Ravenna: its role in earlier medieval change and exchange

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This book deals with the history of the city of Ravenna, near Italy’s north eastern coast, in the period between the fifth and the 11th centuries AD. It comprises an excellent introduction by the editors and 15 chapters of varying lengths. It is well illustrated and has a very useful index, not always the case with edited volumes. The chapters cover political history (Heather, Deliyannis, Ortenberg West-Harling, Nelson), archaeological finds (Jäggi, Marano, Augenti and Cirelli), economic and social history (Cosentino, Prigent, Schoolman, Haubrichs, Brown), religious history and literary culture (Corcoran, Geldhill) and, of course, visual culture (Carile), for which Ravenna in this period is most famous. Most essays cross these arbitrary boundaries. Taken as a whole the volume adds up to a much-needed survey in English of one of the most fascinating early medieval Italian towns. As a collection of essays written by 17 different authors it cannot provide the sort of consistent overview which a single-authored work offers and for that we will have to await the volume by Tom Brown advertised here as forthcoming in 2016 (p. 341). Nevertheless, the collection has been very well edited, and it certainly hangs together very effectively as a portrait of Ravenna in this period.

As Tom Brown points out in his concluding essay ‘Culture and society in Ottonian Ravenna: imperial renewal or new beginnings?’ (pp. 335–44), the most recent detailed history of medieval Ravenna in English remains that published in 1913 by Edward Hutton (p. 335), an extremely prolific author most famous for his travel writing, much of it about Italy. Hutton presented the city’s medieval history as one of decline, which was the general conclusion of Victorian writing about Ravenna, of which there was a great deal. More scholarly than Hutton but similarly inclined to a view of ‘decline’ were the various books of Thomas Hodgkin, the best-known being Italy and Her Invaders (2nd edn in 8 vols, 1892–9) in which Ravenna figures repeatedly. G. T. Rivoira began his survey of ‘Lombardic Architecture’ with a long section on Ravenna. More recently, there have been important books on late antique Ravenna and several on the Liber Pontificalis of Agnellus, an important source often cited in the book under review. Most important of all have been the many essays of Tom Brown, the leading scholar of Ravenna in English. This recent work has argued that Ravenna flourished for most of the time, and it has put to bed the old view of decline. Italian scholarship on Ravenna has not surprisingly been more copious but it has sometimes suffered from a too narrow focus on the city itself. This tendency is not evident in the contributions by Italian scholars in
the volume under review, all of which demonstrate the vitality of current Italian work in this field and argue for Ravenna as a vibrant place.

The first-time visitor to Ravenna (mine was in September 1994) cannot but be impressed by the famous buildings which have survived from late Antiquity, above all San Vitale and Sant’Apollinare Nuovo and their much-reproduced mosaics. These and other buildings, notably the so-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, form the main evidence discussed by Maria Cristina Carile in her chapter ‘Production, promotion and reception: the visual culture of Ravenna between late antiquity and the middle ages’ (pp. 53–86). This is a very thorough discussion of a range of official mosaic schemes produced in Ravenna from the perspective of visual culture where the viewer and the maker are equally important in the creation of a shared culture.

Carile comments interestingly on well-known images. The fifth-century decorations in Galla Placidia’s mausoleum are read alongside those at S. Aquilino in Milan and S. Pudenziana in Rome. Although these drew on common imagery from across Italy, for example starry skies, creativity was shown at Ravenna by the use of unique styles of star (pp. 59–61, figs 3.2 and 3.3). The representation of the enthroned Christ was also distinct at Ravenna in the sixth century (e.g. in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo), and unlike that developed at contemporary Rome. The most interesting part of the chapter is however the discussion of later mosaics, much less frequently discussed in the literature. Here Carile shows that, although the actual manufacturing techniques may be less assured (e.g. at Sant’Apollinare in Classe in the seventh century) the ‘new iconographies’ produced ‘new meanings’ at this time (p. 74). It seems likely that the local mosaic tradition continued into the ninth century, evidenced by restorations undertaken at Sant’Apollinare in Classe after a big earthquake sometimes between 813 and 815 (p. 77, Fig. 3.11). Further new mosaics were produced as late as 1112. This chapter demonstrates very well that although we do not know who actually made the mosaics under discussion Ravenna did have an active local culture of image production which was fully aware of trends elsewhere. It was not derivative or in decline. The chapter also raises the question, not answered here, of the degree to which local artists appropriated and responded to the local heritage and the degree to which mosaics were conceptualised as ‘heritage’ to be preserved and cared for.

