of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, housed in

the buildings formerly belonging to the Benedictine monastery of San Vitale.

In 1897 the Italian government established the Soprintendenza ai Monumenti di Ravenna, the first such bureau in Italy, under the direction of Corrado Ricci, a native of Ravenna who went on to become the national Director General of Arts and Antiquities in 1906.³⁰ Ricci's vision was to restore Ravenna's ancient monuments to their original condition, which meant that archaeological investigation had to determine what the original state was, and later accretions and decorations had to be removed.³¹ He immediately initiated work on the "mausoleum of Galla Placidia" and San Vitale, and under his leadership, and with the assistance of Giuseppe Zampiga, Alessandro Azzaroni, and his eventual successor Giuseppe Gerola, many more monuments were excavated and restored. Gerola oversaw publication of the results of many of these projects during the period from about 1910 until the 1930s, and Ricci himself oversaw the publication of the eight-volume *Monumenti: tavole storiche dei mosaici di Ravenna* (1930–7), which contain drawings made before and during the restorations by Zampiga and Azzaroni. Since 1897 Ravenna's Soprintendenza has been modified, divided, and recombined with a confusing number of names. The current configuration, created in 1975, consists of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna (Archaeology) and the Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici e per il Paesaggio di Ravenna (Monuments and Environment).³²

Ricci and Gerola played an active role in stimulating other historical work in the city. The journal *Felix Ravenna* was founded in 1911 to publish scholarly research on the city and its monuments; it continued publication until 2000.³³ Under Ricci's and Gerola's auspices, a major excavation of the site of the "Palace of Theoderic" southeast of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo took place between 1908 and 1914.³⁴ In 1924 the first two fascicles of a new edition of the *LPR*, edited by Alessandro Testi-Rasponi, appeared in the new series of the *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*. This edition was never completed, but has remained influential; it contains extensive notes, very inadequately referenced, which have been used uncritically by many scholars who have subsequently made use of the *LPR*.

During World War II Ravenna was bombed by the Allies, which resulted in major damage to the church of San Giovanni Evangelista and minor damage to other buildings. The destruction resulted in an intense campaign of excavation and restoration after the war. These efforts were headed by new groups of researchers, some local and some from elsewhere. In particular, faculty and students of the Università di Bologna began to play a prominent role in Ravenna scholarship. In the 1950s Giuseppe Bovini, professor of Christian archaeology, began to convene an annual conference, the *Corso*