

2010

Review of *Il mosaico absidale di S. Clemente a Roma: "Exemplum" della chiesa riformata*, by Stefano Riccioni

Dale Kinney

Bryn Mawr College, dkinney@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs

 Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Kinney, Dale. Review of *Il mosaico absidale di S. Clemente a Roma: "Exemplum" della chiesa riformata*, by Stefano Riccioni. *Speculum* 85 (2010): 189-192.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/6

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

author herself notes, “This is a story not about kings, but about class and love” (p. 130). Part of the reason why the close readings sometimes seem disconnected from the book’s thesis is that the terms of analysis are not clearly defined, and, as also happens in other chapters, one wonders why sometimes the focus is on kingship, other times on nobility in general, governance, or love. Yet Rayner’s gathering together of such different Chaucerian texts on the basis of ideas of kingship, even though they are too loosely defined, does reveal some unexpected connections. And one of her arguments in this chapter, that the Parson’s Tale reveals that “God is the only king that [Chaucer] is willing to celebrate unequivocally” (p. 145), is noteworthy.

The book ends with a brief conclusion in which Rayner argues that “the poets reacted to their world by turning away from the monarch and restating the importance of the individual” (p. 161) and that to these poets “it is the kingship of the inner self that truly matters” (p. 162). While it is hard to see how Gower, for instance, turned away from the monarch, the importance of the individual in all the texts is rightly highlighted. Given the topic signaled by the title, Rayner’s book could have been more ambitious. It could have engaged fully with the many nuanced debates among critics about the question of kingship in the texts she analyzes. Since it does not do so and since the close readings tend to go over treaded ground, it is best to think of the book primarily as a useful introduction to the texts under discussion and to their various approaches to the theme of kingship.

MARÍA BULLÓN-FERNÁNDEZ, Seattle University

STEFANO RICCONI, *Il mosaico absidale di S. Clemente a Roma: “Exemplum” della chiesa riformata*. (Studi e Ricerche di Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte, 7.) Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2006. Paper. Pp. xix, 107 plus 29 black-and-white and color plates. €45.

doi:10.1017/S0038713409990534

No other Roman apse mosaic is as explicit about its intended meaning as that in San Clemente. “We will liken the Church of Christ to this vine (*ecclesiam Christi viti simulabimus isti*),” “which the Law desiccates, but the cross makes verdant (*quam Lex arentem set Crus facit el[ss]e virentem*),” appears in white letters on a deep blue ground along the lower edge of the conch. Sure enough, a vine springing from a robust acanthus plant fills the conch with five rows of symmetrical coils. All of the spaces between the scrolls are filled with images of people, animals, naked winged putti, and birds: a profusion that must represent the florescence created by the cross. The cross is represented by a crucifix, flanked by Mary and St. John, that rises stemlike from the central acanthus bush. The purpose of this substitution is explained by a parenthesis within the inscription: “some of the wood of the cross, a tooth of James, and a tooth of Ignatius repose in the body of Christ depicted above (*de ligno crucis Iacobi dens Ignatii[que] in suprascripti requiescunt corpore Cristi*)”; the apse is a reliquary, and the crucifix both is and represents a *staurotheca*. The arched wall framing the semidome is also covered with images and explicatory inscriptions: standing prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, with inscribed scrolls; seated figures of Sts. Lawrence and Paul (“of Paul teaching Lawrence to serve the cross”), Sts. Clement and Peter (“Clement, behold the Christ I promised you”); and at the top, a bust of the promised Christ and the four beasts of the Apocalypse. The most prominent inscription of all is written in gold letters on a dark blue ground around the arch directly above the conch: “Gloria in excelsis Deo sedenti sup[er] thronum et in terra pax hominibus bone voluntatis.”

Despite the uncommon frankness of its meaning, no other Roman apse mosaic has generated a larger bibliography. The floodgates were opened by a learned article published in 1970 by Hélène Toubert (reprinted in *Un art dirigé: Réforme grégorienne et iconographie*, 1990), who methodically reviewed the visual sources and conventional meaning of nearly every motif and concluded that the mosaic as a whole represents a deliberate synthesis of early Christian images

and medieval allegory in a “complex program” that must have been devised by a cleric steeped in the ideology and literature of the *ecclesiae primitivae forma*. Almost as an afterthought she suggested that the cleric could have been Leo of Ostia (d. 1115), best known to art historians for his description of Abbot Desiderius’s reconstruction and decoration of the monastery at Montecassino in the 1060s.