The three archaeological chapters tell similar stories of a flourishing material culture which did not end when Ravenna stopped being capital of the western Empire. Carola Jäggi’s excellent survey of sixth-century church archaeology (with very good illustrations) shows convincingly how, after the Byzantine reconquest of the city in 540, the bishops of Ravenna – especially Ecclesius, Apollinaris and Maximian – were crucial in maintaining Ravenna as a central place. They could do this because Byzantine rulers were light-touch (for example, Justinian never went there). Bishops concentrated on sanctifying the city developing the cults of Apollinaris (at Classe as well as Ravenna itself) and of Vitalis, a Bolognese martyr-saint. Vitalis provided Ravenna with a martyr and Apollinaris, who was argued to be a follower of the apostle Peter, provided an apostolic connection Ravenna did not hitherto have. These two developments, manifest in the decoration of San Vitale and Sant’Apollinare in Classe, helped to provide a distinctive identity for Ravenna which allowed it to compete with other later imperial centres including Milan and especially Rome. Marano’s chapter (‘The circulation of marble in the Adriatic Sea at the time of Justinian’) complements Jäggi’s nicely. His study shows that quarried marble and standardised products continued to circulate across the Adriatic in the sixth century, especially along the Istrian and Dalmatian coasts. Pore?, Pula, Salona, Siponto, Epirus and Durrës all feature here. The chapter (reasonably) questions the idea that Ravenna was an entrepôt for marble, but the point could have been strengthened with more attention being given here to Ravenna itself. Nonetheless, this is a really interesting subject, which once again supports the view that Ravenna was not in decline. The chapter of Andrea Augenti and Enrico Cirelli (‘San Severo and religious life in Ravenna during the ninth and tenth centuries’) focusses on a single Benedictine monastery founded next to the late antique basilica of San Severo in Classe. The paper shows that the foundation date of this community must be pushed back considerably before the earliest written documentation for the community (955 AD). Excavations since 2006 are very clearly explained here and cover the end of the ninth century to the mid-15th century when the site was abandoned. The monastic buildings were undeniably impressive from early on and there is good evidence that the community benefitted from trade in luxury goods from as far away as Iraq. This important excavation demonstrates without doubt that Classe, the port for Ravenna, was no more in decline than
Ravenna was for much of the period at issue. The importance of the site should not be exaggerated however as, for example, reception quarters for elite individuals remain undiscovered (and most of the complex is now known). Although San Severo was clearly on the itinerary of Otto I, the excavations have not been able to confirm that he did in fact stay here.

The material culture discussed in the preceding paragraphs is clear evidence of a functioning economic and social system which had Ravenna at its heart. This is well brought out by Cosentino, one of the leading contemporary scholars of Ravenna, in his chapter (pp. 133–49) which discusses what evidence of papyri reveals about the later stages of Ostrogothic Ravenna. He argues (very much against Patrick Amory) that the Ostrogoths had a clear identity as a group. His main evidence are the 59 papyri edited by Tjäder. He provides a detailed reading (and new transcription) of Tjäder 49 (pp. 148–9), which traces the stages by which Gudila a Gothic aristocrat was deprived of his lands and converted from Arianism to Catholicism. Cosentino argues that this and other texts show how carefully the incoming Byzantines ‘eradicated their social organization’ in this instance with the help of Pope Vigilius. The fragmentary nature of this papyrus, and many others, makes detailed analysis of the ways in which this city-focussed economic system functioned impossible, but their survival does show that land was subject to detailed and careful management at this time. Vivien Prigent’s chapter ‘A striking evolution: the mint of Ravenna during the early middle ages’ (pp. 151–61) is an excellent survey which focusses on the period of Byzantine rule (540–741). The minting of coins here followed the shifting political fortunes of Ravenna’s rulers, and minting certainly did go into decline as the political power of the exarch waned during the eighth century. Prigent argues convincingly though that the symbolic importance of Ravenna as a minting centre was considerable and influential on the Lombard coinage.

The chapters of Schoolman, Haubrichs and Brown all deal with local elites and control of the local social fabric. Schoolman’s ‘Nobility, aristocracy and status in early medieval Ravenna’ (pp. 211–38) argues that Ravenna was unique in the way in which local elites absorbed incomers rather than being supplanted by them. This was different to what happened in the rest of northern Italy, Rome and Naples. A good outline is given here of the way in which a local hereditary aristocracy emerged and developed into a nobility by the tenth century, using the transition from papyrus to parchment documents as evidence. Schoolman highlights two moments of fracture in the local social system: the end of the Exarchate in 751 and the arrival of Otto I on the scene. Overall, this is an important chapter which inserts Ravenna very effectively into wider debates about the transformations of aristocratic power across Italy in this period. The long chapter by Wolfgang Haubrichs ‘the early medieval naming-world of Ravenna, eastern Romagna and the Pentapolis’ (pp. 253–95) is a very thorough consideration of naming practices over a long period. His evidence is largely that of the charters used also by Cosentino and Schoolman, and much of it is set out in a useful series of tables. He shows that the composition of the exarchate was basically Romance (not Greek) with few Germanic names (only one archbishop, Kailo 898–904 and few notaries, or tabelliones in the local usage). Other instances of a distinct local culture are the common occurrence of Maria, a name rarely found in the rest of northern Italy, and groups of middling status having Romance names. There are excellent discussions also of nicknames (pp. 276–8) and the rise of Germanic names (282–92), especially in the tenth century. Given the density of this important contribution, a final paragraph summing up the main conclusions would have been helpful to readers. Tom Brown pulls a lot of this material together in an excellent final chapter. He stresses how well documented Ravenna is (the second largest number of charters after Lucca, Agnellus and excellent archaeology). He demonstrates that Ravenna remained resilient long after late Antiquity and clearly developed a significant role under the Ottonians, including links between Ravenna and the see of Magdeburg. A point of great significance is that many merchants are mentioned in Ravenna charters, and Brown uses this fact to suggest that Venice may not have been as economically dominant in this part of Italy as often argued (p. 341). This is a point very well made in the light of the recent Comacchio excavations, and given that this mercantile presence is paralleled in other places such as Milan.

A thriving economy was clearly necessary to support education and study. This is clear from the excavations at San Severo, but also from the chapters of Corcoran on law and Gledhill on literary life. Simon Corcoran’s ‘Roman law in Ravenna’ (pp. 163–98) is a long and densely argued chapter which provides a clear and
critical overview of the subject. He (rightly) questions the idea of continuity between late Roman law and 11th-century legal knowledge at Ravenna, but does acknowledge that Roman law was known and used here in some contexts, including the production of documents where Ravenna can claim a continuous tradition unlike any other part of Italy. Gledhill in ‘Life and learning in earlier eleventh-century Ravenna: the evidence of Pater Damian’s letters’ (pp. 323–34) uses the letters of Peter Damian to trace how Damian was educated and where. It is clear from this material that cathedral schools were important, but also that secular learning was ubiquitous across northern Italy, including at Ravenna.

Finally, the three chapters which deal most closely with local politics: Peter Heather’s ‘A tale of two cities: Rome and Ravenna under Gothic rule’ (pp. 15–38), Veronica Ortenberg West-Harling’s ‘The church of Ravenna, Constantinople and Rome in the seventh century’ (pp. 199–210) and Jinty Nelson ‘Charlemagne and Ravenna’ (pp. 239–52). These all deal with subjects which are better covered in English than most of the other chapters. Heather’s chapter concerns well-known events involving Theodoric, Cassiodorus and Boethius and is developed around a critique of Shane Bjornlie’s recent book about Cassiodorus (7), with which he has fundamental disagreements, especially the idea that Cassiodorus rewrote the letters to fit in with the current Christian ideology of Justinian rather than the older traditions of Neo-Platonism in which Cassiodorus was steeped. Heather’s critique is convincing and also allows him to arrive at a new explanation for the murder of Boethius, namely the unresolvable succession problems of Theoderic’s final years. West-Harling takes up the story in the seventh century when, once again, Ravenna was in close relation with Rome and Constantinople. She rightly plays up the importance of links with Rome but shows how the autocephaly of Ravenna which came about in the later seventh century was not what the popes wanted. Much of the explanation for these events can be attributed to ongoing heresies in the East and the consequent fall-out for the West. West-Harling gives a clear account of these developments, concluding that by the end of the seventh century Ravenna was no more Greek in orientation than Rome was. Jinty Nelson’s chapter investigates another moment of close interaction between Rome and Ravenna, this time involving the Franks in the person of Charlemagne. Her detailed discussion of letters in the Codex Carolinus (letters between Pope Hadrian and Charlemagne) dealing with Ravenna in 774–6, 783, 787 and 791, shows without doubt how important Ravenna was to Charlemagne and how frustrated Hadrian was with the behaviour of Ravenna’s archbishops. As she shrewdly notes these letters show in fact how successful Archbishop Leo was in maintaining the local territory, retaining his own power locally, and effectively creating an ‘ecclesiastical lordship’ (p. 247) with Charlemagne’s backing.

Overall, this is an important volume, not just for Ravenna or even Italian specialists but perhaps particularly for those interested in how regional histories are created and maintained. There is little to take issue with and little to add, although it would certainly have been interesting to have heard more about the highly distinctive local ecology. Ravenna was and is very much a watery environment (alluded to in the introduction (p. 3)), as the excellent work of Paolo Squatriti has shown.(8) What were the physical challenges presented by this? How were they solved? Did this ecology help to fashion Ravenna’s distinctive identity? Similarly, as Byzantium is a near constant presence in this volume it could be argued that a chapter about the attitudes of Byzantine elites towards Ravenna would also have been valuable. Was it seen as a backwater? Can Ravenna seen from Constantinople seem quite so dynamic? Lastly, the relationship with Venice, alluded to in Tom Brown’s concluding chapter, would certainly merit greater discussion if only to contextualise the current excavations at Comacchio and at Venice itself and to challenge the many myths of Venice which still circulate. One thing is certain however: this book certainly challenges the myth of Ravenna’s early medieval decline and it does so in great style.

Notes


2. Giovanni Teresio Rivoira, Lombardic architecture: its origin, development and derivatives, English
3. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity (Cambridge, 2010). Back to (3)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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