Toubert’s idea of a programmatically driven “early Christian revival (*renouveau paléochrétien*)” connected with Montecassino was embraced immediately as self-evidently true, not least because a Montecassino connection had already been championed by the eminent scholars Herbert Bloch and Richard Krautheimer (for a useful historiographic overview see I. S. Robinson in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42 [1991], 264–70). Thus San Clemente became a fixture in a burgeoning literature on the “directed” art of the Gregorian reform, and multiple articles have been devoted to further unpacking the mosaic’s many components: the vine, the crucifix, the relics, the inscriptions; and to situating it ever more firmly in the context of the writings and personalities of the reform. Only recently has this edifice of scholarship showed some cracks, notably an important essay by Serena Romano on Roman medieval painters and tradition (in Maria Andaloro and Serena Romano, *Arte e iconografia a Roma da Costantino a Cola di Rienzo*, 2000). Romano questioned whether the “revival” of early Christian and pre-Christian decorative forms might not better be described under the rubric of reuse, a familiar “habit” of Roman medieval architects and sculptors and perfectly feasible for painters employing templates made by tracing. She also urged consideration of a broader spectrum of motives for reuse: not only ideology but also convenience, taste, and *decus*, an elevated sense of ornament, could lie behind the “redrafting (*ripescaggio*)” of shapes and compositions from the deep well of Rome’s artistic past.

In this book from his dissertation, Stefano Riccioni follows the road more traveled and takes Toubert as his point of departure. He is more adventurous, however, in his interpretive approach. Better read in art history generally than many of his compatriots and more open than most to postmodern critical devices, Riccioni aims to illuminate not the content of the apse mosaic’s message but the rhetorical modes in which it is expressed, to “read” the mosaic as a “discourse” comprising the “communicative systems” of image, writing, and text (pp. xv–xvi). As described in the English-language preface by Herbert Kessler, this endeavor is wholly successful: it is “the fullest sustained presentation to date” of “a new trend to understand medieval art not as a static conveyer of a single, prescribed message—in Toubert’s famous formulation *un art dirigé*—but rather as a stimulus for mental processes” (p. xii). Though fulsomely written in the manner of Italian *presentazioni*, Kessler’s generous and clear-sighted distillation of the argument is a useful guide even for the reader fluent in Italian, who might otherwise lose the thread in the detailed and exhaustively documented text.

One potential source of confusion is the chapter divisions, which do not correspond to the posited three communicative systems but to a more traditional art-historical layout of background or context (“Le premesse”), descriptive analysis of the work and its components (“L’arco absidale,” “La calotta absidale,” “L’epigrafe e il discorso”), and conclusion. The first chapter, on “premises,” judiciously surveys the presumed historical context (reform popes, Montecassino, secular canons) and the contributions of scholarship since Toubert, without, however, confronting the fact that we do not know the date of this mosaic. For all of its informative inscriptions, the mosaic is almost uniquely silent about its authorship. Riccioni assumes, as have most interpreters, that it was executed under Cardinal Anastasius (1102–1125/26), who was responsible for the basilica and its magnificent Cosmatesque pavement and furniture. However likely, this is so far only a hypothesis, so the truism that “context” is not an objective prelude to interpretation but part of the interpretation itself is more than usually pertinent.

The second and third chapters each contain sections on iconography and style, for which Riccioni prefers the rhetorical term *ornatus*. He identifies the style of the large, static, easily

legible figures on the arch and of the Crucifixion as elevated (*gravis*) and that of the small-scale, lively vignettes around the vine as plain (*adtemuatus*). The second chapter continues with a section on the “iconography of the inscriptions” on the arch, and the entirety of the fourth chapter is devoted to the inscription in the conch. The imagery of the conch is treated in chapter 3, much of which proceeds in the manner of traditional iconography, identifying the literal subject matter (including precise ornithological labels) and the medieval sources for the symbolism accorded to each animal and bird. Though somewhat laborious to read, this part of the chapter will be an invaluable reference for anyone wishing to study the mosaic in the future. The iconography is not presented for its own sake but to substantiate Riccioni’s thesis that the diagrammatic, treelike vine around which the smaller images are disposed was a “cognitive device” (“*machina cognitiva*”) for a “monastic rhetoric” that facilitated spiritual contemplation. “The individual *figurae* of the mosaic could take on meaning only in the mind of the individual reader” (p. 40). Yet the iconographic analysis reveals restraints; it seems that the art is *dirigé* after all, and the third chapter concludes with a modified restatement of its premise: “the images in the semidome . . . are shown to be the fruit of a specific project [to] . . . deliberately exalt the Church renewed and, at the same time, to caution its faithful and make them think” (p. 64).

Riccioni’s treatment of the inscriptions is his most original contribution. Though he was not the first to study them, his sustained attention to paleography, composition and wording, and origins of the textual citations surpasses anything done previously. For that reason his fourth chapter seemed to me the most stimulating, if also the most debatable. In line with the theory that the vine mosaic is a *machina memorialis*, he deduces from the relatively small scale of the explanatory inscription and the problematic message “hidden” in the multivalent word *lex* that this part of the decoration must have had a restricted audience. It was intended for those who could come close enough to read the inscription and to ponder its message(s), namely, the canons resident at the church. The conclusion develops the notion of two intended audiences: the lay congregation confined to the far half of the nave, who could see the arch and the central crucifix, and the canons who could see and read the components of the conch. It also stresses the bookish nature of the imagery and its program and returns, once again, to the importance of Montecassino. Although there is a gap of forty or fifty years—at least two generations—between the mosaics made for Desiderius’s new abbey church and the mosaic in San Clemente, Riccioni affirms “the most likely hypothesis” that “the mosaic was the fruit of a complex working out in the circle of Cassinese monks and Roman reformers. . . . The execution of the program was entrusted to mixed groups of workers, ‘Roman’ and ‘Cassinese’ . . .” (p. 80).

Like all scrupulous medievalists, Riccioni walks a line between the liberating metaphors of critical theory and historically verifiable categories and events. It is easy to conflate them; thus “discourse” tends to be literalized as the *ars dictaminis*, and the audience is imagined in terms of particular groups of people in real space. Specificity lends welcome credibility to his argument but also invites concrete corroboration. My own experience is that the layperson standing outside the choir enclosure in the nave can see the conch of the apse just fine, although not well enough to identify the species of birds. My vision is aided by corrective lenses and electric illumination, however; before such devices were available, even those permitted to stand directly under the mosaic would have had difficulty making out all of its details. But that is perhaps not the point. As discourse, the arch and conch mosaics posit viewers who are also readers, and thus create ideal communities of literates and *idiotae*, investing the former with the power of interpretation but offering the latter the intuitive delight of color, light, and mimetic representation. The intention may have been to segregate and to privilege the clerical literate, but unlettered Romans were ingenious “readers” of images on their own terms, as anyone who knows the twelfth-century *Mirabilia urbis Romae* is well aware.

This is a gentlemanly book, deeply respectful of the author’s predecessors while tacitly revising their conclusions. The overemphasis on Montecassino may disguise the near absence of

the *renouveau paléochrétien* and the shift to what Kessler rightly points out is a new and very different ground of interpretation. And whether or not one agrees that the *Chiesa riformata* is the only or even the best context in which to understand these wonderful mosaics, unquestionably Riccioni's research into the writings of key authors, and especially the prominence accorded to Bruno of Segni, is a very significant step forward.

DALE KINNEY, Bryn Mawr College

MICHAEL RICHTER, *Bobbio in the Early Middle Ages: The Abiding Legacy of Columbanus*. Dublin and Portland, Oreg.: Four Courts Press, 2008. Pp. 211 plus 6 black-and-white plates; 6 black-and-white figures. \$65.
doi:10.1017/S0038713409990546

In spite of Bobbio's reputation as the "Monte Cassino of the North" no comprehensive study has been done before Richter's. His particular aim is to show that the monastery's Irish connections lasted considerably past the time of its founder, St. Columbanus, and he is able to marshal evidence to support that position from history, paleography, philology, and archaeology as he presents an orderly, if still sketchy, picture of the development of the monastery from the seventh through the end of the ninth century. The opening chapter, on the three rather opaque founding documents of the monastery, seems to have been moved there at a late stage in editing, as it refers without citation to things that appear later in the text, but the book as a whole is the best introduction to Bobbio and its traditions to date. Richter's most persuasive evidence for a continuing Irish ethos at Bobbio comes from a careful reexamination of the paleographic and architectural evidence. With respect to scribal practice, he follows (p. 78) Leonard Boyle, against E. A. Lowe, in regarding Bobbio as the origination point for Irish (or "Insular," to accept the terminology of the opposite theory) abbreviations. Richter sees northern Italy as a transmission point for the transmuted Latin *notae juris* back to the Insular world, and as evidence he points particularly to the large number of "Irish spellings" (such as *ss* for *s*) used in Bobbio manuscripts throughout its first century. It is, of course, pace Lowe, not necessary to postulate more than one strong teacher of Irish writing habits at Bobbio in the seventh century to account for a continuing local scribal tradition without resorting, as Richter seems to do (p. 87), to supposed "fresh recruits from Ireland" in Lowe's phrase. On the other hand, the presence in Bobbio of manuscripts of Irish origin from the eighth and ninth century, most notably the commentary on the Psalms with Old Irish glosses, the famous "Milan Glosses" (Milan, Ambrosian Library, C 301), argues for continuing contacts across the Continent. With respect to Irish architectural arrangements, Richter points to the early references to a revered freestanding cross, monastic buildings in wood, and a small oratory established by Columbanus across the river Trebbia, built to his own proportions ("ad magnitudinem sanctissimi corporis sui," p. 29). "Items such as boundary marks, cells and free-standing crosses have significant parallels in Ireland" (p. 121).

First and foremost, Richter is a historian, and the book, grounded in source criticism, provides a chronology that pulls together, insofar as is possible, the intertwined evidence concerning the relationship of Bobbio with Rome, with the Lombard court at Pavia, and with the Carolingian empire. Founded in 613 by Columbanus under the patronage of the Lombard king Agilulf, Bobbio was a haven of orthodox Catholicism among the largely Arian Lombards, and Columbanus did his best to provide a bridge between Agilulf and the papacy. The monastery was a player in the ending of the Three Chapters controversy and grew increasingly large and influential. Ninth-century documents show several dependencies and as many as fifty-six estates (*curtes*) and list annual production data including 410 *modia* of grain and six hundred carts of hay (p. 130).

In an epilogue Richter reviews the evidence for Bobbio's position politically and socially, concluding that its continuing Irish affinities and habits give evidence of a certain isolation